



Vengeful Spirits or Loving Spiritual Companions? Changing Views of Animal Spirits in Contemporary Japan

Pet memorial rites gained currency in Japan in the late twentieth century. Beginning in the 1970s, Japan experienced an “occult boom,” which was marked by increasing interest in paranormal phenomena, divination, and vengeful spirits. At the same time, Japanese society underwent dramatic demographic changes and a marked increase in pet ownership. Pet memorial rituals became popular in this environment. However, the rationale behind these rituals is shifting in the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyō incident and through the growing influence of a global pet loss literature. Once regarded as threatening, vengeful spirits, pet spirits have emerged as loving, faithful spiritual companions. This article traces these changes at Buddhist pet cemeteries and in the writings of popular spiritualists from Gibo Aiko to Ehara Hiroyuki.

KEYWORDS: new spirituality movements and culture—*petto kuyō* (pet memorial rites)—*chikushō* (realm of beasts)—*jōbutsu* (becoming a Buddha/being at peace)—pet loss—the Rainbow Bridge

EARLY in the afternoon on Sunday 15 July 2007, the small main hall of Jikeiin 慈惠院, a Rinzai temple in Fuchū in western Tokyo with one of the largest and busiest pet cemeteries in the metropolitan area, is crowded with sixty people—mostly middle-aged women and a few young women and elderly men (FIGURE 1). Despite the heavy rains of a typhoon that morning, they have come to attend the yearly *segakie* 施餓鬼会 ritual for pets. The patrons have received booklets so that they can chant along with the clerics as they intone the *Heart Sutra*, a Kannon *dharani*, and the Four Vows. A censer box is passed through the rows of patrons so that they can offer incense. The service ends with a brief dedication of merit. There is no sermon, and the pets are not mentioned individually, but some patrons will commission individual services later in the afternoon.

As the ritual is about to begin, Mrs. M., a middle-aged, slender woman, slides into one of the last open chairs next to me. She whispers: “You know, it was my cat who woke me up this morning so that I would attend this ritual on his behalf. I nearly overslept because of the typhoon. He kept licking me with his rough tongue. I would not have made it in time without him waking me up. When I opened my eyes though, he was gone.” Her mackerel tabby Jun had died only eleven days earlier at the age of twenty. She did not want another cat so soon after Jun’s passing, but her neighbor brought her a kitten that was Jun’s spitting image, except that his tail was a bit longer. The new cat immediately took to her so she became convinced that Jun had been reborn as this kitten. When the kitten had woken her up this morning, it was a message from Jun that he did not want her to miss his memorial service.

In the 1990s, the Japanese pet industry expanded into a trillion-yen business. Estimates place the number of pets above the number of children under the age of fifteen.¹ With the pet boom, there has also been a dramatic growth in the pet funeral industry. As indicated by the pervasive usage of the term “our little ones” (*uchi no ko*) to designate pets, contemporary Japanese pet owners increasingly view their companion animals as family members (*kazoku no ichi'in* 家族の一員); therefore, pets are often buried and memorialized with rites due to a family member (see FIGURES 2–3). There are now over nine hundred pet cemeteries in Japan, about one hundred and twenty of which are operated by Buddhist temples (YAMAMOTO 2006, 64). Even pet cemeteries not operated by Buddhist temples usually have



FIGURE 1. *Segakie* service at Jikeiin, Fuchū, Tokyo on 15 July 2007. (All photographs by the author)

ties to Buddhist clerics who officiate during rituals on major holy days dedicated to the dead such as the equinoxes (*bigan* 彼岸) and the festival of the dead (*obon* 御盆). Buddhist mortuary rites for pets have become an institutionalized practice, even though some temples, particularly those of the Jōdo Shin (True Pure Land) sect, reject the performance of pet memorial rites. However, in my ethnographic fieldwork at over thirty pet cemeteries over the past four years, it was apparent that Buddhist clerics left their views on the afterlife of pets largely unarticulated even though one would assume some explanation to be crucial for providing a rationale for pet mortuary rites. This is not to say that this discourse does not exist, but that it occurs in popular publications and discussions in Internet chat rooms rather than at Buddhist temples.²

As Shimazono Susumu has pointed out, there has been a growing interest in spirits and spirituality in Japan's highly urbanized society of the late twentieth century. Spirit belief and magico-spiritual practices occur mostly outside the framework of established religion: in the "new new religions," the writings of spiritual intellectuals and what Shimazono terms "new spirituality movements and culture" (*shin reisei undō/bunka* 新靈性運動・文化).³ Shimazono argues that such spiritualist practices and spirit beliefs are particularly compatible with the postmodern world because they work well within the context of disintegrating traditional family structures and weakening ties with established religious institutions. They are also



FIGURE 2. Outdoor grave at the pet cemetery on the grounds of Jindaiji, Chōfū, Tokyo. The inscription translates as: “You dogs and cats who were family members, thank you for all your gentle kindness. Please rest in peace.”



FIGURE 3. Outdoor pet grave at Daijōjisan Dōbutsu Reien, Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture. The inscription reads: “Thank you. To my eternal family.”

appealing because they play on the notion of complexity and uncertainty, which they appear to make somewhat controllable through the manipulation of spirits (SHIMAZONO 2004, 164–77, 275–79, 290–92, 304). Shimazono has also repeatedly noted the emphasis on individuality and personal gratification in the “new new religions” and the new spirituality movements and culture. He argues that these spiritual and magical practices are radically different from the communally-oriented ancestral practices in established Buddhism and older new religions, which emphasize the protection of the family rather than the existence of personal spirit guardians (SHIMAZONO 1992a; 1992b; and 2007, 275–306; READER 1993, 237–38). It is no surprise then that the discourse about the afterlife of pets—with its implied redefinition of the meaning of “the family” (*kazoku* 家族) and emphasis on vengeful and protective spirits—has primarily occurred in the context of this new spirituality culture.

In my survey of sermons at mortuary rituals for pets (*petto kuyō* ペット供養), interviews with Buddhist clerics and clients at pet cemeteries, publications by popular psychics, and internet chat rooms, I encountered several influences that shape ideas about the afterlife of pets: 1. Buddhist ideas of transmigration, rebirth, and salvation; 2. notions about unsettled, vengeful spirits and benign, protective spirits; and Western influences including 3. popular ideas of heaven as well as 4. spiritualist and psychological notions from the field of pet-loss therapy. The growing influence of pet-loss literature early in the new millennium as well as the post-Aum climate have altered the ways in which Japanese pet owners, ritualists, and psychics conceptualize the afterlife of pets: from potentially vengeful spirits and spiritually inferior beasts to benign, faithful companions.⁴ The transformation of pet spirits during the past two decades illustrates the changes in the new spirituality culture through the Aum Shinrikyō incident and increased globalization through the rise of the internet.

BUDDHIST CLERICS: ANIMALS ARE SENTIENT BEINGS, BUT NOT BEASTS

Traditional Japanese views of the spiritual status and the afterlife of animals are ambivalent. Even though the divine, human, and animal realms are seen as interconnected, there has also been a sense of differentiation and hierarchy. Animals have been regarded as powerful, even potentially threatening, spiritual forces that can punish those who wrong them and reward those who treat them well. Within Buddhism, animals are also sentient beings (*shujō* 衆生, *ikimono* 生き物, or *ujō* 有情) with the potential for better rebirth and salvation. Yet they are also lower beings in the cycle of death and rebirth that are spiritually inferior and inherently unclean. As residents of the realm of beasts (*chikushōdō* 畜生道), one of the three lower—or evil—realms of rebirth, animals are regarded as emblems of delusion and attachment. Being reborn as a beast is the result of karmic retribution for unwholesome deeds and viewed as a punishment. Furthermore, while animals appear frequently in Buddhist didactic tales beginning with the *jataka* literature, there are no Buddhist scriptures specifically for animals, let alone pets.

This leads to dilemmas when contemporary Buddhist clerics who conduct pet memorial rituals turn to traditional Buddhist doctrine to describe the posthumous fate of pets. Operating largely without any definitive guidance from sectarian headquarters on these matters, individual Buddhist clerics have to reinterpret Buddhist scriptures and teachings creatively and selectively if they want to appeal to contemporary pet owners. In general, Buddhist clerics conducting pet memorial rituals tend to promote the notion of pets as fellow sentient beings and the idea of rebirth near the former owner in this life or the next, but many clerics tend to avoid equating pets with the beastly existence.⁵

The case of Narita Junkyō 成田淳教, the abbot of Kannōji 感応寺, a Jōdo (Pure Land)⁶ temple in Kamiyama (Setagaya Ward, Tokyo), which has a small pet cemetery on the temple grounds, illustrates how Buddhist clerics struggle to appropriate traditional scriptures to suit contemporary needs. Since Narita's sectarian leadership offered him no guidance on how to integrate pets doctrinally and ritually, he searched keywords related to animals in internet versions of the major three Pure Land scriptures.⁷ Of course, the modern term “animal” (*dōbutsu* 動物) does not occur in the texts. However, the older Buddhist term “beasts” (*chikushō*) appears but only in the comment that there is no beastly realm in Amida's Pure Land. Narita interpreted this to mean that pets cannot be reborn directly into the Pure Land. On his temple's website he mentions the six realms of existence but carefully avoids the term *chikushō*, opting instead for the modern term *dōbutsu*. He constructs pets as quasi-family members and fellow living beings:

All living beings [*ikimono*] transmigrate—that is, they are reborn—into the six existences of hell, hungry ghosts, animals [*dōbutsu*], Asura, humans, and heavenly beings. Because both humans and animals share the same life that they have entered through rebirth, [animals] are memorialized just like humans. You make a wish that through the transfer of merit accrued through the nenbutsu⁸ and the recitation of scriptures, the light of Amida-*sama* will shine on animals and alleviate their suffering, that they will be reborn in a better place and environment, and that they will form a bond [*en* 縁] with Amida-*sama* there and be reborn in the Pure Land. In the Pure Land, they can be reunited with humans who were their companions during previous lifetimes.

