

## **Part I: The Japanese Zeitgeist**

Here in the Western Anglosphere, it is commonly known that the Chronicles of Narnia are about the gospel, or the story of Jesus. This one is known to anyone who knows two things about the gospel: that Jesus the Savior died and that he was resurrected on the third day. You don't even need to have gone to church, or to have grown up Christian, or to know a damn thing about Christianity; you find out through context clues and talking to people over the course of your life, like anyone else. Somewhere along the line, someone will clue you in that most of us here in the West come from a Christian background, that Jesus is important to Christians, and that he died and was resurrected a couple days later. And then when someone points out that C.S. Lewis was a Christian theologian, you're like - makes sense! Aslan was Jesus!

Aslan was special. Aslan died. Aslan came back. The whole savior-redeemer thing. This is contextual on a level that usually only deserves a cursory mention - because we of the target audience can largely infer what that means for the story without any further work on the author's part.

This stuff is pretty obvious to us, but it isn't obvious to everyone. Let's say you grew up somewhere where Christianity wasn't the historic majority, where it didn't inform the very fabric of culture and all of its works of art for millenia. Your culture's art for thousands of years doesn't speak of saviors or redemption, of dying and coming back, of God's love and forgiveness, at least not in those exact terms. Your famous authors aren't all notable Christian theologians, like J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis or (dare I say it) Anne Rice. Well, maybe you'd have no fucking idea about this! Maybe that'll be some kind of insane revelation - some two-and-two cultural equation that

opens up a whole new world of theory and possibility and discussion on the Chronicles of Narnia, just by putting yourself within this aspect of the Western context.

But that's not the case for us.

For us, at least once it's pointed out, it is exceedingly clear that C.S. Lewis was talking Christian shop through fantasy.

From a Western standpoint, the religious cultural context that informs a work from a non-Christian, Non-"Western" nation or culture is often deeply obscured. It doesn't help that we've been the media majority - and the default everyman - for a decent part of the 20th and 21st centuries. Without consciously examining a greater zeitgeist or already being "in" the author's culture, we are usually completely blind to the cultural background of a narrative that the typical reader *should* already know, stuff that's so intrinsic to the target audience that it will never be spelled out - like how the Chronicles of Narnia are very obviously about Jesus' death and resurrection to people who grew up in the UK or US. To people outside a Christian-dominated culture, Lewis' connection to Christian religion isn't so obvious. It isn't a stretch to then say that for media from outside of the Anglosphere, maybe we're missing some serious cultural context that isn't gonna be spoon fed to us in-text.

Long story short, pretty much everything from Japan for a Japanese audience is informed by two overall assumptions of the reader's narrative knowledge: that you know the Shinto narrative first, and Buddhist theology and cosmology second. These are things that any Japanese reader will know intrinsically. How Hell works, reincarnation, nirvana, the plot beats of a Shinto story - all of this is so known to the Japanese audience that it's not worth spelling it out in-text.

The problem with this is that as Japanese media becomes more accepted worldwide outside of hyper-nerd spheres, the cultural context needed to have that general sense of archetype, themes, history, and narrative is obscured more and more. Not that the average anime fan of the late 70's to the late 2010's was aware of the archetypal Shinto narrative or of Buddhist belief, but at least they knew that they were missing something big when they read Fruits Basket, and that they'd have to dig a little deeper than the average Japanese reader to get at it. Now that anime is mainstream, I fear that we have that sense even less.

So let's start first with the Shinto narrative. What even is it?

### **The Shinto Narrative**

Shintoism, an animistic indigenous ethnoreligion native to Japan, predates the Japanese introduction to Buddhism. It melded with the later Chinese Buddhism import and continues to influence Japanese culture to this day in significant ways. In fact, the average person in Japan holds some mishmash of Shinto and Buddhist belief, much to the chagrin of the more serious temples and practitioners; effectively, they're inseparable. It's very natural for its narrative movements, then, to permeate pretty much all Japanese storytelling at a base level.

In his Japanese Buddhist Art History lectures in I wanna say 2013<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sandy Kita, art history professor at the University of Maryland and self-described expert on the sumi-e drawing of the Japanese bull, described the archetypal Shinto narrative broadly like so:

1. There is peace.

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<sup>1</sup> This class series was a fundraiser for Ekoji Buddhist Temple, a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist temple in Fairfax, VA, offered in 2013 jointly with his wife Terry Kita as a Japanese Buddhist Art History and language class in memory of Rev. Shojo Honda, founder of Ekoji. I attended this class. These are from my notes.

