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Grave Changes

Scattering Ashes in Contemporary Japan

This article examines the formation and growth of the Grave-Free Promotion Society (GFPS), a civic group formed in 1990 to promote the scattering of human ashes in Japan. Changing family structures and a critical lack of sufficient burial space have led to a “grave revolution” since the end of the 1980s. Scattering sits at the intersection of legal battles over the ambiguous status of cremated remains, historical debates over what constitutes “traditional” funerary practices, Buddhist arguments for the necessity of posthumous ordination and memorial rites, as well as social and medical concerns over locating the dead. The “natural funerals,” or *shizensō*, performed by the GFPS do not require a Buddhist funeral, memorial rites, posthumous name, or grave, and thus present a highly visible challenge to over 300 years of Buddhist mortuary practices and family-centered, patrilineal graves.

KEYWORDS: Scattering ashes – *shizensō* – burial practices – graves – contemporary Buddhism – freedom of religion – *eitai kuyō*

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The true grave lies in the heart. —Yasuda Mutsuhiko

IN AN EDITORIAL to the *Asahi* newspaper on 24 September 1990, Yasuda Mutsuhiko, former *Asahi* editor and soon to be founder of the Grave-Free Promotion Society, wrote an essay titled, “Is scattering ashes in the ocean or in mountains really illegal? We are losing the freedom of mortuary practices not because of regulations, but through preconceptions.” Yasuda argued that, despite popular belief, the scattering of ashes was in fact not covered under any of the laws then in effect and therefore was not illegal. He then went on to urge people to consider scattering as both an environmentally friendly and much more traditional style of burial than the over-priced, family-centered form of ancestral graves that had emerged, along with mandatory temple registration, in the Edo period (1603–1867).

Less than five months later, on 2 February 1991, the first meeting of the Grave-Free Promotion Society (*Sōsō no Jiyū o Susumeru Kai* 葬送の自由をすすめる会; hereafter, GFPS, or Society) attracted over 300 people in Tokyo, and within that same year they had completed their first official scattering ceremony.¹ By their twelfth year the Society had over 11,000 members, thirteen branch offices nationwide, and as of December 2002, had completed 719 “natural funerals” (*shizensō* 自然葬) for the remains of 1,258 people. While these numbers remain relatively small on a national scale,² the Society has generated nationwide attention and debate completely out of proportion to its size. Due in part to its media savvy and timely emergence after the economic bubble of the late 1980s, the Society has had a dramatic impact on the public conception of mortuary practice. A recent government survey showed national acceptance of scattering ashes jumped from under twenty percent in 1990 to almost seventy-five percent by 1998, with one in eight people saying they would choose a natural funeral for themselves (MORI 2000, appendix pp. 1–38). In 1997 the Welfare Ministry began investigations into the need for the first change in the grave laws in over fifty years, largely in reaction to the Society’s success; and in 1998 the term *shizensō* officially entered the Japanese language with the publication of the fifth edition of the *Kōjien* dictionary.

As one would expect, however, in a country dominated by a patrilineal family-

1. The *Sōsō no Jiyū o Susumeru Kai* officially translates its name into English as the Grave-Free Promotion Society because they feel this best describes their intentions to non-Japanese. A direct translation of the name would read: The Society for the Promotion of Funerary Freedom.

2. In 1999 alone there were almost one million deaths nationwide (NIHON TŌKEI NENKAN 2002).

grave system, ancestral rites, and Buddhist deathways, support for the Society and its objectives has been far from universal. By transgressing the boundaries of graveyards and tradition, natural funerals clearly pose a direct challenge to over three centuries of Buddhist funerals and memorial rites. Despite Yasuda's claims of historical precedents for scattering in the ancient and medieval periods, Buddhist mortuary rites and graves for commoners dating from the Tokugawa period are considered by most to constitute proper mortuary tradition in Japan. Further, Yasuda's attempts to connect the Society's version of scattering to wider environmental concerns and issues of personal and religious freedom have given rise to opposition from various Buddhist organizations, local civic groups, scholars, and even former Society members. The Society's success has also spurred imitation by professional funeral companies, splinter groups, and some Buddhist temples, leading to calls for new regulations for scattering if not a complete revision of current laws governing burial.

This paper attempts to place the Society's activities within the wider context of the contemporary debate over traditional burial practices and the increasing need for new grave space. With the "graying" of Japanese society, widespread nuclearization of families, an increase in divorce, rising land costs, and growing concern for the environment, Japan is now facing a crisis over insufficient space for the dead. Scattering remains, new-style "eternal memorial graves" (*eitai kuyō baka* 永代供養墓), women's burial associations, high-rise ossuaries, and outer-space burial (*uchūsō* 宇宙葬) all speak to changing conceptions of how the dead are to be treated and where they are to be located. Scattering sits at the intersection of legal battles over the ambiguous status of remains, historical debates over what constitutes "traditional" funerary practices, Buddhist arguments for the necessity of posthumous ordination and memorial rites, as well as social and medical concerns over locating the dead. Despite its limited scale, the Grave-Free Promotion Society and the debates surrounding it provide valuable insights into changing conceptions of family, religious freedom, self-determination, and the long-standing Buddhist monopoly over death.

The Beginnings of the GFPS

On 5 October 1991, in Sagami Bay near Tokyo, the GFPS quietly held its first official natural funeral. A portion of the cremated remains of a young woman who had killed herself thirty years earlier over lost love was scattered in the sea along with flowers during a short, simple, non-religious ceremony. Along with the head of the Society, Yasuda, and three other members were former Welfare Ministry official Saitō Nanako 齋藤七子, two boat operators, and three private photographers.

Ten days after the ceremony, the Society made an official announcement about the event and the following day all the major papers and television net-

works carried the story. By performing the ceremony before making it public, the Society both avoided a protracted legal battle, and revealed its media savvy. Note that there were as many photographers at the ceremony as there were Society members, and having a former Welfare Minister member present no doubt projected an essential element of credibility if not outright government acceptance to the public. Further, by scattering only a small portion of the remains of a woman who had already been interred thirty years earlier, the Society ameliorated public concerns over macabre practices. And, finally, the love-suicide narrative gave the event a certain romantic appeal.

Yasuda's gamble paid off when the media carried the reaction of the related Ministries the day after the Society's announcement. As he had predicted in his editorial a year earlier, neither the Justice Ministry nor the Welfare Ministry was ready to declare scattering illegal. The Justice Ministry, commenting on article 190 of the criminal code, which prohibits the discarding of corpses (*igai ikizai* 遺骸遺棄罪), responded that "Since the aim of this regulation is to protect the religious sentiments of societal customs, as long as this [*shizensō*] is for the purpose of a funeral and takes place with moderation, there is no problem" (YASUDA 1992, pp. 122–23). Further, the Ministry conceded that scattering did not constitute discarding (*iki* 遺棄) and cremation obviously did not constitute destruction (*sonkai* 損壊). Therefore, as long as scattering was for the purpose of a funeral, it did not break any existing laws.³

For the Society, the ruling was an "epoch-making" event that was taken as total approbation for the practice of scattering remains. Within the year they had put out numerous articles and published two books. The first, *You Don't Need a Grave: It's precisely because you love them that you should have a natural funeral* (墓なんかいらぬ—愛すればこそ自然葬), which was actually published before the first *shizensō*, included a reprint of Yasuda's *Asahi* editorial and basically reiterated his main arguments on the legality and history of the practice, and its relationship to the environment. The most striking aspect of the book is the surreal cover, which shows an old, decrepit, overgrown graveyard with cracked gravestones in complete disarray. The earth hovers in the sky above, forcing the reader to reconsider what planet he or she is actually on. On the back cover we see only the blue-green earth ordering us to "Bury the dead in the hearts of the living" (死者ハ生者ノ心ニ埋メロ).

The second book, *Freedom from "Graves": Natural funerals that return us to the Earth* (「墓」からの自由—地球に還る自然葬), was published a mere two weeks after the announcement of the first *shizensō*, and offers the first complete manifesto of the GFPS as well as details on the logistics of scattering and legal advice on all necessary paperwork.

3. Article 190 states: Anyone who damages, discards, or removes the corpse, remains, or hair of the deceased, or an item placed in a coffin, shall be imprisoned for no more than three years.

The six-part manifesto of the basic rules of the Society includes respect for the wishes of the individual and for religious beliefs, the promise of no discrimination, harmony with nature, and a not-for-profit pledge. Most notable in the list is the following definition of *shizensō*: “The natural funeral, as the final rites of the deceased, returns the remains (ashes) to nature and moreover pays tribute to his or her memory. This is a new creation that takes scattering, a funerary method established in our country since before the Nara period (710–794), and revives it in a form that suits contemporary customs” (SŌSŌ NO JIYŪ O SUSUMERU KAI 1991, p. 176). We shall return to the question of what exactly constituted pre-Nara scattering in a later section, but it is worth considering here how the Society intended to adapt this putatively honored and ancient tradition to modern sensibilities.