In addition to transferring merit to the pet, you also intone the nenbutsu for your own sake and make a wish that you will be reborn in the Pure Land in order to be reunited there, never to be separated again, and become Buddhas [*jōbutsu* 成仏] together. It is very sad, but all living beings must die at some time. It saddens the little ones [*ko* 子] who died before their owners if their beloved owners grieve for a long time. We would like you to turn your sadness into an expression of gratitude through memorial rites (*kuyō* 供養) and to wish for a reunion in the Pure Land.⁹

Grappling with the traditional tenets of the scriptures central to his school, Narita is engaging in a delicate balancing act to avoid the overly negative connotations of the beastly realm. Perhaps this reluctance is due to the fact that in colloquial mod-

ern Japanese, *chikushō* is used to describe someone as a “brute.” The term is also used as an expletive with a similar meaning as a four-letter word in English, while *chikushōdō* (beastly existence) colloquially means “incest.”¹⁰ Instead of dwelling on the beastly realm, Narita emphasizes themes of kinship and karmic connections. In an interview with the author in 2006, Narita firmly insisted that animals cannot be immediately reborn in the Pure Land because they cannot recite the nenbutsu and therefore cannot be saved directly through the power of Amida’s original vow. However, when the owners recite the nenbutsu and memorialize their pets, the pets are able to be born as humans or heavenly beings and thus have a chance to gain salvation in the Pure Land. Though it is somewhat delayed, they can gain salvation through the agency of the owner. This view was initially also reflected on Kannōji’s website, but recently Narita rephrased the text to make it more appealing to his clients.¹¹ Of note in his comments is that once reborn via a human life into the Pure Land, the pets will be reunited with their loved ones. The notion of a happy reunion in a future existence must be appealing to pet owners; yet the delay through an intermediary rebirth might be dissatisfying for some.¹²

However, more often than not Buddhist clerics leave the posthumous fate of pets and the rationale for the performance of the rituals up to the imagination of the pet owners. Unable or untrained to produce appealing answers based on doctrinal sources, many clerics avoid addressing the issue of the afterlife of pets entirely. For example, in 2007, I asked Suzuki Wajun 鈴木和順, a Jōdo cleric who founded Azusawa Memorial Park 小豆沢墓苑, which allows joint human-pet interment, whether people ever asked him about what happened to pets after their deaths. He responded: “No. That doesn’t come up. I think that we don’t really know. Religions such as Christianity have come up with the notions of heaven and hell and other stories. In Buddhism, we have the Pure Land and so forth, but I believe that we don’t really know. Ultimately, Buddhism is for the living. Lately, you hear about young people who commit suicide in the belief that they will be reborn. That is bizarre, I think.” Here Suzuki resists any speculation about the afterlife of pets. He further questions several fundamental concepts of Pure Land Buddhism: rebirth and the existence of Pure Land. Instead, he adopts a rationalist and agnostic point of view.

When I mentioned that another Jōdo cleric had argued that pets could not be reborn directly into the Pure Land, Suzuki expressed astonishment and suggested that Pure Land texts ought to be read metaphorically in order to meet contemporary needs, including those of bereaved pet owners. In other words, Suzuki rejects a literal reading of Buddhist texts that runs counter to a modern, rationalist worldview. He also constructs Buddhism as a religion for the living. This was an attitude that I commonly encountered at Buddhist temples offering pet memorial rituals. Many clerics saw the performance of the rites as a service for the living, that is, the pet owners. When pet owners come to a Buddhist temple, a pet funeral is not seen as an occasion to dwell on the uncertain fate of the deceased pet but rather to preach on Buddhist themes in general.

In her study of memorial rites for aborted fetuses (*mizuko kuyō* 水子供養), Helen Hardacre notes a similar dynamic. She explains:

In general, the Buddhist priesthood has been slower to clarify a position toward *mizuko kuyō* than spiritualists, and has tended to be passive and reactive. With the exception of Jōdo Shinshū, which rejects *mizuko kuyō* outright, Buddhist sects have not issued a clear policy on these rites, partly from the desire to avoid political involvement, and partly to avoid offending parishioners, who themselves have a wide spectrum of views. This means that Buddhist institutions had been overtaken by religious entrepreneurs and an outpouring of popular religious sentiment before they could reach a clear policy within each sect. Because there are few opportunities for ecumenical dialogue on such issues, most sects have not had occasion to air a range of views, nor to inform themselves systematically on the practice of other religionists. (HARDACRE 1997, 155–56)

Instead of within the Buddhist sects, Hardacre argues, the liveliest discourse on the spirits of aborted fetuses occurs in other channels, particularly among localized and independent spiritualists and religious entrepreneurs (HARDACRE 1997, 155–74). In the case of pet memorial rites, much development occurs at individual temples rather than through promotion by the sectarian headquarters. There are few channels of communication between clerics of different temples although a few efforts to collaborate on a business level do exist, but there is little cohesion in terms of the contents of the rites or the teachings represented.¹³ As in the case of *mizuko kuyō*, independent spiritualists rather than Buddhist clerics are the most vocal participants in the discourse on pet spirits.

PET SPIRITS IN THE PSYCHIC

LITERATURE OF THE 1990S: VENGEFUL SPIRITS

Popular psychics and clairvoyants have been eager to address the topic of the afterlife of pets. As pet memorial rites were gaining popularity and the occult boom was reaching a pinnacle in the early 1990s, spirit mediums and clairvoyants painted a very threatening picture of dead pets that were not buried or memorialized “properly.” They portrayed the spirits of pets as threatening entities that would haunt their owners or those who mistreated them when they were alive. A Buddhist term that often appears in this context is the concept of *jōbutsu*. As Elizabeth Kenney has aptly noted, the term literally means “to become a Buddha” but in the context of Japanese memorial rites it usually has the meaning of “to have a happy afterlife” (KENNEY 2004, 59). One might also translate the term as “becoming a spirit that is at peace.” Memorialization is seen as essential to the pet’s spirit finding peace.

In the early 1990s, clairvoyants such as Izumo Sayoko 出雲佐代子 (1943–), Gibo Aiko 宜保愛子 (1932–2003), and Tomidokoro Gitoku 富所義徳 (dates unknown) published on the subject of the memorialization of pets. All three focus strongly on the spiritual harm that animals will cause when they are memorialized incor-

rectly and therefore unable to find peace. They promote a highly anthropocentric world view according to which animals exist on a lower spiritual plane than humans and are locked into a nearly endless cycle of rebirths as animals. They give pets the highest spiritual status among animals because of their close relationship with humans. They also provide highly prescriptive instructions on how to conduct funerals and memorial rites for pets. Failure to follow these instructions is said to lead to spiritual retribution by the restless, distressed spirits while compliance promises to usher in personal happiness (*shiawase o maneku* 幸せを招く). With the exception of Izumo, these psychics engage in a forceful critique of the practices promoted by Buddhist institutions that run pet cemeteries.

The most moderate of the three is Izumo, who claims to have received her power from Amaterasu Ōmikami. She argues that animals have a lower spiritual status than humans, but the closer they are to humans, the higher their status. This gives pets such as cats and dogs the highest, most desirable spiritual status. However, cats and dogs that were mistreated in their lifetime lose their high status and thus become unsettled spirits (*fujōbutsurei* 不成仏霊) (IZUMO 1994, 18–19). Yet even though their spiritual status may be high compared to other animals, pets do not have the power to become protective deities—in contrast to human spirits. They may in instances repay kindness while they are alive, but they cannot act as protective divinities for the living once they die. On the contrary, they are far more likely to cause spiritual harm (IZUMO 1994, 34–37). As animals of high spiritual rank, as long as they have not been mistreated by humans or caused spiritual harm to humans, pets may eventually be reborn as humans themselves, but they face many obstacles on this path (IZUMO 1994, 42). To prevent spiritual harm from pets, Izumo advocates proper memorialization, offerings, and purification. Offerings include monetary offerings as well as donating one's time to charitable activities (IZUMO 1994, 104–105). Izumo argues that to find peace, pets should not be buried at home (which would pollute the soil) but rather cremated and interred in pet cemeteries. Pets should be memorialized for at least one month through daily prayers and offerings. If done properly, pets can find peace (*jōbutsu*) within three months after their deaths (IZUMO 1994, 138–52).

