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1

Introduction: Kierkegaard among the Temples of Kamakura

James Giles

The writings of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) are among the more enigmatic in Western philosophy. Kierkegaard's poetic style, the density of his texts, the incompleteness of his arguments, along with his use of pseudonyms, all conspire to render his philosophical positions frequently unclear. Yet behind this enigmatic approach it is not hard to discern the insights of an original thinker deeply engaged with the problem of human existence. These features of Kierkegaard's writings – both their cryptic quality and insightfulness – have led to much scholarly research. One of the fascinating things about this research is the way in which scholars from diverse fields and cultural traditions have been able to read Kierkegaard in such distinct ways.

One cultural tradition that has added much to the understanding of Kierkegaard is that of Japanese philosophy. Yet oddly enough, this tradition has been all but ignored by Western Kierkegaard scholars. A good example of this can be found in a chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* that purports to be an examination of the 'twentieth-century receptions' of Kierkegaard. Here the author describes in detail the Danish, German, French, British, and American receptions of Kierkegaard's writing, while apparently oblivious to the fact that there was also a large Japanese response to Kierkegaard in the early twentieth century (with even some Japanese awareness of Kierkegaard before that). Indeed, Japanese translations of Kierkegaard appeared several years before English translations did. There is, of course, the odd exception to this lack of awareness of the relations between Japanese thought and Kierkegaard, the most notable being Mortensen's *Kierkegaard Made in Japan*. But then this book was also ignored. It is not, for example, mentioned anywhere in the *Cambridge Companion*, even though it was published three years earlier.

In a way, this ignoring of Japanese thinkers is part of a larger tradition in Western philosophy that disregards Eastern philosophy in general. Although this is changing, it is still commonplace to see books or university courses that claim to be on the history of philosophy, and yet never mention a word about significant Asian philosophers, Asian views of epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics, or the debates among the various Asian schools of thought. Thus, in the popular text book *The Enduring Questions: Traditional and Contemporary Voices* (2002), not one of the voices, traditional or contemporary, is an Eastern voice. Confucius – probably the most influential philosopher in history – is not even mentioned. This neglect of Eastern thinkers is all the more amusing because, although Berkeley's dialogues on idealism and Hume's writings on the no-self theory are given, no writings from Astanga or Vashubandhu (founders of the Mind-Only school of Buddhism) or dialogues of the Buddha (originator of the no-self theory) are given, even though these philosophers presented essentially the same theories hundreds of years before Berkeley or Hume. Likewise, in S. Morris Engel's 2002 textbook, *The Study of Philosophy*, it is confidently asserted that 'philosophy began here, in the coastal city of Miletus, southeast of the Greek island of Samos'¹ in full contradiction to the fact that the ancient authors of the Vedas and Upanishads were doing philosophy in India at least 1000 years before Thales first got the idea that everything might be water.

Yet this ignoring of Eastern (and other non-Western) traditions by Western philosophers comes at a great cost. For not only does it hinder Western understanding of, and thus interaction with, non-Western cultures, it also denies Western philosophers the use of non-Western arguments and concepts, many of which have been intricately refined through centuries of debate. New understanding, it seems, frequently comes when a philosopher is able to step back from the usual approach to a problem and see it in a different way. For the Western philosopher one of the immense values of Eastern philosophy is that it can provide this 'different way' of approaching a problem. This is true because although Asian thinkers have developed their own traditions, which differ from Western thought, any Western philosopher who cares to spend time with Eastern texts will quickly see that Asian philosophers are dealing with basically the same 'enduring questions' as Western philosophers are.

It is in just this way, then, that an examination of Japanese thought and its relation to Kierkegaard's ideas can provide us with new approaches to understanding what Kierkegaard is saying.

But what is it about Kierkegaard's philosophy that suggests a comparison with Japanese thought? To answer this question, let us first get a picture of Kierkegaard's overall philosophical approach and interests. One of the most prominent features of Kierkegaard is his focus on humanistic concerns. What interests Kierkegaard are those philosophical issues that have an immediate relevance to an individual's life. Thus, Kierkegaard pays little attention to philosophical issues like the existence of universals, the nature of mathematics or logic, or the philosophy of history. Rather, his concern is with issues like subjectivity, death, freedom, anxiety, self-deception, and despair. These problems, he argues, are directly relevant to the existing individual.

Someone will no doubt want to protest that by listing these topics as issues for Kierkegaard, I am ignoring the fact that much of what he says here is written under different pseudonyms and, consequently, should not be seen as being the ideas or concerns of Kierkegaard himself. However, as I have argued elsewhere, the consistency of interests and philosophical positions across Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works is enough to discount this view.²

Let us now look at how Kierkegaard's philosophy is related to these issues. A good place to start is with Kierkegaard's well-known assertion that truth is subjectivity. On the face of it this is an odd claim; for truth is supposed to be something that is objective and contrasts with the notion of subjectivity. But Kierkegaard is not denying that there is such a thing as objective truth (though he is unclear what this would consist of). Instead, he is saying something about the meaning that different truths have, or ought to have for us. He says that 'the crucial thing is to find the truth that is truth for me, the idea for which I will live or die. And what use would it be for me to discover so-called objective truth...if it had no deeper meaning for me and my life.'³ Truth only takes on this meaning when it is experienced subjectively as a 'truth for me'. In this sense 'truth is subjectivity' must mean for Kierkegaard 'crucially meaningful truth is experienced in subjectivity'.

This view provides the basis for his attack on Hegel's world-historical perspective of human existence. From Hegel's perspective, individuals, their subjectivity, choices, actions, and purpose are lost in the grand scheme of things. Kierkegaard says, 'what makes the ethical the deed of the individual is the intention; but this intention is precisely something that can not be found in the world-historical, for what is important here is the intention of the world-historical'.⁴

Further, one need not turn to the world-historical account to see this happen. This loss of our own subjectivity is something that occurs in all spheres of our daily lives: love, faith, and what it means to die, says

Kierkegaard, are determinations of subjectivity, yet real lovers, persons with real faith, and those who know what it means to die are rare. To take the example of what it means to die (which ties into Kierkegaard's concerns with death), Kierkegaard says, 'concerning this I know what people in general know; that I shall die if I take a dose of sulphuric acid, just like I shall die if I jump into water or go to sleep in coal gas, and so forth' (p. 138).

Yet, he continues, 'despite this nearly unusual knowledge or proficiency in knowledge, under no circumstances can I regard death as something I have understood'. In all this objective knowledge about death the deeper understanding that death really will come, indeed, that it may come tomorrow, has been forgotten: 'Merely this one uncertainty, when it is to be understood and held fast by an existing individual, and hence enter into every thought, precisely because it is an uncertainty entering into my beginning upon universal history even, so that I make it clear to myself whether if death comes tomorrow, I am beginning upon something that is worth beginning – merely this one uncertainty generates inconceivable difficulties' (pp. 138–9). In this sense one might say that the person who has not fully grasped the inevitability of his or her own death, or the uncertainty of when it might arrive, has not fully grasped the truth that he or she will really die. This is so, Kierkegaard would say, because truth is subjectivity.

This leads into Kierkegaard's discussion of human freedom; for only in our subjectivity do we fully experience our freedom. As long as we try to view our lives from an external, objective point of view (a view which, being in fact unachievable, is a form of self-deception), we will think that our actions and choices are merely links in a long chain of cause and effect. And, consequently, we will think we are determined and so lack free will. When, however, we turn inward and view ourselves subjectively, then we see that nothing causes our choices and, as a result, we are fully free. Here, says Kierkegaard, we experience the instant of choice as a 'qualitative leap' which 'no science can explain'. The idea of a leap is supposed to show that, subjectively or experientially we feel our making of a choice as a leaping towards our desired action, rather than being, say, pushed from behind by a cause. This leap is qualitative because it is something completely new, something which is born in the moment of choice and has no causal or deterministic ties to what came before.