As material objects, human remains require physical treatment and necessitate action. While it is easy at times to forget, when hearing discussions of “returning to nature” and “funerary freedom,” natural funerals involve the very real and physical act of disposing of human remains. In the case of the GFPS this is most evident in the need to prepare the cremated remains for scattering. Japanese crematoria are designed to burn bodies at a specific temperature that leaves the bones fairly intact. This is to allow the tradition of “picking up the bones” (*kotsuage* 骨揚げ) and placing them into a funerary urn for interment.⁴ In response to public fears, the GFPS advises that these bones must then be crushed into powder so that there are no pieces larger than five millimeters.⁵ The Society offers several methods for crushing the bones including using a wooden stick, a vase, a golf club, or, if available, an electric grinder. One measure of both the success of the Society and the difficulty posed to family members when faced with having to crush the bones of a loved one is indicated by the emergence of funerary companies that, for a nominal fee, will grind the remains for you.⁶

Once the remains are prepared they are generally scattered in the mountains or in the sea. In *Freedom from “Graves”* the reader is given general instructions about choosing the space for scattering, transportation to that spot, the method of scattering, and suitable containers for the ashes. For ocean services the Society

4. For details in English on *kotsuage* see KENNEY 1996–1997, p. 423, SUZUKI 2000, pp. 117–18, and ROWE 2000, p. 369.

5. Despite the apparent acquiescence on the legality of scattering by the government there was still much debate in the national press over the actual degree of acceptance given the “within moderation” phrase in the Justice Ministry’s opinion. Concerns ranged from the pollution of oceans and mountains to “indiscriminate scattering of remains” (YASUDA 1992, p. 123). Notwithstanding the Society’s assurances that human bones are made of calcium phosphate and therefore environmentally beneficial, there remained a fear that someone would now be able to throw away large, recognizable pieces of human bone in public spaces.

6. For some examples of reactions by Society members when faced with this process see YAMAORI and YASUDA 2000, pp. 96–214.

recommends being in international waters, which begin roughly twenty-two kilometers from land, and for mountain scattering a remote spot, ideally a place the deceased had visited. In either case, if the ashes are to be placed in any type of container, it must be completely biodegradable. The book also reminds readers that ashes do not settle in any one spot: some are taken by the wind, some are washed away, and some enter the earth. Because the natural funerals advocated by the society have no fixed religious elements, mourners are told there is no need to have Buddhist rites or Christian hymns (SOSŌ NO JIYŪ O SUSUMERU KAI 1991, p. 182).

While the Society was working hard on the promotional front, they also continued to perform funerals. In 1992 they held three more *shizensō*, including the first one on land; and in 1993 there were nine more natural funerals for thirteen people (see Table 1). In spite of these early successes, the legal and social ambiguity of scattering has yet to be clarified. While the Society continues to grow and to arrange natural funerals all over the country, it is still fighting an ongoing battle to gain acceptance for what, despite their claims of tradition, is a revolutionary form of mortuary rites.

From Legality to Regulation

Debate over natural funerals can be divided into two periods. There was an early stage where the legality, historical views, and environmental aspirations of

TABLE 1. Natural Funerals 1991 to June 2001

Year	Number of Shizensō	Number of People
1991	1	1
1992	3	5
1993	9	13
1994	16	29
1995	20	40
1996	40	70
1997	72	145
1998	106	187
1999	99	177
2000	128	228
2001 (to June)	44	66
Total	538	961

Ocean 409; Mountain 109; River 3; Private Garden 4; Sky 13
 Individual Services 414; Group Services 124

the Society were all challenged, and a later stage where the basic premise of scattering was accepted but only within carefully regulated parameters.

Yasuda made it clear in the early days of the Society that he felt the two main hurdles that had to be cleared were (mis)perceptions of the law and of history. Three years before the first *shizensō*, then Diet Member Ishihara Shintarō 石原慎太郎 focused national attention on the question of the legality of scattering human remains. Asked by his brother, the famous entertainer Ishihara Yūjirō 石原裕次郎, to scatter his ashes in the ocean, Ishihara then consulted various groups and became convinced that scattering was not legal. Ultimately he did not follow his brother's wishes and the issue of scattering was widely considered settled. It was in reaction to this conclusion that Yasuda wrote his 1990 editorial to the *Asahi*. Yasuda's position, justified by the Ministries, was that the grave laws, written in 1948 in response to sanitation concerns in the immediate post-war period, had no provision for the scattering of remains. As for criminal code prohibition against discarding corpses, Yasuda, employing one of his favorite hyperboles, noted that "If the scattering of ashes in mountains and oceans were covered under this law then the family that leaves some amount of the remains behind at the crematorium as well as those workers at the crematorium who dispose of the remains as industrial waste or garbage are all criminals" (*Bukkyō* 1997, p. 116).⁷

As the Society's success grew and government surveys showed a marked increase in national acceptance of scattering, the debate shifted from arguments over legality to questions of regulation. A spate of articles by Buddhist scholar Fujii Masao and engineer/graveyard specialist Yokota Mutsumi calling for some form of scattering regulation led in part to a government round-table inquiry into contemporary grave practices.⁸ Made up of scholars, priests and professionals, the Welfare Ministry's roundtable, "An open discussion on the future of grave practices" (これからの墓地等の在り方を考える懇談会), held twelve sessions over fifteen months from February 1997 to June 1998. The committee focused on two concerns: first, the crisis over insufficient grave space and abandoned graves, and second, clarifying the position of the current grave laws in regards to scattering and deciding if some form of regulation was in order. At issue was not only the uncertain status of cremated remains in a country with a 99 percent cremation rate, but also fundamental questions of religious freedom. As the committee report makes clear, the postwar grave laws

7. There are inevitably some remains left over after the process of picking up the bones and placing them in the urn (*shūkotsu* 收骨 or *kotsuage*). Generally in western Japan a large percentage of the remains are left over while in eastern Japan most of the remains are entombed with only a small amount left behind at the crematorium. However, it is not the case that the remains are simply treated as industrial waste. Some crematoriums put the remains in a single memorial grave and others actually scatter them in the mountains. See SUZUKI 2000, pp. 164–67.

8. See FUJII 1995 and 1996, and YOKOTA 1996 and 1997.

were only intended to protect public health and thus to apply a broader interpretation of them in order to regulate what constitutes “acceptable customs” would be highly problematic.

Not surprisingly, when Yasuda and other representatives from the GFPS were invited to speak before the committee, it was on precisely this point that they mounted their defense. Switching tactics from the Society’s staple argument that ashes were not covered under the grave law as outlined in Article Four, Yasuda instead focused on Article One, which, along with protecting public health and welfare, ensures burial practices that will conform with the “religious sentiments” of the people.⁹ As Yasuda put it:

What exactly is the religious sentiment of the people that is listed in the first article of the Grave-law? If this is not carefully debated then this sentiment could be bound up with control by the State. Amongst all the different religions, is there a single religious sentiment? This is not something that should be regulated by the State, and we would like to carefully discuss this matter. We believe that what we are doing in the Society is a manifestation of our religious sentiments.... Natural funerals are a new religious practice and are protected under freedom of expression and belief.... In order to debate problems that would arise if scattering became more common we must pin down what is meant by religious sentiments. The idea that something that is new is strange and therefore must be regulated is a dangerous one .

(<http://www1.mhlw.go.jp/shingi/s1023-1.html>)

This bold assertion marked an important shift in the status and policy of the Society. Clearly they had reached the stage where the government had to address them directly and begin investigations into their legal claims. Yasuda’s arguments were no longer based on establishing the legality of his fledgling civic group, but rather fighting for their rights to the same kind of freedom that religious groups are guaranteed under the constitution. While Yasuda had always argued for freedom of choice, these statements represented a new focus. As we shall see, the claim that scattering represented proper Japanese burial practice was based on a vision of family graves as tools of State ideology in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods. In transposing this argument to the present day and questioning the very essence of religious freedom, Yasuda placed the GFPS in a highly political position vis-à-vis the State by making funerary freedom a battle against State oppression and scattering the most fundamental of human rights.

9. Article Four, titled, “The prohibition of burial outside of graveyards and cremations outside of crematoriums,” states: “Burial or interment of ashes shall not occur in an area outside of a graveyard.” Article One states: “The intent of this law is to ensure that the management of graveyards, ossuaries, and crematoriums, as well as burial and the like shall, in conformity with the religious sentiments of the people and in accordance with public sanitation and communal welfare, occur without hindrance.”

The committee, while shying away from strictly defining “religious sentiments,” made it clear that it was more concerned with the reactions of the people who lived in areas where scattering was taking place than with the religious feelings of those doing the scattering. As the chairman of the committee, Waseda University Law Professor Urakawa Michitarō 浦川道太郎, stated, “We are aware of the idea that people ‘want everyday living and the spirits of the dead to be separate’ and that we should consider the religious sentiment of those people who live in areas where ashes are scattered” (*Mainichi Shinbun* 98/8/17). Along with the need for a clear definition of scattering, some system of authorization, and punishment for breaking the laws, the biggest concern of the committee was on the location of scattering. Specific fears included people shying away from seafood caught in places like Sagami Bay, where scattering often takes place, as well as reports of individuals simply digging holes and dropping in ashes in clear violation of the law. Another potential problem stemmed from the practice of scattering ashes on private land or in gardens and then reselling that property. One critic produced the following imaginary ad to illustrate his opposition: “House for Sale. 165 square meters, southeast facing corner lot. Ten years old. Fifteen-minute walk from train station. Human remains included” (YOKOTA 2000, p. 113). In the end the committee recommended to the Ministry that scattering be regulated at the prefectural level and that there be unified administration of locations, methods of scattering, and records of each case (*Mainichi Shinbun*, 98/8/17). As of September 2002, there have been no major changes to the grave laws in regards to scattering ashes.