Gibo, the most widely known among the three psychics discussed here, also espouses a highly anthropocentric view of the spiritual status of animals. From the 1970s until the mid-1990s and again from 2001 to 2003, Gibo was frequently featured on Japanese radio and television and published numerous books on spirit matters, including occasional books and book chapters on animals (HARADA and SUGINAMI 2006, 491–501; GIBO 1987; 1990a; 1990b; 1991a; 1991b; 1995; 2002; and 2003). Like Izumi, Gibo constructs a hierarchical system of spiritual status that places humans at the pinnacle and ranks animals below them depending on their relationship with humans. Because of their close relationship with humans, pets rank highest, followed by livestock. By comparison, large wild animals rank below them because they are distanced from humans and live difficult lives fending for themselves. Even though the habitat of vermin such as mice and cockroaches is closer to that of humans, such animals cause harm to humans; therefore, it is

compassionate to kill them and enable them to gain a better rebirth more quickly (GIBO 1990a, 87–91). It is apparent here that Gibo's ethical views are not reflective of mainstream Buddhist concepts, such as the precept of not killing.

Gibo stresses that animals are not able to speak, are inherently pure, and have weak spirits, but those that are closest to humans can sense words, gestures, and feelings. If treated unkindly or if they die an untimely death, pets and livestock in particular can cause spiritual harm (*reishō* 靈障) to humans, but if treated with kindness they repay the favor with good fortune (*ongaeshi* 恩返し).¹⁴ Humans should express their gratitude for the service and company of animals through proper memorialization to avert spiritual harm (GIBO 1987, 166–82; 1990a, 84–85; 1990b, 88–100; and 1991a, 167).

Gibo typically illustrates her claims with short anecdotes about how animal spirits affect the fortune and the health of humans by causing business failure or illness (for example, ringing in the ears, losing the ability to speak, joint and muscle pain, cancer, and so on) in those who harmed them. In contrast, animals treated with kindness are described as healing humans or causing business success in order to repay their debt of gratitude. However, spiritual harm and curses (*tatari* 祟り) caused by vengeful animal spirits can be reversed by proper memorialization (GIBO 1990a, 97–137 and 1991a, 168–91).

Memorialization thus has an important protective function. This means that one has to observe the correct procedures. Gibo shows herself very much concerned with the form of pet memorial rites. In her prescriptions, where, how, and for how long memorial rituals are conducted are important markers to differentiate animals from humans. Gibo warns that animals should not be memorialized like humans with lavish funerals, extravagant graves, or too much incense.¹⁵ Since animals know that they have a different spiritual status, treating them like humans in life or in death causes them to suffer. Thus it prevents them from finding peace (*jōbutsu dekinai* 成仏できない) (GIBO 1990a, 86, 98). This means that the owners should not provide tombstones, wooden memorial slats (*tōba* 塔婆), or Buddhist statuary for them and should not include them in the ancestral altar. To do so will only lead to spiritual harm because animals resent this treatment and cannot find peace. Cremation is the proper form of disposal for larger pets. They should be turned over to a Buddhist temple that offers pet funerals or be cremated and buried in a spot usually not frequented by humans. Successful memorialization consists of offering the deceased animal a quarter to half of an incense stick in a flowerpot buried in the ground. In the case of pets, one should offer water in a small bowl, the pet's favorite food, and half a stick of incense in their favorite place for the duration of about one week. The food should later be fed to an animal of a similar species as the deceased pet. At the time of the offering, one should tell the animal that one is sorry (*gomennasai*). Livestock should be memorialized similar to cats and dogs by offering them their favorite food and drink and thanking them for their years of service. Small animals like goldfish and tropical fish can be buried directly in the ground and should be offered a third of an incense stick.

In any case, memorialization should not exceed thirty days (GIBO 1990a, 113, and 1990b, 111–18).

In the mid-1990s, Gibo's career experienced a five-year hiatus in the aftermath of the Aum Shinrikyō affair, when alternative religion was strongly criticized as heterodox. Her career rebounded briefly from 2001 to 2003. Shortly before her death in 2003, Gibo published chapters in two books that chastise what she considers the excesses in the treatment of dead pets. She seems to have been particularly preoccupied with the blurring of boundaries between humans and pets. She claims that ignoring differences between the species makes the pets suffer needlessly. She argues against memorializing pets with or like humans, giving pets posthumous names, and having joint-species burials. Instead she advocates simple funeral and memorial practices, such as interment in a collective pet grave after one year and a plain setting for memorialization using ordinary, everyday objects. She claimed that the spirits of dead pets had communicated with her and told her that they preferred burial in a corner of a yard rather than a pet cemetery or with their human companions (GIBO 2002, 79–96 and 2003, 178–82). In these publications, she is reacting against a growing trend in the Japanese funeral industry to offer pet owners the option of being buried with their pets and the practice of enshrining pet memorial tablets on the family altar. She also criticized an increasingly diversified and lavish funeral industry for pets. Gibo's theories are thus largely a prescriptive critique rather than a descriptive observation of common practices. Her death in 2003 ended her prolific career, but it is questionable whether her views would have continued to have any considerable impact on the performance of pet memorial rituals had she lived longer.

An anthropocentric view that sought to maintain clear distinctions between humans and animals and that threatened spiritual harm if this boundary was violated seems to have been the trademark of the earlier generation of psychics during the occult boom of the late twentieth century. Tomidokoro, who published *Inu no sō to kuyō* (Funerals and memorial rites for dogs) in 1993, is another representative of this view. He provides the most detailed prescriptions for proper memorialization and the most forceful rejection of Buddhist memorial and funeral rites for pets. He advocates a position that is highly anthropocentric and critical of common memorial practices within an institutional Buddhist context. Other than embracing memorial rites (*kuyō* 供養) and the idea of rebirth (*rinne tenshō* 輪廻転生), he strongly resists linking the spirits of dogs (and other animals) to Buddhist practices, which he regards as the reserve of humans. Tomidokoro views the spiritual world as a world of suffering and holds that newly-deceased spirits are a threat to humans if not appeased according to his prescriptions. He presents a threatening vision of a rigid, hierarchical spiritual universe that can only be controlled by following his advice. Dog spirits appear as unstable forces that can be appeased and sent off to a better life with a new owner at best.

Tomidokoro critiques many commonly held beliefs. For example, perhaps influenced by Chinese conceptualizations of the heavenly *hun* 魂 and the earthly *po* 魄,¹⁶ many Japanese associate the spirits of the dead both with an ethereal spirit

world and with the physical remains. This view is also applied to the remains of pets, which are widely regarded as the locus of spiritual presence. In contrast, Tomidokoro argues that a dog consists of two entities: body and soul (*reikon* 靈魂). While the body is physical and tangible, the soul is not. At death, body and soul are separated. Death occurs when the soul leaves the body and does not return. For Tomidokoro, the distinction between the physical and the spiritual is essential. The physical remains are not the objects of memorial rites. The corpse (*nakigara* 亡骸) should be returned to the soil. The soul lives on and becomes the object of memorial rites (*kuyō*) (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 14–17). Thus funerals for the corpse of the dead dog are not the same as memorial rites, which serve to propitiate the spirit. Memorial rites have to follow the rules of the spirit world rather than those of the human world in order to be effective. If the rules of the spirit world are not respected, it causes suffering for the spirit of the deceased dog (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 18–22). Tomidokoro's insistence that the dog's body and soul diverge after death seems to indicate that he models his memorial rites for dogs on those for animals other than pets. Such memorial rites are commonly performed by the food industry for the animals they kill or by organizations and institutions that employ working animals for the animal's service. These rites usually do not involve animal bodies but make use of an effigy (such as a memorial monument) instead.

Tomidokoro claims that dogs are locked into a nearly endless cycle of death and rebirth as dogs. They are usually reborn within one year, sometime even as quickly as one month. This, Tomidokoro declares, is an unquestionable axiom of the spirit world. The quality of the rebirth depends on the extent of the memorial rites the owner performed for the dog. If the owner is diligent in the performance of memorial rites, the dog has a high chance of being reborn as the dog of a conscientious owner. After death, the restless soul of the dog can settle down within one month. The dog can then lead its non-corporeal existence comfortably for about one year. By then the dog should have gained enough independence to be reborn. However, since the dog should be reborn within a year, memorial rites should not exceed this time span in order not to delay the rebirth and cause the dog unnecessary suffering in the spirit world. In fact, the sooner the dog is reborn, the better (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 28–33).