A significant feature of this qualitative leap of freedom, something which we are recreating at every moment, is anxiety. The reason why anxiety appears at this juncture, says Kierkegaard, is because in the

moment of choice we are both drawn to and repelled from the option we do not wish to choose. Thus, in any choice there will be an option I want to choose and various options I do not want to choose. Yet, even though I feel I definitely do not want to choose a particular option, 'anxiety maintains a subtle communication' with this option.⁵ This 'subtle communication' is the birthplace of anxiety.

To take an example, imagine you are standing on a street corner waiting to cross the road. Imagine further that the road is clear except for a large lorry that is racing towards you at 70 kilometres per hour. Now one option that you can choose is to wait until the lorry has passed and then cross the road. And further imagine that this is the option you want. But another option is that you could wait until the lorry is only a few yards away and then, leaping out in front of it, attempt to dash to the other side without being hit and killed, an attempt that will almost certainly fail. This, imagine, is the option you definitely do not want. Yet, even though you do not want this option it might be, as it is for many people, that you maintain a 'subtle communication' with it and even, as the point of no return approaches, begin to wonder if you might not make this terrible choice. In this instant anxiety appears.

And it is not just in cases like this (where a choice might make you lose your life) that anxiety appears, but in all cases of choice. Thus, rather than paying the restaurant bill after a meal, you might choose to run out without paying; rather than sitting quietly to hear a distinguished speaker, you might choose to jump up and scream mindlessly; or rather than getting out of bed in the morning, you might simply choose to stay there for the entire day. In every instant of choice, says Kierkegaard, anxiety in its various degrees and varying types is constantly present.

This is one of the places where the theme of self-deception works its way into Kierkegaard's writings. This is because in experiencing the anxiety over the awareness of being drawn to and thus in potential danger of choosing the purportedly unwanted option, the individual exists in a dissonant or noxious state. One way to attempt to escape this discomfort is for the individual to deceive himself or herself into believing that he or she is not really free to make such a choice even though, at another level of awareness, the wish is to keep the option open. Or, if the individual does make the 'unwanted' choice, then there remains the option of trying to deceive oneself into believing that it had to happen, was the only option, was someone else's fault, or some such thing.

Self-deception, says Kierkegaard, can also take place on a grander scale, where it might underpin a person's entire life. In *The Sickness unto Death*, for example, Kierkegaard discusses the idea of how people try to

deceive themselves about their own despair by living an illusion. He then rejects the belief that illusions are something people typically grow out of: 'People overlook the fact that illusion has essentially two forms: that of hope and that of recollection. Youth has the illusion of hope and old age has that of remembrance. But just because the older person is under an illusion, he also has the one-sided idea that there is only the illusion of hope.'⁶ This is why, says Kierkegaard, the older person can imagine that he or she has grown out of his or her illusions: he or she is no longer young with naive hopes about the future. But there is also the illusion of recollection and it is here where an older person's self-deception can often lie. Thus, says Kierkegaard, 'an older woman, who has apparently given up all her illusions, can often be found to be just as fantastic in her illusions as any young girl, with regard to how she remembers herself as a young girl, how happy she was at that time, how beautiful, and so on' (p. 192).

This theme of self-deception fits naturally with another major theme in Kierkegaard's writings, namely that of sorrow and despair. This is because, as he puts it in *Either/Or*, 'if this deception does not involve anything external but a person's whole inner life, his life's innermost core, the probability of the continuance of the objective sorrow becomes greater and greater'.⁷ But why should Kierkegaard have such an interest in despair? One answer is because of what he sees as the universality of despair. That is, Kierkegaard sees despair everywhere. Sometimes people are openly aware of their own despair, but more often it lies hidden from their own view. It is because of the pervasiveness of its hiddenness that despair can be found far and wide:

The ordinary view of despair holds to appearances and is a superficial view that is no view at all. It means that every person can best decide for himself whether or not he is in despair. The person that says he is in despair is seen to be in despair, and the person that feels he is not in despair is seen not to be in despair. It follows from this that despair is a rare phenomenon rather than an ordinary one. It is not rare that a person is in despair; no, it is rare, it is very rare, that a person is in truth. (pp. 81–2)

For Kierkegaard, the frightening thing about despair is that there often seems to be no way out. In many forms of suffering, the idea of death can present itself as a possible comfort: if nothing else can save the sufferer, at least death offers a way out. But with despair, argues Kierkegaard, things are different. Here, 'to be delivered from this sickness by death is

an impossibility, for the sickness and its torment – and death consists in not being able to die' (p. 80).

What does Kierkegaard mean by this? How could death not deliver one from despair? Does not death end all suffering? To understand Kierkegaard's point, I think, it is necessary to assume the subjectivity of the person in despair. And at the root of despair is the complete lack of hope. Especially in deep despair, the individual has sunk to the bottom of a fathomless pit from which there seems no way out. All options seem equally fruitless and every course of action seems equally pointless. In such a state of darkness not even death presents itself as a viable option. Thus, there is no reason to seek death and the despairing individual is stranded in life. This might well explain the peculiar phenomenon of suicide during recovery from depression; for when the sufferer begins to emerge from depression, once again it becomes clear that death will end his or her suffering.

Despair, for Kierkegaard, can take various forms. Each of these, however, results from the fact that what we call the self is a synthesis of infinity and finiteness and, further, that this synthesis or relation is one that is freely chosen. Despair, then, develops out of the way in which the person chooses to make these relations occur: 'the development must consist in infinitely moving away from oneself in the process of infinitizing (*Uendliggjørelsen* in Danish), and infinitely returning to oneself in the process of finitizing. If the self does not become itself, then it is in despair' (p. 88). In other words, despair occurs when I imagine the sort of person I want to be and thus move my hopes and desires away from the person who I really am. Kierkegaard calls this 'infinitizing' because it is carried out by the imagination, the faculty by which we conjure up a near infinite amount of possibilities. Once this desired imaginary self has been conjured up, I then compare it back to reality (the process of finitizing). If the person I am in reality does not become, or perhaps even match up to, the person I want to be, then I am in despair.

Another important feature of Kierkegaard's writings are the frequent discussions of Christianity, theism, and passages from the Bible. Because of these, and because Kierkegaard himself holds Christian beliefs, it is often held that he is foremost a Christian writer, a theologian, or a biblical apologist. To this it can be replied that Kierkegaard clearly did see himself as a Christian in some sense and several of his devotional works (prayers and hymns) attest to this. However, when it comes to his philosophical and psychological writings, the Christian and theistic elements recede into the background and play little role in his philosophical view of things. Indeed, what Kierkegaard seems to do

is to take an idea or passage from the Bible and then re-interpret it in such a way that it becomes more broadly symbolic of features of human existence. This is why he is often said to be a humanist or existentialist; for his main concern is with the human condition and how we live out our existence.

For example, in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard analyses the biblical story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac in terms of what it means to have faith or to make a choice, while in *The Concept of Anxiety* he re-interprets the story of Adam and Eve and original sin as symbolic explanation for the experience of freedom and anxiety. Likewise, in *The Sickness unto Death* he takes a passage from the New Testament concerning Lazarus rising from the dead and uses it as a basis for his account of despair. Further, in 'An Occasional Address', he cites another verse from the New Testament, the injunction for the double-minded to purify their hearts, and explains it in terms of overcoming self-deception through the willing of one thing. In each of these, and several other such cases, the Christian concepts of God, Christ, or heaven play little or no philosophical role.

