Michiko Watanabe was an “office lady” in a major Japanese company. Normal company policy (as is so often the case in Japan) was to make all female employees retire when they got married or, if they failed to marry, to make them leave at the age of thirty. Michiko, however, loved her job and wished to continue working for the company as long as she could and, moreover, had no desire to get married. As her thirtieth birthday approached, she began to express her concerns over the impending loss of her job to friends, one of whom belonged to a new religious movement (shin shūkyō). Extolling the efficacy of this religious group and its practices—which, she claimed, enabled its devotees to achieve any goal they wished—her friend persuaded her to go along to a meeting at this movement’s local center. Attending the meeting and encountering several other women of a similar age, each of whom affirmed the positive nature of this religion, and listening to testimonies from members who told of practical benefits they had received as a result of their religious devotion, Michiko became convinced that this was a religion that might be able to help her out of her present predicament. She began to attend the meetings regularly, and got involved in special prayers and recitations both at home and at the weekly meetings. As colleagues and senior members of the religious group told her to do, she directed her prayers toward her wish to stay on at her company beyond her thirtieth birthday.

One day, some months before her birthday, she was summoned to the office of her section head. Believing she was about to be told she would have to leave the company, she entered in trepidation—only to hear her boss say that since she was a devoted and model worker, the company wanted her to stay on and become a senior in charge of training all new office lady employees. Michiko was overjoyed. In that
moment she realized the efficacy of her prayers and could see how her involvement in the new religious movement had improved her life. In that moment she recognized what her friend had told her and what countless other adherents to new religions in Japan had preached: proof of religious validity can be found through experience. She was convinced of the truth of her newfound religion because it had worked and solved her problem, and this deepened her faith. Soon she was advocating its values to other friends and colleagues and advising them to come with her to meetings in order to deal with their own problems and desires.

In various publications detailing the benefits that can accrue from following their religious practices, numerous Japanese new religious movements tell stories such as Michiko’s and make it clear that direct, immediate, and often material benefits flow from religious faith, practice, and adherence to their tenets. Such stories are commonplace among Japanese new religions and convey a readily understood message for members and potential converts alike: here is a religion that actually works, one that offers practitioners the hope of something beneficial and relevant to their daily lives. These immediate benefits are known as genze riyaku, a term that can be translated as “this-worldly benefits,” “practical benefits in this lifetime,” or simply “practical benefits.” As these three translations of the term are virtually synonymous, we use all of them in this book. At times genze riyaku has also been translated as “this-worldly material benefits,” but this term can have a derogatory connotation, as if the only benefits sought in the new religions are material.

Although genze riyaku may cover any kind of good results, they are generally understood to involve primarily material or physical gains such as good health, healing, success, or, as in the case cited here, personal advancement in one’s life path, as well as less tangible benefits such as an increased sense of personal well-being and freedom from problems. Such practical benefits have been widely regarded as an integral feature of the new religions and a crucial factor in their appeal to a wide audience both in their initial stages of development and in their subsequent growth. The earliest religious power of Nakayama Miki, for instance, the founder of the new religion Tenrikyo, was the apparent ability to grant safe childbirth to supplicants. It was this power, along with her ability to grant protection against illnesses such as smallpox, that first drew people to her and provided the catalyst for the formation of the group.