Historical Background

Before discussing the Society’s version of traditional Japanese mortuary history, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the Japanese grave system and the development of Buddhist funerals. Traditionally the corpse was seen as something to be feared both as a source of pollution and of malevolent spirits, and it is widely accepted that commoners in rural and urban areas abandoned (*iki* 遺棄) the dead in mountains, riverbeds, or other non-inhabited areas well into the fifteenth century.¹⁰ Early village graveyards were often mere dumping grounds, and in fact scholars have looked at the terms “grave” (*haka* 墓) and “bury” (*hōmuru* 葬る) as deriving from terms that mean “throwing away” (DOI 1975, p. 125).

According to Hashizume Shinya, most urban residents did not have cemetery plots until the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Temple cemeteries developed largely after the Ōnin war (1466–1477) as the Buddhist management of the dead became more widespread (HASHIZUME 1996).¹¹ While previously

10. See for example, KATSUTA 1987, HASHIZUME 1996, and DOI 1997.

11. For a similar argument see TAMAMURO 1964, p. 211.

commoners would have built communal monuments, from the seventeenth century onwards one began to see stones dedicated to individuals and couples (BERNSTEIN 1999, p. 35). With the temple-registration system (*terauke seido* 寺請制度) of 1640, the relationship between temples and commoners was solidified in the so-called parishioner system (*danka seido* 檀家制度) that required all Japanese families to register at local temples. While this policy was implemented to thwart the perceived threat of Christianity, it soon transformed temples and priests into organs of the State, giving them an inordinate amount of control over the lives of their parishioners who were beholden to local priests for registering them as non-Christian.¹² The parishioner also had to visit the temple for death and ancestral rites throughout the year as well as for *bon*, the equinoctial weeks, and the death anniversary of the Buddha (TAMAMURO 2001, p. 266). According to Andrew BERNSTEIN this meant that

By the end of the warring states period that preceded the Tokugawa, Buddhist death rites had already generated a steady cash flow for temples, but Tokugawa policy created fixed channels for that flow. By registering, processing, and memorializing deaths for captive parishioners, Buddhist temples enjoyed the fruits of total death management, making them both enforcers of social control and enablers of social advancement. (1999, p. 37)

The registration system also meant that Buddhist funerals and memorial rites became more or less mandatory.¹³ Once registered at a specific temple it was next to impossible to transfer to another temple, and having memorial or death services anywhere else was strictly forbidden (TAMAMURO 2001, p. 277).

Temple cemetery plots for urban commoners began appearing in the sixteenth century and became more common after the 1640 implementation of the temple-registration system. Tanigawa Akiko, working on Tokugawa period grave excavations, has traced a significant mid-eighteenth century surge in family centered graves in Edo and surrounding areas.¹⁴ New styles of gravestones in the period “represent the heightening of a family-centered consciousness—a shift in thinking in which the modern extended family (*ie* 家) became the central unit of society, and for which memorial services for the dead became prevalent”

12. Tamamuro Fumio has done extensive work on the abuses of the registration system, including various cases of priests who extorted sexual favors from parishioners by threatening not to register them (TAMAMURO 1999).

13. Buddhist funerals had been spreading amongst commoners since at least the second half of the fifteenth century, when Sōtō priests, armed with rituals adapted from Song dynasty monastic funerals, began proselytizing in the countryside. According to William Bodiford, the popularity of these funerals was due largely to the idea of posthumous ordinations that afforded lay people the rites for a monk and carried a promise of salvation after death that was previously unavailable (BODIFORD 1992).

14. Tanigawa warns that her findings hold for the warrior and farmer classes, but are not conclusive in regards to the merchant class (TANIGAWA 1992, p. 293).

(TANIGAWA 1992, pp. 288–89). With the family registration law (*koseki* 戸籍) of 1871, temple registration was officially abolished, but the connection between Japanese families and local temples was now cast in stone. Despite attempts by the State to promote Shinto funerals as part of the larger pro-Shinto movement, the general public was not easily converted. This is most clearly indicated by the 1873 proscription of cremation as part of an attempt to promote Shinto burials. The ban lasted only two years (BERNSTEIN 1999).

Until the Meiji period there was a wide variety of burial practices throughout the country, including areas where bones and graves were not objects of worship. With the inception of the Meiji civil code in 1898, however, a single unified framework of burial and ancestor-based ritual was mandated in order to promote the concept of the extended family and ancestor worship as the cornerstone of the emperor system. In this way, the extremely private act of burying the dead, and the apparatus of that act, the grave, became subject to national control by the government of the time, and was legalized in the “right of succession of household act” (*katoku sōzoku no tokken* 「家督相続の特権」), number 987 of the Meiji Civil code (INOUE and OGAWA 1995, p. 1).

After the war, despite the dissolution of the *ie* system, many of the premises upon which it was founded, continue to exist. According to Mori Kenji, the clause concerning inheritance in the current civil code, redone after the war, was the result of a compromise between those groups that wanted to abolish the household system and those that wanted to preserve it (MORI 1991, pp. 49–51). Clause 897 of the current civil code, which covers the “inheritance of ritual/religious assets” (*saishi zaisan no keishō* 祭祀財産の継承), includes a provision stating that “the person who, according to custom, should perform the ancestral rites shall inherit [the grave and Buddhist altar].” As Mori points out, the inclusion of “following custom” ensures that the ideals of the household system remain strongly ingrained in the current code.¹⁵ This is most clearly indicated by the inability of those without descendants to buy grave space and the difficulty in passing on graves in families with only daughters. Sociologist and writer Inoue Haruyo argues that the continued influence of the *ie* system also affects the religious choices people are able to make, particularly in the case of women who marry and must adopt the religious affiliation of her husband’s family in order to be included in temple graves.

In this way, “household religion” does not entail, in any true sense, freedom of belief. As for temples, it was not people, but rather graves that were held

15. The full text of clause 897 reads as follows: “The genealogical records, ritual implements, and the rights to the grave, not bound by previous statutes, shall be inherited by the person who, according to custom, should perform the ancestral rites. However, if the progenitor designates a person to perform rites for the ancestors, then this person shall be the inheritor. In the case where custom is not clear, the family courts will determine the person who shall inherit.”

hostage in order to ensure stability. Thus, rather than traditional religious activities, it was the household system around which a financial policy based on funerary Buddhism was created. This is why today, people without descendants encounter discrimination from temples that will not sell them grave space. (INOUE and OGAWA 1995, p. 1)

When you buy a grave in Japan today, what you are actually buying is the right to use the land in perpetuity (*eitai shiyōken* 永代使用権). The system is premised on the concept of a continuous, direct descent, localized family that is still implicitly enshrined in civil law. To the present day, the Meiji civil code's institutionalization of family graves (*ie no haka* 家の墓) has defined graves as a central site in family ritual. These graves follow patrilineal lines and are passed through the eldest son, who is expected to maintain upkeep, carry out yearly memorial rites, and visit the grave during the equinoxes and the summer festival of the dead, *obon*, in mid-August. Cremated remains are placed in urns that are interred in the family grave forty-nine days after death, when the traditional Buddhist liminal period ends. The deceased then receive individualized yearly memorial services on the anniversary of death for thirty-three, fifty or even up to one hundred years, at which point they join the anonymous ranks of ancestors.

Along with complaints against the “outmoded” grave practices listed above, scholars such as Mori Kenji have also documented a backlash against inflated grave prices and unethical business ties between religious organizations and grave-stone producers during the economic bubble of the late 1980s (MORI 2000, pp. 5–16).¹⁶ It was largely out of these factors that groups such as the GFPS emerged at the start of the 1990s.

The “Tradition” of Scattering

In addition to legal issues, the second major obstacle that the Society faced was the Japanese attachment to funerary rites and burial practices that had been around since the Tokugawa period (1603–1867). It was essential to show both that contemporary practices, viewed as “traditional,” were actually the products of Tokugawa bakufu and Meiji government policies, and, at the same time, establish a link between scattering and the older practice of abandoning corpses. This two-pronged attack of deconstructing family graves and traditionalizing *shizensō*, though overlapping, required different arguments and justifications.

In order to elevate the historical status of scattering, Yasuda provides a variety of precedents, including references to scattering in elegies (*banka* 挽歌) from the eighth-century poetry anthology, the *Manyōshū*; the early Heian

16. For a general survey of anti-funeral criticism see MURAKAMI 1997. For an English translation see MURAKAMI 2000.

Emperor Junna 淳和 (786–840) who wrote in his will, “Scatter me in forests and fields and do not build a grave”; and Shinran’s famous request that his remains be used to feed the fish in the Kamo river (*Asahi Shinbun* 1990/9/24).¹⁷ By invoking these well-known markers of “Japaneseness” in almost every Society publication or interview, Yasuda is trying to connect natural funerals to some deeper Japanese essence. There are, however, important distinctions to be made between the abandonment or discarding of complete corpses in mountains due to fear of death impurity, and hiring a boat or helicopter to fly out over the ocean to scatter the carefully prepared, cremated remains of a loved one who has specifically asked for this treatment. Aside from the physical differences between scattering ashes and dumping corpses, these two responses originate in very different motivations. Despite references to romantic tropes uttered by famous historical figures, natural funerals are not a glorious return to a golden mortuary age so much as a modern response to the specific economic, political, and social forces of the last fifteen years.