2. Something unfamiliar comes from “over there” (over the river, over the mountain, over the sea, over in space, beyond the veil - depends how far along we are in Japanese history) and brings chaos.
3. We learn how to treat the “something”.
4. The “something” is treated properly then leaves. Cycle back to point 1: Peace returns.

This is the archetypal narrative, simplified by Dr. Kita into 4 steps. In his view, it's a description of pretty much every Shinto story, from Amaterasu to Kuzu-no-Ha. He further pointed out that this narrative informs pretty much every piece of Japanese media you can find, not stopping at Shinto myth - in his terms, “any anime will fit the bill”. The entire genre of isekai posits itself on inherent knowledge of this formula for a story.

In terms of pacing, in the Japanese literary understanding of story structure, they often explain story in terms of *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* (起承転結), or like so:

- a. Introduction (Kiku - 起句) - the scene is set.
- b. Development (Shoku - 承句) - elaboration on the situation.
- c. Twist (Tenku - 転句) - new development in our understanding.
- d. Result (Kekku - 結句) - the result or consequence of this development.

This is a format used in poetry, manga, in games, even Nintendo does it. It also, maybe coincidentally, mirrors Dr. Kita's Shinto archetype quite nicely.

So what might this look like when we combine the two?

Let's take an example from isekai in the 4 movements of *ki-sho-ten-ketsu*.

1. Introduction: Guy is living a normal, everyday life as a salaryman before he is hit by a car and wakes up in his favorite video game.

2. Development: Guy discovers that something is deeply wrong in this game - the big bad has been tyrannically ruling over the people as if it were the bad ending and he has to figure it out and beat the big bad to go home.
3. Twist: Guy kills the Big Bad only to find out he was dead all along.
4. Result: Guy goes to the land of the dead. Peace reigns once again in the video game now that the Big Bad is dead.

To the Japanese reader, it's a use of the Shinto narrative in a familiar series of movements. This goes beyond trope - this is an archetype!

What else can we describe with this narrative? Well, anything. Video games, manga, I mean, you name it, it probably adheres to this Shinto narrative and largely to these 4 movements. Monster of the day is this narrative. Akira is this narrative. Devilman is this narrative.

So we know what the Shinto narrative encompasses. What the hell does Buddhism have to do with this?

### **Buddhism 101**

Buddhism boasts several millennia of thought and understanding behind it, and several hundred years of misunderstanding on the part of Western religion and academia. I'm not going to do any course correcting, but will instead give you the basics. Ignore the image of the fat guy - that's Hotei and we're not talking about him.

Buddhism is a religion far more than a philosophy, but it's more of an "internal" religion; its practices are widely varied, but at the core, its interest is less in creating a peaceful world by subjugating its people to divine commandments (as in Abrahamic religion), and more about encouraging inner peace through resolving conflict of the self,

and by being a person who has that peace, creating a better world as a consequence (as in Dharmic religion).

So there's a goal here. All religions have a goal. For Christianity, the goal is salvation after death and creating heaven on Earth. For Buddhism, the goal is nirvana, or enlightenment. This term, per Rev. Dr. Kenneth Tanaka in his introductory book "Ocean", can be described as "spiritual resolution"<sup>2</sup>. It is a state in which one is tranquil, at peace with the self, and without internal conflict; without internal conflict, one is free from the cycle of suffering. But there's a little more to it than that.

A little history: Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama in about 500 BCE. Siddhartha was a prince who was at much unease in his palatial life, who ditched the palace to become an ascetic and seek the truth of suffering. Being unhappy as both a rich warrior prince and a poor beggar ascetic, he was frustrated, broke away from the ascetic life, and meditated under a Bodhi tree until he reached this state of spiritual resolution - what we call enlightenment<sup>3</sup>! By doing so, he became a Buddha, or an enlightened one. He is referred to as the "historical Buddha", or as "Shakyamuni Buddha"<sup>4</sup>, which I will use from hereon out. Having understood this total truth of suffering, he preached this truth - or *dharma* - to his many disciples until his death.<sup>5</sup>

These discussions were recorded later as *sutras*, and there are an astronomical number of them. As for scripture, Christians have the Bible, Muslims have the Quran, and the Jewish people have the Tanakh. Buddhists have the *Tripitaka*<sup>6</sup>, or the collection of written words transcribing the Buddha's dharma talks, which is so large that much of

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<sup>2</sup> Tanaka, "Ocean".