Practical benefits have also been a constant target of the critiques of the new religions made by priests and others associated with mainstream religious traditions, such as Buddhism, and by journalists in the mass media. Accusing the new religions of being solely material-
istic in nature, such critics condemn them as being concerned with foolish superstition. From a psychological point of view, Nakamura Kokyō attacked the new religion Ōmotokō as “a frightful superstition unparalleled in the country.”¹⁵ Scholars too have joined in criticizing the new religions. In their book Shinbō shūkyō, Samoto Akio and Kotake Akira characterize the new religions as magical and ecstatic mass movements.⁶ On the question of genze riyaku in particular, the Buddhist scholar Kikumura Norihiko argues that the term originally referred to spiritual benefits but Japanese folk beliefs corrupted the idea to include material pleasures.⁷ The Nichiren scholar Asai Endō characterizes the new religions as being devoid of doctrine and having only methods for magical healing; he criticizes the Sōka Gakkai in particular for their understanding of practical benefits as actual proofs of the power of the Lotus Sutra, saying that their interpretation does not accord with what Nichiren himself wrote.⁸ Studies carried out in the 1950s by Buddhist and Shinto scholars frequently characterized the new religions as being “doctrinally shallow, magical, and focused on this-worldly benefits.”⁹ Generally they portray the new religions and their adherents as interested in little other than material benefits obtained through magic rather than rational effort. This criticism implies that these are not true religions, a point emphasized by the terms often used to refer to them: jakyō (wrong religion), ruiji shūkyō (quasi-religion), and shinbō shūkyō (new fad religion). Arai Ken has commented on the negative image that has surrounded new religions—especially as they were portrayed in the media in the prewar era—because of superstitious claims about their powers to heal the sick and confer all manner of worldly benefits.¹⁰

The critiques leveled against the new religions, through their focus on this-worldly benefits, have thus sought to depict them as not “real” or “true” religions but somehow false and corrupted—implying that “real” and “true” religions are not concerned with material or this-worldly benefits acquired through superstitious magic. True religion in this model involves genuine faith, spiritual salvation, creedal affirmation, and ethical rules of life. Although such critiques originated primarily in the Japanese situation from within a religiously oriented, predominantly Buddhist, academic milieu, they have to a great degree been reinforced by Western academic traditions. The textual-based origins of Western academic studies of religion, and of Buddhism in particular, have certainly played their part in this. From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, the Western study of Buddhism in India has had what Gregory Schopen calls a Protestant bias in having to find “true religion” located in scripture. So long as Buddhist studies scholars insist that “real Buddhism is tex-
tual Buddhism,” then what is written in the texts as ideals must be understood as having taken place in actual practice—and, conversely, any idea or practice that cannot be found in scripture must be rejected as a historical impossibility.\footnote{\textsuperscript{11}}

A major problem is that academic studies of religion have tended, especially from the nineteenth century onward, to emanate from a number of different sources. There is a particularly problematic split between anthropological and sociological studies on the one hand (which tend to focus on phenomena such as ritual, practice, and custom that are often visible apart from scriptural sources) and theological studies on the other with their focus on issues of creed, text, and doctrine. The latter, especially when related to the missionizing impulses of nineteenth-century Christianity, of which the academic-theological tradition was part, was concerned with differentiating between concepts of true and false religions and, through spreading the doctrines of “true religion,” with rejecting what it saw as falsehood and superstition. The focus of anthropological study was thus relegated to the investigation of what from the theological viewpoint was seen as false and superstitious, while the study of “religion” proper was conceptualized within a theological, doctrinal, and faith-oriented framework. This tendency has naturally had repercussions on the subsequent development of the study of religion and religious cultures, as Schopen’s point illustrates. While academic studies of religion have in many ways moved beyond the narrow theological parameters of the nineteenth century and now recognize the importance of practice and ritual, they have not always managed to resolve the problems created by early conceptualizations of “religion” within a basically Christian theological framework. Indeed, such is the concern over the potential theological (and culture-specific) implications of the term “religion” itself that scholars have begun to question the applicability of the term “religion” to non-Western cultures: since the term relates to creeds, beliefs, teachings, and doctrines, it is inappropriate as a term of analysis for situations where customs, practices, and other ritual actions may be the means of expressing underlying meanings that do not need affirmation in doctrinal forms.

While we recognize the problems caused by the term “religion,” we do not concur with such concerns. In this book we are talking about a non-Western culture and are dealing largely with matters not of doctrine and teaching, not necessarily even of belief, but of practice and action. Thus we readily use the term “religion” to describe the issues we are talking about. We do this knowing full well that the topics we focus on—praying for worldly benefits and the various practices and concepts that surround it—may at times seem more closely associated with commerce, entertainment, and casual behavior than they are with the apparently traditional concerns of religion as a doctri-
nally oriented phenomenon. In our usage of the term “religion” we are, in effect, utilizing an English translation of a Japanese word, “shūkyō.” The irony of this will not be lost on scholars aware that “shūkyō” is the term developed in the nineteenth century in Japan to refer to the English word “religion,” which at that time was most specifically a theologically oriented term.