Shima Tōru, researcher of the Jomon period (10,000–400 BCE) and Director of the Japanese Buddhist Statuary Society (日本石仏協会), has written several critiques of the GFPS and of Yasuda’s historical claims in particular. SHIMA (1994) summarizes Yasuda’s position in five stages:

1. There was no custom of graves in ancient Japan. From the ancient to the medieval period commoners would throw away the corpse in mountains, forests, fields, rivers, oceans, or on an island.
2. From the medieval to the modern period the corpse changed from an object of aversion that should be discarded to something that was memorialized. In that process a segment of the ruling class built graves at temples.
3. Commoners did not build graves until the parishioner system of the Edo period. Use of individual and family graves spread amongst the general populace through public administration via the temples. Temples bound the people to graves and actively promoted funerary rites.
4. Today’s family graves (*ie no haka* 家の墓) were institutionalized in the Meiji Civil Code of 1898, which set forth graves as the object of family religious services (*ie no saishi* 家の祭祀). This was against the background of a familial State based on the emperor system (*tennōsei kazoku kokka* 天皇制家族国家) that tried to strengthen the family system through an emphasis on ancestor worship at graves.
5. The Meiji government forced commoners to memorialize the dead at graves and even dictated funerary styles. Until the Meiji period regional funerary styles varied widely but these gradually became homogenized.

17. Another consistent, though not so ancient, example that the Society uses is former United States Ambassador to Japan Edwin Reischauer, who requested that his ashes be scattered in the Pacific to create a bridge between the two countries.

Shima proceeds to clarify the Society's statements as indicating that the original funerary method for commoners was simply to throw away the corpse, while the ruling class practiced funerary rituals, maintained graves, and conducted memorial services. The State then mandated these practices as a way to control the masses with the family grave system becoming merely a tool of State management. The objective of the GFPS thus became achieving freedom from State control through a return to the origins of discarding the corpse. Shima's response is right to the point: "Why must the making of graves by common people in the medieval period be rejected as a transgression against some original practice?" (SHIMA 1994, p. 115). Clearly the family-grave system was tied to State control in the Edo period, but this does not mean that graves were simply imposed from above. Commoners also aspired to the more extravagant rites, graves, distinguished posthumous names, and promises of salvation afforded to the elite classes. As Hashizume Shinya has argued, as temple cemeteries began to spread in urban areas from the sixteenth century, more and more people wanted their tombs as close to the main hall as possible to ensure the "guarantee of continual prayer for their spirits after death" (HASHIZUME 1997, p. 25).

Possibly the most succinct critique of the Society's readings of history comes from Shingon priest Miyasaka Yūkō 宮坂宥洪 who applies Yasuda's own logic to rice cultivation. "In the Jomon period we mainly ate acorns. Therefore there is no rule that says we must eat rice simply because we are Japanese. Furthermore acorns don't require the destruction of nature to create cultivated fields nor is the environment poisoned by pesticides" (http://www.mikkyo21f.gr.jp/father_shukyo002.html).

Environment

Although Yasuda's historical arguments are premised on making a connection between natural funerals and earlier practices of discarding corpses, his defense of the Society hinges on drawing a distinction between simple scattering (*sankotsu* 散骨/撒骨) and the *shizensō* advocated by the GFPS. Integral to this difference is the environmental platform of the Society, which actually emerged from the idea of a "Forest of Rebirth" (*saisei no mori* 再生の森). Yasuda initially came up with the idea in response to a debate in 1990 over the destruction of a riverhead in Tamagawa 多摩川, Yamanashi Prefecture. Locals wanted to build a resort and golf course to revitalize the area but opposition arose in Tokyo, which was dependent on the river for water. Yasuda later proposed that privately owned groves at the head of rivers be designated *saisei no mori*. Those who wished would pay a basic fee of 100,000 yen (\$800)¹⁸ to have their ashes scattered in the woods. The money collected would be used to protect the

18. Exchange rates are calculated at 125 yen to one US dollar.

woods and revitalize the local area while at the same time ensuring clean water for major cities. In this way people from the city would have their ashes “returned” (*kaesu* 還す) to nature, helping to preserve the area and guarantee clean water for future generations. According to Yasuda, the *saisei no mori* was aimed at “having humans and the environment live and be reborn together in the great cycle (*junkan* 循環) of nature” (YASUDA 1997, p. 114).

In 1994, in response to the Society’s announcement that they had conducted a *shizensō* for two people in a public grove in Tamagawa earlier that year, the local village applied to ban all future natural funerals. There were three main objections: 1) that the land also belonged to the locals; 2) that scattering would hurt the image of the area, which was trying to attract tourism; and 3) that entering mountains littered with human remains would feel strange (*Mainichi Shinbun* 94/6/19). The local protest showed that the Society had to battle not only what it perceived as a mistaken notion of funeral tradition in Japan, but also with more fundamental taboos and fears of death in general—the same fears that fuel protests against the construction of new funeral parlors, graveyards, and crematoriums in local neighborhoods all over the country. One also has to wonder whether Tokyoites would have been happy with a solution that meant their drinking water was being filtered through human remains. The Society now has seven of these forests around the country, but all of them are privately owned either by the Society itself, or individual members (See Figure 1 for locations).

A second, more political, critique of these Forests of Rebirth comes from Yokota Mutsumi, who questions the entire environmental premise of the GFPS. Yokota, an architect and city planner, is particularly interesting because as a former member of the society he has unique insights into its workings. For Yokota, the Society’s problems stem from a lack of understanding of the dual position of human remains in Japanese society as an object both of veneration and of taboo. He also strongly criticizes the Society’s attempts to justify scattering by constantly emphasizing the supposed environmental benefits (YOKOTA 1994, p. 256). As someone who was drawn to the society because of interest in the problem of insufficient grave space, Yokota felt that the environmental issue was simply “bait” to draw more interest to the cause.

Shima Tōru flatly denies that the Society is an environmental movement. In an article titled “Some doubts about the ‘Scattering’ movement: Somewhere between a community and an illusory family,” he argues that scattering ashes is a personal choice that should not be tied to larger issues. Shima believes that by equating scattering with environmentalism, the Society is creating a false sense of community centered on environmental issues (rather than treatment of the dead) and seeking a self-righteousness that is ill deserved (SHIMA 1994, pp. 112–13).

The question then is what exactly is the concept of nature that the Society is putting forward? Clearly one could argue, as critics of the Society have, that

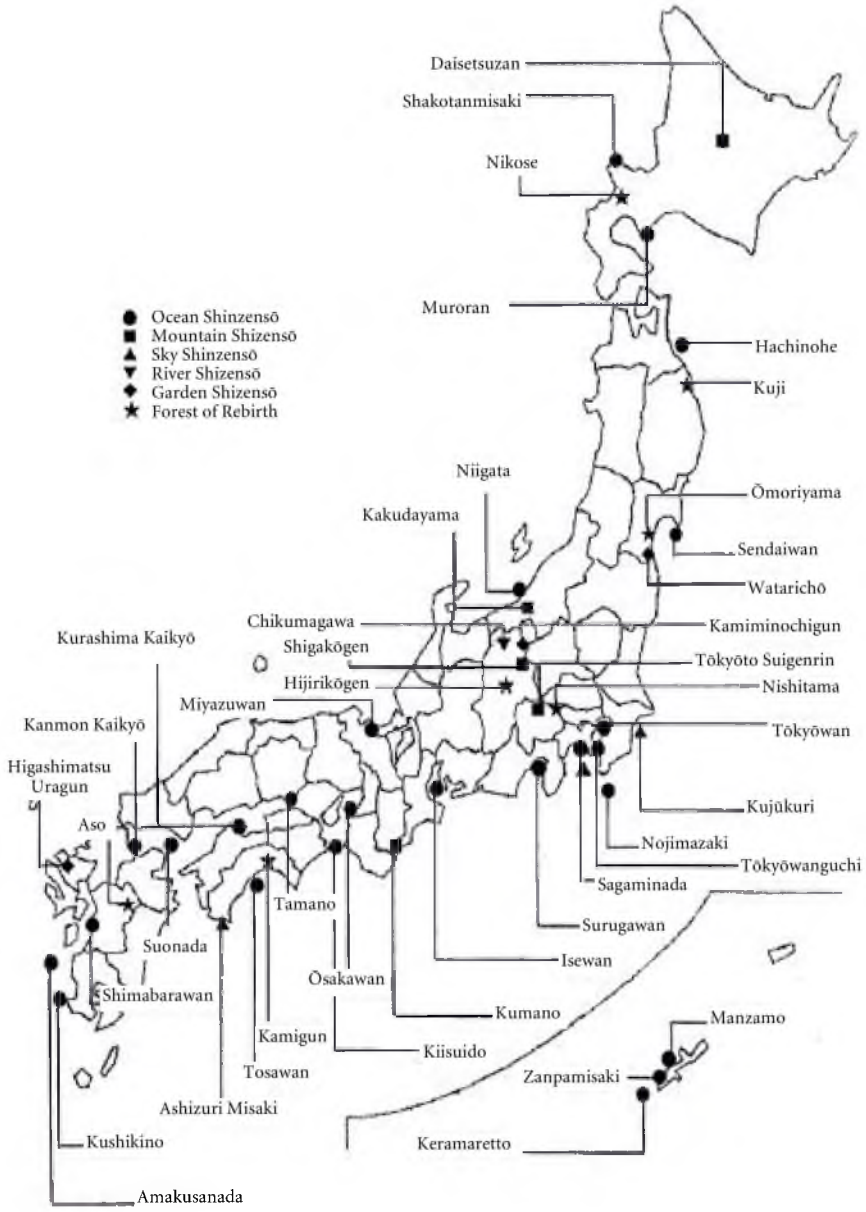


FIGURE 1. Shizensō sites as of 20 January 2001

there is nothing particularly natural about cremating a human body in an oven, crushing those remains into powder with a golf club, and then hiring a motor driven boat or helicopter to go twenty-two kilometers out to sea to dump the ashes into the ocean. Nor is turning private forests into scattering grounds in order to maintain clean water for cities and income for rural areas particularly “natural.” The Society’s use of “nature” or “natural” for their rites is, like their use of tradition, a construct set into opposition to all other forms of mortuary rites. Returning the ashes to the great blue sea is contrasted with dark, dank, claustrophobic tombs that inevitably fall into ruin.¹⁹ Environmentally beneficial scattering forests are opposed to the growing environmental menace of grave parks that are devouring the natural countryside much as golf courses did in the 1980s. Nature is something that must be protected and nurtured as well as something that sets the Society apart from other groups. Indeed, one could argue that the Society’s “natural” funerals should more properly be coined “environmental” funerals (*kankyōsō* 環境葬).