Tomidokoro strongly critiques the rationale for memorial rites at Buddhist temples. According to Tomidokoro, memorial rites are meant to pacify the soul of the deceased and usually involve offerings. The experience of death is unsettling for the soul of the dog, but the offerings calm the soul and give it a peaceful feeling. When dogs die, they—like all animals—end up in the world of suffering (*kukai* 苦界). They are not automatically peaceful and happy leading an existence near the former owner. The world of spirits is not happy-go-lucky (*runrun no sekai de wa nai* ルンルンの世界ではない). Therefore, they need the owner's assistance in finding peace. This need can be met through memorial rites and offerings. Memorial rites for dogs are thus a duty of the former owner (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 25–27 and 175).

Because memorial rites are the responsibility of the owner and his family, it is wrong to turn them over to ritual specialists such as Buddhist clerics. Such vicarious practices have no efficacy. He denies that animals can become Buddhas directly. In his view, to become a Buddha means to become like Shakyamuni. He equates “becoming a Buddha” with the notion of “becoming a Buddha in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏); therefore he argues that this can only be achieved by humans in their lifetime, not in the spirit world, and not by animals. In fact, he notes, to even use the term *jōbutsu* to refer to animals is an insult to the Buddha (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 52–58). Tomidokoro believes that to burden a Buddhist cleric with a task apart from teaching humans how to become Buddhas is impolite. He also argues that the status difference between the dog and the Buddhist cleric is simply too high and will just confuse the dog. The Buddhist cleric may perform such rites in order to comfort the bereaved owner but the dog would not be the beneficiary. Memorial rites for the dog are primarily intended for the benefit of the dog, not the emotional well-being of the owner—another claim that counters the rationale commonly voiced by Buddhist clerics. The status difference between the dog and the Buddhist cleric will only mean that the dog will be scolded in the spirit world for the failure of the owner to respect ordinary procedures. Furthermore, the dog has no personal relationship with the Buddhist cleric and therefore will not benefit from a ritual conducted by a stranger. Only being memorialized by the beloved owner makes the dog happy (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 34–43). This in fact denies an important aspect of the rationale for merit transfers executed by Buddhist clerics, namely that they have enhanced spiritual powers.

Tomidokoro also rejects the use of common accoutrements used at Buddhist temples. Since his work dates to the early 1990s—before the full development of the pet funeral industry marketing a wide range of altars—his views were perhaps not initially intended to be as strongly critical of common practices as they appear in the contemporary context. Tomidokoro stresses that for the successful propitiation of dog spirits the owner needs to enshrine a photograph in a small, simple altar shaped like a small doghouse, which he calls an “enshrinement hut” (*matsuriya* 祀り家). In contrast, Buddhist altars, *kamidana* (a household Shinto altar), or overly extravagant huts will only cause the soul to become a wandering spirit (*fuyūrei* 浮遊霊) because it will feel estranged and will not settle down in the shrine (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 66–69 and 78–80). To my knowledge, nobody still produces the enshrinement hut anymore, but instead small altars and enshrinement in the family ancestral altar have become popular, thus Tomidokoro’s suggestions do not reflect any lasting, actual practices. Since Tomidokoro’s recommendations are so precise about the form of the required memorial accoutrements, it would be difficult to accommodate them to different settings such as enshrinement on the ancestral altar or the use of pet memorial tablets.

Tomidokoro also rejects the use of a photograph without the enshrinement hut and the offering of objects filled with memories for the dog, such as collars and toys, because the spirit will end up possessing (*toritsuku* とり憑く) these objects rather than dwelling (*yadoru* 宿る) in them in peace, which in turn would lead the spirit to

become harmful. Instead he advocates ritual induction into the enshrinement hut followed by unceremonial burial or cremation to prevent the spirit from possessing inappropriate objects or lingering near its body (TOMIDOKORO 1993, 70–77, 81–87, 90–92). Since Japanese pet owners commonly treat the remains of their pets with great affection, offer toys to their deceased pets and use photographs as focal points for memorialization, he is again voicing a critique of received practices.

In sum, clairvoyants writing during the mid-1990s stressed the harmful potential of vengeful pet spirits and the relative inefficacy of institutionalized Buddhist rites, and issued highly prescriptive recommendations on how to avoid spiritual harm. They constructed pets as close to humans but ultimately and essentially Other. They also strongly argued against wastefulness and extravagance in pet funerals and memorial rites—a common charge levied by the Japanese public against pet memorial rites, which are widely seen as money-making schemes conceived by excessively entrepreneurial Buddhist clerics. The widespread negative attitude toward pet memorial rites can be explained as follows. First of all, the use of pets as symbols of material excess is a common trope across different cultures. As James Serpell has pointed out, pets have little utilitarian value; thus pet-keeping has often been depicted as a wasteful extravagance. In the past, keeping pets as practiced by the social elites was an image of decadence. Even in the contemporary period, this image is very potent and often stressed in the media (SERPELL 1996, 43–59). In Japan, critics often see the recent boom in keeping pets as an outgrowth of late twentieth-century consumerism. Second, the Japanese mortuary industry has a similarly tarnished image of being exploitative and commercialized. The media have accused funeral companies of predatory practices in recruiting clients and fixing prices (BERNSTEIN 2006, 173–74). Funeral workers may earn the gratitude of bereaved clients, but their work also entails aspects considered dirty by larger society (SUZUKI 2000, 123–78). Third, the roles of Buddhist clerics in the mortuary practices are also charged with negative connotations. Buddhist clerics are widely criticized for charging exorbitant amounts of money for posthumous names and for the exploitative nature of rites for aborted fetuses (COVELL 2005, 140, 153). They are also widely regarded as treating their profession as a business rather than a religious vocation (SUZUKI 2000, 167–76). The spiritualists' criticism of pet memorial rites conducted by Buddhist clerics needs to be understood in this context.

To distinguish their own practices from lavish funeral practices at Buddhist temples, the spiritualists of the 1990s favored simplicity and moderation, which they argued would best help to propitiate the spirits of dead pets. Many Japanese pet owners seem to agree that pet memorial rites need not be lavish or expensive, that animals need to be memorialized to be at peace, and that they are subject to rebirth. Some pet owners, especially those belonging to an older generation, might believe that disturbing the remains by keeping them in the home indefinitely or moving them about prevents the pets from finding peace. Likewise, excessive grief or attachment is thought to prevent the pet's spirit from settling.¹⁷ However, in

my fieldwork I have not found much evidence that the majority of pet owners believed strongly in the harmful potential of pet spirits. On the contrary, some pet owners, like Mrs. M. at Jikeiin, consider the idea that pets are locked into a cycle of continuous rebirth as animals desirable. Instead of wishing for a higher rebirth for their pets, some pet owners would like their pets to be reborn as their new pets so that the bond between owner and pet can continue without interruption. Many contemporary Japanese pet owners also interpret the lingering presence of the pet (for example, in the cremains) as positive. Rather than fearing being haunted, many think that pets have the potential to become benevolent protective spirits. The discourse on this subject appears to have shifted.

NEW CONCEPTS: LOVING SPIRITUAL
COMPANIONS IN HEAVEN OR UNDER THE RAINBOW BRIDGE

It appears then that neither traditional Buddhist concepts about rebirth, salvation, and impermanence nor the image of vengeful spirits is completely satisfactory for contemporary Japanese pet owners.¹⁸ The influx of Western pet-loss therapy and spiritualist literature regarding pets in the 1990s and the growth of Japanese pet-loss literature in the first decade of the millennium have propelled psychics, and even a few Buddhist clerics, to respond to these new concepts.¹⁹ Contemporary views blend Western and traditional Japanese ideas in order to present a very comforting, benevolent—rather than frightening, and vengeful—vision of the afterlife of pets.

The spiritualist scene has responded to the emerging pet-loss discourse. For example, FUWA Kyōzō is a self-proclaimed pet therapist. His book published in 2004 is a mixture of, on the one hand, practical advice on how to overcome pet loss, pet-loss testimonials, the emotional benefit of therapy pets and, on the other hand, testimonials to the uncanny, spiritual abilities of dogs, possession by animal spirits, and speculations on the afterlife of animals. To resolve spiritual difficulties with dogs, he recommends a mixture of memorial rituals, amulets, geomancy, and psychotherapy. Ultimately, Fuwa emphasizes individual choice, internal attitude, and companionship over rigid form. Thus he embraces a much more moderate message than the previous generation of spiritualists, who tend to be more rigidly prescriptive.

However, Fuwa's book does not sell nearly as well as those of others that have adopted a much more positive view of the afterlife of pets, such as Harold SHARP (2002). The central tenets of the Sharp book are advertised on the front leaf as:

The life of pets is immortal

Even though we cannot see pets once they have died, they are always present near their owners.

People will be reunited with their long-time pet companions after death.

Animals that died of illness or due to accidents also have happy and healthy lives in the “new world.”

(SHARP 2002)

These tenets are very much representative of the current literature on pet death and pet loss in Japan.