<sup>3</sup> Or *nirvana*.

<sup>4</sup> Meaning "sage of the Shakya clan", see Tanaka.

<sup>5</sup> Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha, "Jodo Shinshu: A Guide"

<sup>6</sup> Pali term meaning "three baskets".

it has not been translated into English<sup>7</sup>. When we speak of Buddhist sects, or denominations, largely they'll pick a small handful of sutras on which to base their entire practice, but Buddhists all share a mutual understanding of the basics of Buddhist thought. There's no "one true" Buddhism; they all use different foundational parts of the Buddha's words transcribed as their basis. Shakyamuni himself described it as "many paths to the top of the mountain".

So Buddhism is all about relieving internal suffering by gaining enlightenment. What do we mean by this suffering?

Tanaka puts into vernacular what Buddhists call the four marks of existence:

- Life is a Bumpy Road<sup>8</sup>;
- Life is Impermanent;
- Life is Interdependent;
- Life is fundamentally Good.

According to Tanaka, these four marks are to be thought of like "shock absorbers on a car"; the better you internalize these thoughts, the less intensely we feel these bumps. What do these four marks mean?

To be alive, we have to be mortal, as in, we have to then someday die. As mortals, we experience existence like this: it has ups and downs, it won't last forever, it depends on a lot of different factors that we can't control, and it's ultimately value neutral to exist - neither good nor bad, but probably more good.

Our ego makes us rub up against these marks - it doesn't like that life isn't always good, that life isn't forever, that we can't control everything. Existence is also called

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<sup>7</sup> There are some efforts to complete the translation into English, such as by Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai America, aiming for a tenth of the complete text thus far. Read more at <https://www.bdkamerica.org/the-translation-project/>.

<sup>8</sup> The word used in Sanskrit is *dukkha* to describe this "bumpiness".

*samsara*, which is often translated as “cycle” or “suffering” - this is experienced as suffering essentially because we get in our own way. We need food to live, we need money for food, and we need to work to get money. We are born, we suffer, we die, and we are born again only to suffer and die again. This need, need, need, which is required to live on this earth, inherently creates this friction and this suffering. The fact that we will always need *more* food and *more* money, and that our offspring will need the same, just perpetuates the cycle - this cycle of existence, or *samsara*, of death and rebirth and death again, or suffering. *Samsara* means existence and existence means suffering.

This is inherently value neutral. We can think of this as a good thing or a bad thing. We can think of life as bumpy, impermanent, interdependent, and good, or we can think of it as always smooth, lasts forever, always mine, and always lousy<sup>9</sup>. One is closer to the truth (the cosmic truth - the *dharma*) than the other, and when we stray from this *dharma*, we experience a lot of friction.

In the *Dhammapada*, a collection of Shakyamuni’s sayings and the smallest part of the *Tripitaka*, Shakyamuni Buddha describes a way in which we can view these marks of existence. We can think of it in the true, Dharmic way, or we can think of it in the false, “me, me, me” way.

1 All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner; they have mind as their chief; they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an evil mind, *dukkha*<sup>10</sup> follows him just as the wheel follows the hoofprint of the ox that draws the cart.

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<sup>9</sup> See Tanaka.

<sup>10</sup> Yes, yet another word translated as suffering! In this case, suffering as in physical or mental pain, or consequence, or rebirth in a worse situation due to one’s actions.



2 All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner; they have mind as their chief; they are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness<sup>11</sup> follows him like a shadow that never leaves him.

(Dhammapada 1-2)

Alright. So samsara is suffering. Birth, death, and rebirth is suffering. *Existing* is suffering. What do we do about that?

These “four marks” are elaborated on with what Shakyamuni Buddha called the Four Noble Truths:

1. We all experience suffering (samsara, or existence, as described in the four marks);
2. Suffering is caused by the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion;
3. The end of suffering is nirvana;
4. The path to nirvana is the eightfold path.