Buddhist Responses

Soon after the announcement of the first natural funeral, the Buddhist press ran articles headlined, “The pros and cons of scattering remains—Is the government’s sanction of scattering a threat to Buddhist style graves?” (*Gekkan Jūshoku* 91/12, p. 2), “A warning alarm to Japanese Buddhism” (*Bukkyō Taimusu* 91/10/25, p. 4), and “Arguing for the centrality of the spirit of mourning and memorial services...an object of veneration is essential” (*Bukkyō Taimusu* 92/01/15, p. 2). Although such concerns are to be expected given this perceived threat to their monopoly over mortuary rites and the steady stream of income it generates, Buddhist reactions on the whole have been anything but consistent. Ranging from damning criticism to approbation, from ambiguity to doctrinal support, the variety of responses says as much about the contentious state of Japanese Buddhist positions on death and burial as it does about the GFPS.

Shingon priest Koyama Tenyū 小山典勇 considers scattering a problem for temples and admits that there is a growing gap between Buddhist priests who do not explain the true meaning of funerals and mourners who simply go through the motions without much thought. Yet even in this context he expects no change in the Japanese desire for continuity. “For Japanese people there is a tendency to leave behind one’s name in memorial tablets, posthumous names and the like. Surely, there are not many people who wish for absolutely no graves or monuments” (*Bukkyō Taimusu* 1991/10/25, p. 4).

Tendai priest and scholar Katō Eiji, in an article titled “Funerals after Funer-

19. In Society literature the verb used to refer to scattering the ashes is almost always “to return” (*kaesu* 還す), rather than “to bury” (*maisō suru* 埋葬する).

ary Freedom,” agrees that since individual freedom, which includes funerals, is protected under the constitution, people should be allowed to choose their last rites. With this acceptance, however, comes an important *caveat* that “the funerary process is not limited to the rite alone. There is a ‘form’ (*kata* 型) that determines everything from the participants’ clothes to words of condolence.” And while Kato argues that “philosophical Buddhism” and “Buddhism that discourses on the meaning of life” are “okay,” what people want is the conventional Buddhist funerary “form” (KATŌ 1993, p. 61). This form requires Buddhist priests who are able to “take the soul of the deceased (wild spirit, *aramitama* 荒御魂), decisively return it to the other world, destroy its sins, transform it into a Buddha (peaceful spirit, *nigimitama* 和御魂), and perform memorial services” (KATŌ 1993, p. 61). According to Katō, the funerary rite is but one type of cultural “form” which, like an organic entity, does not like sudden changes or discontinuity. By consistently following an unchanging funerary pattern, the form handles the “rupture” of an individual’s death and preserves the “continuity” of the social body:

As long as the communal body continues to exist it will seek to preserve the continuity of cultural “forms.” Today only Buddhism can provide people with a funeral “form.” We really should stop placing so much importance on the debate going on in temples over “funerary freedom” (*sōsō no jiyū*). Isn’t it just “freedom from funerals” (*sōsō kara no jiyū*) that is being debated? (emphasis added). (KATŌ 1993, p. 61)

The continuity that is being protected here is clearly that of Buddhism’s monopoly over funerary and memorial rites. The Society is chastised both for its inability to properly pacify and transform the spirits of the dead and for shirking its duties to the departed ancestors. Given the fact that the natural funerals advocated by the GFPS include no Buddhist service, posthumous name, merit transfers (*tsuizen kuyō* 追善供養), or subsequent memorial rites it is of no surprise that Buddhist critiques of the Society often emphasize the need to make continual offerings on behalf of the dead.

Rinzai priest Ishizaki Yasumune 石崎靖宗 is one of several commentators who places ancestor worship in binary opposition to funerary freedom and then attempts to trace the change from the former to the latter.²⁰ In an outline dharma talk on ancestor rites Ishizaki emphasizes Buddhism’s role in explaining causality (*inga* 因果) and the impossibility of an independent condition (自立的でありえない状況). This is set up as a counter to what he perceives as the Society’s imported Western notions of individuality and self-determination (<http://www.geocities.co.jp/Bookend-Soseki/5166/senzo.htm>). Ishizaki transposes Buddhism’s fundamental tenet of co-dependent origination onto ancestral rites, arguing

20. This shift is a central theme in MORI 2000.

that performing memorial rites does not simply benefit the deceased, but also the descendant, who through previous generations is tied to and in some way dependent on all the life in the universe. For Ishizaki, the Society's abandonment of ancestral rites ignores some fifteen hundred years of Japanese ancestor worship and is seen as self-centered and selfish. "When you look from this [long history], the trend toward 'funerary freedom' over the last few decades seems like just a flash in the pan" (*ibid.*).

Shingon priest Komine Michihiko also focuses on what ancestor worship, and more specifically, Buddhist forms of memorializing the dead, can teach the living. His consideration of natural funerals begins with an extended history of the treatment of human remains in early Mahayana Buddhism and then proceeds to the importance of Buddhist stupas and five-tiered grave markers (*gor-intō* 五輪塔). "The meaning of building a five-tiered stone monument above the remains is to pray that the deceased will be embraced by Dainichi Nyōrai and become one with his eternal dharma body" (KOMINE 1995, p. 119). According to Komine, the grave, while primarily a site for memorializing the dead, also provides an opportunity for guiding the living toward enlightenment. This is contrasted with scattering, which leaves nothing behind. "Scattering cuts off this important site that leads us to something of value. This is why I have misgivings" (KOMINE 1995, p. 119).

Komine also focuses on the beneficial lessons of causality as part of his critique, though in a different way than Ishizaki. He argues that while direct cause (*in* 因), which he interprets as "the power of one's volition," and contributory cause (*en* 縁) "which is the power that surrounds and fosters direct cause," are both essential, it is the latter that is the source of everything we experience. "This reckless scattering, which destroys the opportunity to direct a person's spirit, must be thought of as severing *en*, which for us Buddhists is the most important thing" (KOMINE 1995, p. 119). There is an important conflation here between very different uses of the term *en*. On the one hand it is a technical Buddhist term that is usually translated as "indirect cause" (or condition/circumstance) and placed in opposition to "direct cause" (*in*). On the other hand, in common usage *en* refers to a "relationship" or "bond" and generally takes the form of family (*ketsuen* 血縁) or regional (*chien* 地縁) ties. We shall return to the question of *en* later, but it is worth pointing out here the attempt to connect Buddhist doctrinal concepts and Japanese social forms through the site of the traditional family grave.

Stephen Covell has shown that while it is clearly possible to disregard much Buddhist critique of the GFPS as a transparent attempt to protect the economic base of temples, for some Buddhists, such as the Tendai priest quoted below, natural funerals are seen not merely as severing family and social bonds, but as "a threat to the very moral foundations of Japanese culture" (COVELL 2001, p. 312).

If we recognize the majesty of human life, it should be clear that the body cannot just be thrown out. Whatever excuse one uses for scattering remains, it comes down to throwing them out. Usually one visits the grave thinking of the parents. What do people who throw out the remains do? Visit the mountains or forest? ... The extended family has already collapsed. But I don't think it is all right to destroy parent-child relations as well. Even in a nuclear family, parent-child relations are authoritative. They are tied to good neighborly relations. We should reaffirm the fact that the family line is extended through the grave.... The lack of an ethical view is a major problem. Ethical views begin in the family.... Set the mind straight, train the body, support your family, govern the country, make all equal under heaven. Are these just too old-fashioned? I think reaffirming the importance of the family and the importance of community relations will shed light on the anti-social nature of scattering remains." (*Kōhō Tendai* 1998/10:12–13, quoted in COVELL 2001, pp. 312–13)

Here again we see the grave as an essential site of family continuity that is now the very basis of morals and ethics, not only for the individual but also for the entire nation. Scattering remains is no longer simply a reflection of larger social problems, but a contributor to the final disintegration of what remains of the traditional family.