Ehara Hiroyuki, the most popular TV psychic in Japan today, also stresses the spiritual companionship between pets and their owners. Ehara (b. 1964) was trained as a Shinto priest and has ties with the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain. Since 2003, he has regularly appeared on television²⁰ and his publications are widely available. He enjoys wide popularity, particularly among a female audience. On television and in his *Petto wa anata no supirichuaru pātonā* (Pets are your spiritual partners; EHARA 2007)—advertised on the slip cover as “the first spiritual book that fosters the eternal bond between you and your pet”—he proclaims that animal spirits are not sources for spiritual harm to humans, but instead they can be harmed and hampered by human conduct. His vision completely eliminates all traces of vengeful spirits and replaces them with a notion of lasting companionship and the promise of a future reunion in the afterlife. Ehara’s pet spirits still obey the call of their former owners and rely completely on their owners for their spiritual advancement. Like earlier psychics, he posits a spiritual hierarchy among animals and humans, but unlike earlier psychics, he does not openly criticize institutionalized religious practices as dangerously misguided. Instead, he offers an individualized, feel-good, internalized spirituality that transcends the formalities of institutionalized religious practices.

According to Ehara, animals have multiple lives and can serve as protective spirits. Before they are born, animals exist as part of a “group soul” (*gurūpusōru*), regarded as the home of all souls (*tamashii no furusato*). Ehara likens this group soul to a cup of water. Being born into this world as a physical being is like a single drop of water dripping from the cup. Upon death, the drop returns to the cup (EHARA 2007, 83–85). Both humans and animals have souls, but the souls of humans are more spiritually advanced than those of animals. There are spiritual gradations ranging from the souls of material objects and plants to animals and humans. Souls progress upward in these stages and cannot regress. Thus animals will eventually be reborn as humans once their souls have developed enough. On the one hand, this implies that humans, once having been plants and animals themselves, share a degree of kinship with these beings. On the other hand, they are clearly more spiritually advanced. While humans have already experienced all forms of life, animals have yet to experience the human stage of life. Thus humans have made it into spiritual elementary school whereas animals are still in preschool (EHARA 2007, 15–17, 83–84). Similarly, animals and humans have different gradations of protective spirits. Animals are protected by nature spirits, such as tree spirits, whereas humans are protected by four types of protective spirits: the main guardian, the professional guide, the spiritual leader, and the helper spirit. In the case of humans and animals these protective spirits watch over the spiritual development of the soul. Humans have more detailed assistance because they have a sense of an altruistic self and a divine self that animals lack (EHARA 2007, 84–85).

Humans provide spiritual guidance to their pets and service animals and foster

their spiritual growth. Being born as a pet rather than as a wild animal has a special meaning because unlike wild animals, pets have the distinct purpose of providing healing for humans. Through their encounter with humans they experience love and grow spiritually. Love, especially altruistic love, is an important factor in the process of spiritual progression, which only humans can experience. Ehara calls this love *taiga no ai* 大我の愛 (the love of the great self). Even though they cannot naturally feel it themselves, pets experience this altruistic love through their contact with humans. Animals generally also lack a sense of rational reasoning. In rare cases, however, humans can impart rational judgment to animals, such as service animals (police dogs and seeing-eye dogs), which thereby gain higher spiritual status even faster than pets. Because animals are so dependent on humans for their spiritual growth, it is important that humans act responsibly toward them and treat them with kindness. The soul of a mistreated and neglected pet sustains spiritual damage (EHARA 2007, 15–17, 91–92, 95–97).

How exactly does this spiritual progression through rebirth occur? When humans die, they undergo a process of purification that leads them from the manifest world of the dead (*yūgenkai* 幽現界) to the world of the dead (*yūkai* 幽界). From there they eventually move to the spirit world (*reikai* 靈界) and finally to the divine world (*shinkai* 神界). The manifest world of the dead is a liminal realm between this world and the other world. Souls remain there for about fifty days.²¹ If their attachments to and worries about the world of the living are too strong they can get delayed in this state and turn into an unpurified spirit. Once they let go of their attachments, they progress to the world of the dead, which has several levels. The soul ends up on the level that corresponds to its spiritual development in the world of the living. It remains there for a minimum of ten years. Afterward, the soul moves on to the spirit world of the group soul. There it can decide whether to be reborn again in the world of the living or to move on to the divine world. The latter, however, is very rare and represents the final birth as a human spirit. In contrast, animals pass from the liminal realm between the living and the dead directly into the spirit world of the group soul without lingering in the proper realm of the dead. Thus their cycle is shorter. This is because animals have no rational judgment since they cannot distinguish between good and evil. Animals are gradually reborn as more highly-developed animals moving from insects and fish to birds and mammals and then from wild animals to pets. However, it is very unlikely that they will be reborn into the care of the same human twice, unless there is an extraordinary spiritual reason. Nevertheless, the spiritual bonds between owners and their former pets persist in the spirit world (EHARA 2007, 87–89).

In this process of progression, death occurs when a soul has learned all it can from the present life. When pets have learned all they can from their human owners, they die and their souls return to their spiritual home. From a spiritual point of view, death is not a sad or inauspicious event. No matter how short their lives or if they die by accident, animals perceive death as soothing. There is no pain or suffering after the physical death. Animals will, however, remember the love and care they received from their owners. Therefore, if they see their former owner

experiencing excessive grief due to pet-loss syndrome, it makes them feel bad and they wish for the owner's speedy recovery. Even though their human owner will likely perceive their passing as sad, the human should send them off with a sense of gratitude rather than try to hold them back in this world. Ehara implies that spirits that are held back might turn into unpurified spirits but does not explore this concretely (EHARA 2007, 103–105, 111–113).

To facilitate this transition, many pet owners turn to funeral and memorial rituals. Whereas Ehara is accepting of various burial and cremation methods, he objects to joint-species burial (an increasingly popular option in Japan) because he regards this method as an expression of excessive attachment. All other methods ranging from burial in one's backyard to cremation, even the use of mobile cremation trucks,²² are acceptable. This is because he holds that animals have little attachment to their physical bodies once they die. Unlike humans, they have no material attachments; therefore the burial method does not affect their spiritual purification. Offerings of their favorite foods at the grave are also not necessary for a long time. Neither is the establishment of a special altar for pets. What is more important is how their owners react to their deaths and how their owners remember them. Thus an owner can set up a photo of a pet that captures a fond memory and use it as a transmitter to inform the pet about new developments in the family (EHARA 2007, 115–117). In addition to this channel of communication, pet owners can also encounter their pets in dreams, a state in which it is easy to communicate with spirits. And they can look forward to meeting their former pets in the spirit world. Even though humans and pets are reborn into different spiritual realms, they can communicate through telepathy and meet each other to recall the good times they had together (EHARA 2007, 119–121). Even though his recommendations imply that institutionalized pet memorial rites are unnecessary, he never condemns such practices as harmful or leading to spiritual retribution. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of an individualized, internalized spirituality that is divorced from institutionalized practices.

An idea that also emerges in the works of Fuwa, Sharp, and Ehara is that animals go to heaven (*tengoku* 天国 or *ten* 天). As noted by KENNEY (2004, 58), the idea of heaven as the destination for deceased pets has become pervasive. Sometimes pet owners use the expressions “going to heaven” or “called to heaven” merely as synonyms for “death.” Popular Western notions of heaven are often reflected iconographically in the pet funeral industry: they are often shown as little angels with haloes and wings, sometimes even against a background of blue sky and clouds. Other subtle visual references to heaven are also common (FIGURES 4–7).

The notion of pet heaven is an avid topic of discussion in chat rooms that focus on pet death and pet loss. Posters paint a paradisiacal picture of pet heaven. Heaven is a highly physical place that meets the pet's needs—food, health, sleep, and sexual relationships. Heaven is also a place of happy reunions and companionship with other pets and with former human companions. Thus, many pet owners express the hope of meeting their pets in heaven after their own deaths. Own-



FIGURE 4. Outdoor grave at the pet cemetery on the grounds of Jindaiji, Chōfu, Tokyo. Note the cat with a halo and angel wings.



FIGURE 5. Outdoor pet grave at Daijōjisan Dōbutsu Reien, Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture. The tombstone of the grave containing six family pets is decorated with a cupid-like angel bearing a cross.



FIGURE 6. Columbarium shelf with offerings, a photograph, a miniature *tōba* and an urn at the pet cemetery on the grounds of Jindaiji, Chōfu, Tokyo. Note the figurine of a bear in a white robe and with angel wings.



FIGURE 7. Main altar with cupids and doves at Pet World Rikugien, Komagome, Tokyo. The animals are not depicted as angels per se but the rococo-style decor of the pet cemetery evokes symbols of peace and heaven.

ers can communicate with their deceased pets in heaven through prayer and the act of remembering them. In return, pets in heaven can communicate with their owners through dreams. Pets in heaven can also protect their owners. Many of these aspects parallel Western notions of heaven; however, Japanese pet heaven is not imagined as an eternal resting place but more like a traditional Buddhist heaven that promises utmost bliss and long life spans, a state that is said to end with another rebirth in a lower realm. Eventually, the pets will be reborn—ideally to meet their former owners again or at least to have a happy future life.²³

There is another related notion that often appears in conjunction with heaven: the Rainbow Bridge. The idea of the Rainbow Bridge has influenced contemporary notions of the afterlife of pets due to the growing awareness of pet-loss literature. The anonymous poem called “Rainbow Bridge,” which is common on web-based pet-loss sites worldwide since the 1990s, initially made its way to Japan through the internet.²⁴ The poem describes the afterlife of pets immediately after death. The setting is a utopian, carefree world without illness, suffering, and strife where pets play with each other on a green meadow at the foot of a rainbow. The space is a liminal world where pets are waiting to be reunited with their owners upon the latter’s death so that they can pass over the rainbow into heaven together.