While the conception of shūkyō (religion) as a narrowly based, theologically and doctrinally oriented phenomenon, associated with belief in a specific faith, continues to have some resonance in contemporary Japan (as does the term “religion” in English-speaking cultures), in scholastic terms it has far broader meanings that incorporate ritual, folk customs, and even etiquette. A brief glance at contemporary Japanese scholarship shows this well: in his book *Nihon shūkyō no kōzō* (The structure of Japanese religion), for example, Miyake Hitoshi discusses this-worldly benefits, rituals, spirit possession, festivals, asceticism, taboos, and the relationship of Buddhism with folk customs. Doctrines and creedal teachings, by contrast, are given little prominence. Numerous studies of folk practices and beliefs are considered to come under the rubric of shūkyō (religion): Shinno Toshikazu’s *Nihon yugyō shūkyōron*, for example, which is concerned with the study of pilgrimage, wandering ascetics, folk legends, and miracle stories, and Miyata Noboru and Tsukamoto Manabu’s edited volume *Minkan shinkō to minzoku shūkyō*, which discusses shamanism, the role of the gods in providing worldly benefits, and the roles of gods of sickness and good fortune. While modern-day Japanese analyses of the influences of “religion” (shūkyō) discuss levels of faith and belief, they are also concerned with observance of calendrical rituals and festivals, ranging from memorial visits to graves to New Year visits to shrines and temples, and with matters such as the purchase of amulets and other lucky charms, visits to diviners, attitudes toward spirits, and the potential incidence of miracles.

Since the terms (and concepts) of religion and shūkyō are imbued with multiple meanings and historical accretions that provoke different interpretations and suggest different and frequently elastic meanings to different people in different contexts, we should state where we stand on this issue. In this book we are using parameters similar to those found in much of contemporary Japanese scholarship: thus we use “religion” as an inclusive term that has elastic frontiers readily intermingled with cultural and social themes in which belief and doctrine can play a part but are not essential. Under the rubric of “religion” we include such things as visits to shrines and temples (locations that cannot be classified other than as religious institutions), participation in festivals that are focused on shrines, temples, and deities, the acquisition of amulets and talismans, and the seeking, through petitioning of deities, of worldly benefits. We treat religion as a mat-
ter not only of doctrine and belief but of participation, custom, ritual, action, practice, and belonging. It is as much a matter of social and cultural influences and behavioral patterns located in day-to-day concerns and the ordinary processes of life—as concerned with ameliorating problems in the present, in producing explanations of why things have gone wrong, and in proposing mechanisms that offer the hope of improvement—as it is with ultimate concerns, theological explanations of the nature of the universe, or the destination of the soul. Rather than reject the term “religion” defined in narrow theological terms, we employ the word with expansive meanings drawn from a broad spectrum ranging from theological abstractions to mundane practicalities.

In taking such a perspective on religion, we may sometimes appear to emphasize the popular, customary, pragmatic, and secular more than the doctrinal and theological. We do not seek to privilege one form of inquiry (such as the anthropological concern with practice and ritual) over others (such as theologically or textually oriented studies). Rather, we recognize that fruitful studies of religion can be more readily carried out when different academic perspectives are brought together. As subsequent chapters of this book show, we argue that topics such as praying for worldly benefits must be studied not merely from anthropological and suchlike perspectives but have to be seen in relation to the wider picture of religion in Japan—that is, in terms of the doctrinal sources and meanings associated with such practices and the textual sources that affirm them.