While this type of critique of the Society may come as little surprise, Buddhist support for scattering comes from unexpected directions. In an article on the first *shizensō* performed by the Society, *Bukkyō Taimusu* solicited the opinions of four Buddhist priests and scholars. Despite the “warning bell” headlines noted previously, the reactions were not entirely negative and in fact three of the priests offered at least partial support for the idea of scattering. For Sōtō priest and director of the Buddhist Information Center (仏教情報センター) Suzuki Eiki 鈴木永城, scattering has lit a helpful fire of critique that, far from undermining Buddhism, may actually “provide the key to how individual temples should react to current [funerary] problems” (*Bukkyō Taimusu* 1991/10/25, p. 4). Although he does not specify why, Jōdo priest Ōmura Eishō 大村英昭 considers scattering to be both folk religious and an extreme form of secularism. Echoing the criticisms above, he sees natural funerals as “severe individualism” but then admits that, as an individual, he too has the desire to have his remains scattered. He then allows, in a surprising, but doctrinally consistent statement, that “the leaving behind of bones is of course a type of attachment” (*Bukkyō Taimusu* 1991/10/25, p. 4).

For some priests such as Shinbo Yoshimichi 新保義道, former head of the Jōdō sect's efforts in Hawaii, scattering is the best way to deal with the increase in the number of individuals who die without descendants to take care of their grave, both in Hawaii and in Japan. Echoing Ōmura Eishō's return to the doctrine of non-attachment, Shinbo argues, “Surely, the best method for protect-

ing against the crude handling of ashes is to return them to nature at a suitable time.... Buddhism originally preached emptiness and discarding attachments to all things. Is it not important that we now discard our attachments to bodily remains? If we are going to cling to our bones then there is no way we should throw away even one fragment of remains after cremation” (*Bukkyō Taimusu* 1991/10/25, p. 4). Shinbo’s last statement is of particular interest because it echoes doctrinally the often invoked defense of the legality of scattering made by Society founder Yasuda about the potential criminality of everyone who leaves behind even a small portion of remains at the crematorium.

Another voice that must be included in this debate comes from Buddhists, such as Shingon Buzanha (豊山派) priest Okada Hirota, who are also members of the GFPS. In a special issue of a sectarian research journal Okada quotes from a 1748 work entitled “A Compilation of Buddhist Rites for Monks and Laity” (*Shinzoku Butsuji-hen* 真俗仏事編), that outlines three ways of dealing with a corpse: earth burial (*dosō* 土葬), cremation (*kasō* 火葬), and water burial (*suisō* 水葬). In a section titled “The superior and inferior merits of the three types of burial” (*sansō no kudoku no shōretsu* 三葬の功德の勝劣) the three burials are defined in the following way: “Earth burial is an act that disposes of the whole body as it is. Therefore it is a very lonely practice. Cremation involves taking the bones and dividing them among the relatives. This follows the cremation of Shakyamuni. Water burial is a practice that offers the flesh of the body to other living things” (quoted in OKADA 2001, p. 93). These are then ranked so that earth burial is considered a lesser merit (*gebon no kudoku* 下品の功德), cremation is a mid-level merit, while water or forest burial (*suisō* 水葬, *rinsō* 林葬) offer the highest merit (*jōbon no kudoku* 上品の功德). While the above classifications are taken directly from the original, Okada then proceeds to equate the sea and forest burials of the text with the natural funerals of the GFPS. “This Buddhist view of placing the body in the water or in a forest as a superior practice evolved from a particular historical background, but surely we can also value the modern act of returning powdered cremated remains to mountains and oceans as a ‘superior practice.’ This is because we can assume that eventually the ashes will become an offering (*fuse* 布施) to living creatures” (OKADA 2001, pp. 93–94).

Despite doctrines of non-attachment and emptiness, the Buddhist fascination with remains is well documented.²¹ As the above arguments show, some Japanese Buddhists are also attached to graves as an essential site of continuity and enlightenment for both the living and the dead. What is particularly interesting about this debate is that arguments both for and against *shizensō* are being justified by references to Buddhist doctrine. As the following section will

21. See for example, FAURE 1991, pp. 132–208.

illustrate, another viable reaction to scattering is to adapt certain elements of the GFPS platform but place them within a Buddhist framework.

Jumokusō 樹木葬

One of the more fascinating Buddhist responses to the growing influence of natural funerals has come from a small Rinzai temple in Iwate Prefecture. Located in the town of Ichinoseki 一関 (pop. 61 000), Shōun-ji 祥雲寺 has been attracting both Buddhist and secular media attention since it began offering “forest funerals” (*jumokusō*) in November 1999. Like Yasuda, head priest Chisaka Genbō 千坂峻峰 came up with the idea as a way to preserve the environment of the area and deal with increased demand for grave space. Located thirty minutes by car from the temple, the 5,000 square meter wooded hill holds over thirty “graves” with reservations for 180 more.

In a typical *jumokusō*, a spot is chosen in the forest where relatives, using only their hands, dig a hole about thirty centimeters deep and pour in the remains. A favorite flower or tree is planted to mark the spot, and finally Chisaka offers a short Buddhist prayer, the Dhāraṇī of Great Compassion (*Dai-hiju* 大悲咒), to end the ceremony.²² The location of the grave (there is no stone marker of any kind) is then carefully recorded using a hand-held global positioning system (GPS) that calculates exact longitude, latitude, and altitude via a satellite uplink.²³

Though the forest funerals practiced at Shōun-ji offer intriguing parallels to the *shizensō* of the GFPS, there are several essential differences between them. The most important distinction is that a *jumokusō*, though a “natural funeral,” consists of earth burial, not scattering, and thus is covered under the current grave law.²⁴ It is for this reason that the mountain area where the *jumokusō* take place is registered with the prefecture as a licensed graveyard. Thus despite differences in appearance, the mountain used by Shōun-ji is technically no different from a regular graveyard except that it contains no concrete graves (or human-made objects of any kind). When confronted by comparisons to the GFPS, Chisaka is careful to point out that, because in a *jumokusō* service the remains are buried rather than scattered, there is no need to break them up into tiny pieces as with scattering. “I oppose scattering because it ignores the religious sentiments of the locals. When ashes are dropped on the ground they are blown about by the wind as are the flowers people put there as offerings.... [Yet in order to avoid trouble] the bones must be crushed. This seems inhuman”

22. This *dhāraṇī* is primarily used by the Rinzai and Sōtō sects. For a list of funerary prayers for each of the Buddhist schools see FUJII 1980. For a discussion of *dhāraṇī*, see ABE 1999, pp. 5–8.

23. Recently a new system has been employed where grave location is recorded in relation to surrounding trees and natural landmarks.

24. At Shōun-ji the term *maisō* 埋葬, “burial/interment,” (as opposed to scattering) is used to describe the act of putting the remains in the ground.

(*Jimonkōryu* 2000/2, pp. 46–47). The final distinction is that Chisaka offers a Buddhist ceremony.²⁵ Having specific gravesites means that Shōun-ji can also offer traditional memorial services as well as yearly gatherings for a group memorial service. At the 2001 memorial I met several families from Tokyo who travel to the memorial service every year as part of their summer vacation.

Ironically one of the biggest complaints against the natural funerals and the *jumokusō* graveyard at Shōun-ji is that they are *far too natural*. As previously noted, the forest is thirty minutes by car from the temple and, even with a recently completed building closer to the site, it is more than a kilometer to the closest toilet or running water. Due to its location in the mountains in northern Japan, the area gets a lot of snow and thus the graveyard is officially closed from mid-November to mid-April. This means that only those who die in the spring, summer, or early fall can have subsequent graveside memorial rites on the actual anniversary of death. Limited accessibility also precludes a traditional equinox visit in March (*higan* 彼岸). A third complaint is the mandatory work requirement. *Jumokusō* rules stipulate that all applicants must do one day of clean up work in the forest every year for five years. Those who are too old or live too far away may make a donation of 70,000 yen (\$560) per day in lieu of working. This is in addition to the roughly 300,000 yen (\$2400) yen that they are already paying. This has led to charges by Yasuda of gouging and “priestly business” (坊さんの商売), though in actual practice the requirements for what constitutes “work” in the forest are fairly relaxed (YASUDA, 1995). One of the biggest problems with the forest graveyard, despite the use of twenty-first century technology, is that relatives still have a lot of difficulty finding family graves. Forest growth changes considerably from season to season, and many of the families only visit the graveyard once a year. For those who come more regularly, even with a special map from the temple it can be very difficult to find a grave. While touring the site with Chisaka at the annual memorial service in 2001, I witnessed at least three different groups asking him if he had any idea where their relative was buried. Uncertainty about where graves are located also makes for rather ginger steps as one walks through the forest. While some families constructed makeshift grave markers by arranging a small ring around the plant or tree, most of the graves were virtually indistinguishable from their surroundings.

To date, Shōun-ji has been one of the most visible Buddhist reactions to the Society and it is worth noting the similar environmental platforms. Not unlike

25. Official temple policy regarding religious affiliation is as follows: “Regulation #2—The temple does not inquire into the patron’s religious affiliation but at the time of burial the service will be conducted in a Zen sect format” (*Jimonkōryu*, 2000/2, p. 48). Religious tolerance is demonstrated by the fact that four of the thirty people buried at Shōun-ji are Christians. At the first annual *jumokusō* memorial service held in June 2001, both chanting of the Heart Sutra and readings from the Bible by a Christian priest were included. See <http://kurikoma.or.jp/~chisaka/kinkyou/kinkyou.html> for pictures and a description of the ceremony.

Yasuda and the forests of rebirth, Chisaka began the project as a way to counter the overflowing graveyards in the area and to promote local conservation. So far Shōun-ji is an isolated case, but like the GFPS it has received prolonged national attention. Chisaka reported that he had also received inquiries from Buddhist priests around the nation and expects to see similar projects soon.