To see this, consider the case in *Fear and Trembling*. Here Abraham is presented as the knight of faith who has no evidential basis for his belief that it is God who has told him to kill his only son Isaac. How does Abraham know that it is God that has spoken to him? How does he know it is not rather an instance of his own bewilderment (Kierkegaard's word), or perhaps an attack of acute psychosis? Kierkegaard's answer is that he does not; for 'all human calculation had long since closed down'.⁸ The only thing Abraham can do here is either choose to believe it is God or choose not to believe. Further, in his choosing to believe it is God who speaks to him he can avail himself of no arguments or reasons, he can only turn to faith. This is all the more true because what he believes God requires of him is 'absurd', namely, that he should sacrifice his son, and also that he should be happy in this world.

But in all of this, it should be evident, God plays no role. Kierkegaard does not try to establish that there is a God, and his concern is not with God at all. Rather, his sole concern is with Abraham and Abraham's faith in God. What Kierkegaard admires here, and wants to understand, is the psychological and phenomenological state of faith. And this is something that has no dependency on the existence of God. It is possible to have faith in God, or in what one believes he requires, whether or not God exists, which is why God's existence is here irrelevant for Kierkegaard's philosophical position.

The same sort of thing can be seen in *The Sickness unto Death*. As mentioned, this is a work in which Kierkegaard seeks to understand despair. He also seeks to find its remedy. To this end he states that 'the self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude which relates itself to itself, whose task it is to become itself, a task which can be performed only by means of a relationship to God' (p. 87). Reading this quickly, and considering it apart from the rest of the text, one might be led to the conclusion that, in Kierkegaard's theory, despair can only be alleviated by God. But Kierkegaard does not say 'only by means of God', rather he says, 'only by means of a *relationship* to God' (emphasis added). It is therefore the relationship to God that is important, not God.

Someone might want to remonstrate that a relationship to God presupposes God and therefore it is, after all, only by means of God that one can overcome despair. Such a claim, however, can only be made by isolating this passage from the rest of the text. If we read further, we see that the reason why God is supposedly important is because of the idea that with God all things are possible, and thus that God can lift one out of despair.

But Kierkegaard's philosophical point is not that such a lifting out of despair depends on the actual existence of a god for whom all things are possible. It is rather that the way out of despair depends on the *belief* that there exists such a god. This is why he says a bit later 'the decisive point is first when someone is brought to the outermost so that, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then it depends on if he will believe that for God all things are possible, that is, on if he will *believe*' (p. 95, italics in original). And as I have said, one can believe in God whether or not he exists.

It is, of course, a bit silly to assert that only through a belief in God can one come out of despair. Not only does it sound like the desperate rhetoric of an evangelist who has no real arguments to offer, but it is also obviously false. For it does not take much observation to see that many people who have no belief in God still come out of despair. Kierkegaard is aware of this and at one point pays lip service to it by saying, 'sometimes the inventiveness of human imagination can suffice to acquire possibility, but, in the end, when it depends on to *believe*, the only help is this, that for God, all things are possible' (p. 96, italics in original). Kierkegaard seems to allow that the inventiveness of one's own imagination might help in overcoming despair, but then quickly discounts such a view. Unfortunately, however, he gives no legitimate reason why it should be discounted. All he says is 'when it depends on to *believe*, the only help is this, that for God, all things are possible'. Or,

in other words, 'when the point is to believe that with God all things are possible, the only help is the belief that with God all things are possible'. This, of course, is true, but like all tautologies says nothing.

This is not to say that, for some people, the belief that with God all things are possible is essential for escaping despair. Plainly, there are people whose religious beliefs operate in this way. Kierkegaard was apparently one of them. He tells us in his biographical work *The Point of View for my Work as an Author* how, while working on his writings, he was 'alone in dialectical tensions that – without God – would drive insane anyone with my imagination, alone in anxieties unto death, alone in a meaninglessness of existence, without being able, even if I wanted it, to make myself understandable to a single person'.⁹ The fact that there are those who require such beliefs does not, however, mean that all, or even the majority of people need such beliefs. Further, it is not even clear that someone with Kierkegaard's imagination (supposedly he means something like the depth of his imagination) would be driven insane without God. Sartre, for example, had a brilliant imagination, was 'without God', and did not go insane – though he, of course, had Simone de Beauvoir (sort of). Perhaps if Kierkegaard had kept Regine (the girl he left for God) he would have not felt so alone in his 'dialectical tensions' and thus been able to keep his sanity without having to believe in God.

Does this mean that Kierkegaard's work on despair should be dispensed with? Not at all. For the central point that Kierkegaard is making is not about God, or even a belief in God. It is about the importance of the belief in possibility. For in the depths of despair what the sufferer lacks is precisely the sense of possibility: there seems no possible way out of an unendurable situation. What the person has need of then is the sense that there is a viable way out. This is something, however, that can be gained in various ways: psychotherapy, meditation, the support of family and friends, religion, and so on. Each of these, in its own way, can give rise to a sense of possibility. None of them has an exclusive claim.

There are, I am well aware, scholars who will strongly disagree with this view of Kierkegaard and assert, to the contrary, that the essential aspect of Kierkegaard's thought is its Christian elements. And this is understandable because the majority of Western scholars writing on Kierkegaard seem to be Christians themselves and thus want to see Kierkegaard as primarily arguing for Christian doctrine, albeit in his unique Kierkegaardian way. And it is just such people who will, no doubt, fail to see the relations between Kierkegaard's ideas and Japanese thought; for in Japanese thought Christianity, and the assumptions on which it is based, also play no essential role.

Let us then turn to Japanese thought to get an idea of where these relations lie. One of the more prominent features of Japanese thought is its extreme syncretism. That is, Japanese thought is a distinctive blend of numerous traditions and ideas that, over the centuries, have entered Japanese culture, mixed with the ideas then present, and subsequently been expressed in new ways. Thus, Japanese thought is a mixture of at least Shintō, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In Japan, each of these thought-traditions has both influenced and been influenced by the other traditions, such that each one becomes expressed in a uniquely Japanese way. Although Shintō itself, at least in its early versions, is often thought to be a religion indigenous to Japan, parts of even early Shintō appear to have been imported, sharing as it does elements with shamanistic and animistic practices from north-east Asia.¹⁰ Also, some aspects of Shintō seem to have Indian or Greek origins. We can start, then, by having a look at each of these traditions to get an overview of the nature of Japanese thought.

The expression 'Shintō' is normally said to mean '*kami no michi*' or 'the way of the *kami*'. The *kami* are the gods and goddesses or spirits. Shintō is the ancient Japanese practice of acknowledging and venerating these *kami*. Many of the *kami* are described in the earliest Japanese texts, the *Kojiki* or *Record of Ancient Matters* and the *Nihongi* or *Chronicles of Japan* (both from the eighth century). Having many deities Shintō is, in one sense, a form of polytheism. Yet the word *kami* does not refer strictly to the idea of a god or goddess in the Western sense; it has vagueness to it that gives it a far wider sense than the Western notion has. As Norinaga Motoori, the eighteenth-century Shintō scholar puts it:

I do not yet understand the meaning of the term *kami*. Speaking in generalities, however, it may be said that *kami* signifies, in the first place, the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient records and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshipped.

It is hardly necessary to say that it includes human beings. It also includes such objects as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains and so forth. In ancient usage, anything whatsoever outside of the ordinary, which possess superior power, or which is awe-inspiring was called *kami*.¹¹

Thus, although *kami* refer to supernatural beings, such as the primordial deities Izanagi and Izanami or their daughter the sun goddess, Amaterasu, it can also refer to awe-inspiring human beings, great sages,

warriors, or emperors. However, it is not just these renowned persons who are *kami*; it can also be less known people who also inspire awe in some way. According to Motoori, 'in each province, each village and each family there are human beings who are *kami*, each one according to his own proper position' (p. 23). It can also refer to the dead; for there is something awe-inspiring about them: once they were full of sound and movement, now they are silent and still. This is more than likely where the Japanese reverence for the ancestors comes from; because they possess that same feature which makes supernatural beings into gods, namely, their ability to inspire awe.

