

# **JAPANESE BUDDHISM -A COUNTER EXAMPLE TO THE NIETZSCHEAN DUALISM-**

## **Abstract**

In The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche discusses the relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the ancient Greek culture. The two deities, Apollo and Dionysus, have completely different roles that at first seem to collide with one another. The former is a sky god of dream and beauty, and the Greeks worship him in order to achieve redemption from their sufferings, while the latter consists of a more primitive power that consumes men into the chaotic pain that exists in the natural world. Although the Apollonian Greeks rejected the existence of Dionysus, Nietzsche claims that the two coexist to create a harmony of suffering and redemption, reality and dream. This fusion was the backbone of the ancient Greek society, and its structure even holds true for the contemporary society, although Nietzsche criticizes the Socratics to have rejected this duality.

This essay attempts to affirm Nietzsche's theory as universal by comparing it to Japanese Buddhism. The religion contains Shinto, Japan's indigenous culture, and Buddhism, which originally started in India and traveled through Asia in time. At first, Japanese Buddhism does not seem to correspond to the theory in The Birth of Tragedy because Shinto and Buddhism cannot be separated clearly as Apollonian and Dionysian. Both seem to have various aspects that do not hold consistency, and the universality of Nietzsche's theory seems doubtful. However when examining the culture closely, the pattern seems to unfold. We then discover that the structure of Apollo and Dionysus is in

fact a very complex one, and its fusion can be found *inside* the cultures of Shinto and Buddhism themselves. In the end it can be concluded that the features of the Apollonian and the Dionysian can indeed be found inside Japanese Buddhism, and that therefore Nietzsche's theory of dualism is universal in human culture.

## **Table of Content**

Introduction...4

1. The Birth of Tragedy and its Universality...6

2. Questioning Nietzsche's Theory...7

3. Counter-Argument: Nietzsche's Theory in Japanese Buddhism...9

Bibliography...18

## Introduction

In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche discusses the unique structure within the culture of the ancient Greeks where two deities, Apollo and Dionysus, have completely different roles that at first seem to collide with one another. Apollo is a sky god of dream and beauty, and the Greeks worshiped him as a way to escape from their sufferings in life. On the other hand, Dionysus is an earth god of intoxication. With the use of wild music, his primitive power consumed the ancient Greeks into the chaotic pain that exists in the natural world. The Dionysian Greeks were different from the Apollonian because they had embraced the suffering and abandoned their individuality to become one. This was a shock to the Apollonian, who instantly rejected the barbarity that Dionysus offered. However, Nietzsche points out that the two opposing deities were actually two coexisting forces that created a harmony of suffering and redemption, reality and dream. This fusion was indeed the backbone of the ancient Greek society and also applies to the Socratic, modern society, although Nietzsche accuses the latter to have rejected the duality, especially the existence of the Dionysian. This essay will affirm Nietzsche's theory to be coherent and that it can be applied to cultures other than that of the ancient Greeks by comparing it to Japanese Buddhism and its Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics found in its foundation, with a special focus on Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan. An argument will be made against Nietzsche's theory that the dualism of Apollo and Dionysus is an oversimplification and that it cannot be applied to the structure of Japanese Buddhism due to its simplistic categories. Both Shinto and Buddhism seem to consist of characteristics that defy the labeling of Dionysian/Apollonian. This is especially true for Shinto, which consists of many Dionysian characteristics and yet

contains some Apollonian features such as its polytheistic structure. To defend Nietzsche, we will in turn examine the Japanese religion in depth, analyzing Shinto and Buddhism individually. In doing so we discover the complex, yet resembling features of Apollonian and Dionysian character *within* each of the religions that are comparable to Nietzsche's descriptions of the ancient Greek culture. From this we can conclude that despite the criticism, Nietzsche's theory is indeed universal in human religion and culture.

## 1. The Birth of Tragedy and its Universality

In the ancient Greek society, Apollo was worshipped as a sky god of light and reason, while Dionysus, god of wine and fertility, was remnant of the indigenous earth-worshipping culture. The former deity inclined toward beauty and dreams, and since the lives of the Greeks were filled with much suffering, the people revered Apollo to escape from their painful reality. Their earning for the pain relieving semblance was fulfilled by this ruler, who shielded them from the innate suffering of the world with art created in images and sculptures. The Apollonian Greeks especially delighted in experiencing dreams because it released them from the cognitive forms of the physical world. They also worshipped the various Olympian gods, whose flawed behaviors justified their own corrupted ways.