So young 30 something year old Siddhartha explains that there *is*, in fact, a way out - and that the way is the Eightfold Path, the basic Buddhist instruction, and that path lets you become enlightened - to reach this spiritual resolution. This is a path in which to conduct ourselves and to discipline ourselves so as to keep in check that ego that causes so much friction in our existence.

It calls for all activities in our lives to be wholesome<sup>12</sup>, namely:

1. View (how we interpret the four marks of existence)
2. Thought
3. Speech
4. Conduct

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<sup>11</sup> Or *sukkha*.

<sup>12</sup> Popularly translated as “right” view, thought speech, etc., which is a translation I find somewhat useless.

5. Livelihood
6. Effort
7. Mindfulness
8. Meditation

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He also prophesied that people will be able to follow these instructions exactly as he spoke them for maybe about 2,000 years... But as time passes, we will be less and less able to do so, until the Buddhist practice looks totally different and is completely unrecognizable from the practices he prescribed.. These periods of gradual degeneration are called the “Three Dharma Ages”. This will become relevant later.

The problem is, by following the path and setting up all these monastic orders where we can live in seclusion and not do any wrong, we’re leaving out an awful lot of people from enlightenment. Okay, so only people who can afford to ditch their families and have their families still be able to support themselves can become monks or nuns and achieve nirvana. Okay, so only people who are physically and mentally able can do this. Only people who have eyes and can read.

This leaves out... an awful lot of people. Not everyone can say fuck it and become a monk and gain enlightenment, right? So a new tradition develops in which there are people who intentionally put off enlightenment - who willingly stay in this realm and this mode of samsara - in order to shepherd others into its embrace. Things begin to bring Buddhist practice away from its focus on monastic orders.

These people who willingly put off enlightenment are a mere step away, but choose to stay in samsara for the sake of helping others to the finish line. They are called *bodhisattva*.

This theological development establishes the Mahayana tradition, one of a handful of overarching traditions in Buddhism (the first main one is *Theravada*, i.e. the more traditional, monasticism-oriented school popular in countries like Thailand, and the last is *Vajrayana*, the esoteric predominant tradition in Tibet, Mongolia, and Nepal). The whole basis is that there's these people in life who bring us closer to enlightenment - traditionally it was special people and entities who were almost there, but in more contemporary understandings, this can be literally any one or any thing who brings you closer to full understanding of the truth, like a kind neighbor, or a loving cat, or some beautiful scenery. These are beings who willingly stay well within this suffering state in order to bring others across the way. It's like a guy who climbs up a wall and sees behind it a lush, beautiful garden, and instead of climbing right over, he ushers everyone else through first. Other equalizing ideas arose as well, such as the idea that all beings have innate Buddhahood, and to gain enlightenment and become a Buddha is simply to *realize* this Buddhahood.

That's all well and good, but what the Buddha prophesied about his teachings proved to be true. Time marched on from the days in which he walked the Earth, and after a while, the teaching had to change in order to reach people; the development of the Bodhisattva and the Mahayana tradition meant that we had moved past the age of the "right" Dharma, or in Japanese *shoubou*, where Buddhism is practiced exactly as Shakyamuni prescribed, and well into "middle age", or *zouhou*, in which it only looks and sounds like the original teaching, but with some necessary added... features. But it doesn't stop there. Shakyamuni went on to say that Buddhism will travel East and then enter a time where our understanding of the Dharma sharply declines, where it looks nothing like he originally said or thought, and that age is the "degenerate Dharma age",

or *mappo*. This is an age where it is impossible to practice as disciples did in his day. After this, he said, it'll travel East the rest of the way and then fully die.

Mappo is an age when we *need* to kill to survive, where we cannot extract ourselves from violent machinations, evil ideology, and evil participation. We cannot have wholesome livelihood, or wholesome view, or wholesome effort or speech - all of this is now totally inaccessible<sup>13</sup>. There is no more ethical living.

Does that sound kind of familiar?

I mean, it sounds an awful lot like the age we live in now. Supposedly, the prophecy stated this age would begin some 4,000 years from Shakyamuni's time and last for 10,000 years before the Dharma fully dies out. There's debate to this day on whether or not we're in *mappo*, and denominations will disagree on exactly how long it's supposed to be and whether or not we're there, but generally speaking, most Buddhists believe us to have been there for some time.