Further, it is not just personified gods or human beings that can be *kami*, but also non-human creatures, 'birds, beasts, trees, plants', and even non-living things in nature – 'seas, mountains and so forth'. As Motoori puts it, 'this does not have reference to the spirit of the mountain or the sea, but *kami* is used here directly of the particular mountain or sea. This is because they were exceedingly awe-inspiring' (p. 24). It is this seeing of *kami* in nature that gives Shintō a quality of nature veneration, tying it in with a reverence for the natural beauty of the world that is often expressed by the placing of Shintō shrines in places of natural beauty. Here the *kami* of the shrine is present in the simple awe-inspiring quality of the surrounding nature. This further gives Shintō a 'this-worldly' quality, making it a religion that focuses on the world as we experience it.

It is true that Shintō recognizes personified *kami* who are not merely aspects of nature. But still they are not transcendent gods from beyond this world or from beyond nature. Rather, they dwell quite firmly in the world we experience. This can be seen in the traditional Shintō account of the world as existing in three levels, the *takamanohara* or the plane of high sky, *nakatsukuni* or the middle land, and *yomi* or the underworld. On the first level are the gods, on the second are human beings, and on the third are the dead. Now although these levels are arranged in a hierarchy, it is strictly a physical hierarchy. That is, there is nothing transcendent about the plane of high sky or the underworld. They do not, like heaven and hell in the Christian tradition, exist in other dimensions or in a realm that is somehow beyond our spatio-temporal world.

Thus, the *kami* that are the personified gods or the ancestors exist firmly in this world. It is just that the plane of high sky is high above this middle land as the underworld is deep below it. (However, the distance above the human level of the plane of high sky is debatable; for throughout Japanese history at least 40 different 'down to earth' locations have been suggested, with the most common being a tract of land in Shikoku, south of Mount Tsurigi.)¹²

It is worth noting here that a later Shintō scholar, Atsutane Hirata (1776–1843) rejected the idea that there was a separate underworld that was physically below the middle land: ‘The view that after men die their souls go to Yomi is part of a tradition that was introduced to Japan from abroad for which there is no attestation whatsoever in our ancient past.’ Speaking of his departed teacher he continues that ‘the place where my teacher’s spirit dwells is Mt Yamamuro [a mountain in Japan] ... He lived there during his life and fixed upon this mountain as his eternal resting place. How then can it be doubted that his spirit dwells there? How can we imagine that it has gone to the filthy land of Yomi?’¹³

Shintō’s ‘this-worldliness’ and veneration of nature is related to another system of thinking that has heavily influenced Japanese culture. This is the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism or *dōkyō* in Japanese. Taoism was first put forward by the philosopher Lao Tzu (604 BCE–?) in the work known as the *Tao Te Ching*. Here he presents the interrelated concepts of the Tao or the way, *kuei-ken* or returning to the root or the source, and *wu-wei* or non-action. Because of the sparely worded and poetic style of this book, exactly what Lao Tzu means by these concepts is unclear. Several passages suggest, however, that the Tao refers to a pre-discursive state of awareness where our mind, when allowed to work of its own accord, exists in harmony with nature.

That the Tao is such a state of awareness is suggested, for example, by Lao Tzu’s claims that although we continually experience the Tao and employ it in our activities, ‘if desire within us be, its outer fringe is all we shall see’.¹⁴ Thus, although this state of awareness is continually with us – a state in which our actions seem to flow of their own accord – if we become filled with and thus distracted by desires, we will lose sight of the core of this awareness. We lose sight of it because distraction interferes with the state of stillness in which the mind is able to flow naturally with the world about me. As Lao Tzu puts it, ‘Who can make the muddy water clear? Let it be still, and it will gradually become clear. Who can secure the condition of rest? Let movement go on, and the condition of rest will gradually arise’ (p. 58). Here awareness, symbolized by water (a common symbol for the Tao), becomes muddied by the activity of desires. Emptying oneself of desires lets the stillness of the primordial awareness (the Tao) appear. This does not mean that awareness ceases activity; for this stillness is achieved only in activity, only when we ‘let movement go on’; that is, when we do not interfere with ourselves.

Lao Tzu employs other symbols from nature to indicate the activity of the Tao. Thus he tells us ‘all things alike go through their activity and then we see them return to their original state. When things in the

vegetable world have displayed their luxuriant growth, we see each of them return to its root. This returning to the root is what we call their stillness; and stillness may be called a reporting that they have fulfilled their appointed end' (p. 59). This idea of 'returning to the root or source' (*kuei-ken*) is the idea of returning to the Tao. This is returning to the primordial state of awareness where we are in harmony with nature.

But how is this done? It is done by non-action (*wu-wei*). Non-action, for Lao Tzu, is the allowing of awareness to pursue its natural course. Non-action is achieved through letting the principles of water and the vegetable world apply to oneself. This is why he says 'the sage manages affairs without doing anything, and conveys his instructions without the use of speech' (p. 48). This does not mean that the sage simply sits and does nothing. It rather means he acts effortlessly by not interfering with his own awareness. Therefore, says Lao Tzu:

The sage holds in his embrace the one thing of humility, and manifests it to all the world. He is free from self-display, and therefore he shines; from self-assertion, and therefore he is distinguished; from self-boasting, and therefore his merit is acknowledged; from self-complacency, and therefore he acquires superiority. It is because he is thus free from striving that therefore no one in the world is able to strive with him. (p. 65)

These Taoist philosophical concepts, which were developed further by later Chinese Taoists like Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu, have an obvious affinity with Shintō notions of nature. Further, these concepts were incorporated by later Taoists into religious versions of Taoism which tended to deify Lao Tzu and other historical figures, and involved rituals and magical practices. These practices, and the Taoist concepts on which they were based made their way to Japan and were integrated into Shintō at an early time. Ueda, for example, argues that by 701 CE, during the period of the Taihō reforms, Shintō rituals performed at the imperial Japanese court were already incorporating Chinese practices and ideas, especially those based on Taoism.¹⁵

Taoist ideas also have an impact in later Shintō thinking, both on their own and through the medium of Buddhism. For example, the medieval Shintōist Yoshida Kanetomo claims that there was an original spirit or *kami* 'pre-dating the diversification of energy' and that 'all phenomena return to that single source', which is basically the Taoist concept of *kuei-ken*. Then taking a phrase directly from Lao Tzu, he

claims that the spirit's divine function was 'softening the glare'.¹⁶ This phrase comes from Chapter 4 of the *Tao Te Ching* and refers to what we must do in order to bring ourselves into harmony with the Tao.

In Kanetomo's version of Shintō ('Prime Shintō' as he calls it) it is clear that this original *kami* is being equated with the Tao.

Another Chinese tradition that had a strong impact on Japanese thought is Confucianism, or *jukyōshugi* in Japanese. This tradition grew out of the ideas of the sixth-century BCE philosopher Confucius and his followers, particularly Mencius. What distinguishes Confucianism from Taoism, is that while Taoism focuses on living in harmony with nature, Confucianism is mostly concerned with social ethics and the human being's relation to others. What Confucius is interested in is the achievement of interpersonal harmony. To this end he advocates the study of the Chinese classics, books that dealt with history, rites, music, divination, and odes or poetry. In this sense Confucius saw himself as merely being a transmitter of tradition.

Yet his purpose in advocating this was because he believed it had beneficial effects on the character. He says in the *Analects*, for example, 'it is by the odes that the mind is aroused, by the rules of propriety [the rites] that the character is established, from music that the finish is received'.¹⁷ Or again, 'without the rites, respectfulness becomes laborious bustle, carefulness timidity, boldness insubordination, and straightforwardness rudeness' (p. 8).

