

Takeshi UMEHARA, *The Concept of Hell*. Translated from the Japanese by Robert Wargo. Tokyo: Shueisha Inc., 1996. 247 pp. ¥3,500 cloth. ISBN 4-08-774220-2

TAKESHI UMEHARA'S *The Concept of Hell* is an interesting study of the concept of hell in Buddhism, in particular Japanese Buddhism and culture. Umehara also analyzes the critical role that Buddhism has played throughout Japanese history and how in his opinion the Buddhist view of hell has deeply affected the development of Japanese society. A secondary purpose of Umehara's work is to use the concept of hell to demonstrate that Japanese literature from the Heian era to the present has been strongly influenced by such Buddhist ideas as suffering and redemption.

Umehara divides his study into two parts. The first section deals extensively with the philosophical and intellectual history of the concept of hell, how it originated within the Buddhist tradition, and how it changed as Buddhism moved from India through China to Japan. The second and most interesting part examines various representative works and authors of Japanese literature to determine the extent to which the concept of hell has affected the Japanese literary tradition. The six chapters in the second section include studies of two early works, *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of the Heike*, and lengthy analyses of the writing of Zeami, Chikamatsu Monzaemon, Miyazawa Kenji, and Dazai Osamu.

Umehara commences his study with a contrast between the Christian and Buddhist concepts of hell:

The Christian concept of hell is strongly tied to an eschatology that posits a final day of judgement, when humans will be divided into those who will be allowed into heaven and those who will be sent to hell. Those who have committed crimes and persecuted the Christians will be thrust into hell...there is both a strong sense of eschatological finality and the notion of meting out punishment for the evils of this world....

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism does not posit an end to history but conceives of history in terms of an endless cycle, and so the punishment meted out for evildoing in the Buddhist scheme is much lighter

than it would be in Christianity. Thus the sense of guilt and fear of punishment are also less intense in Buddhism.... Mahayana Buddhism has a very strong realistic component to it. Hell is not so much seen as a real place where one goes after death as something that exists in the human heart. In this belief system, hell is no longer something that appears with the day of final judgement...or even simply a place where one goes upon death.... [I]t is something that exists in the actual world, within the human heart. Thus, hell will continue to exist in the real world as long as humans exist. (pp. 18–19)

Umehara argues that although the ideas of heaven and hell are closely inter-related in Western thought, the concept of hell plays the predominant role in the theology of every Buddhist sect and is immediately tied to human life while the idea of paradise as a destination after death only appears in Japan with the Pure Land sects.

Umehara stresses that although the historical Buddha's teaching was thoroughly ethical and lacked any pronouncements about a hell full of suffering and agony, there is an implicit connection with the concept of hell. "If one considers the present world to be a world of suffering, how could one refrain from going on to conceive of a world where suffering has been purified and objectified—a hell?" (p. 26). According to Buddhism all living beings, including humans, exist in one of six worlds ranging from hell to the domain of the gods. Even the fifth world, the human realm, is nothing more than a world of illusion or deception. Taken as a whole, these six worlds are realms of negation and suffering. Hell is not something far off in the distance; it actually exists right here in each of our hearts.

Umehara argues that the Mahayana tradition and the Tendai school in particular have had a profound impact on Japanese thinking, strongly influencing all aspects of culture from daily life through literature and the arts. Tendai thought directs its focus on a philosophical system of ten worlds ranging from purity (Buddhahood) to absolute evil. These ten realms (*jikkai*) are said to exist simultaneously in every being, implying that even the most saintly monk is capable of profound evil and that an evil person contains the potential for virtuous conduct.

Therefore, Mahayana tradition offers two distinct facets: it focuses on the dark side of life and yet offers the potential for joy as well. Buddhism's contribution to Japanese culture, therefore, is a shift in thinking from the more ancient Japanese worldview that was optimistic and life affirming. In Buddhism, "the Japanese...were presented with a dialectical philosophy weaving together negation and affirmation. They were introduced simultaneously to a pessimism that saw life in terms of suffering and an optimism that preached the joys of eternal life" (p. 32).

Umehara contends that this Buddhist worldview and its preoccupation with the concept of hell have dominated Japanese thought from the Heian period through the present. "Despite the outward rejection of the religion [in the modern era], Buddhist sentiments are still very much alive in the hearts and minds of the people. Accordingly, writers who ventured to peer deeply into the human soul were often forced to confront the hell they found

lurking in their own hearts” (p. 186). Today, notes Umehara, it is impossible to discuss the development of Japanese sculpture or painting without taking into account the Buddhist influence.