On the other hand, Dionysus was a god of imageless art, i.e. music. The Dionysian followers were completely different from the Apollonian Greeks because they, with the help of wild intoxicating music, abandoned the self and allowed themselves to be absorbed by nature into the primordial unity. Nietzsche calls this releasing of individuality drunkenness as opposed to the dream-like state of Apollonian believers. Dionysus did not relieve the people from pain in the way Apollo did—instead the suffering for him is an eternal existence, to be accepted as a natural phenomenon and turned into bliss. The oneness with nature led to a harmonization which could not possibly be achieved by the Apollonian dreams, because in doing so Dionysus removed the semblance that concealed the ultimate chaos. Only after rejoicing in this chaos and losing themselves in it can man transcend beyond suffering and reach salvation.

Because the two deities were so different, the Apollonian Greeks rejected Dionysus and his rather violent power. However in the book Nietzsche points out the dependency that lies in the relationship between Apollo and Dionysus. The barbaric aspects of Dionysus were necessary for the Apollonian Greeks as they were the reality and thus the truth, a foundation on which the Apollonian created the semblance of beauty. Meanwhile Dionysus needed the existence of Apollo for redemption. Thus the two worked as opposing forces struggling with one another and yet at the same time emerged as an intertwining whole.

According to Nietzsche, however, the Socratic era that later came rejected this notion of the Dionysian chaos. This is the main issue and his greatest concern in The Birth of Tragedy; mankind has since then acknowledged the Apollonian beauty but ignored Dionysus' presence, which Nietzsche argues is unnatural. He claims that contrary to what the present society seems to believe, his theory of the dependency between Apollo and Dionysus is a universal one applicable to the cultures we see today.

## 2. Questioning Nietzsche's Theory

The cultural universality of Nietzsche's theory in The Birth of Tragedy discussed in the previous chapter is put into question when examining Japan Buddhism and comparing it to the Apollonian-Dionysian culture. In doing so one notices the difficulties in comparing these two, and suspicions arise as to whether the dualism mentioned by Nietzsche is actually a universal theory of human culture.

Buddhism is found to have originated from ancient India around the sixth century B.C.E., when a prince by the name of Siddhartha Gautama, gaining enlightenment through meditation and becoming the Buddha, or the "enlightened one", sought out people to preach sermons. After his death, his disciples were recorded by his many students, and gradually Buddhism developed into various forms as it spread over Asia. Japan is one of the many countries that are part of the branch of the Mahayana Buddhism; however, its establishment of Buddhism is quite unique in that the religion was simplified and fused together with other ways of thinking that had existed priorly in Japan. The most significant impact it received was from Shinto, an ancient religion of the country. Although originally a separate existence with distinct differences, Shinto has now become so consumed into Buddhism (and vice versa) that it is not uncommon to see temples, which are built for Buddhism, to be standing right next to shrines, created specifically for Shinto beliefs. Interestingly enough, the common people do not regard this situation with a sense of contradiction. For them, the two components have been set into their culture as one whole religion of Japan. Researches have also shown that many Japanese are believers of Buddhism and Shinto simultaneously, and engage in rituals of both.

## **Buddhism**

The fundamental Buddhism preaching is the Four Noble Truths, which focuses on the cessation of suffering in life. It is said in its doctrines that sufferings are caused by desire, and that one must eliminate their desire in order to cease their suffering. The Four Noble Truths include the Eightfold Path in its fourth noble truth as the way to achieve this end. The eight components include: right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Enlightenment is found through the achievement of all of these factors.

This sense of liberation from suffering is reflected in Mahayana Buddhism, a collection of Buddhist traditions which Japanese Buddhism is a part of, although the teachings of Buddha are interpreted loosely compared to Theravada, another branch of Buddhism that thrives in the southern areas of Asia. Mahayana stressed the importance of compassion, for the freedom from ego is thought to be attained through cultivating concern for others. It also regarded Buddha as the manifestation of a universal spiritual being, and considered bodhisattvas, or “enlightened beings”, which originally referred to the Buddha before his enlightenment, to be savior figures and objects for worship.