In following these rites or rules of propriety a person follows the proper order of things which, for Confucius, mainly refers to the social order. In a way this proper social order is also thought to reflect the universal order of things. Confucius, however, keeps silent on metaphysical questions, whose pursuit will not lead to what is of true importance, namely, following tradition and establishing character. This is achieved by keeping one's boldness from becoming insubordination, straightforwardness from becoming rudeness, and so on, and having music add the finishing touch.

But in pointing to the effects of such study on character, Confucius is in fact doing more than merely transmitting tradition. He is justifying such transmission by basing it on a theory of character formation, and herein lies his originality.

Confucius pursues his theory of character formation in the *Analects* by describing various sorts of ideal characters and discussing the virtues related to each. It is the discussion of these virtues and their mode of cultivation that makes up the major part of Confucius' teachings. Among the virtues discussed by Confucius are humaneness, reliability

in word, reverence, filial piety or love, brotherly love, and loyalty to one's superiors.

One obvious connection that Confucianism has to Japanese thought is its 'this-worldly' quality. Confucianism turned its focus to human beings and their interpersonal environment and, like Shintō, avoided discussions about transcendent objects, realms, or concepts.

Confucianism and Japanese thought are further related in their reverence for and veneration of ancestors. I have already mentioned how ancestor veneration in Japan was connected to the Shintō belief that the dead were *kami*. This fits well with Confucius' ideas about the importance of filial piety and devotion towards parents and grandparents. For Confucianism, as for Shintō, this devotion and piety carries over to the dead. When asked about filial piety, Confucius replied, 'When parents are alive, serve them according to the rules of propriety. When they die, bury them according to the rules of propriety and sacrifice to them according to the rules of propriety' (p. 23).

Although the exact early relation between Confucianism and Shintō is unclear, as the Shintō scholar Holtom suggests, 'Confucianism strengthened, if, indeed, it did not actually create, early Japanese ancestor worship and gave greater definiteness to the more vague and original conception of *kami*.'¹⁸ Part of the problem is in determining the dates when Confucian ideas entered Japan (Holtom suggests that 405 CE is the likely date for the introduction of the *Analects*). Confucian and Taoist texts were being studied at the imperial court by at least the eighth century. By the Heian period (794–1185 CE) Confucian ideals seem well established in Japan. For example, in the writings of the esoteric Buddhist thinker Annen (841–889 CE) we find his '*Dōjikyō*' or 'Maxims for the Young'. Here numerous Confucian prescriptions, blended with Buddhist and Shintō ideas, are given. Thus Annen says:

In the presence of a superior, do not suddenly stand up.
If you meet such a person on the road, kneel and then pass on.
Should he summon you, comply respectfully
With hands clasped to your breast, face him directly.
Speak only if spoken to; if he addresses you, listen carefully.

Further, he says, 'when the writings of the [Confucian] sages are being read, do nothing indecorous'.¹⁹

The Confucian virtue of loyalty to superiors finds dramatic expression in the Japanese tradition of the warrior, a tradition which in later

centuries became enshrined in *bushidō* or the way of the warrior as practised by the samurai.

About a century before Annen was writing, the Japanese emperors were seeking to gain more political control by establishing a system of feudal armies throughout Japan (an idea which they imported from China).

With the evolution of this military system there gradually appeared the idea that the warrior should show absolute loyalty to the emperor or local lord. This loyalty of the warrior to his lord, even to the point of dying for the lord, is recorded in the various *gunki mono* or war tales. In one such tale, *Taiheiki* or *Chronicle of Great Peace*, the warrior Nitta, who is fighting for the emperor, considers his options in the forthcoming battle: 'If now, upon learning that the enemy has a great army, I should withdraw to Kyoto without fighting even one battle, it would be a humiliation I could not bear. Victory or defeat do not concern me. I wish only to display my loyalty.'²⁰

The depth of the Confucian influence is underlined by the fact that Nitta's comrade-in-arms, Masashige, challenges Nitta's thinking here by directly quoting from the *Analects*. Thus, Masashige replies that Nitta should not be influenced by what people will think of his retreat, but should only consider whether the situation is right for battle. Masashige says, 'thus Confucius admonished Zilu with these words, "Do not follow the lead of one who would fight tigers with his bare hands and ford great rivers on foot, regretting not that he may be killed"' (p. 289).

Nevertheless, Masashige, himself a great hero in Japanese culture, dies fighting for his emperor in a battle he knows he cannot win. Here we are told, 'Masashige, a man combining the three virtues of wisdom, benevolence, and courage [all Confucian virtues], whose fidelity [also a Confucian virtue] is unequalled by anyone from ancient times to the present, has chosen death as the proper way [a Japanese warrior virtue based on Confucian loyalty to one's superiors]' (p. 291). A peculiar blend of the Confucian virtue of loyalty and the Shintō idea of *kami* made its appearance in the Second World War with the *kamikaze* or suicide pilots. The *kamikaze* or 'kami from the wind' showed their absolute loyalty to the emperor by dying for him while being proclaimed as *kami* for their awe-inspiring sacrifice.

A further and major influence on Japanese thought is Buddhism. Buddhism has its origins in northern India where Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha (563–483 BCE) first presented his account of human existence. Central to his view are the ideas of the four noble truths, the chain of dependent origination, and the no-self theory. The four noble truths start with the claim that all life is suffering. Thus, says the

Buddha, 'Birth is suffering; ageing is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering.'²¹ The second truth is that this suffering is caused by craving and selfish desire, while the third truth is that to stop suffering one must stop craving and vanquish selfish desire. The final truth is that in order to vanquish such desires one must follow the eightfold noble path, which encompasses a list of practices such as holding right views, making a right resolve, and entering the right states of concentration and mindfulness (that is, meditation).

By partaking of the eightfold path one is, the Buddha says, able to break the chain of dependent origination, a chain that shackles us to suffering. This chain starts with ignorance, which leads to the idea of self, to craving, and thence to suffering. Through following the eightfold path one is able to overcome the ignorance that gives rise to the idea of self, accept the non-existence of the self, and thus become enlightened and overcome suffering.

These early teachings of the Buddha were preserved in the later Mahāyāna wing of Buddhist thought, but were elaborated and re-interpreted in new ways. Central to Mahāyāna thought is the idea of the bodhisattva, the compassionate individual, who while practising to become a Buddha and thus to overcome suffering also seeks to help all beings to gain enlightenment. In doing this the bodhisattva or Buddha may use *upāya* or expedient means, that is, claims that are not fully true, but nevertheless aid a person to achieve enlightenment.

These teachings of the Buddha, especially as given in Mahāyāna texts like the *Miao-fa lion-hua ching* or *The Lotus Sūtra*, eventually spread to China and Korea and from there to Japan (the earliest extant version of *The Lotus Sūtra* is a Chinese translation). While in China, however, they were blended with Confucianism and Taoism and in due course evolved into distinctly Chinese forms of Buddhism. It was these Chinese forms of Buddhism that were finally introduced into Japanese culture.

Although Buddhism first arrived in Japan in 552 CE, it was not until the Nara period (709–784) that Buddhism began to take hold. During this time six schools of Buddhism became established in Nara, the home of the Japanese court. Yet these schools, mainly representing the early Hīnayāna form of Buddhism, tended to the exclusionist view that enlightenment in this life was only possible for monks who followed an arduous regime of study and meditation. Others would have to wait for rebirth in another life. This, along with their strong connections to the imperial court, hindered the spread of Buddhist ideas in Japan.

Nevertheless, there were several aspects of Buddhism that fitted well with already accepted Japanese ideas. The Buddhist idea that all life is suffering appealed to Japanese sensitivities about the way that sorrow permeates life. This idea is well expressed by the Japanese word *aware*, a word that refers to an emotion of poignant sadness. Early Japanese poets would use this word to express a gentle sorrow over the fleetingness of existence: the changing of the seasons, the falling of a leaf, or the flying away of a bird.

