Religion in Contemporary Japan

by

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For Rosemary

alluded briefly to this in Chapter 1 when I spoke of the importance of individual interpretation, action and experience in the formulation of religious attitudes, but it is now time to examine this issue more thoroughly, and this will be the focus of the next chapter.

5 Individuals, Ascetics and the Expression of Power

While the religious world in Japan has provided a basis for social harmony, cohesion and belonging, it has also offered ample scope for self-expression and individuality, as the sociologists Sugimoto and Mouer have commented:

> Given the syncretic nature of Japanese religious practices and a tradition of many gods, each individual is able to choose a unique combination of gods and practices to suit his or her own individualistic needs.[1]

This individualistic dimension does not, however, go against the socially harmonising aspects of religion that have been discussed previously but rather stands in conjunction with them. As the example of the Zen priests meditating in the temple demonstrated, the path to awareness is at the same time an inextricably social affair, the meditator who lives as part of a temple community being expected to utilise what he has learned not simply for his own enlightenment but for the benefit of others.

This continuum between the social, everyday aspects of the religious world and its more austere and transcendent expressions in the activities of individual religious practitioners will be a major item of consideration in this chapter, which will examine the roles of such individual figures, the practices they undertake to attain awareness, and their continuing place in the Japanese religious world. It will also start to shed some light on the ways in which the religious world may provide the scope and opportunities for people in Japan to give expression to their feelings as individuals, moving from the social constructs of religion in which their roles and actions are clearly defined, delineated and structured, into more individual areas of expression determined by choice.

This will lead on, in subsequent chapters, to discussions of other areas in the religious sphere which offer scope for self-expression and individual action based on choice and volition. Chapters 6 and 7, for example, will examine activities connected with popular temples, shrines and pilgrimage routes, while Chapter 8, on the

ever-growing legions of new religions and popular cultic practices, will demonstrate just how this scope is increasing in contemporary Japan, providing an almost untrammelled world of action and choice on an individual level to supplement, and occasionally supplant, the social framework of religion that has been dealt with in Chapters 3 and 4.

STANDING OUT FOR SELF AND OTHERS: THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF SPIRITUAL POWER

The religious world offers the individual various means, such as Zen meditation, pilgrimages and the religious practices of the new religions, for self-reflection, development and cultivation. Indeed, it is the realisation of such qualities, which are highly valued and emphasised in Japan not just as means of improving one's own personality but also as ways of making oneself a more valuable social being, better able to contribute to society in general and to those around one, that lies at the heart of all such religious activities and practices. Self-cultivation, as Helen Hardacre has argued, is a central facet in what she sees as the united and coherent world view of the new religions of Japan,[2] and the importance of this concept is stressed by many new religions. Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō, for example, a religious movement founded at the end of the war by the charismatic female Kitamura Sayo, who herself performed many austerities including the repeated recitation of Buddhist chants and long periods of cold-water austerities as part of her own process of self-cultivation, tells its members to 'polish their souls' through spiritual practice, thus developing themselves as individual and social beings.[3] It is not a concept limited to the new religions, however, but one that exists throughout virtually the entire Japanese religious spectrum, found clearly also in, for instance, Zen temple life, asceticism and activities performed at popular religious centres.

At times the notions of self-development and individual expression may come into conflict with the pressures for conformity and the principles of social cohesion that are inherent in Japanese society. To some extent it may be because of the strong group emphasis in Japanese society that the individual tradition is so alive, reacting against the constraints of the former and tempered by its pressures to greater strengths: certainly the two, group and individual, do exist in a state of some friction, the requirements of the one not always sympathetic to the disruptions at times caused by the other. Those who do step outside of group boundaries, whether as charismatic religious leaders or individuals becoming involved in a religious group that cuts across social bonds, have rarely had an easy time in Japan because they appear to go against the tide of conformity and social order. The widely used Japanese phrase *deru kugi ga utareru*, 'the nail that sticks out is beaten down', exemplifies a prevalent social attitude to nonconformity and individuality, making it clear that social forces are on hand to assert conformity and, if required, to suppress any individuality that threatens group norms. Yet this very pressure against 'the nail that sticks out' can conversely strengthen those who have the resolve to do so, intensifying their determination and feelings.

It is certainly one of the most intriguing features of Japanese social and religious history that a society so frequently portrayed as consensus- and group-oriented and with a bias towards conformity and the suppression or sublimation of individuality for the sake of the group, has such a rich and vigorous individual religious tradition of people who have stood out in some way. One of the most constant themes in Japanese religious history has been the continuing emergence of dynamic, charismatically powerful and even apparently miracle-working religious figures who have frequently, by their very natures, upset or challenged social harmony and norms. It is probably also fair to suggest that the religious sphere has been the arena for the expression of such charisma and individuality in a way that no other area of Japanese society, least of all politics, has. A cynic might even argue, at least in contemporary Japan, that a demonstrable lack of personal charisma may in fact be a positive advantage to aspiring politicians!

Such charisma and power is not so much located in and acquired through the formalities of office (even if some of these figures are at the same time priests) as through the pursuit of spiritual disciplines, generally performed outside the normal confines of society. I shall shortly describe some of the practices and settings in which power may be acquired. First, however, I shall look briefly at the social dimensions of spiritual power and of the asceticism that is closely associated with it, for the Japanese religious situation requires more than just acquiring and possessing spiritual, inspirational and charismatic powers. It demands social relevance as well: the ascetic sitting in splendid spiritual isolation on the mountaintop is of no great

value to his/her fellows until s/he comes down to share, mediate and disseminate the power that has been acquired.