Buddhism appealed to the Japanese because it offered a metaphysical understanding of death, an area of thought absent from Shinto. It was also easy to accept in that it allowed the freedom to participate in different religion traditions simultaneously. Nevertheless, several distinct emphases in Buddhist philosophy were affected by Japanese influence. First and foremost, its innate pessimism was modified. It is understood in Theravada Buddhism that the world has no beginning and no end. People are endlessly reborn up or down the rank of beings depending upon the accumulated

merit of their previous existences. The goal is to eliminate suffering by eliminating desire in one's final rebirth. These emphases simplified as the Japanese people were introduced to Buddhism, finally making it so that enlightenment became available to all. Although traditional Buddhism stresses renunciation as a means of achieving enlightenment, the renunciation of family and society implies principles of rejection and finality that run counter to the innate Japanese love of life and natural delight in its simple pleasures. Because of this the stern demands of Buddhism became softened in various ways.

On the other hand, when compared to the ancient Greek culture, Buddhism seems to consist of mainly Apollonian views. However, its flexibility to let other traditions cooperate does not seem Apollonian, if not entirely Dionysian. From these respects one can conclude that the Buddhism cannot be separated and classified as either Dionysian or Apollonian in such a simplistic way.

### **Shinto**

Shinto developed during the prehistoric times as the native religion of Japan. It is believed in Shinto that various *kami*, or deities, inhabit and control the power of the natural world. Most of these *kami* are simple spirits that are related to nature, whether animate or inanimate, and can also serve as guardians of areas and clans. Because the *kami* is believed to be distant ancestors of the Japanese people, they serve as an inspiration to the world, giving it life and protection from any harm. However, even though the *kami* embody the life force and can bring blessings to humans, they may also act in unpredictable ways, disrupting the natural order. They are prone to all-too-human feelings such as jealousy, rage, annoyance, vanity, and thoughtlessness. Immediately we

can sense the Apollonian characteristic here; the Apollonian Greeks, too, had worshiped various Olympian gods with similar flaws in their behavior. Nietzsche had claimed that the Greeks had seen a reflection of themselves in the Gods' humane character, which justified their own behaviors. It is possible to say that the Shinto *kami* served the same role for the Japanese, and is therefore Apollonian from this perspective.

However, when looking at the other aspects of Shinto, we find that it is rather Dionysian as well. Often referred to as a "happy religion", Shinto assumes a basic goodness in people and the world, paying very little attention to feelings like guilt and sorrow. The highest value is given to life in this world, and therefore the question of redemption is unimportant in the religion. As redemption is vital to the Apollonian Greeks, Shinto leans more toward Dionysus than Apollo in this aspect.

As we may well see, Shinto seems Dionysian in that it is an indigenous religion of Japan focused primarily on life. However, it also has a polytheistic structure, something not found in the culture of Dionysus but rather in the Apollonian. Its ideal for purity seems to be Apollonian as well, because in Shinto cleanliness and purification are emphasized, and the people are invited to find beauty and renewal in nature and simplicity. While Dionysus was more about immersing one's self in the chaos of nature; it was the Apollonian Greeks who strived for beauty, which the concept of purity seems to be a part of. The separation between Apollo and Dionysus therefore does not seem to apply to Shinto, leading to the doubt of the dualism's universality.

### **3. Counter-Argument: Nietzsche's Theory in Japanese Buddhism**

The argument against Nietzsche's theory in The Birth of Tragedy seems practical, and therefore the universality of the dualism impossible, for on the surface Nietzsche's theory is too simplified to analyze Japanese Buddhism, as discussed in the previous chapter. But this is only when looking at the superficial structure of the Apollonian and Dionysian fusion. Nietzsche's theory is not a simple system for classifying a culture into two clear-cut categories. Its structure exists inside Japanese Buddhism with such complexity that the points made for critique against Nietzsche in Chapter 2 turn out to be supporting the theory's universality instead.

#### **Shinto as Dionysian**

The fact that there are multiple *kami* in Shinto, all of whom have humane behaviors, might make it seem as though Shinto is in that aspect more Apollonian rather than Dionysian. However, they are not a part of a polytheistic system. They are one in essence and manifest themselves in many forms in a world that is spontaneous and free. There remains the philosophical enigma of how to consistently reconcile the insight of faith that divinity is "one" and united, with the observation of experience that the world of everyday life is "many" and varied rather than one. As for their behaviors, while in the Greek culture the gods are portrayed with flaws to justify the behaviors of the Greeks, the Japanese people saw the *kami* as "role models" in that they would rectify whatever wrong they had done previously.