A few years after the close of the Nara period, the schools of Tendai and Shingon Buddhism were founded by Saichō (767–822) and Kūkai (774–835), respectively. It is here that Buddhism began to take its place in Japanese thought. Both Saichō and Kūkai argued for the view that enlightenment in this life was possible for everyone. Saichō did this by simplifying the precepts for those taking Buddhist training and by arguing for the Tendai doctrine of original enlightenment, namely, that all beings are originally endowed with enlightenment. Kūkai did likewise by presenting a variety of esoteric meditative techniques, each of which, when taught by an authentic master, will lead to enlightenment. Such views as these resonated well with what the Buddhist scholar Tamura calls ‘the Japanese tendency to affirm life and this world’.²²

Although Tendai and Shingon Buddhism made the Buddhist concept of enlightenment more acceptable for Japanese ways of thinking, it was in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) that Buddhist thought first became widely disseminated in Japanese culture. This is because the three main schools of Kamakura Buddhism – True Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren Buddhism – not only affirmed the Tendai and Shingon views of the immediate availability of enlightenment but, further, had a rigour and simplicity to their teachings that made them broadly accessible. The success of these schools gave rise to a flurry of activity at Kamakura – the seat of the Shōgunate – that transformed Kamakura into a centre of Buddhist thought.

Pure Land Buddhism, which had its roots in India and expanded greatly in China, centres around the idea of a Pure Land which is free from delusion and in which one can be reborn by having faith in the original vow of one of the Buddhas, namely Amida Buddha. Amida Buddha, or the Buddha of infinite light as he is also called, is claimed in the Indian sūtras to have vowed to save all beings from suffering. He is an ‘other power’ in which people must put their faith. Yet, according to the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist, Eikan, Amida Buddha is really just ourselves. As he puts it, ‘this mind is the Buddha’.²³ But how does one have faith in an ‘other power’ when there is no difference between

oneself and that other power? A possible answer, suggested by Humphreys, is that the other power of Amida can be seen as an 'objectivised or projected version of the Buddha within'.²⁴ Here we can see the Mahāyāna idea of expedient means at work. Although a Pure Land practitioner might think that there really is an Amida Buddha, a separate being or 'other power' in whom she has faith, such a story is in fact just a device or expedient means to get the practitioner to stop interfering with her own awareness and thus liberate herself from her own delusions. In Lao Tzu's words – and here is the connection with Taoism – it is to return to the source.

Originally, Pure Land Buddhism taught that there were several meditative practices that could enable one to be reborn in the Pure Land. But for the Japanese Pure Land master Hōnen (1133–1212), the sole practice was the calling of Amida's name in the mantra '*Namu Amida Butsu*' or 'Praise to Amida Buddha'. For Hōnen, constant effort was essential in the chanting of the mantra. Hōnen's student Shinran (1173–1262) (founder of the True Pure Land sect) diverged from his teacher in asserting that not even constant effort was necessary. Indeed, because of the depth of craving and evil desires, it was not even possible. If one simply had one moment of faith in Amida's vow, said Shinran, one was guaranteed birth in the Pure Land.

Further, although many Pure Land followers before Shinran interpreted the Pure Land as something like the celestial *kami's* plane of high sky – another land in which they would be reborn after death – Shinran argued that there was no difference between the Pure Land and this world. This is because that moment of faith *is* the Pure Land. Thus, says Shinran, 'when a person realizes shinjin (faith), he or she is born immediately. "To be born immediately" is to dwell in the stage of no retrogression. To dwell in the stage of no retrogression is to become established in the stage of the truly settled. This is also called the attainment of the equal of perfect enlightenment.'²⁵

When Zen Buddhism first came to Japan from China in the Kamakura period, it presented itself as being distinct from other forms of Buddhism. It was hailed as a separate transmission outside the sūtras. That is, the Chinese Zen (*Ch'an* in Chinese) masters rejected the authority of the Buddhist sūtras and instead advocated direct experience. This feature of Zen is well expressed in Liang K'ai's famous painting (c. mid-twelfth century) of the Sixth Patriarch of Zen tearing up a sūtra.

The major figure in Kamakura Zen Buddhism is Dōgen (1200–53). Dōgen argued for this 'direct experience' feature of Zen Buddhism by

stressing the importance of zazen or sitting meditation. It is in meditation, says Dōgen, that we directly experience the nature of reality, which is none other than enlightenment itself. This is experienced as a ‘casting off of mind and body’ (Japanese: *shinjin datsuraku*), in which we see that there is no enduring self or mind (Dōgen’s word *shinjin* is written with different characters than Shinran’s word *shinjin* and thus has a different meaning). Some people, however, think that although the bodily form is temporary, the mind is permanent and somehow persists beyond the body. In his ‘*Bendō wa*’ or ‘On the Endeavour of the Way’ section of his major work Dōgen replies to this idea by saying,

how can you say body perishes but mind is permanent? Is it not against authentic principle? Not only that, you should understand that birth-and-death [that is, life in this world] is itself nirvāna. Nirvāna is not explained outside birth-and-death. Even if you understand that mind is permanent apart from the body, and mistakenly assume that the Buddha wisdom is separate from birth-and-death, this mind still arises and perishes and is not permanent. Is it not ephemeral? (Translation modified)²⁶

It is evident that, despite some divergence, there is a strong connection between the ideas of Shinran and Dōgen. Both thinkers reject the notion of transcendence and affirm that ultimate reality – the Pure Land or nirvāna – is to be found in this world.

Another significant thinker who has to be mentioned is Nichiren (1222–82), the founder of Nichiren Buddhism. Nichiren differs from Shinran and Dōgen in that, while they focused their concern on the individual, Nichiren expended much of his energy on social concerns. This was a result of his concern about the several natural and social disasters that were afflicting Japan at the time. He thought that the disasters were occurring because people had fallen away from the true teachings of Buddhism. Thus he attempted to unify Japanese Buddhism by returning people’s focus to *The Lotus Sūtra*. This sūtra, he felt, was the final teaching of the Buddha, with all other sūtras being provisional teachings, and he advocated reciting passages from *The Lotus Sūtra*, especially the mantra incorporating the sūtra’s full title, ‘*Nam myōho rengo kyō*’ or ‘Praise to the lotus of the wondrous law’ – as the path to enlightenment.

However, beneath these differences from Shinran and Dōgen’s view, there lay an essential agreement concerning the nature of enlightenment. The Buddha’s teachings, in Nichiren’s words, ‘mean that earthly desires are enlightenment and that the sufferings of birth and death are

nirvāna. When one chants Nam-myoho-renge-kyo even during the sexual union of man and woman, then earthly desires are enlightenment and the sufferings of birth and death are nirvāna. Sufferings are nirvāna only when one realizes that life throughout its cycle of birth and death is neither born nor destroyed.¹²⁷

The ties between these three major schools of Buddhism – schools that came fundamentally to affect Japanese thought – were appreciated by many subsequent Japanese thinkers. For example, the eighteenth-century Zen Master Hakuin argued that what is essential to gaining enlightenment is seeing into one's own nature. This is only to be achieved by overcoming the grand delusion that one has a self. Hakuin taught the method of *koan* study, that is, the study of an illogical puzzle or word that rational thinking cannot solve. By persisting with the *koan* the student eventually breaks through his or her delusions to arrive at enlightenment. There are, however, numerous ways of overcoming this delusion. Hakuin therefore says, 'so it is with the Way. Whether you sit in meditation, recite the sūtras, intone the *dhāraṇī* [magical incantations], or call the Buddha's name, if you devote all your efforts to what you are doing and attain the ultimate, you will kick down the dark cave of ignorance... The content of the practices may vary but what difference is there in the goal that is reached?'¹²⁸

In addition to the influences of Shintō, Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism on Japanese thought, there were also the influences of Christianity and Western philosophy, although these were both late-comers to Japan and were never widely assimilated. Christianity, for example, which first arrived with missionaries in the late sixteenth century, was seen by the Tokugawa Shōgun as a covert attempt by the West to colonize Japan and after an initial brief expansion, in 1612 Christianity was banned. Shortly afterwards the Christian missionaries were driven out of Japan and the Shōgun made a determined effort to eradicate Christianity. Finally, in 1629 Japan established itself in near total isolation from the rest of the world, cutting itself off from the impact of Christian and other Western ideas. This remained the situation for almost 250 years, until, under pressure from the West, the Meiji government once again opened Japan to foreign contact. At this point, Western ideas began steadily to enter Japan, but what is now known as Japanese thought had, for the most part, already been firmly established. Thus, although Japan again allowed Christian missionaries to seek converts, Christianity never spread widely through Japan – as Confucianism and Buddhism had done earlier – and Christian thinking did not alter or add much to Japanese thought.