Japanese pet-loss counselors, pet-loss websites and popular publications on the subject have embraced the idea of the rainbow bridge. Such publications sell well on the Japanese Amazon website (amazon.co.jp) and are often found in waiting rooms at pet cemeteries.²⁵ The décor of some pet cemeteries and funeral services often includes rainbows (FIGURE 8). The idea of the rainbow bridge is even beginning to influence young Buddhist clerics who conduct pet memorial rituals. For example, the precinct of Sōhakuji 宗栢寺, a Nichiren temple in Shinjuku Ward, Tokyo, contains a columbarium wall in the courtyard that incorporates the Rainbow Bridge (FIGURE 9). According to the young abbot, the monument was erected in 2006 and was designed by the abbot himself. The wall features small individual stone chambers that flank the collective grave at the center of the wall. A Buddha watching over several small animal statues is depicted above the collective grave. The scene is framed by a colorful rainbow in allusion to the Rainbow Bridge. The reference is made clear by the inscription “Rainbow Bridge Monument” (*Niji no hashi no hi* 虹の橋の碑) and the poem inscribed on the base. The temple website advertises the memorial in the language of loss, healing, and reunion: “Our pets spend their lives as family members. Witnessing the end of their lives is truly painful. We are assailed by unspeakable sadness. To help you heal your aching hearts, Sōhakuji has erected a memorial stone for pets, which is called Rainbow Bridge Stone.... The Rainbow Bridge Memorial Stone is a place where our hearts can always meet.”²⁶

Yokota Harumasa (1971–), the abbot of Chōfukuji, a Sōtō Zen temple in rural Niigata prefecture and recent author of a pet-loss book, has undergone training as a pet-loss counselor to better serve his clients at his pet cemetery. Yokota became ordained as a Zen cleric in 1998 at the age of twenty-seven after working at a pet supplies company and an advertising company. In 2001, he opened a pet cemetery



FIGURE 8. Rather than a Buddhist icon, this altar features a glass globe creating a rainbow of light against the shiny silver backdrop. Pet columbarium at Kanazawa Teramachi Dōbutsu Reien on the grounds Saihōji, Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture.

FIGURE 9. Rainbow Bridge Memorial Stone at Sōhakuji, Komagome, Tokyo. The Buddha meditates under a rainbow. Small animal figurines are at the Buddha's feet. The memorial is marked as "Rainbow Bridge Memorial Stone" and bears an inscription with the Japanese translation of the Rainbow Bridge poem.



at his wife's family temple in Niigata and opened a branch in his native Tokyo in 2002. Unlike contemporary spiritualists—perhaps in reference to Ehara—he states clearly that he is neither a clairvoyant nor able to see auras (YOKOTA 2008, 227). A self-proclaimed “cleric for animals” (*dōbutsu no obōsan* 動物のお坊さん), his position represents the most radical departure from the notion of vengeful spirits and even places pets above humans on a spiritual scale. His views are the most revolutionary among his contemporaries, but he strikes a cord with pet owners. His recent book sells well on the Japanese Amazon website even though he is not a TV celebrity like Ehara. His urban clients seek out his small temple in Niigata, and a wealthy benefactor in Setagaya Ward, Tokyo, donated some land so he could set up a branch pet cemetery in the metropolis.

Yokota makes skillful use of the Rainbow Bridge and the idea of heaven. He promotes a vision of the afterlife of pets that combines Buddhist, animistic, and Christian notions with psychology and pet-loss therapy. On his website, he clearly states that there is a heaven for pets, which is just like the one in the “Rainbow Bridge.” This happy, harmonious place is sustained by the happy thoughts of the former pet owners who can partake of this world by thinking of their deceased pets. By identifying this heaven as a powerful mental construct, he can skirt the issue of whether this place actually exists. It is a heaven without barriers and discrimination, where all the pets can dwell in good health regardless of their tragic ends, and where they will eventually be reunited with their owners.²⁷ In his recent book on pet loss, he reproduces the “Rainbow Bridge” poem and asks:

On the other side of the Rainbow Bridge there is heaven. Pets wait for us to cross into heaven together. We will go to heaven together. And then? Is this the end or just the beginning?... We call those whose souls are connected through the bond of love “soul mates” [*sourumeito* ソウルメイト], which can be translated as “spirit companions” [*tamashii no hanryo* 魂の伴侶] or “spirit friends” [*tamashii no tomodachi* 魂の友達]. (YOKOTA 2008, 182–83)

Soul mates have a lasting bond across the ages and multiple rebirths through familial ties, place of residence, and position in life. They live together when they have physical form and look after one another when they do not. They are always together (YOKOTA 2008, 183–84). The bond of souls that Yokota is describing sounds reminiscent of Ehara's “pets are your spiritual partners” but in its totality is even more permanent and encompassing. Since Yokota is a Buddhist cleric, the absence of any references to the teaching of impermanence is striking.

Elsewhere his language is replete with references to basic Buddhist concepts, but he radically reinterprets them. For example, Yokota's discussion of heaven is colored with Buddhist overtones: “I think that our deceased companions go to heaven (as it is generally called) when they die. The terms “heaven” and “hell” appear frequently, but what do they mean? If heaven and hell are completely opposite worlds, are our companions really going to heaven?”²⁸ Referring to Buddhist models of transmigration, Yokota explains that immediately after death, the human spirits go to a twilight zone where they undergo cycles of judgments for forty-nine

days, which determine their rebirth into one of the six existences. His view of the afterlife of pets, however, is very different from mainstream Buddhist concepts. In contrast to humans, Yokota argues, pets will face rebirth more quickly without passing through the liminal stage of the forty-nine days because they will not be judged for killing, evil deeds, or verbal misconduct. Their prospects for rebirth are better than those of humans because they have not committed any evil acts:

Their rebirth does not follow the principles of cause and effect or retribution. The rebirth probably depends on how much they loved their families and how much their families loved them, if they managed to do something kind for somebody, and if they fully did their duty as animals. They have not done anything evil ... so they cannot fall into hell or become hungry ghosts, beasts [*chikushō*]²⁹—how I hate that word! One should rather say animal [*dōbutsu*]²⁹—or Ashura. So they must be fated to become humans or heavenly beings. They gave us a lot of joy and happiness and were loved very much by us. They helped us by teaching us joy and doing good deeds so I believe they will go to heaven.²⁹

Thus Yokota repudiates many traditional tenets of Buddhism. Pets are not subject to the law of cause and effect. Moreover, not only are they exempt from being reborn as hell beings or hungry ghosts but they cannot be reborn as beasts. Pets are exempt from moral judgment. Their *raison d'être* is entirely focused on the well-being of the owner. Their future existence depends on the mutual love between pets and their owners, but they are likely destined to be reborn in a heaven regardless.

While it seems at first that the heaven Yokota is referring to is the same as the world of heavenly beings, he has in mind a realm that combines Buddhist, Christian, and animistic notions but turns the usual hierarchy between animals and humans upside down:

I think that beings who have done good deeds and gone to heaven will transcend the cycle of transmigration. When their life ends, they will bypass the paths that lead to rebirth. I think that choosing the path of a pet is to train to become a *kami* (a god, in a general sense) who lives in an upper heaven that is not subject to rebirth and is beyond the cycle of transmigration.... From days of old, animals that were connected to us have been regarded as messengers of the *kami* and those who trained to become divinities were messengers of the *kami* (perhaps this is the same as what is called an angel in the West). They serve as proxies that help to put our hearts at ease. I think the reason why we feel the pure spirit or pure heart in our companions is due to this sacredness. We feel so sad and full of regret upon their passing because we feel the great difference between their sacredness and our sinfulness. People believe all kinds of things, such as that they become spirits, *kami*, or a Buddha or that they go to heaven or the next world or are reborn as another being, but [pets] really are angels that are messengers of the *kami*. They give us a sneak preview of that world. Your companion is an angel. Haven't you felt it?³⁰

Yokota's view of the afterlife of pets is a *mélange* of traditional Buddhist ideas, Japanese folk religion, and Western concepts. Like others before him, he depicts pets as liminal beings close to humans, but rather than placing them in a marginal space between animals and humans, he places them between humans and divinities. Pets emerge as beings that are entirely benign. They are angels. They are completely pure and sacred compared to the sinfulness and delusion of human existence.

Yokota's view of pets as soul mates makes no room for vengeful, unsettled spirits. Like many other contemporary Buddhist clerics, he strongly rejects the notion of spirit possession and curses:

We should not speak badly about others so I refrain from criticism when people seek my advice. People are being told “you are possessed by an animal spirit” or “your pet cannot find peace” [*jōbutsu dekinai* 成仏できない] only to be pressured into paying money for purifications, prayers, or memorial rites. It's probably not that the pets cannot find peace, but the actual goal is to obtain money.