Commercialization

Perhaps the clearest indication of the Society's growing success, aside from the amount of social and legal controversy it has produced, is the growing number of professional funeral companies (*sōgisha* 葬儀社) that have started offering their own versions of the natural funeral. Within two and a half years of the first *shizensō*, the Tokyo based funeral company Kōeisha 公営社 became the first professional group to offer ocean scattering (*kaisō* 海葬) services. Charging 270,000 yen (\$2160) for individual services and 100,000 yen (\$800) per person for group ceremonies, Kōeisha will charter the boat and transport up to eight mourners to a spot twenty kilometers from land in Sagami Bay, where a simple ceremony takes place.²⁶ Similar in most ways to the ocean scattering rites of the GFPS, Kōeisha's service is modeled on a burial at sea with ceremonial intervals marked by moments of silence, the fog whistle or the ship's bell. The ceremony is presided over by a member of the funeral company, though families may have a priest present if they wish, and it is also possible to have some sort of "traditional" funeral ceremony before scattering the remains in the ocean. The company's web page advertises the service in the following way:

With changes in the environment and a shift in awareness from the family to the individual, one can see a reform in funeral form and thinking about graves. Scattering arises from a desire for recurrence, one that regards returning to the ocean as the principle of nature and one that sees humans as originally part of a life energy that was born of the sea.

([http:// www.mps.ne.jp/company /koueisha/sankotu/nos.htm](http://www.mps.ne.jp/company/koueisha/sankotu/nos.htm))

Though there are obvious parallels to GFPS ideology of a cyclical relation between humans and nature, Kōeisha manager Aoki Mitsuo 青木満男 insists his company is not in competition with the Society nor is it trying to spread the idea of natural funerals or expand the funerary freedom movement in any way. They are merely offering new services to individual consumers (AOKI 1994, p. 108). A crucial distinction between *shizensō* and rites offered by professional companies is the degree of self-awareness in the former. All Society funerals include a specific reference to which number, in the overall *shizensō* count, the particular rite represents. There will also be a reference within the ceremony to

26. Costs for a natural funeral through the GFPS are 100,000 yen for a group ceremony and 150,000 to 300,000 for an individual service.

the funerary freedom movement in general and its growing success. If the scattering takes place in a new location or form, this is also emphasized. In late 1996, Yasuda was on hand in Miyagi Prefecture to supervise the first *shizensō* held on land. The husband of the deceased wanted to put his wife to rest quietly, and had initially refused to allow any television coverage, but was later convinced that as a member of the GFPS he had an obligation to help spread the Society's message (YAMAORI and YASUDA 2000, pp. 104–15).

The Society does not oppose the commercialization of scattering, but it does make every effort to distinguish itself from commercial scattering services. As noted above, Society literature consistently attempts to separate natural funerals, or *shizensō*, from scattering. According to Yasuda, the funeral companies offer scattering as merely one more service and often do not take the environmental element seriously. He frequently complains that pictures in the news of flower bouquets, still wrapped in plastic, alongside other environmentally unfriendly memorial items floating in the sea, do little to further the Society's efforts.

Ironically, one benefit of going through a funeral company is that it may offer more freedom for people who want to have their ashes scattered, but do not necessarily agree with all the elements of the Society's platform. For example, Kōeisha, unlike the GFPS, offers return trips to the scattering spot for yearly memorial visits and will also arrange religious ceremonies upon request.

Grave Situations

In order to properly understand the emergence and significance of the Society, its practices, and other similar movements, we must consider the wider context of the current burial situation in Japan. Most professionals, be they religious, funerary, or academic, agree that since roughly 1990 Japan has been undergoing drastic changes, some say a crisis, in regards to treatment of the dead. Government and business surveys suggest that a growing number of Japanese have no place to go when they die. In the case of the eight public graveyards serving the Tokyo metropolitan area, the four that are within the city limits (within the 23 Tokyo wards) are no longer accepting applicants as they are slated to be turned into parks. Despite a leveling off over the last several years of applications to the remaining four graveyards at about 10,000 per year, there are still an average of thirty applications for each grave plot, with this ratio increasing to over fifty to one for more popular sites (SŌGI REIEN BUNKA KENKYŪKAI 2000, p. 272).

In addition to exploring possible regulation of scattering, the Welfare Ministry's 1997 committee on current grave practices also concerned itself with assessing the problem of insufficient grave space. According to the committee's report, by 2004 the demand for graves in Metropolitan Tokyo should outstrip supply by forty percent, potentially resulting in roughly 140,000 corpses going

homeless by the end of next year (<http://www1.mhlw.go.jp/shingi/s0321-3.html>). A major factor contributing to this shortage is the large number of “unconnected” or abandoned graves (*muen funbo* 無縁墳墓). Literally, “graves without ties,” this refers to graves where there are no descendants to take care of them or organize memorial rites. The committee proposed easing requirements for reporting abandoned graves and for subsequent removal of the remains to a communal grave, thus increasing available space (<http://www1.mhlw.go.jp/shingi/s9804/s0428-2.html>). In addition to making it easier to “evict” the dead, the report stresses the need for new graveyard styles including “spirit parks” (*reien* 霊園),²⁷ communal graves, and “wall style” graves (*kabegata bochi* 壁型墓地), which are also referred to as “coin locker graves” because of their physical resemblance to the ubiquitous lockers found at train stations and shopping centers around the country.

So called “eternal memorial graves” (*eitai kuyō bochi* 永代供養墓地) have seen a huge boom in the last decade, with several temples throughout the country setting up high-profile “societies” (*kai* 会) that both fill existing demands for new types of grave space and create new connections between the public and temples.²⁸ Members of the “Society of En” (En no Kai 縁の会—founded in 1996) at the Sōtō temple Tōchō-ji 東長寺 in Tokyo pay 700,000 yen (\$5,600) to have their remains interred and memorialized as individuals for thirty-three years, after which time they are placed in a communal grave “treasure tower” where they will continue to receive services as ancestors for as long as the temple stands. Members are also given a posthumous name and a grave marker in the form of a twenty-by-ten-cm, hollow, black oblong stone engraved with their actual, as opposed to posthumous names, and placed in small square islands of 81 stones in a small pool on the temple grounds.²⁹ Family members may place small items that belonged to the deceased inside these stones. The actual ashes and memorial tablet (*ihai* 位牌) are placed in the “Hall of Arhats” (*rakandō* 羅漢堂) directly under the main hall. As of July 2002, approximately six years after the En no kai began, it had roughly 4,850 members, with enough space for up to 7,500. When one realizes that the temple is already considered quite large

27. Resembling Western grave parks, *reien* began emerging in the 1930s. They have been referred to as everything from “utopias for the dead” to “subdivisions for the dead.” See BERNSTEIN 1999 and HASHIZUME 1996.

28. In 2000, *Eitai kuyō baka no hon*, a guidebook of over 225 eternal memorial graves across the country was published and required a second printing within two months.

29. Significantly, all of the posthumous names of those who belong to the En no Kai must end in either *shinnyo* (信女) for women, or *shinji* (信士) for men, both mid-level status titles affixed to the ends of posthumous names and traditionally indicating a lay follower. This is in sharp contrast to the common practice of paying large sums for long and prestigious posthumous names seen at other temples and even among the regular *danka* at Tōchō-ji. One wonders if this was not a conscious decision on the part of the temple to appease the parishioners by inserting a highly visible class break between the plebeian dead and the *danka* patriarchs.

with its 700 parishioner families, the idea of an additional 7,500 members is staggering. The society also has a quarterly newsletter and offers numerous cultural and educational programs such as a singing chorus, zazen meditation sessions, and lectures on Buddhist culture offered through Tōchō-ji.

One major impetus for these new styles of graves that do not require descendants is a growing number of women who, for various reasons, want the opportunity to own their own graves. The most visible group to call for women's graves, The Society for a Women's Monument (Onna no Hi no Kai 女の碑の会), founded in 1979 by Tani Kayoko 谷嘉代子, was initially formed for women widowed in the second World War. The original monument, located at Jōjakkō-ji 常寂光寺, a Nichiren temple in western Kyoto, was engraved with the words "As long as a single woman lives we will pray for peace here." According to Tani, the monument expressed the sentiment that "though a women lives alone, once she dies she wants to rest with her friends" (TANI 1994, p. 86). Though the monument was erected in 1979, it was not until ten years later that an ossuary (*nōkotsudō* 納骨堂) that could actually hold the women's remains was built. The ossuary was named "The Shrine of Intentional Bonds" (*shienbyō* 志縁廟) in order to show that those interred within were joined by bonds (*en* 縁) of purpose rather than the traditional bonds of family (*ketsuen* 血縁) or region (*chien* 地縁). As of early 2000 the Onna no Hi no Kai had over 600 members, due in large part to a noticeable shift in membership that began around 1990 when young, single women began joining. Tani sees the change as part of a larger trend toward variety in funerary styles that is not only allowing single and widowed women to make choices, but also married women, who may not wish to spend eternity with their husband's ancestors.³⁰ While there is as yet no specific data, it is clear that there is a growing trend in Japan toward what Inoue Haruyo has termed "posthumous divorce" (*shigo rikon* 死後離婚, INOUE 2000, p. 34).

