

Minoru KIYOTA, *Gedatsukai: Its theory and practice*. Los Angeles and Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1982. 132 pp.

The Gedatsukai, a Shinto-Buddhist syncretist sect founded in 1929 as a branch of Shingon esoteric Buddhism from which it later broke to become an independent movement, is one of the most interesting of Japan's new religions from a doctrinal and historical point of view, and Professor Kiyota's slender little volume seems to me just right for bringing it to the attention of a wider audience of Western scholars interested in the religious phenomena of contemporary Japan. The book is neatly arranged, amply documented with English and Japanese sources, economically written, sympathetic yet critical, and sensitive to the broader social context within which such movements flourish and to which they must answer.

Kiyota divides his study into three descriptive chapters and a reflective epilogue. The opening chapter reviews the historical background of Japanese Buddhism, focusing on the rise of Shingon Buddhism. With all the skill of one familiar with the details of that complicated story, Kiyota selects his material with an eye to the tension between the elitist and political dimensions of Buddhism and its particular appeal for the common folk. While sharply critical of the alienation of Buddhism from its noble aims of being a truly universal religion, he shows respect for its ability to adapt to the religious questions of both a privileged aristocracy and an exploited mass of people steeped in the rich folk traditions of Japan.

The second chapter treats the roots of Shinto in the agricultural life of old Japan and helps explain the impact that Buddhism made when it arrived from the continent in the seventh century. In noting the way the Japanese shaped and personified their deities to make them accessible to everyday life, Kiyota hazards the view that the basic intent, if not the actual theory, of *honji-suijaku* (which he prefers to characterize as a principle of "popularization" rather than "assimilation") must have been present from the very start. He does not see this adaptation merely as a strategy devised by religious leaders to promote Buddhism, but as a testimony to the "skill-in-means" with which Buddhism is able to contextualize the Dharma. His approach to syncretism here is positive and meant to distinguish it from the simpler and more superficial eclecticism, of which there are examples enough in the world of Japanese religions.

The lengthy third chapter details the theory and practice of the Gedatsukai. After a brief account of the life of its founder, Okano Seiken, and his familiarity with folk religion (and particularly Shugendō), Kiyota lays out before the reader the iconography of the Sacred Ground in Kitamoto where Okano is said to have

received the revelations that led to the founding of the sect and where the principal deities of the Gedatsukai are enshrined. From there he proceeds to isolate the various elements that were synthesized to give shape to the doctrine of the sect. The central deity, Mahāvairocana, comes from Shingon whence it traces its ancestry back to a Tantric sutra from the mid-seventh century. A personification of the Dharma that Shingon had raised to the stature of a deity, Mahāvairocana is seen by the Gedatsukai as a synergistic force that pervades the universe and serves as the theoretical and practical basis for man-Buddha integration. It combines qualities drawn from folk religion (hence its name, the “Sun Spirit”) and from the Mādhyamika concept of emptiness or *śūnyatā*. The liberation (*gedatsu*) of the human ego from the ignorance that impedes the fruition of the “seed” of Buddhahood that are planted in all living things is seen to comprise two movements: from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa*, and from *nirvāṇa* to *saṃsāra*. The bodhisattva ideal that this expresses—that personal enlightenment is dependent on the enlightenment of all beings—is of course fundamental to Mahāyāna Buddhism, but the expression it is given in the Gedatsukai shows the strong influence of Shingon once again. The theory of knowledge that underlies this ideal, Kiyota shows clearly, is drawn from the Mādhyamika understanding of *tathatā* (reality “as it is”) which the human mind is innately equipped to know. All of this explains the particular importance of the *Heart Sutra* in the formation of Gedatsukai doctrine.

The two pillars of practice, the *kuyōto* rite of purification and *shugyō* meditation, stem from the Yogācāra tradition, the latter heavily influenced in turn by Shingon’s practice of *kaji*, which aims at a total physical, vocal, and mental union of man and Buddha. Both of these involve doctrines of the spirit world for which Gedatsukai has developed its own vocabulary. As Kiyota shows, this does not deny the Buddhist repudiation of a personal soul, but draws attention to a vital force that lies beyond ordinary perception and governs human destiny, and which is variously manifested in this world. While, theoretically, the spirit world is understood to portray psychic states, some note surely needs to be taken of literal belief with which it is embraced by the common householders who make up the vast membership of this lay organization, and hence the tendency for practice to turn into the exploitation of the many by the few. Kiyota does not enter into this question, but does note in concluding his description that the Gedatsukai is experiencing the need to keep up with the growing sophistication of its adherents and make adjustments in both its theory and practice.

Kiyota’s own views come out most clearly in the critical epilogue. There he argues against the elitism that has taken over Japanese Buddhism as a “betrayal of lay Buddhism,” whereas the flowering of the new religions are closer to the original Buddhist ideal. (Attention is also given to attempts to relate Buddhism radically with social movements during the postwar upheaval in Japan.) At the

same time, he observes that “since established Buddhism has no clear function other than to perform funeral rites and memorial services, and the new religions are dedicated to curing the sick and realizing secular benefits”—a polemic exaggeration, of course—both of them are related to folk religion, which continues to be a powerful force, perhaps the single most powerful force, in Japanese religiosity. This contains a danger and a promise. The danger is that religion will forfeit its proper ends for the sake of its own or its members’ material well-being; the promise is that by keeping rooted in the living reality of modern men and women they may contribute to what Kiyota calls “a new socio-religious configuration of man which transcends national and ethnic boundaries.” It is in this context, he advises, that the Gedatsukai should carefully reexamine its practices.

A translation of the *Heart Sutra* and other selected relevant texts forms a helpful appendix, and a glossary of Chinese characters placed at the end so as not to clutter up the text is to be counted as an added blessing. One would have wished, perhaps, for more details on the actual practice of the *kuyōto* rite (the information on the *shugyō* meditation is most interesting), and some indication of the size and composition of the membership. Aside from a half dozen proofreading oversights and two omissions from the glossary, my only other complaint is that the cover the publishers have supplied does not seem suited to the content: the glossy print and colored lettering give it the look of much of the promotional literature that Japanese religions distribute to the West, and not that of the respectable piece of independent scholarship that it is. At any rate, Buddhist Books International is to be commended for publishing this work, and will I hope be encouraged to support other similar studies of the new religions of Japan.

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