Shinto also does not seem too Dionysian in that it values purity. In a sense, however, Shinto is more advanced than the Dionysian culture because although it admits evil in the world, it refuses to accept that the world or the people in it are inherently evil. Buddhism stresses that the process of life is inevitably characterized by suffering and death. For Buddhism, only the elimination of desire can lead to the possibility of release and enlightenment. In Shinto there is not evil in an absolute sense, but simply perverseness of spirit. In this light, the role of purification as the basic form of Shinto ritual becomes clear. Whereas sin is forgiven in Christianity, in Shinto, lost innocence is completely restored, man's spirit is balanced, and the world is made pure, returned to its original state. This sense of trust toward the mortal life makes Shinto a Dionysian culture but with an Apollonian touch because it endures the suffering and yet claims balance through purity.

As Shinto is a medium for seeking the *kami*, worshipping and ritual ceremonies are regarded to be important. The aims of these festivals vary; one may be to revere the enshrined deity, one as a prayer for good harvest and then appreciating the harvest given, one a ceremony to celebrate important dates such as New Year's, and another a rite to worship the deities of a locality and the land. Festivals that strike as having a Dionysian aspect are ones that consist of *mikoshi*, or a portable shrine. These are called *matsuri*, or festival, can be found throughout the country as a ritualistic ceremony initially intended to worship the deities of nature that protected and nourished the people of the local area. In *matsuri* everyone is dressed up in certain matching costumes and swarms around in the streets. They parade through the local area shouting and taking rhythm to the music played by instruments such as drums and wooden flutes. In some occasions the people have whistles hanging around their neck and blow on it with the rest of the group as is

required. Dancers are sometimes included in the parade too, enhancing the vibrant energy of the people. But the most significant element of the *matsuri* is the portable shrines. They are quite heavy and can be very big in size, but are hoisted up on the shoulders and carried around by dozens of people throughout the entire parade. They represent the deities that inhabit the local shrines of the community, and are decorated with vivid colors of gold, red, white, etc.

Upon careful examination we are able to see a parallel between this form of celebration and the Dionysian festivity. First of all, the use of the beating music and dance in the *matsuri*, which are aimed to stimulate the minds of the people, seems very familiar. Dionysus, being the god of intoxication, had indeed used both of these elements to create the trance-like state of his followers. He had especially emphasized on music; unlike the Apollonian music which consisted of an austere structure, it was wild and primitive, with drums as an essential part of the songs. In the *matsuri* the same thing was going on, and to the same effect of excitement and drunkenness.

Another similarity with the Dionysian would be the merging of the individual into one uniformed group. In the *matsuri* individual actions do not take on an important role in the ceremony; instead one must go with the flow and become part of the uproar. Instantly the primordial unity comes to mind, the sense of losing one's identity as an individual being, i.e. the shedding of the *principium individuationis* as one throws oneself into the chaos of nature in the Dionysian culture. The people participating in the ritual are no longer separate but have become a single cluster of movement that pulses with exhilaration at celebrating their religion.

Moreover, as the people strive forth with the portable shrine on their shoulders, they must go through immense pain and exhaustion. This is yet another characteristic which goes along with the Dionysian ideas. Nietzsche had claimed in The Birth of Tragedy that the Dionysian Greeks embraced pain of the physical reality as an eternal existence so as to be one with nature. The acceptance of mortal suffering can be seen in *matsuri* as well. The task of carrying the portable shrine requires strength, both physical and emotional, as one must uphold the shrine for many hours while being jammed by the crowd and shouting out in accordance to the music being played. It is chaotic, its wildness draining energy out of the body—and yet the people continue on. The suffering experienced in this situation seems to have a mesmerizing effect on them, and this trancelike state makes them hold on to the pain instinctively.

However on the other hand, in contrast to the crowds of people gathered for the festival, the portable shrine distinguishes itself from the scenery. It is distant from the crowd of people in that it seems to insist upon its individual existence as a sacred deity taking resemblance as a shrine. Whereas the people below give off the smell of mortality, the portable shrine is a representation of the immortal; a beautiful semblance that the mortal beings all admire. Therefore the relationship between these two elements can very much correspond to that of Apollo and Dionysus, showing yet again the duality within Shinto itself.

Other characteristics of Shinto described in Chapter 2 such as its focus on life and not on redemption contain, as previously noted, a very Dionysian outlook. The very fact that Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion also is similar to Dionysus because it is the root of the Japanese culture, as the Dionysian culture is to the ancient Greeks. In that way,

Shinto can be seen overall as strongly Dionysian, with Apollonian traits fusing into the religion.