Umehara proposes as a hypothesis that there are three basic concepts that have influenced the development of Japanese intellectual history: life, mind or heart (*kokoro*), and hell. “The Japanese have embraced...philosophies that affirmed the power of life and those that have concentrated on life’s darker aspects” (p. 41), but it is the philosophy of mind or heart, wherein the potential for both good and evil exists, that unites them as one.

The most fascinating aspect of Umehara’s study are the six lengthy chapters that portray the concept of hell in Japanese literature. He contends that most of Japan’s great writers from the Heian period to the present and many of the masterpieces of Japanese literature are all linked together by their common fascination with the hellish. Because of various differences in temperament, historical conditions, and personal experiences, each of these writers has created a hell unique in flavor, but nonetheless there is a common thread, the notion of human suffering and capacity for evil, that binds them all together. Umehara contends that since classic literature is a reflection of everyday life in each period, the concept of hell and the struggle with evil have permeated every aspect of Japanese culture since the Heian period.

Umehara introduces the section on literature with a study of various characters in *The Tale of Genji*. His portrait of Lady Rokujo, who loves the noble prince and is jealous that he forsakes her for others, is of a woman of “great determination and self discipline” (p. 116) who suppresses her jealousy, but because her heart beats with a passion of love that has no outlet, she on occasion explodes in a frenzy of violence to hurt those women who receive Genji’s affection.

Umehara contends that characters like Lady Rokujo exist in most of the classics of Japanese literature through the present and certainly in all the writers discussed in this book:

Rokujo is certainly the type of person who would be consigned to the fires of hell. Even while alive, she is a jealous demon, and her spirit continues to be consumed by the flames of jealousy even after her death.... The spirit of Lady Rokujo lives on today, in our own hearts. She was a well-educated and virtuous lady who lived a chaste, circumspect existence. But the more proper her lifestyle became, the more difficult it is for her to contain the raging spirit within her, until at last it severed the bonds of rational restraint she had imposed on it and exploded in a mad frenzy of jealousy. (p. 118)

Similarly, the worldview of the *Heike* is one of “utter darkness, and human beings are nothing more than pitiful beasts who suffer and moan in anguish in that darkness” (136). Zeami’s Noh plays, which deal with the suffering and despair of restless ghosts who have not achieved salvation, begin with a mild-mannered character who only gradually reveals his true ghostly nature and end with the ghost acting out his rage in an angry dance. Chikamatsu’s young lovers ultimately commit suicide as atonement for having caused others pain

and tribulation. His main theme is that humans “have intense and violent passions hidden deep in their hearts, masked by a veneer of moral and social rectitude” (p. 169).

The poetry of Miyazawa Kenji, an early twentieth-century writer and fervent Buddhist, links a vision of purity with “the hellish bonds of the passions and the ego” (p. 201). He portrays both evil and good to “help lead people out of the hellish battlefield and into the world of the Buddha” (p. 203). Dazai Osamu’s life and writing remind one of a lost soul “who has plunged down through even deeper hells, finally panting and moaning in anguish in the ultimate infernal pit of unrelenting pain” (p. 209).

Umehara initiates an interesting discussion on the role Buddhism has played in the great differences between Chinese and Japanese literature. He suggests that while Buddhism traveled through China, the Chinese never fully accepted it and retained their Confucian worldview. On the other hand, Buddhism penetrated far deeper into the hearts and minds of the Japanese to the extent that Japan became a truly Buddhist country while China did not. The result, for example, is Yuan dynasty drama that is didactic and moralistic and a Japanese Noh tradition that provides an introspective insight into the character of the human soul.

Umehara argues a most convincing case and provides excellent examples to support his thesis. He is a superb writer and a sound scholar. However, one must wonder if he does not overstate his case. The tenets of Neo-Confucianism played an important role in the Edo period and are still visible in various aspects of Japanese cultural life today. Such Shinto notions as purity and cleanliness and a reverence for nature remain important. Also, one might argue that the Japanese sense of pragmatism and present-oriented thinking stems from a Shinto perspective that stresses dealing with problems as they arise rather than long-range planning. Umehara’s zealous portrayal of Buddhism’s influence virtually ignores all other religious trends in Japan.

There are a few minor quibbles. Umehara might have made some comparisons with aspects of Western literature that deal with the evil inherent in man. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is an obvious example. There are an irritating number of typographical errors. Umehara provides an excellent glossary of major terminology in his notes, but his failure to provide any index or bibliography is troubling. Umehara’s text ends abruptly with his discussion of Dazai Osamu, and the book needs a brief concluding analysis to synthesize the various aspects of the idea of hell introduced throughout the text. Finally, there is no biographical information about the translator, Robert Wargo, who has prepared a wonderfully clear version of Umehara’s text.

These minor objections, however, do not detract from what is a most worthy study of Japanese religious history.

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