In a very real sense, individual religious activists and charismatic practitioners are 'standing out' on behalf of and for the benefit of all those who cannot do so for themselves, acting as a medium through which others may realise their aspirations and needs, or indeed through which they may project those needs and aspirations. The natural concomitant of the accession to spiritual transcendence and awareness through the practice of spiritual disciplines and the realisation of charisma has been the acquisition of some or a number of powers that can be used for the benefit of others. Among the abilities widely considered to be possessed in some degree by powerful religious figures in Japan are the powers of divination and of identifying sources of spiritual hindrance that are preventing individuals from attaining their wishes or that are causing them illness and misfortune, the capacity to exorcise or eradicate those sources of hindrance, and the ability to communicate with the spirits of the dead and transmit their needs to their living kin.[4] On perhaps a less dramatic level, but equally useful, is the ability to give wise counsel and spiritual advice and comfort to others, for ultimately all these powers focus on dealing with other peoples' unease and problems and the ways of counteracting them.

Thus, at core, the abilities, and the role, of religiously powerful individual figures are channelled into helping others to deal with their problems and needs. Helping others is an intrinsic part of helping oneself in the path of spiritual awareness, a notion encapsulated by the Japanese phrase *jiri rita* (literally, the process whereby benefiting oneself helps others). The essential meaning of this concept, and its relevance to the heart of the path of religious practice, has recently been explained by Gojō Junkyō, a noted ascetic practitioner and head of the temple Kinpusenji, a major centre for mountain religious asceticism at Yoshino:

> First reflect on yourself, repent your faults, and correct yourself so as to develop the great and powerful mind of *jiri rita* (this is, at the same time as cultivating yourself, to seek the happiness of other people and to strive for the betterment of others). This involves not only seeking world peace and great harmony among all people: one must also take up with determination the sufferings and wishes of every individual and must save them from their sufferings and help them in their wishes.[5]

Apart from its obvious indication of the human-centred and comprehensive nature of Japanese religion (no individual human need

or wish should be neglected), this statement reflects the underlying view that human activity in the religious sphere can be effective in bringing about the realisation of those needs. Inherently, then, it accepts and affirms both the causative relationship of the spiritual and physical realms and underlines the value and importance of intercession. This drive to help others as well as oneself has always been expressed not simply on the spiritual level but also in pragmatic and civic ways as well. In earlier ages it was often religious figures who were able, through the force of their charisma, to raise funds and mobilise people into action to carry out social welfare schemes and public projects in ways that political and governmental agencies were incapable of doing. Besides mediating between the spiritual and everyday worlds, religious figures and wandering ascetics were often involved in activities of social benefit besides. Janet Goodwin, in talking of such figures of the thirteenth century, has used the phrase 'building bridges and saving souls' to describe these complementary functions of dealing with spiritual and pragmatic needs,[6] while Carmen Blacker, discussing ascetic travellers from the eighth century onwards, has written:

> With the special powers they had acquired through their austerities, they could heal sickness and prophesy future things. They seem also to have been accomplished engineers, for we read of them helping a village to dig a well or a canal, and to build roads and bridges.[7]

Contemporary society has, of course, eradicated the need for religious activists and ascetics to become involved in public building projects, but none the less this tradition lives on in new forms in the lives and actions of many of the charismatic leaders of the new religions. These, besides preaching and spreading spiritual benefits to followers, have galvanised their followers into building religious centres and networks throughout the country, often also developing social-welfare schemes, educational establishments, printing presses and the like, a theme that will be taken up in Chapter 8 when I look at the new religions and, particularly, at Agonshū, its charismatic leader Kiriyama Seiyū and the technological developments and building projects he has set in motion.

holy amulets blessed by Okada and through which he is considered to have mediated and channelled the transformative, purifying and healing powers of Su-God, the central deity in the Mahikari pantheon, to Mahikari followers, thus making accessible to them the powers of spiritual healing and exorcism that once were the province of traditional religious specialists such as the *yamabushi* alone. This 'democratisation of magic' as Davis has termed it[18] will be encountered again in Chapter 8 when I examine the new religions and other contemporary religious developments. A point that is relevant here, though, is that the new religions, which are primarily urban-based, have, through their leaders and the powers and techniques they have passed on to their followers, in many ways bridged the mountain/village dichotomy that made the *yamabushi* so important by bringing the practice and acquisition of power into the cities. This has further eroded the areas within which the *yamabushi* traditionally operate and shifted their focus to the urban world of the new religions where many of the most prominent elements of charismatic religious power are expressed today.

THE DRIVE TO POWER: ASCETIC PRACTICES

It is this ability to stand out and act in a different way from other humans, forming a point of contact between them and the spiritual world and channelling its power to them that serves as the distinguishing hallmark of powerful religious activists. This ability has usually been generated by an inner drive to seek power and awareness, often stimulated in turn by misfortune and need, coupled with the performance of harsh ascetic disciplines. It is quite often the case that such figures have in some way or other been impelled to this path of action through some spiritual revelation, possession, dramatic misfortune or emotional hardship that drives them to extremes. Spiritual strength thus frequently derives from an apparent weakness or from adversity, which is used as a challenge to be overcome and transformed through spiritual disciplines. As we shall see later in this chapter, one of the most striking ascetic figures of contemporary Japan, the Tendai monk Sakai Yūsai, was impelled to the ascetic life after a failed personal life that culminated in the suicide of his wife. The life histories of many of the founders of the new religions also contain stories of misfortunes, weaknesses and sufferings that drive them to the pursuit of religious disciplines and, eventually, to transcendence and spiritual power. This again is a point that will be dealt with in Chapter 8.

A common theme basic to the path of anyone seeking to become a mediating figure or person of spiritual power in Japan, and one which fits well with the concept of going outside normal social boundaries, is a predilection for ascetic disciplines and austerities. Such austerities, generally known in Japanese as *gyō* or *shugyō*, are an intrinsic part of the development of transcendent consciousness. The physical nature of the religious path (and indeed of religion in general in Japan with its 'do it and see' culture) has already been commented on, for example in Chapter 4 which showed that physical actions and disciplines are the means through which Zen practitioners seek enhanced consciousness. Similarly they are at the core of the individual religious path, vitally important as keys to heightened spiritual awareness.