The 12th century monk Shinran Shonin supposed we were so deeply in mappo that enlightenment couldn't be achieved by our own effort at all, and that we had to rely on the cosmic power of a certain Amida Buddha and his promises (I'm not going there today) to attain enlightenment because our own efforts would be fruitless. Even back then, he supposed that propelling ourselves into enlightenment had become impossible<sup>14</sup>. This meant that other methods had to be determined to gain enlightenment. This understanding forms the basis of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, an internationally popular denomination that began with a monk ditching his station, and one I am personally very familiar with as a former practitioner.

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<sup>13</sup> See Jodo Shinshu: A Guide.

<sup>14</sup> See Jodo Shinshu: A Guide.

A lot of these latter-day, *mappo* era denominations<sup>1516</sup> will focus on specific sutras and other dharmic concepts as the center of belief and practice rather than the self-effort<sup>17</sup> oriented denominations of, say, older traditions, especially the more monastic Theravada traditions like in Thailand and the esoteric mantra-based Vajrayana. For example, Jodo Shinshu's main practice is gratitude and calling the name of Amida Buddha, with its theological basis being the all-encompassing compassion and love of Amida Buddha<sup>18</sup> rather than the practitioner's own efforts. While it's totally different from the do-it-yourself hard work of self-transformation required in the early days of buddhism and in the sects that retain that spirit, it does still maintain a certain Buddhist heart. From the *shoubou*-era Dhammapada:

5 Hatred is, indeed, never appeased by hatred in this world. It is appeased only by loving-kindness. This is an ancient law.<sup>19</sup>

So the connection to Shakyamuni's preaching in Jodo Shinshu practice is very tenuous, but it's still there, even if by a thread.

So there it is. Buddhist history, practice, and eschatology<sup>20</sup>. It's concerned chiefly with how we internally sort ourselves to view the world around us, and that we come to understand the true nature of things in order to best act in the world, and to ease this idea of cyclical suffering.

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<sup>15</sup> Another example is Nichiren Buddhism. While Jodo Shinshu practitioners call on the name of Amida Buddha in the chanting of *namu amida butsu* as from the three Pure Land sutras, Nichiren practitioners will chant the Lotus Sutra's name, *namu myoho renge kyo*, or its contents. You can read more but I strongly suggest avoiding the since-disowned offshoot cult Soka Gakkai International ("SGI") sources for a more robust understanding.

<sup>16</sup> In general, any Buddhist sect that ranks itself as the highest and only vehicle for the *dharma*, especially the new ones, can be disregarded as a cult, and will usually have flagrantly abusive membership practices. SGI is only one example - there's a lot of 'em!

<sup>17</sup> In Japanese, *jiriki*. A lot of midcentury Jodo Shinshu Buddhist works such as "Shin Buddhism" by D.T. Suzuki will prefer the Japanese term over the translation.

<sup>18</sup> Or "other-power", in Japanese, *tariki*.

<sup>19</sup> See Dhammapada.

<sup>20</sup> Or study of the end times.

So what does this all mean in terms of reading Japanese media?

### **The Zeitgeist**

These are all items that, in terms of understanding fiction and art, are pretty standard knowledge in Japan. Historically and theologically, Shintoism and the later introduction of Buddhism merged into the general sense of religion as it exists in Japan today - so the average Japanese person holds both concepts as a general basis for pretty much every work of art they take in. I can't take you through the work of becoming so intimately familiar with these concepts that you know them like we know the Jesus story, or even begin undoing centuries of misconceptions about Buddhism or Shintoism, but do understand that that's how it is - it's stuff that's so obvious it doesn't even need to be said to the target audience. It's like how at no point in Akagi does Fukumoto bother to tell you how riichi mahjong works - it's assumed you will already know. And in the reverse, when Go Nagai read The Divine Comedy, he probably had a wildly different experience than people reading it in contemporary Europe.

There are also practical, historical, and denominational concepts I purposefully left out. I'm not gonna bore you with the particulars, but leave you with the idea that religion and religious influence goes way deeper into culture - and also pop culture - than anyone gives it credit, and that includes supposedly secular culture such as books, comics, anime, and manga. And when you look at anime and manga, I guarantee it's all some mishmash of Shinto narrative and Buddhist belief.

Yes, even Ultraman<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Ultraman creator Eiji Tsuburaya is Roman Catholic. That's not enough to stop Ultraman from having the Shinto archetypal narrative, though - it's just that it also has Jesus slapped on top.