It is interesting to note that even among Japanese who consider themselves Christians their idea of being a Christian does not necessarily exclude the possibility of their also practising Shintō or Buddhism. Thus, Mortensen refers to a Japanese student of Kierkegaard he met who 'came from a non-religious environment, but had attended one of the traditional Buddhist temples in Nara. After which he was baptized and lived as a student in a hostel owned by the congregation of the United Church of Japan. Despite his deep involvement in Christian religious philosophy, he supported the erection of a Buddhist pagoda in his home town with pride.' Reflecting on this, Mortensen says, 'One can ask oneself what the concept of faith really means in a society where each individual can believe such a variety of things and where, in many instances, he or she belongs to a certain sect out of considerations for ancestors.'²⁹

Why Mortensen asks himself this is because from the usual Christian perspective, Christianity is the truth and other views that contradict it – for example, views that are atheistic, reject the idea of heaven, or do not see Jesus as the son of a god – are false. Thus from a conventional Christian perspective it does not make sense for someone to claim to be a Christian while at the same time supporting Buddhism and ancestor veneration. In other words, the core of Christianity, which sees itself as being the sole road to salvation, is lost upon the majority of Japanese.

As for Western philosophy, this too made little impression on Japanese thought in general. It did, however, affect Japanese modern philosophy. This is because Japanese universities with philosophy departments – which were both modelled after the West – only began to appear during this period of renewed contact. It is here that Kierkegaard played a decisive role. The reason, as we shall see, is because of the numerous links between Kierkegaard and Japanese thought.

From the overviews just given it should now be evident where these connections lie. For example, subjectivity, a major theme in Kierkegaard's works, is a theme that appears throughout Japanese thought. For Kierkegaard, truth is found in subjectivity because of the meanings that certain events have for us. These meanings are lost when one attempts to take the objective point of view. Likewise, in Shintō thought, the *kami* are often felt in the subjective awe-inspiring quality of various experiences. The experience of the *kami* is lost when the observer takes an objective view.

Thus, were I to try to observe the bamboo grove surrounding a shrine in a detached objective way I would fail to experience the *kami*. However, turning inward and becoming subjective, as Kierkegaard would say, I become aware of the awe-inspiring feature of these entities. I see the

peculiar and almost life-like swaying of the bamboo while the wind gently moves through the grove. (Is this swaying something that the *kamakiri* or praying mantis, itself a *kami*, tries to imitate as it creeps up the branches?) I see the shimmering play of light on the rustling leaves which creates a dance of colour and shade, a dance whose infinite complexity pulls me into a whirlpool of meanings. My sense of the *kami* is only to be found in the subjectivity of my experience. Here truth is subjectivity.

In just this way the experience of *aware* is only felt when one becomes subjective, that is, when one turns to the way in which the world presents itself to one's own subjectivity. The tinge of sadness that I see in watching the blossom fall from its branch is nothing that would enter into an objective account of this event. I only find *aware* when I focus on the meaning that this event has in my subjectivity. Further, as Eshin Nishimura points out in Chapter 4, the notion of human subjectivity is one that lies at the heart of Zen Buddhist thought.

This feature of Zen Buddhism provides the basis for several connections with the ideas of Kierkegaard, connections that are also explored in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. It will be recalled, for example, how in Kierkegaard's account Abraham had no basis on which to decide from whither came the voice that commanded him to kill his child. Was it God? Was it a hallucination? All he could do was choose in faith. This is especially true since the command is an 'absurdity' and, for Abraham, 'all human calculation had long since ceased to function'. This has an obvious link to the Hakuin's notion of *koan* study; for a *koan*, just like the question of whether it really is God who commands Abraham to kill his only child, is an unsolvable problem, a puzzle with no definite solution. The connections between Kierkegaard's idea of absurdity and paradox and Hakuin's idea of *koan* study are examined further by Archie Graham in Chapter 7.

The idea of subjectivity also ties Kierkegaard into a central feature of Shintō (and thus Japanese thought generally), namely, its 'this-worldly' quality. For, as I have tried to show, Shintō's focus is on nature and the empirical world of experience. Kierkegaard's philosophical concerns are also with this world and how it presents itself to us. All of his major areas of inquiry have to do with human experience. Even in the recurring theme of death, his concern is not with death itself, but with the meaning that death has for us or the appropriate way to remember the dead, and so on. Likewise, although Kierkegaard refers often to God, his philosophical concern is always with the belief in God, not with God as something existing beyond the belief. This aspect of Kierkegaard, which

brings him into harmony with Japanese ways of thinking, is nicely expressed by the philosopher Kazuo Mutō who says of Kierkegaard, 'his thought amounts to God without God' (p. 146). Or again, in line with the 'this-worldly' quality of Shintō and of seeing the *kami* in nature, there are Japanese philosophers who understand Kierkegaard's idea of God in just this way. Thus the philosopher Satoshi Nakazato says, 'many researchers claim that Kierkegaard is extremely Christian and does not find God in nature, but that is incorrect in my opinion: on many occasions he has seen or experienced God in nature' (p. 129). The relations between Shintō, especially the modern Shintō thinker Kobayashi, and Kierkegaard, are explored in detail by Makoto Mizuta in Chapter 11.

Kierkegaard's theme of freedom is also one that appears in various places in Japanese thought. In Taoism, both in itself and as it appears in Japanese Buddhism, freedom plays a fundamental role. In the Taoist view of things I experience my freedom by liberating my awareness from the obscuring desires that impede its natural activity. The opaque waters of awareness become clear and my actions now flow of their own accord. Here I experience my freedom in *wu-wei* or non-action. This idea of freedom is, however, somewhat different from Kierkegaard's; for in the Taoist picture I find freedom by letting things happen of their own accord, not by actively moving towards a chosen goal.

Although there is this difference, there is also a deeper relationship. This is because there is an important sense in which the qualitative leap also happens of its own accord. No science can explain what makes the leap take place; for there is nothing that causes it. This is why it is free. In the moment of choice, choice simply takes place. It also happens of its own accord. In this sense, the qualitative leap is *wu-wei*. What happens, however, is that the waters of awareness become muddied with self-deception as we try to interfere with our choices. This does not mean that in self-deception we are not free, but only that we are trying to deceive ourselves into thinking we are not free. As Lao Tzu would put it, we only see the outer fringes of the Tao.

A similar account could be made for Buddhism. In Pure Land Buddhism, for example, one enters the Pure Land when one gives oneself over to the 'other power' of Amida Buddha. What one is doing is simply not interfering with the operation of natural awareness. One gives oneself over to the other power by letting non-action take over. In this sense, Kierkegaard's qualitative leap is none other than Shinran's 'other power'; for the qualitative leap is also an 'other power'. It is something which, having no causal or deterministic ties to previous events, happens of its own accord. Yet just as Amida Buddha is really my own

mind, so is the qualitative leap really my own choice. Where Kierkegaard differs from Shinran, is that Kierkegaard did not have a fully developed notion of a Pure Land, or did not seem to see that the qualitative leap leads to something like the freedom of the Pure Land. This is because his discussion of the leap, especially in *The Concept of Anxiety*, is tied in with the idea of sin and guilt. Shinran is also concerned about evil desires, but he is not concerned with the idea of an 'other power' as something which leads us to have these desires. This, however, is Kierkegaard's concern, and so their paths diverge.