Many kinds of austerities are used to stretch the body to its limits and to break down the barriers of consciousness so as to realise awakening or the acquisition of strengths unknown to ordinary humans. All involve going outside the normal boundaries of society and everyday behaviour in some way or other. Prominent among them are standing under waterfalls, pouring buckets of ice-cold water over one's body, especially in the depths of winter, fasting, intense periods of meditation, incessant walking, isolation and the denial of sleep. Often these various austerities are combined: they are also frequently coupled with the chanting of incantations, *mantras* and other such prayers from the Buddhist tradition, prominent amongst these being the *Hannya Shingyō* discussed in Chapter 2, and invocations from the Lotus Sūtra, one of the most widely disseminated Buddhist texts in the Far East.

All of these austerities have strongly purificatory and exorcistic dimensions: the crushing or punishing of the body through, for example, the action of incessantly pouring icy water over it works to drive or wash out impurities of the mind, removing, or more straightforwardly breaking down, all the barriers, physical and mental, that might prevent the practitioner from achieving higher consciousness and powers. Here of course we are remarkably close to the techniques and practices used in Zen temple life to break down logical barriers and to achieve the 'dropping off of body and mind' discussed in the last chapter. They also serve as a way for the individual to assert his or her own willpower so as to surmount any misfortunes that may have driven them to the austerities in the first place.

The most common of all such austerities are those connected with water. Water austerities (*suigyō*) of various forms are used throughout the Japanese religious world: the *yamabushi* immerse themselves in the Doro river during their mountain pilgrimages to Kumano, the Buddhist ascetics of Hiei stand under waterfalls, and many of the founders of new religions such as Kitamura Sayo include cold water ablutions as part of their religious practices. One core reason for this emphasis on water is its purificatory symbolism and the importance this has as a means of regeneration. The image of Izanagi's bathing after his flight comes to mind yet again here: just as this purification eradicated the pollutions and hindrances surrounding him and helped give birth to new *kami* so too can the practice of water austerities be seen as exorcising the practitioner's spiritual obstructions and giving birth to a new awakening.

One can find waterfalls in numerous religious settings in Japan, in the grounds of temples and shrines and in the mountains. In the Ikoma hills east of Osaka, for instance, an area in which there are numerous religious establishments of all sorts from Buddhist temples to Korean shamanic institutions catering to the Korean ethnic minority of Osaka, to Shinto shrines and small, one-person religious centres and new religious groups, virtually every religious institution has its waterfall, either natural or man-made, which is used for the purpose of performing *suigyō*.[19]

Several of the 88 temples on the Sasaguri pilgrimage route in northern Kyushu have their own waterfalls where anyone may perform such austerities: a guidebook to the pilgrimage even provides an illustrated guide to the practice. One should, it notes, dress in white, which is both the colour of purity and death in Japan, and should purify oneself and the area of the waterfall with salt. This places oneself and the area in the correct state of ritual purity in which to carry out the austerity. Waterfalls are generally associated, in Japanese cosmology, with either (or both) the fiery Fudō or Suijin, a Shinto water deity, and the practitioner is told to invoke them during the practice, the aim of which is to become one with the deity. There is a similar motif in the fire-walking rite of the *yamabushi* mentioned earlier: by identifying and becoming one with the deity who symbolises the element (fire or water) one cannot be harmed or hurt by it. As one invokes the deity, one should become one also with the water, allowing it to permeate one's whole being, a process furthered by drinking a small draught. During the period under the waterfall one should chant Buddhist sūtras and *mantras* (it is suggested that three recitations of the *Hannya Shingyō* are normal), and perform various symbolic gestures associated with the deities. On leaving the waterfall one should clap one's hands and make an offering to the deity.[20]

The idea of becoming one with the figure of worship who forms the focus of the religious action is a common thread in much of the ascetic world and is yet another example of the closeness between humans and the *kami* and Buddhas, and of the lack of clear boundaries between them. The content of such austerities also illustrates, yet again, the overlapping nature of religious traditions in Japan: the above description shows how elements that are distinctly Buddhistic (the chanting of *mantras* and the *Hannya Shingyō*) as well as Shinto (the clapping to the deity and the use of purificatory salt) may exist together in one practice.

The continued existence of *suigyō* can be verified by anyone who is prepared to walk a little in the hills in Japan. Areas where I have come across practitioners doing *suigyō* include the Ikoma hills and the area around Yoshino that has long been associated with the mountain ascetic tradition. One can also see it performed in a slightly different form by ascetics in the Nichiren Buddhist sect who, at the height of winter, perform open-air cold-water ablutions, wearing little but a loincloth and scooping buckets of water over themselves as they and their followers chant invocations from the Lotus Sūtra, the sacred text of Nichiren Buddhism.[21] This activity usually is the culmination of an arduous ascetic retreat lasting 100 days during which the priests undergo a strict regimen of cold-water training to develop the spiritual powers which enable them to act as spiritual healers. There is a strong tradition among Nichirenist priests, particularly those associated with the Nakayama branch of Nichiren Buddhism, of exorcism, casting out spirits from those who think they are possessed, and the cold water ablutions that the priests perform are a requisite training through which to acquire the ability to perform such exorcisms.[22] There is a distinct motif of 'self and others' about this practice for, as the Nichiren ascetic Nagamura Nichihō, who has done this particular austerity five times, has written, the first 35 of the 100 days are devoted to practice for oneself after which the aim and focus turns to the benefit of others.[23]

THE *SENNICHI KAIHŌGYŌ*: THE ASCETICS OF MOUNT HIEI TODAY

Perhaps the most widely known ascetic practitioners in Japan today are the monks at the Tendai Buddhist centre at Mount Hiei near Kyoto who perform the *sennichi kaihōgyō*, or the 1000-day mountain-circumambulating austerity. A great deal of media attention, including books, magazine and newspaper articles, photo-essays, television programmes and full-length films, has been directed to these men in the last decade or so, and this in itself is testimony to the continuing interest in asceticism in contemporary Japan.[24]

This mountain-centred practice, which is just one of a number of ascetic practices performed by priests at Hiei, occurs either as a 100- or 1000-day practice. The 100-day practice is a necessary part of the training for all those who wish to officiate as head priests of temples in the massive Hiei complex, and is done by several priests each year. The more arduous 1000-day austerity, however, is taken on by only a few: there are no records extant of the period prior to 1571 when the whole Hiei complex was burnt to the ground by the armies of Oda Nobunaga, although it is known that the roots of the practice go back as far as the ninth-century Tendai priest Sōō.[25] Since 1571 fewer than 50 monks have done it, an average of one a decade.