### **Buddhism as Apollonian and the Dualism in Japanese Religion**

It is easier to see the qualities in Buddhism that make it Apollonian. The religion aims at escaping from the sufferings of life and focuses on redemption, a major purpose for worshipping the Apollonian culture for the ancient Greeks. Indeed, the lack of redemption is what had attracted Japanese people into taking in Buddhism into their native land. We can easily assume from this that the common ground in the relationship between Buddhism and Shinto, and the Apollonian and the Dionysian, is the fusion of life and death. In both cultures people had celebrated life, and yet at the same time their sufferings had caused them to desire an escape through redemption, which was gained through Apollo for the Greeks, and through Buddhism for Japanese. However, as Buddhism traveled along the Asian countries it gradually separated into various branches, allowing different interpretations to its teachings. And of them all Japanese Buddhism was particularly unique, because not only did it evolve from the Mahayana thinking, which is considerably tolerant of individual interpretations compared to the other branches, its set of ideas had been greatly influenced and modified by Shinto to suit the lives of the Japanese people. This acceptance of various interpretations and participation of different religions cannot be called upon as Apollonian, for the Apollonian Greeks were at first dismissive of the Dionysian culture. But Buddhism had embraced the culture of Shinto, and had even changed itself to the needs of the Shinto beliefs and its followers. And yet at the same time, the Japanese people were able to achieve a complex set of

philosophy as well as advances in art, literature, and the sciences through Buddhism. This reflects the dualism that Nietzsche had pointed out in The Birth of Tragedy—for all its beauty and semblance, the Apollonian needs the Dionysian for the truth and reality as its foundation, but without the Apollonian the Dionysian cannot maintain its balance. The synchronization of Buddhism and Shinto is a clear representation of this relationship. As the Japanese people strived for a better life, Shinto became the foundation for their celebration of life, while Buddhism was needed to assure their well-being in the afterlife and to complete what Shinto had lacked in as a religion in terms of aesthetics and culture. The description of the lives of the Japanese as “born Shinto, die Buddhist” is an excellent evidence of how the two religion, when put together, completed each other in ways one alone could not have been able to. But the complexity within each religion must not be forgotten as well. The statement that Japanese Buddhism consists of the Dionysian and Apollonian elements also refers to the fusion *inside* Shinto or Buddhism alone. Nietzsche’s theory in The Birth of Tragedy acknowledges the complex structure the dualism can turn out to be—a detailed look at Japanese Buddhism have shown this, because the more dualism one can find in a religion the more convincing is the system of two opposing forces coexisting to become a comprehensive but a complete whole.

## Bibliography

### Books:

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music. Trans. Shaun Whiteside. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1993.
- Hartz, Paula R. Shinto. New York: Facts on File, 1997.
- Netzley, Patricia D. Buddhism. San Diego: Lucent Books, 2002.
- Picken, Stuart D. B. Buddhism; Japan's Cultural Identity. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.
- Suzuki, Daisetz T. An Introduction to Zen Buddhism. New York: Grove Press, 2004.
- Picken, Stuart D. B. Shinto; Japan's Spiritual Roots. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1981.
- Suzuki, Daisetz T. Zen and Japanese Culture. New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1959.
- Burns, Susan L. Before the Nation; Kokugaku and the Imagining of Community in Early Modern Japan. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Reader, Ian. Religion in Contemporary Japan. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991.

### Electronic:

- Zen Buddhism. 2 Oct 2002. BBC. 14 Nov 2006.  
<[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/zen\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/zen_1.shtml)>

- Mahayana Buddhism. 2 Oct 2002. BBC. 14 Nov 2006.  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/subdivisions/mahayana.shtml>>
- Shinto. 15 Oct 2006. BBC. 14 Nov 2006.  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/>>
- Kasulis, Thomas P. “Japanese Philosophy”. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 1998. 27 Aug 2006. <<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G100>>
- Ripley-Moffitt, Matthew. Shinto: The Way of the Gods. 25 Nov 2006.  
<[http://web1.caryacademy.org/facultywebs/matthew\\_ripleymoffit/Japan\\_Shinto.htm](http://web1.caryacademy.org/facultywebs/matthew_ripleymoffit/Japan_Shinto.htm)>