Anxiety is also a theme in Japanese thought, although it appears in a different way. With Kierkegaard, as we have seen, anxiety is something that attends freedom and thus is always there in some form and to some degree. In Japanese thought, however, anxiety is not something that is inevitable in this way. This is because anxiety is not seen as an experience that accompanies all choices. Rather, anxiety is seen, as is usual in the Buddhist tradition, as a form of suffering. And suffering is something that is to be overcome.

That a major goal of Buddhism is to rise above anxiety is attested to by the fact that the Buddha is often depicted as holding his hand in the *Abhaya* mudra, a hand gesture that means 'Have no fear' (fear and anxiety are not typically distinguished in Buddhism). We find an important difference in the way that Kierkegaard and Japanese thought approach the problem of anxiety; for while Japanese thought offers a way to be free from anxiety, Kierkegaard does not. It is true that in the closing chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard gives the appearance of offering a way of escaping anxiety. He cryptically refers to the idea of atonement. But as I have argued elsewhere, no such solution is really given and, further, it goes against his entire theory.³⁰ As Ian Mills observes in Chapter 6, there is an anguish present in Kierkegaard's writing that contrasts with the calmness evident in Dōgen's writings.

In the same way, death, which is a mutual and major concern for both Kierkegaard and Japanese thinkers, is dealt with in related ways. Kierkegaard, as we have seen, feels that death can only be fully understood from within the individual's subjectivity. What this involves is experiencing a fear of death in the awareness of the inevitability of death. Further, this awareness has to be accompanied by the thought that death could come at any time. As Adam Buben shows in Chapter 8 the samurai also feel that one should be aware of death and, in deep subjectivity, accept that it could come at any time. There is an obvious connection here, yet as Buben demonstrates, while Kierkegaard thinks the fear of death should, to a certain degree, be kept in our awareness,

the samurai see the fear of death as something to be prevailed over. This would seem to be a point of divergence.

It is also worth noting that Kierkegaard's concern with death, especially with the idea of how we are to treat the dead, has deep connections with Confucian and Shintō thinking. This is strange because, if there is one particular strand in Japanese thought that would seem to be most distinct from Kierkegaard, it would appear to be Confucianism; for Confucianism is concerned, in a basic way, about the harmony of interpersonal relationships, a concern that seems distinct from Kierkegaard's. Yet even here one can find a connection. As I mentioned earlier, Confucius sees filial piety as being an important virtue, and one that should be cultivated. This piety, he thinks, should also carry over into the realm of the dead. Thus, he tells us that when our parents die we should, 'bury them according to the rules of propriety and sacrifice to them according to the rules of propriety'. This reverence for one's deceased parents also carries over in Confucian thought to a general reverence for the dead ancestors. In like manner, it is also the practice of Shintō to revere the dead and ancestors as awe-inspiring *kami*.

There are several places in Kierkegaard's writing where the dead take on this awe-inspiring quality. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, for example, Kierkegaard describes his walk through a graveyard and the awe that he feels for the dead. Their tombstones are inscribed with 'We shall meet again', and yet they remain quietly in their graves. For Kierkegaard this becomes symbolic of passionate inwardness: to hold fast to your course in spite of having everything against you.³¹ This idea is also expressed in Kierkegaard's idea of the fellowship of the dead, a society of the living who are like the dead in that they are inwardly entombed and cut off from fellowship with the living. In Chapter 13 Masugata explores this idea and its relation to the Japanese Kierkegaard scholar Masaru Otani; someone who saw himself as part of Kierkegaard's fellowship of the dead. Though in both cases the dead become symbols, they are nevertheless venerated by Kierkegaard in a not completely un-Confucian or un-Shintō way.

This link to Japanese ideas about the dead is even more striking in *Works of Love* in the chapter entitled 'The Work of Love in Remembering One Dead'. Here we find Kierkegaard reflecting on the proper way to show love for the departed. As Kierkegaard points out, unlike other forms of love, this is a situation in which there is no possibility of reciprocation. One can only love with unconditional respect and reverence. Kierkegaard no longer sees the dead as symbolic of something else, but here describes feelings for the dead as themselves, and the duty that one has to remember them in this way. Much of what he says is not unlike

the Japanese practice of bowing to the family *butsudan* – a small altar with pictures of the family dead – each time one enters the house.

Turning now to Kierkegaard's theme of despair, the connections with Japanese thought are unmistakable. For Kierkegaard despair is universal; for Buddhism all life is suffering. According to the Buddha, sickness, ageing and death – three of the sights that made him leave home and seek the answer to suffering (the fourth being the sight of a wandering yogin) – are among the unavoidable features of existence that sink us into despair. We grasp at and cling to health, youth, and life and can never accept their loss. But they will be lost. And as we watch the approach of their inevitable impermanence we descend into despair. Here, Kierkegaard presents essentially the same story: despair arises from the inability to become the self the individual longs to become. Translated into Buddhist terms this suffering arises because it is not possible to become the so much desired healthy, young, and deathless being.

The divergence between Kierkegaard and Buddhism would seem to appear when Kierkegaard goes on to claim that the way out of despair only comes through the belief that with God all things are possible. Yet, as I showed, Kierkegaard offers no support for this claim, which is obviously false. However, elsewhere Kierkegaard does suggest another way out of despair. And here his suggestion is supported with argument.

Thus, in an article entitled 'One Lives Only Once' Kierkegaard reflects over the fact that people commonly have a wish that they long to fulfil. A person in this circumstance often believes that the fulfilment of this wish would bring happiness. But, says Kierkegaard, 'imagine such a person on his deathbed. The wish was not fulfilled, but his soul, unchanged, clings to this wish – and now, now it is no longer possible. Then he rises up on his bed; with the passion of despair he once again states his wish, "Oh, what despair, it is not fulfilled; what despair, one lives only once!"' Then, says Kierkegaard, 'it seems terrible, and it truly is, but not as he thinks; what is terrible is not that the wish was unfulfilled, what is terrible is the passion with which he clings to it. His life is not wasted because his wish is not fulfilled, not at all; if his life is wasted it is because he refused to give up his wish.'³² On this point Kierkegaard is in agreement with Buddhism. What Kierkegaard states here is essentially the third noble truth given by the Buddha, namely, that to stop suffering one must give up craving and selfish desire.

With this it should be clear why Japanese philosophers, with their blend of Shintōist, Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist ideas, would find significance in Kierkegaard's ideas. Indeed, Kierkegaard would have fit in remarkably well among the temples of Kamakura. The Japanese

thinkers at Hasedera and Kenchoji temples, would have felt an affinity with his ideas and Tōkai Shōshun, the master at Engakuji temple, might even have accepted him for Zen training. At the very least he would have no longer had to complain, as he did, about being a ‘genius in a market town’. How later Japanese philosophers came upon his ideas, and their responses to them, are the subject of the next chapter.³³

Notes

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6. Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden* [*The Sickness unto Death*] in *Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, 15, pp. 113–14.
7. Kierkegaard, *Enten-Eller* [*Either-Or*] in *Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, 2, pp. 171–2.
8. Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bævan* [*Fear and Trembling*] in *Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, 4, p. 189.
9. Kierkegaard, *Synpunktet for min Forfatter-virksomhed*, in *Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, 18, p. 123.
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31. See James Giles, 'From Inwardness to Emptiness: Kierkegaard and Yogacāra Buddhism', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 9 (2001) 311–40.
32. Kierkegaard, 'Man kun lever een Gang', in *Kierkegaards Samlede Værker*, 19, p. 275.
33. I should like to thank James Sellmann for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

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