The practice is a long and continuing combination of several forms of austerity traditionally practised in Japan, such as standing under waterfalls, fasting, going without sleep, and long-distance walking.[26] To undergo this 1000-day practice the monk (and it should be stressed that those who do this must be ordained and single, although some of those that have completed a 1000-day term had previously been married before turning to the monastic way of life and becoming ordained) has to remain in the Hiei region for a total of twelve years, a period which includes preliminary training and preparation, and has to get the permission of the Tendai authorities before commencing. There can be no turning back, and a symbolic dagger and piece of rope are carried by the practitioner as a reminder that he should kill himself rather than give up. There is an implicit theme of death throughout the practice: like the pilgrim, the monk wears white robes to symbolise that he is dead to the mundane world, standing apart from it and ready and prepared to meet death at any step. Besides the white robes the practitioner's outfit includes a long, narrow hat woven from strips of *hinoki* wood: it is not worn, except during rain, for the first 300 days of practice. He wears straw sandals, many pairs of which wear out in the course of walking, and may only wear *tabi*, traditional Japanese socks, after 300 days have been completed.

The 1000-day practice is basically an extension of the 100-day one, but lasts over a period of seven years. The major focus is on traversing a route through the forests and hills of Hiei every day for 100 days in a row, usually beginning in early spring, a time when there is still snow on the ground at the higher reaches of Hiei. There are two routes that may be followed: that which starts from the temple Mudō-ji is just under 35 kilometres long, and the other, far less frequently done, goes through the Imuro valley area of Hiei and is around 40 kilometres in length. The practitioner commences early in the morning, usually rising around midnight, performing a Buddhist service at the temple and then standing under a waterfall before setting out on the route. Along the way he stops to pray and chant *mantras* at 260 sites which cover the entire gamut of objects worshipped in Japan, from Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines to wayside stone Buddhas, trees, rocks and waterfalls, a graphic reflection both of the inclusiveness of the Japanese religious world and of its perceptions that all aspects of the physical world are settings for the existence of the spiritual. Usually the priest will return to his temple at some time in the morning (it takes six or seven hours to go around the route once the body has become hardened to it) and then has to take part in the normal cycle of temple activities, from performing rites at the temple to seeing and counselling visitors. Normally he will get to sleep around 9 p.m., and will live on sparse and simple food and a minimum of sleep. On one of the 100 days the practitioner will visit various religious sites in Kyoto on a 48-kilometre circuit known as the *kirimawari*, during which he will give blessings to people along the way, a first step in the process of transferring the powers and merits he attains to others.

This basic 100-day practice is, in the 1000-day setting, performed every spring for three years: in the fourth and fifth years it is extended to 200 days, starting in spring and ending in autumn. At the end of the second 200-day term, when he has completed 700 days, the ascetic enters the most stringent phase of all, the *dōiri* (literally, 'entering the hall'), a nine-day total fast in which he must abstain from food, water and sleep: he may not lie down either. This is the crux of the whole practice, a turning point when he will

come close to death and after which the focus of the ascetic's practice is turned from himself to the benefit of others.

In the *dōiri* the monk is secluded in a Buddhist temple, and sits in the lotus posture in front of a statue of Fudō, reciting prayers and invocations as well as conducting Buddhist services. Two attendants stay with him to make sure he does not fall asleep. Each day, at 2 a.m., he leaves the hall to make a 200-metre journey to a well, where he draws water and carries it back to the temple to offer to Fudō. On this journey he is accompanied by several attendants who chant prayers such as the *Hannya Shingyō* and the *mantra* of Fudō. The journey may take only a few minutes on the first day, but by the last days, when the effects of fasting and sleeplessness have become intense, it may take 40 minutes or more.

It is common for people to gather at the temple during the night to offer support to the ascetic as he makes the increasingly arduous journey to the well: when, in October 1984, Sakai Yūsai did the *dōiri* for the second time (having completed one 1000-day period he had decided to do it again), I went to Hiei on three nights to witness the walk to the well, and noted that the numbers of people in attendance grew until perhaps 500 or so were present on the last night when he left the hall at 2 a.m. to draw water for the last time before the retreat ended (with a symbolic bowl of herb tea) a short while later. As the ascetic, by now emaciated and drawn, made his slow and painful progress between the temple and well, the crowd chanted along with his attendants. The whole area resonated with the sound of the prayers, and I was left with the feeling that everyone was willing him forward, seeking to give their strength to him in his austerity. Later, when he emerged, having completed the *dōiri*, people bowed to him and to the power he had acquired which would henceforth be directed back to them.

The ascetic confronts death, and in doing so throws off his former self and is reborn as an enlightened being, becoming one with Fudō. From this symbolic rebirth his practice should be devoted to the help of others. The *dōiri* takes place in the autumn of the fifth year, and in the following spring the ascetic embarks on a new round of 100 days, this time extending the walk to a route of 60 kilometres that takes up to fifteen hours to complete. In the seventh and final year he performs the *ōmawari*, a 84-kilometre route through Kyoto, during which he worships at various shrines and temples in the city and dispenses blessings to and prays for people along the way. This route may take eighteen or more hours to complete, and during this

100-day period the ascetic has to make do on virtually no sleep at all. The last 100 days revert to the original short course, after which the austerity is complete.