The site that many take as the foundation of Japan's eternal memorial grave boom is Myōkō-ji 妙光寺, a Nichiren temple in Niigata Prefecture that is the home of the Tranquility Society (Annon Kai 安穩会) founded in 1989. Members are interred and prayed for as individuals in the "Tranquility Shrine" (*annonbyō* 安穩廟), a large octagonal concrete building in the shape of a traditional Buddhist stupa with a small treasure tower (*tahōtō* 多宝塔) in the center (see Figure 2). Demand from across the country for these ossuaries has been so high that the 432 graves in the four Tranquility Shrines were totally full as of 2001 and the temple was forced to build an "Annon Forest" (*mori no annon* 杜の安穩) of 240 smaller octagonal graves in 2002. There are also new Annon shrines at Nichiren temples in Kyushu and Kamakura that began in 2001 and 2002 respec-

30. A 1995 survey found that 35% of women thought it was acceptable for married couples to be buried separately and over half of the women in their 40s thought it was fine to be buried with friends or acquaintances.

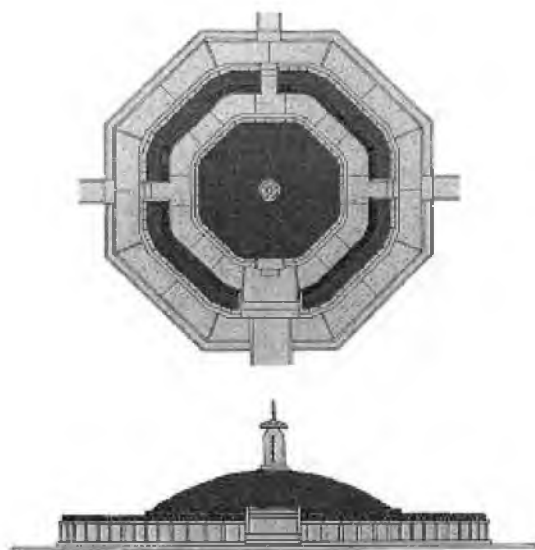


FIGURE 2. The Tranquility Shrine at Myōkō-ji

tively. The success of Annon Kai has come largely from its yearly gathering, the “Tranquility Festival” in August, when members take part in memorial services, attend a series of Buddhist memorial rites, cultural performances, lectures, dharma talks, and dance the “Annon jig” (*annon jinku* 安穩甚句) while the head priest, Ogawa, plays the *taiko* drums. Like En no Kai and Onna no Hi no Kai, Annon Kai is successful not due simply to its “open grave” policy, but because of the surrounding network that it offers.

The various burial societies, with their simplified, inexpensive rites, guarantee of post-mortem individuality for up to thirty-three years, and memorial rites for “eternity,” address a new group of religious consumer that has been emerging since the late 1980s. While the existence of such groups clearly reflects changing conceptions of family and ancestors, it is also worth considering how they are reshaping traditional relationship forms. As noted above, the two most common forms of relationship or bond (*en*) in Japan are those of blood and locale. What is fascinating to note about some of these burial groups is the way they are appropriating the *en* bond in new ways. The En no Kai offers no modifier for *en*, and becomes thus a “Society of Bonds.” The use of the term *shienbyō* by the Society for a Women’s Monument consciously modifies *en* by adding “will” or “intent” and thus allowing these women to form new types of bonds. In both cases as well as with other burial societies, the traditionally recognized forms of relations are being dramatically expanded, so that friends, acquaintances, even strangers, may now be buried together and memorialize

each other. One might then add a third category of relation, “death bonds” (*shien* 死縁) to signify this new phenomenon of post-mortem social reform.

Building upon the work of Japanese scholars such as Murakami Kōkyō 村上興匡, who has tracked a shift toward the privatization of funerary custom since the 1960s, I have argued elsewhere that we may now speak of the “individualization” of the dead, in which a person’s own desires for post-mortem treatment take precedence over the wishes of family or the expectations of society (MURAKAMI 1997; ROWE 2000). Within this context, the Grave-Free Society may be seen as simply another response to widespread uncertainties about what will happen to one’s physical remains; but there are essential differences. Despite the new death relationships mentioned above, we must keep in mind that the actions of the various burial societies are still well within the established Buddhist idiom of memorial rites and graves, whereas the GFPS is making a radical break with these practices.

Society members may revisit a site, particularly if it is on land, but there are none of the rituals or offerings that accompany traditional yearly grave visits. Though the Society does not often address itself directly to the question of memorial rites, both Yasuda and individual members are clearly aware of the issue. The Society’s quarterly newsletter *Rebirth* (*Saisei* 再生) includes brief letters by members describing natural funerals in which they have taken part and giving their opinions on related issues. A particularly poignant response to the question of memorial rites came from a veteran who wrote of the great number of his fellow navy officers in WWII who had died without funerals in the South Pacific. As if speaking directly to the Buddhist priests he wrote, “The melody of the endless tide pacifies the departed spirit better than one million sutra recitations. I hope that I too will be scattered in the azure sea” (*Saisei* 41, p. 19). When I specifically asked Yasuda for his position on ancestor worship, he answered that, though he agrees with the concept in general, most people have never even met the generation before their grandparents and thus have little connection to them. He also doubted that any ill would come from not continuing to make offerings to the dead, since there was no way a deceased spirit would want to harm his or her own descendants. Despite the apparent logic of this statement, it is a radical departure from traditional conceptions of the dead. Both the history and physical landscape of Japan are littered with monuments, shrines, and myriad prophylactic rites to ensure the ancestors’ continued appeasement.³¹

Locating the Remains

The biggest tradition that scattering overturns is the clear separation between

31. Obvious examples include Tenmangu shrines, battlefield prayers to pacify the souls of slain enemies, and offerings to wandering spirits, to name but a few.

the living and the dead. By slipping through the loophole in current Japanese grave laws, the Society has potentially opened up the entire country to death. With scattering, the boundaries of a graveyard or memorial park are no longer relevant. There is a real fear that somebody's ashes could conceivably be in your backyard, under your picnic basket, or mixed in with the fish you are having for dinner. The fact that people are reacting so much more strongly to the form and location of scattered remains rather than to the potential undermining of ancestral rites and family continuity shows that the location of human remains may be more important than whether or not anyone is memorializing them. Despite finding widespread support for scattering, the Welfare Ministry's 1997 survey also revealed that, even among those who accept scattering, sixty-two percent felt that fixed rules should be laid down regarding location. Over eighty percent of all surveyed thought that scattering in places such as towns, parks, roads, river heads, and beaches was inappropriate, and seventy percent felt the same way about fishing and farming areas (MORI 2000, appendix pp. 28–30).

Immediately after death the corpse is in an ambiguous or, to use van Gennepe's terms, liminal state. Neither fully present nor completely gone, the deceased must be ritually removed from both the social and the physical sphere of the living and transferred to that of the dead. What is particularly intriguing about the idea of scattering in public spaces is the way that it may extend the liminal period indefinitely. While van Gennepe's work tended to focus on liminality, we need to also keep in mind the importance of reincorporation. It is essential that at some time the dead are clearly situated somewhere other than amongst the living. Note that while for the bereaved family and the GFPS, scattering may end the liminal stage, for those who live and work in the area where the remains are scattered, the lack of a clearly defined space for the dead means that they are never *in their place*.

This ambiguity of location that scattering entails carries over into other areas as well. There is the unclear position of scattering in the eyes of the law, neither legal nor illegal, neither prohibited nor fully accepted. The remains are also ambiguous in terms of tradition. Scattered in the ocean or in a forest they are taken out of the cycle of ancestral worship and family obligation, not abandoned (*iki* 遺棄), but certainly without ties (*muen* 無縁). In a sense scattering solves the problem of *muen* not simply by reducing the load on overburdened urban graveyards, but rather by providing the deceased with an alternative to the ancestral cycle—that of nature.

Buddhist institutions are also providing alternative cycles and spaces. While still within the Buddhist idiom of memorial rites, temples such as Myōkō-ji, Tōchō-ji, and Shōun-ji are creating associations that they argue will transcend the bonds of family and region. What appears to be the essential difference between these temples and the GFPS is that the latter ends its relation to the dead as soon as they are “returned” to nature while the former will continue its

interactions for thirty-three years or more. The very impulse toward individual rights and the desire to determine one's fate after death that the GFPS champions, is leading people to seek alternatives that both let them make choices and keep their individual identities as objects of veneration long after they have died.

Japan is in the midst of a far-reaching transformation vis-à-vis the structure of the family and this may be nowhere more apparent than in the nation's graves. People, who ten years ago would have had little choice but to enter a family grave or end up nameless in an ossuary, are now in a position to make a wide range of choices about where their remains will end up and how long they will maintain their individuality after death.

Clearly what we are witnessing is more than merely a reaction against traditional Buddhist graves and funerals. Though it is tempting to attribute these changes to modernity, this is by no means a simple question of rationalization or secularization. The fact that many people are trying to renegotiate their relationships with temples either by joining burial associations, or simply by choosing eternal memorial graves that allow them to die Buddhist and as individuals, indicates that all Japanese have not succumbed to a general Weberian disenchantment. At the same time it is also clear that Buddhist temples that are entirely dependent on the traditional *danka* system are in serious trouble. Priests whom I have interviewed all speak of the end or at least a radical transformation of the parishioner-temple relationship over the next few decades as the traditional household continues to take new forms. The GFPS, Annon Kai, Onna no Hi no Kai, and others reveal possible directions for the future not only of burial practices, but religious affiliation as a whole. I would posit that the current revolution in Japanese grave and funeral practices does not simply reflect larger societal changes, but may provide an essential arena where social norms are first contested.

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