(YOKOTA 2008, 225)

Yokota's comments indicate that the notion of vengeful, unsettled spirits continues to exist, but that a strong discourse has emerged that provides a prominent alternative, according to which the promotion of vengeful spirits is considered predatory and difficult to market openly. The reader might react suspiciously to Yokota, who manages two pet cemeteries, for pointing the finger at other ritual specialists and their supposed predatory practices. Be that as it may, Yokota tries to keep the costs for his patrons down at his modest Niigata cemetery by performing many of the chores himself, even cremations, which other temples with pet cemeteries tend to pass on to hired staff. As a result, his temple's pet cemetery is considerably cheaper than many of his competitors. Yokota's saccharine image of angelic pet spirits might also leave an unpleasant aftertaste for some, but his patrons appear to deeply appreciate his skillful and unique method of pet-loss counseling.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Japanese conceptualizations of the spiritual potential and the afterlife of pets have undergone a radical transformation in the last ten years. Until the mid-1990s, pets—especially mistreated and neglected ones—were mostly feared as potentially powerful, threatening spiritual forces after death. These spirits could be propitiated through the correct memorial services that followed strict parameters set by psychics. Nowadays, pets are mainly presented as beloved family members rather than a threatening Other. Separation through death is feared more than the potential harm they could visit upon the owner; pets have become constructed as faithful companions even after death. Memorial services are no longer carried out to propitiate but to demonstrate the owner's lasting love for the deceased pet. Pets are seen as pure, incapable of making immoral decisions or meting out punishment.

Ultimately, we could ask whether this shift from vengeful spirits to benevolent, loving companions has raised the status of pets in Japan. One could argue

that even though pets are viewed more positively, the shift has diminished the agency attributed to them. Many Japanese pet owners seem to have a strong urge to perpetuate the bond that they felt with their pet even after the pet's death. This longing for a continued relationship with the pet focuses on the needs of the pet owners, such as companionship and protection. Even though pet owners often state that they hope the pet will not be lonely after death, it could also be interpreted as a narcissistic projection of their own fear of loss and abandonment. Whether the pet's spirit is envisioned as reuniting with them under the Rainbow Bridge or in heaven, as lingering in this world as a protective spirit, or as being reborn as another pet in the same household, the pet remains in its function as a companion rather than an autonomous agent. Ultimately, how one interprets the recent development depends on how one interprets pet-keeping itself. Is the practice of keeping a pet, as Yi-Fu Tuan argues, an act of dominance veiled in affection or, as James Serpell argues, a symbiotic relationship that has great physical and emotional benefits for the pet owner and the pet (TUAN 1984; SERPELL 1996)?

What has made Japanese pet owners so receptive to this change? Clairvoyants of Gibo Aiko's generation flourished during the Japanese occult boom of the late twentieth century. However, the Aum Shinrikyō incident tempered the occult boom through the resulting mistrust in new religious movements and occult practices (SHIMAZONO 1995, 411). After Aum, a highly negative image prevailed among the media and the public. New religious movements and the new spirituality culture were seen as potential threats (DORMAN and READER 2007, 7). New religious movements were attacked by the press and by the growing anti-cult movement and subjected to harsher legal restrictions (READER 2001, 225–32). Already attacked by Ōtsuki Yoshihiko 大槻義彦 (1936–), a scientist on a mission to debunk occult superstitions, Gibo Aiko, who promoted a highly negativistic message, disappeared from television for several years (KOIKE 2007, 120–22; KURIHARA 2008, 33–37).³¹

As Benjamin Dorman has shown, popular diviners such as Hosoki Kazuko reacted in the wake of the Aum incident by repackaging their message in ways that were acceptable to the larger public despite the prevailing negative image of religion (DORMAN 2007, 34, 46). Similarly, as Koike observes, Ehara regards institutionalized religion as nothing but a skillful construct of humans and only recognizes spiritual experiences as genuine, a hallmark of contemporary new spirituality in Japan. Ehara has been able to find the right balance between fate and self-effort, Western spiritualism and traditional Japanese concepts, spirituality and counseling that appeals to a contemporary audience (KOIKE 2007, 22, 43, 46–47). Other popular spiritualists and ritual specialists also modified their message about pet spirits by adopting the psychological language of pet-loss therapy and by constructing pet spirits as non-threatening, personal guardians. This does not mean such spiritualists have no detractors,³² but they still have been able to appeal to a large and loyal audience.

NOTES

1. See the 28 June 2008 edition of the *Shūkan Ōsaka Nichinichi Shimbun* 週刊大阪日日新聞: *Petto gyōkai ni tsuki matou kage* ペット業界につきまとう影 [Shadows of the pet industry], http://www.pressnet.co.jp/osaka/kiji/080628_03.shtml (accessed on 2 April 2009).

2. This article is based on fieldwork at thirty pet cemeteries in the larger Tokyo metropolitan area, Nagoya, Kanazawa, and Niigata, where I interviewed Buddhist clerics, cemetery employees, and cemetery clients, and engaged in participant observation. I also surveyed popular publications, cemetery websites, and Internet chat rooms.

KENNEY (2004) briefly refers to some of the published materials (for example, the works of Izumo Sayoko and Tomidokoro Gitoku) discussed in this article, but does not elaborate in detail. Furthermore, the discourse has changed over the past five to six years. In addition to changing attitudes toward pet spirits, I also noticed a growing willingness among the public as well as some Buddhist clerics to embrace joint-species burial, another phenomenon much more uncommon during Kenney's fieldwork. See KENNEY 2004, 56–57. Nevertheless, Kenney's article provides a very useful discussion of the ritual aspects of pet memorial rites.

3. Shimazono's term "new spirituality movements and culture" refers to a phenomenon that parallels the new age movement in the West but that tends to be more inclusive of traditional religious practices.

4. Their transformation is not unlike that of demons (*oni* 鬼) in contemporary popular culture from frightening to cute, as chronicled by Noriko REIDER (2003).

5. Contemporary publications with testimonials of pet owners who lost pets occasionally mention how Buddhist clerics addressed the posthumous fate of the pet, usually by promising a good rebirth near the owner but carefully avoiding any reference to the idea of the beastly realm. See, for example, YASUDA (1999, 144) and SETO (1999, 80–81).

6. The Japanese Pure Land school traces its history back to the Buddhist cleric Hōnen, who lived in the Kamakura period (1185–1333). The school focuses on devotion toward the Buddha Amida with the goal of being reborn into Amida's Western Pure Land.

7. The three central scriptures of the Japanese Pure Land tradition comprise the *Smaller Pure Land Sutra*, the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, and the *Visualization Sutra*.

8. The nenbutsu refers to the recitation of the words "Namu Amida Butsu" (Praised be Amida Buddha), one of the central practices of the Japanese Pure Land tradition.

9. See Narita Junkyō 成田淳教, *Petto sōgi kuyō: Goaisatsu* ペット葬儀供養—ごあいさつ [Pet funerals, memorial rites—Welcome], <http://www.kannouji.com/pet/index.html> (accessed 3 April 2009).

10. In the past, the characters 畜, 玄田 (read *chiku*), and 玄田牛一 (read *chikusō*) were also often used in discriminatory posthumous names for outcasts in an apparent allusion to the supposedly unclean professions of these groups, which were often related to the handling of animal products (such as hides and carcasses).

11. Kenney cites an eighteenth-century tale from the *Kinsei nenbutsu ōjōden* 近世念仏往生伝 compiled by the Buddhist cleric Jun'a Ryūen 順阿隆円 (1759–1834) that contains the story of a dog that practiced chanting the nenbutsu and was thus reborn in the Pure Land (KENNEY 2004, 58). In my fieldwork, I found no evidence that any contemporary clerics or pet owners were familiar with this tale. On the contrary, postings in chat rooms occasionally reflect the idea that pets cannot be reborn in the Pure Land. See, for example, posting 264, 28 March 2005 on *Inu neko kuyō ni tsuite* 犬猫の供養について... [Regarding memorialization of dogs and cats], <http://19.dee.cc/~cm/read.php?1197388204> (posted 23 February 2003–11 December 2007; accessed 8 June 2008). Kenney also acknowledges that her informants were unfamiliar with the tale and were more likely to refer to the idea of universal Buddha nature (KENNEY 2004, 59).

12. That is perhaps why some Jōdo clerics are less specific about how and when rebirth occurs in the Pure Land. For example, the Jōdo cleric Muyo Kūjin 無譽空臣, who serves as an officiant at Pet World Rikugien ペットワールド六義園, a pet cemetery in Komagome (Bunkyō Ward, Tokyo), explains that both humans and animals share the same life and can go to the Pure Land and become Buddhas if memorial rites are performed properly and with an attitude of gratitude. See Muyo's *Petto no kuyō wa dono yō ni shitara ii no deshōka?* ペットの供養はどのようにしたらいいのでしょうか? [How should I conduct memorial rites for pets?], <http://www.daily-net.com/petworld/kuyou/001.html> (accessed 3 April 2009).