Most of those who have done the austerity do not undergo it again, although they have invariably continued to perform various ascetic disciplines and to use their spiritual prominence to further the cause of Buddhism. Hagami Shōchō, who completed the austerity in 1953 (and who had become a monk after the tragically young death of his wife), was a major religious activist who wrote books on Buddhism and travelled widely promoting religious understanding and peace, while Utsumi Shunshō, who completed it in 1979, runs a temple on Hiei and from time to time takes groups of interested lay people along the route and gives talks about the practice.

Sakai Yūsai, however, decided to perform the practice again and, even after his second completion, shows no inclination to give up the harsh disciplines of the ascetic life. He did not become a priest until he was almost 40 years old, after a rather drifting and unhappy life full of business failures, lost jobs and a tragic personal life in which his wife committed suicide. Eventually he turned, in his distress, to Hiei, becoming a novice monk and gradually undergoing various ascetic practices until determining to do the 1000-day practice. During it he was apparently, during the first four 100-day periods, beset by visions of his dead wife and of friends who died in the war, before these troubles fell away.[27]

The life of ascetic practice has suited him well, and he has stated on occasions that he does not ever wish to cease, for the religious path has no end. He has also remarked that this was the only thing he had been able to do properly in his life, and hence was something he ought not to cease. He remains perhaps the most widely known of all contemporary ascetics in Japan, cheerfully receiving the large numbers of people who come to him for advice or simply to talk, and telling everyone of his immense gratitude for the natural world around him. The austerities themselves are something to be grateful for, for they offer the path to true understanding: even the rain that hinders his progress at times is a cause for gratitude, for it means that the crops will grow and that people will have food to eat.[28]

Hiei is not the only place in Japan where such extreme austerities are found, although it is perhaps the most active and well known. The practice of long and absolute fasts may be found at Kinpusenji in Yoshino, where Gojō Junkyō completed a nine-day sleepless fast

in 1974.[29] Versions of the 1000-day mountain practice are extant at several mountain centres including Yoshino and Kubote in Kyūshū, where in 1986 a *yamabushi* named Yamada Ryushin became the first person for 116 years to complete the austerity which involved ascending to the summit of Mount Kubote (a round trip of almost 30 kilometres) to perform offerings, as well as various stringent fasts.[30]

Many of these ascetics have written books on their experiences, and have used them, and their recent fame in Japan, to encourage others to heighten their own religiosity. This need not be in the severe manner of the trained ascetic, but may be of a type more readily accessible to the ordinary lay person. Yamada, for example, talks not only about the ascetic practices of religious specialists such as himself but also relates the concept of spiritual practice or training, *shugyō* to the world of the ordinary lay person. Yamada asserts that *shugyō* or spiritual practice is not something reserved for specialists, writing of it as accessible to lay people in the following terms:

> greeting the ancestors every morning and evening would be good [*shugyō*]. This means greeting the ancestors with words such as 'good morning' and 'good evening', just as you would greet family members with the same greetings. Spiritual practice [*shugyō*] is everywhere in life. . . . there are all sorts of *shugyō* that you can do without having to do such unreasonable things as emulate ascetics who pour water over themselves and fast. For instance, just carrying on quietly with your work is also a great spiritual practice.[31]

By placing spiritual practice and training directly in everyday life Yamada is clearly reiterating, in different terms, the basic Zen concept of enlightenment as an ordinary, everyday experience to be encountered in cleaning the floors as well as in meditation. Implicit in this statement is the idea that religiosity is not in any way divorced or separate from ordinary life but is an intrinsic part of it, accessible to all. This, again, is a strong reaffirmation of the fluid continuities of the Japanese religious world, providing a related means of action for everyone, whether it is the ascetic Yamada standing under waterfalls and ascending mountains, or the ordinary person carrying out his or her job with sincerity or greeting the ancestors correctly. It is also a further affirmation of the mediating role of the ascetic himself, acting as a means of directing the lay person into a religious awareness of his or her own life.

DIVINERS, MEDIUMS AND OTHERS

Besides such powerfully dynamic ascetic figures there are also countless other religious practitioners ranging from diviners to spirit mediums and shamanic healers, all of whom incorporate several of the themes of ascetic practice, often as a result of some affliction or calling, leading to the ability to mediate in some way between human beings and the spiritual world. This often involves the manifestation of a facility to predict the future, communicate with the spirits of the dead, or perhaps identify the spiritual cause of a problem or illness and eradicate it in some way.

It is unclear quite how many diviners, mediums and the like currently operate in Japan, nor how many people regularly seek their counsel, although it is clear that there is, at the very least, a sizeable minority who do so on a casual or regular basis. In its survey on the attitudes of its *danka* cited in Chapter 4, the Sōtō Zen sect asked how many of them visited *ogamiya-san*, faith-healers and practitioners of magical cures. Of the respondents 26 per cent had done so, and when all the interviewees were asked whether they believed what such figures said, 14 per cent responded 'yes', 11 per cent 'no', 19 per cent 'sometimes' and 54 per cent did not answer.[32] This at the very least represents a small but significant minority of people who do go to and take note of such figures outside the formal religious structure.

Often one can find in the areas around major religious centres numerous diviners and *ogamiya-san*. The streets leading to Ishikiri shrine in eastern Osaka are a good case in point, with many independent religious specialists with their own stalls or premises, offering to divine fortunes, predict the future, give counselling about siting the family grave or provide spiritual and occasionally herbal cures for maladies. Whenever I have been to this area, especially at weekends and public holidays, such practitioners appear to attract a good number of clients.

Some of these figures do little more than seek to divine the future, while others lay claim to greater powers, often of the level of those that have established new religions. Indeed, besides the larger new religions of Japan there are countless other small-scale religious groups, usually gathered around one figure of power who caters to the needs of a small following. A recent popular book entitled *Nihon no reinōryokusha* ('People with Spiritual Power in Japan'), which outlines the biographies of nineteen religious figures who are

active in Japan today, is but one of a number of recent books drawing attention to such figures, and it indicates clearly how they are as likely to be found in the hearts of the major cities as in the mountains, for many of those profiled operate in urban centres such as Tokyo and Osaka. While they all have small groups of regular followers they are also actively concerned with dealing with people on a more casual and need-orientated basis.[33]

This is the case also with the *itako* of Osorezan, a group of blind female mediums who are widely known for contacting and relaying words and messages from the spirits of the dead in seance-like rites. The *itako* deserve mention here not just because they incorporate many of the elements that have been discussed so far but also because they have become extremely well known in Japan, as much as anything because they represent the last and dying vestiges of a shamanic tradition that once was very strong in northern Japan. Their first qualification for undergoing the training that is needed to become a medium is their blindness, which marks them out (or selects them) for this role, but they also need to have a long period of arduous ascetic training involving a long apprenticeship to another medium, during which they learn the techniques of summoning the spirits of the dead and undergo long periods of intense asceticism, especially of cold-water ablutions, which hone their abilities to do this.

Osorezan, which is located at the very northern tip of the main island of Honshū, is a wild and desolate mountainous and volcanic area of hot springs and barren rocks with sulphur fumes seeping out of the ground. In Japanese folklore it has long been regarded as a place where the souls of the dead may return to earth to be contacted by the living, a view clearly endorsed by its eery atmosphere which readily conveys an other-worldly impression. Especially during the two festivals for the dead held there each summer, at which the *itako* gather, it is a place of great activity. Besides the *itako* there is a Buddhist temple run by priests of the Sōtō sect, at which memorial services may be said for the souls of the dead. Every summer busloads of visitors make the journey there for such a purpose, consulting the *itako* to find out what the dead require in terms of offerings, memorials and the like, and what they have to say to the living, and going to the Buddhist temple to carry out the requisite memorials and to acquire talismans dedicated to the dead from the Buddhist priests who here, as elsewhere, are the agency for dealing with and memorialising the dead. This is an

interesting example of how the established and popular folkloric traditions may interact and exist in tandem: people visit the *itako* and the temple as two interlocking parts of the process of contacting, finding out the needs of and memorialising the dead.

The established tradition, on the surface at least, appears to distance itself from this interaction and from the *itako*, who are seen through official eyes as representing something akin to superstition: one might also suggest that their supposed abilities to communicate directly with the dead pose an implicit threat to the role of the Buddhist priests, who may find themselves carrying out formalised rites on behalf of the dead as a result of what the *itako* have said. A notice at the temple informs people that the *itako* have been allowed to use the temple grounds during the festival because of tradition and historical circumstances, and that they really have nothing to do with the temple and its practices. However, the notice, at least in 1981 when I saw it, was small and placed in a dark corner where few would notice it. Official disapproval fades into the background when confronted with popular reality and with the ways that people utilise both the formal and informal religious traditions as a coherent whole. In reality, the two, temple and *itako*, are linked together in the practices of those who visit Osorezan.

It is clear that the *itako* depend less on personal power than on the processes of theatrical drama. When approached to contact a dead person's spirit the *itako* go through a standardised ritual of chanting, rattling their long rosaries and relaying messages from the dead in a rather formalised response. Although it is generally considered that they are generally following a rather formatted procedure (as Blacker has pointed out, the questions and answers they give are somewhat standardised[34]), when the theatrical nature of their performance is set against the background of the rather exotic atmosphere of Osorezan and placed in conjunction with the emotional states of some of those who call on them, they clearly make some form of impact. When I was at Osorezan in 1981 I was struck by the numbers of people who managed to find meaning in what the *itako* were 'relaying' to them from their dead relatives, and recall more than one person in tears at what was said, although it should also be mentioned that I also met people there who affirmed that they had seen little more than a ritualised drama. Performance in itself is, of course, a form of therapy, and the drama of the rite, with its rattling of rosaries, its chants and its rather exotic performers, was enough to satisfy most, if not all, of those who called

on their services. The *itako*, at least symbolically and in the minds of those who visit them, act as bridges and mediators between this and other worlds, thus acting in much the same way as other religious figures already encountered in this chapter.

NOSTALGIA, REVIVAL AND THE IMAGES OF ASCETICISM

The *itako* represent a rather faded and almost extinct form of spirit mediumship in Japan. Indeed, it is probably as much as anything because these are the last vestiges of what was once a far stronger tradition that they continue to attract a large amount of attention. The busloads of people who go to Osorezan are evidence of this: a recent estimate suggested as many as 100,000 people now visit Osorezan during the two festivals each year.[35] There is, in general, a great amount of interest in all forms of asceticism and figures of power in Japan today. Books such as *Nihon no reinōryokusha*, mentioned above, can be found in large numbers in Japanese bookshops, while the numbers of people visiting Osorezan, turning to the charismatic leaders of new religions or showing an interest in the performances of the ascetics of Mount Hiei, are indications that the highly motivated and driven individual religious figure remains, even in the midst of modernisation and the changing patterns of Japanese society, a figure of significance and interest. The ascetic and individual religious traditions of Japan with their deep roots in Japanese religious history and their emphasis on harsh physical austerities as a means of attaining awakening and spiritual powers to be used for the benefit of others have not been displaced by modernity and contemporary change. In fact they have probably been stimulated and encouraged by them: certainly the development of the modern media has helped make their practices and messages more widely known than ever.