This stance on the use of the nenbutsu and *kuyō* in conjunction with merit transfer, common in the Jōdo sect, is rejected by Jōdo Shinshū, or the True Pure Land sect. Jōdo Shinshū officially objects to any kind of merit transfer rites. Helen Hardacre explains that Jōdo Shinshū claims Shinran's teachings as the basis for rejecting merit transfer rites (*tsuizen kuyō* 追善供養) and that it strongly denies the need for appeasing vengeful spirits (HARDACRE 1997, 192–93). However, there are still a few Jōdo Shinshū temples that will carry out pet memorial rites despite the sectarian rejection of the practice. I encountered one example in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture. Nakamura Ikuo mentions another example in Niigata Prefecture (NAKAMURA 2001, 229)—both areas that are dominated by Jōdo Shinshū.

13. For example, One Heart Communication ワンハート・コミュニケーション, a stone masonry business developed by a Jōdo temple in Kyōto, offers urns in the shape of pets. The company has managed to develop a loose network of temples offering pet memorial rites while promoting the urns (One Heart Stone); see the website of One Heart Stone ワンハートストーン, <http://www.nettemple.jp/> (accessed 12 May 2009). Furthermore, FUJII (2006), professor emeritus at Taishō University, has edited a volume aimed at Buddhist clerics who want to establish a pet cemetery. For this work, the compiler surveyed several pet cemeteries and solicited detailed information about the pet memorial rites conducted at each. Some of the participants, however, were reluctant to divulge detailed information about the rites, such as the verse for the merit transfer, because they feared being reprimanded for being unorthodox by their sectarian headquarters.

14. The trope of animals returning a debt of gratitude (*ongaeshi*) has a long history in Japan. See LONG 2005, 27–29 and KNIGHT 2005, 233–34.

15. Gibo uses the length of the incense stick as an important marker of spiritual status differences between animals and humans. Only human spirits should be offered two full incense sticks. On her radio show, *Gibo Aiko no Mystery Theater* 宜保愛子のミステリーシアター, she once explained that even the spirits of *mizuko* 水子 should receive two full sticks. In addition, one should offer one liter of milk over the course of seven to ten days to the *mizuko*. See also GIBO 2002, 181–84.

16. According to ancient Chinese belief, a human soul comprised three heavenly *hun* souls and seven earthly *po* souls. After death, the *hun* souls rose to heaven while the *po* souls remained earthbound. For a detailed discussion of the concepts of *hun* and *po* in Han Chinese theories of the human body and in funerary practices, see LEWIS 2006, 51–76.

17. For example, in the 1960s, Shiraki Misae annually dug up her golden retriever's urn that lay buried in the backyard upon returning home for *obon*. After ten years, her mother told her that if she continued indefinitely the dog would not be able to become a Buddha, implying that he would not be able to find rest (SHIRAKI 1999, 147–54). See also postings 526 and 527 from 19 November 2006 on *Inu neko no kuyō ni tsuite* 犬猫の供養について... [Regarding memorialization of dogs and cats], <http://19.dee.cc/~cm/read.php?1197388204> (posted 23 February 2003–11 December 2007; accessed 8 June 2008); and posting 371 from 29 September 2006 on [*Shi*] *Petto ga shindara* (死) ペットが死んだら [(Death) If your pet dies], <http://www.23ch.info/test/read.cgi/dog/1137073920/> (posted 12 January 2006–3 September 2007; accessed 3 July 2008).

18. For example, posting 35 on 28 April 2006 on [*Reien*] *Petto no ohaka dō suru?* [*Niwa*] (霊園)ペットのお墓どうする?(庭) [(Cemeteries) what to do about pet graves? (garden)]

summarizes Gibo Aiko's recommendations for pet memorials in detail, but the posting is completely ignored by the other chat room users; <http://hobby11.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/pet/1089292918/> (posted 8 July 2004–1 June 2008; accessed 8 June 2008).

19. Kenney notes that during her fieldwork on pet memorial rituals early in the new millennium, pet loss was not a widely recognized concept among pet owners (KENNEY 2004, 58–59). However, the term has arguably gained greater recognition and currency since then.

20. He previously appeared on Kansai Television's *Tsūkai eburidei* 痛快エブリデイ Tuesday segment, *Ehara Hiroyuki kokoro no shobōsen* 江原啓之心の処方箋, and is presently on Asahi Television's *Ōra no izumi* オーラの泉 and Fuji Television's *Ehara Hiroyuki supesharu tengoku kara no tegami* 江原啓之スペシャル 天国からの手紙. For an analysis of Ehara's television presence, see KOIKE (2007, 11–58).

21. This idea appears to be related to the Japanese Buddhist notion that a major transition in the afterlife occurs after forty-nine days, which is usually marked by a Buddhist memorial service (*hōyō* 法要). By this day, the remains of the deceased have usually been interred, an ancestral tablet (*ihai* 位牌) has been prepared, and the period of mourning (*kichū* 忌中) is lifted.

22. Mobile cremation trucks offer a convenient method of having your pet cremated near your home without having to seek out a distant pet crematorium. Nevertheless, the use of such services is widely criticized as improper and rumored to be connected with organized crime.

23. For example, see 2 Channeru internet chat rooms entitled *Tengoku ni itta petto no omoide o kakinaguru sure* 天国に逝ったペットの思い出を書きなぐるスレ (Threads with scribbles on memories of pets that went to Heaven, 2004–2008) and [*Shi*] *Petto ga shindara* ([Death] If your pet dies, 2006–2007), <http://hobby11.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/pet/1081172775/> (posted 5 April 2004–28 May 2008, accessed 3 July 2008); and <http://www.23ch.info/test/read.cgi/dog/1137073920/> (posted 12 January 2006–3 September 2007, accessed 3 July 2008).

24. The Rainbow Bridge is also referred to in Japanese chat rooms. For example, [*Reien*] *Petto no obaka dō suru?* [*Niwa*] and *Tengoku ni itta petto no omoide o kakinaguru sure* are filled with references to the poem and to the image of reunion under the Rainbow Bridge. Occasionally, posters wonder if the Rainbow Bridge truly exists. For example, postings 149 (15 September 2007) and 150 (28 September 2007) on [*Reien*] *Petto no obaka dō suru?* [*Niwa*] express doubts about whether the Rainbow Bridge exists but come to the conclusion that they would still like to meet their pets there; see <http://hobby11.2ch.net/test/read.cgi/pet/1089292918/> (posted 8 July 2004–1 June 2008; accessed 8 June 2008).

25. Japanese books on the Rainbow Bridge are currently top sellers among pet-loss literature offered on the Japanese Amazon website. Founded in 2000, it is Japan's largest internet bookseller, and unlike its closest rival, Kinokuniya, it does not just handle the sale of new books but also provides links to used bookstores throughout Japan. Many of the books for sale on the Japanese Amazon website are ranked by sales. It therefore provides a good estimate of the nationwide trends in books sales.

26. See *Petto kuyō hi* ペット供養碑 [Pet Memorial Stone] website of Sōhakuji 宗柏寺: http://souhakuji.com/05_pet/index.html (accessed 6 April 2009).

27. See Yokota Harumasa 横田晴正, *Kokoro no tengoku* 心の天国 [Heaven in the heart], http://www.hpmix.com/home/sourumeito/C19_3.htm (posted on 2 November 2002; accessed on 2 April 2009); and *Q.41 Pettotachi ni mo tengoku ha aru no Q. 41* ペットたちにも天国はあるの [Question 41: do pets have a Heaven too?], http://www.hpmix.com/home/sourumeito/C25_6.htm (posted on 26 February 2005; accessed on 2 April 2009).

28. See *Kono yo to ano yo...* この世とあの世... [This world and the next world], http://www.hpmix.com/home/sourumeito/C6_4.htm (posted on 13 July 2002; accessed on 2 April 2009).

29. See *Tengoku to jigoku...* 天国と地獄... [Heaven and hell] http://www.hpmix.com/home/sourumeito/C6_4.htm (posted on 13 July 2002; accessed on 2 April 2009).

30. See *Tengoku to jigoku...* 天国と地獄... (note 29).

31. Ōtsuki published an entire book dedicated to the misconceptions of Gibo Aiko. In a critique of her views on animals, such as the notion of *tatari*, he argues sarcastically that if it were true that the souls of animals that died an untimely death bore a grudge then we should have to fear the spirits of dinosaurs and other extinct species (ŌTSUKI 1993, 148–49).

32. As Gibo Aiko's apparent successor, Ehara Hiroyuki has also been soundly critiqued by Ōtsuki Yoshihiko. Ōtsuki calls Ehara's claims—to clairvoyance, divination by auras, supernatural powers, spirit communication, healing, purification, aversion to spiritual harm, and spiritual counseling—lies (*uso* 嘘) (ŌTSUKI 2008).

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