The interest that is displayed in asceticism is often tinged with nostalgic nuances, chiefly because such asceticism and the underlying concepts it involves represent a vital part of Japanese cultural history and because they thus represent the idea of a strongly rooted and continuing sense of tradition, of cultural roots and hence of identity in a society and age that continues to undergo rapid changes. Thus one full length film shown widely in Japan in the mid-1980s, which was entitled *Yomigaeru: Tōtō* (with the English

sub-title 'The Eastern Pagoda-Phoenix of Mount Hiei'), focused on two events: the rebuilding of one of the pagodas of the temple in traditional style using no modern materials, and the performance of the 1000-day practice by Utsumi Shunshō. The juxtaposition of these traditional images, especially of the ascetic clothed in traditional white against the modernised background of contemporary Japan, was used to great effect to suggest that somehow the former, representing the traditional, held more depth than the latter with its inherent modernity, and to impart the message of implicit revival inherent in the film's title. Two commentators on the film reflected these nuances with similar remarks in a booklet published to accompany the film: the Buddhist academic Nakamura Hajime wrote that the film should be sub-titled 'the revival of the Japanese spirit', and Matsumoto Kenichi stated that the ethos of Japan was to be found in the traditional form of the ascetic and his white robes rather than in the westernised background against which he stood.[36]

The nostalgic feelings expressed here are elements in a wider and more general revival of interest in traditionalism in contemporary Japan, a revival that of necessity must be seen in relation to the rapid tides of modernisation and the intrusion of Western influences in Japan. These again are issues that will be commented on more fully later in this book. What is of interest in relationship to the present chapter is the ways in which both Nakamura and Matsumoto projected their views and feelings on to and through the figure of the ascetic who thus, in his practice, becomes more than a medium through whom power may be disseminated. In performing his *gyō* he comes to represent, and even be a substitute for, the wishes, feelings and needs of others. In acting out his own struggle for awareness he becomes a vessel and a means through which others may reflect and project their own feelings and emotions. This is further affirmation of the ways in which the individual religious practitioner, in the very act of standing apart from and following a way of life that is antithetical to the normal, remains at heart an intensely social being, pointing the way to self-expression and individuality while mediating the qualities thereby attained to others. This not only reiterates many of the basic themes of individual practice discussed at the beginning of this chapter, but shows the extent to which these themes, so basic to Japanese religious history, continue to be alive and relevant in Japanese society today.

17. The obligation to train a priest to succeed one is inscribed in Article 28 of the sect's rules: making one's son that successor is the easiest (and for many the only) feasible option in an age where there are few outsiders entering the priesthood. The question of the hereditary priesthood is a contentious one that cannot easily be resolved. I have friends who are priests who condemn the system because they think it weakens the vocational elements and makes priesthood into a business, while others who have grown up in temples consider it to be a good system because it means the priest will have been raised in a temple environment and thus be extremely suited to the position.
18. See Reader (1986) pp. 14–5.
19. Sōtōshū shūseichōsa iinkai (ed.) (1984) Appendix, pp. 23–7.
20. Ibid., Appendix, p. 18. Kyburz (1987) p. 135, notes that none of the villagers that he asked (some 50 or so) knew what sect they belonged to.
21. For a full description of this process see Ooms (1967) pp. 271–8; and Smith (1974) pp. 69–114.
22. Ooms (1967) pp. 275–6, suggests that the one left at the grave to decay symbolises the body and the one at the *butsudan* symbolises the soul.
23. Smith (1974) p. 85.
24. Sōtōshūshūmuchō (ed.) (1987) p. 106. The percentage discrepancy is because a small number (just under 4 per cent) went on beyond 100 years and about 24 per cent ceased before the 33rd.
25. *Mainichi Daily News*, 9 March 1989.
26. *Shūkan Asahi*, no. 11/4 (1988) pp. 13–5.
27. I am aware this is something of an oversimplification as the practices of ancestor worship and the customs of the household itself vary from region to region, and also because many of these customs themselves are in a state of flux in contemporary Japan. None the less, this description, which is based on Takeda (1976) pp. 119–27, is useful in that it serves to show the extent and nature of the changes that are taking place.
28. Smith (1974) pp. 152–86, esp. p. 174.
29. Kōmoto (1988) pp. 39–50.
30. Wisewell (1988) pp. 373–4.
31. I have commented on some of these themes in Reader (1985) and (1989) pp. 10–15.
32. See Smith (1974) pp. 115–46, esp. p. 140–6.
33. *Asahi shinbun*, 15 February 1987, p. 1.
34. See, for example, Bukkyō bunka kenkyūkai (ed.) (1987a).
35. The Revd Oda Baisen of Tōganji in Nagoya informed me of a temple parishioner whose illness was divined as being the result of spiritual hindrances caused by an inappropriately sited ancestral grave: the family concerned had a new grave constructed as a result. I have been told of many similar cases by friends and acquaintances, and have since the mid-1980s picked up several leaflets from diviners and from gravestone manufacturers asserting that misfortunes may accrue from wrongly sited or constructed graves.
36. Kōmoto (1988) pp. 43–7.

37. On graveyard problems see Kōmoto (1988) pp. 43–7; Weatherall (1989) pp. 66–8; Matsumoto (1989) pp. 39–41.
38. Information taken from a pamphlet published by the Hanshin Company and put through my letterbox when I lived in Japan.
39. For instance, Rokugatsu Shobō publishes the quarterly magazine called *Reien gaido* ('Cemetery Guide') which gives information on the latest cemeteries, has short articles about aspects of caring for the grave, advertisements for graveyards and other such information.
40. The article was by Rick Kennedy in the *Japan Times*, 15 March 1987, p. 15.
41. Sōtōshūshūmuchō (ed.) (1987) pp. 2–3.
42. In Reader (1986), esp. pp. 12–4 and 24–5, I have discussed this issue, basing my remarks on the findings of the comprehensive survey published in Sōtōshū shūseichōsa iinkai (ed.) (1984).
43. The principal of these is *Zen no kaze* (subtitled in English *Zen Forum*, although no English appears in the text), an annual magazine which was first published in Sōtō in 1981. I have described this and other such publications in Reader (1985) pp. 44–5.
44. This short tract has been included in various Sōtō publications, including Sōtōshūshūmuchō (ed.) (1981a) p. 4, and (1981b) pp. 28–9 (the latter with an added commentary).
45. For a fuller exposition of the nostalgic imagery in Sōtō literature see Reader (1987a) pp. 294–8.

Notes to Chapter 5: Individuals, Ascetics and the Expression of Power

1. Sugimoto and Mouer (1986) pp. 199–200.
2. Hardacre (1986) pp. 11–21.
3. Tenshō Kōtai Jingūkyō (ed.) (1954) emphasises how she polished her own soul and encouraged others to do likewise: see, for example, p. 19.
4. The interrelated themes of ascetic practice, the powers that accrue from this and the ways in which these are used are discussed thoroughly by Blacker (1975), which remains very much the best account of the whole topic of individual practice and shamanism in Japan.
5. Gojō (1983) p. 47.
6. Goodwin (1989b) pp. 137–49.
7. Blacker (1984) p. 596.
8. See Reader (1988b), esp. pp. 53–8.
9. On the development, practices and activities of the *Kōya hijiri* see Gorai (1984).
10. See Reader (1987b).
11. See Imai (1981) pp. 131–44, where she, a journalist sent by her newspaper to travel some of the Shikoku route and write about it, relates miracle stories told her by fellow pilgrims. Shikoku hachijūhakkasho reijōkai (ed.) (1984) is a collection of experiences of the

pilgrimage, including numerous miracle stores, told by various pilgrims, pilgrim guides and priests.

12. Blacker (1975) (see above, note 4) provides a comprehensive description of the richness of this tradition in historical and practical terms.
13. Few people go all the way from the first station now as a new road and regular bus service convey people up to the fifth. On the issue of mountains in general see Hori (1968), esp. pp. 141–79.
14. A good description of this pilgrimage is to be found in Swanson (1981), while the summer 1989 edition of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* concentrates on Shugendō, especially in historical terms, and contains many useful articles. Miyake (1971) is a standard reference work on Shugendō rituals in which he describes (pp. 110–20) a Shugendō version of the *yutate* rite described in Chapter 3. Miyake (1983) is a short and clear general outline of Shugendō rites and pilgrimage accompanied by an excellent photo-essay by Yano Takehiko (pp. 91–126).
15. Blacker (1975) pp. 248–51, describes various Shugendō ascetic feats including *hiwatari*.
16. See the devastating comments in Blacker (1975) pp. 295–7.
17. Numata (1988) pp. 4–86.
18. Davis (1980b) p. 302.
19. Shūkyō shakaigaku no kai (ed.) (1985) pp. 27–30.
20. Tanigame (ed.) (1986) pp. 104–5.
21. Descriptions and photographs of this austerity can be found regularly in *Chūgai Nippō*, for example 15 and 24 February 1988. Blacker (1975) pp. 302–3, also describes such Nichirenist asceticism, while an illustrated commentary on such practices is given in Tanigame (ed.) (1985) pp. 95–106.
22. Blacker (1975) pp. 301–14 describes such exorcistic practices at two separate Nichirenist temples.
23. Nagamura's comments are reported in Tanigame (ed.) (1985) pp. 104–5.
24. One full length film, *Yomigaeru: Tōtō*, directed by Tabata Keiichi in 1983, and one major documentary, *Gyō*, by Wazaki Nobuya in 1979, have been shown in recent years in Japan: each follows the path of one of the ascetics through the practice. TVC Yamamoto (ed.) (1983) is a collection of essays on the practice and the film itself. Books by the ascetics about the practice and their experiences include Hagami (1971) and Mitsunaga (1973), while those about the practitioners include Wazaki (1979), Shima (1983), and Hironaka (1985) pp. 70–92. In English, Stevens (1988) contains general information on the practice, short biographies of some of the ascetics and some good photographs, while Rhodes (1987) provides a thorough discussion of the practice and its meanings.
25. For historical details I have based my remarks on Rhodes (1987).
26. The description of the practice given here is based on the sources and films cited in note 24 and on my own visits to Hiei.
27. Stevens (1988) p. 126.
28. When I talked to Sakai in September 1984 he spoke along these lines: similar words were used in the documentary *Gyō* (see note 24).

29. Gojō (1983) pp. 36–43, describes this fast.
30. Yamada (1988) is a description of austerities, including the 1000-day practice, performed at Mount Kubote.
31. Ibid., p. 218.
32. Sōtōshū shūseichōsa iinkai (ed.) (1984) Appendix, p. 31.
33. Ōishi (1987).
34. Blacker (1975) pp. 160–1.
35. This estimate is given in Fitzpatrick (1989) p. 43.
36. Nakamura (1983) p. 6; Matsumoto (1983) pp. 32–3: see also my comments on these remarks in Reader (1987a) pp. 287–303.

Notes to Chapter 6: Sites and Sights

1. See Grapard (1988) and (1982).
2. Though there is a Buddhist bias to the origins and nature of *engi* their nature, structures and themes have been assimilated also by Shinto: see Sonoda (1988c).
3. This myth, an English version of which is found in Rugola (1986) p. 144, is described in pamphlets available at the temple.
4. My account here is based on leaflets obtained at the shrine.
5. This simplified version of the legend is given in Rugola (1986) pp. 138–40; a far longer and more complex version is given in Enkyōji (ed.) (1968) pp. 1–11.
6. Naritasan (ed.) (1981) pp. 87–91.
7. This information is based on an interview with the Revd Yoshii at the Kōrien temple on 28 October 1988. The *engi* and the story of the transmission of the statue are described on a large billboard at the temple.
8. The advertisement cited in Chapter 2 concerning the Kannon in Mie is a good example of this, as are the posters displayed throughout Kyoto by Jishu shrine (which will be discussed later in this chapter as a centre for would-be lovers).
9. Kōdansha (ed.) (1981).
10. Jishu shrine leaflet (undated but available at the shrine). Interestingly the shrine publishes an English leaflet which does not contain these words.
11. These remarks are based on several visits to the temple between 1986 and 1988. An outline of this temple appears in Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) pp. 138–42.
12. Ibid., p. 182.
13. This comment is based on a brief survey of the *ema* there on 15 November 1987.
14. See Reader (1988b) and also below, Chapter 7.
15. Rugola (1986) and Sawa (1970) both discuss the art treasures of Saikoku in some detail.
16. See Foard (1982).
17. These remarks are based on observations and interviews at Saikoku temples between November 1986 and October 1988: many people appear to have taken several years to do the whole route.