A similar point has been made recently by Robert Sharf in an article which critiques the methodological disjunctions that have hampered the study of Japanese religious phenomena. Sharf argues that these schisms have resulted from a basic division of labor between sociologists and anthropologists, on the one hand, who are concerned with synchronic analyses and tend to neglect historical and doctrinal matters, and Buddhologists, on the other, who focus on text, philology, and doctrine. The Buddhologists, he notes, “tend to dismiss the new religious movements as degenerate popularizations utterly devoid of doctrinal sophistication or subtlety.” The results of this division of labor, according to Sharf, include a lack of studies of new religions that are sensitive to their scriptural precedents and a lack of ethnographically textured studies of older Buddhist schools in the modern period.

Although there is a growing convergence between these two approaches in the study of Japanese religion, there remains a tendency in academic writing to differentiate between “true religion” and superstitious practice. In a recent edition of their volume on the Japanese in the present day, Edwin Reischauer and Marius Jansen
conclude that “religion in contemporary Japan is not central to society and culture.” It is not just the new religions, but all the other traditions as well, that either fail the test of being a real religion or, if they qualify, as Christianity does, have only a small number of adherents. Reischauer and Jansen admit the prevalence of superstitious folk beliefs and the popularity of a wide variety of visible institutions and rituals, but they count little of this for true religion, since 70 or 80 percent of Japanese do not profess to believe in any religion. Most of the elements of real religion are seen to be missing: there is no faithful affirmation of teachings that provide guidance in life.

The view of Reischauer and Jansen, that “religion in Japan offers a confused and indistinct picture,” results, however, from their expectations of what is real religion rather than from any understanding of the actualities of Japanese religion. As we have noted, there are many other valid elements in Japanese religion besides those considered by Reischauer and Jansen. Indeed, Japanese religion is less a matter of belief than it is of activity, ritual, and custom. The vast majority may not assert religious belief but—a point demonstrated in numerous studies and surveys of behavior in religious contexts—that same majority participates in religious activities and rituals. Even Reischauer and Jansen, despite their view of a society in which religion does not play a central role, admit that Japanese life is “intertwined with religious observances.” Indeed, understood as active participation, religion is hardly a peripheral phenomenon in Japan.

The picture on the front cover of Reischauer and Jansen’s book makes exactly this point: the Japanese are very much involved with religion—in particular, with ritual behavior and practice involving the pursuit of practical benefits through religious situations and means. The photograph, which shows a family catching the holy water of Otowa no Taki (Otowa Falls) with long-handled ladles at the famous Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto, is representative not only of Japanese religion but of contemporary Japan. Otowa no Taki, the first of the so-called ten famous springs in Japan, is visited by throngs of people seeking to drink its water in order to cure illnesses, prolong life, and fulfill wishes. A sign at the premises advises people to drink the water, make tea with it, or mix it with powdered milk; supplicants are told they can take home a bottle for 500 yen. Taking home the water, which can produce the benefits cited here because it comes from the sacred location of the temple and is therefore associated with its main figure of worship, the bodhisattva Kannon, is one of a number of actions open to the visitor seeking benefits on offer at the temple. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, temples, shrines, and other religious institutions provide—for a fee, as with the water at Kiyomizu—a whole range of means whereby people can take home with them the
signs and representations of the sacred power of the location. Among the objects we shall encounter in this book are numerous and often generic forms of amulets, talismans, and votive tablets, to say nothing of assorted lucky objects and charms, as well as more specialized representations of good fortune, benefits, and spiritual power such as the water of Kiyomizu.

Nor do the religious institutions that provide these services, materials, and access to the various forms of genze riyaku discriminate. Anyone may purchase an amulet, request a special ritual prayer, or make a personal supplication to the gods or buddhas. There is no need, and no demand, for special affiliation or specific denominational involvement before one can approach a deity or utilize a temple for such services. Kiyomizu Temple, for example, has the reputation of being everyone’s temple since it does not cater in any specialized way to a particular group of people. It is for everyone. No one is barred from searching for good fortune, seeking the providence of Kannon, imbibing the holy powers, and receiving the benefits there. Reischauer and Jansen’s picture of the emblematic activity of taking water at a temple and thereby receiving benefits is most appropriate for a book entitled The Japanese Today.

Buddhism and This-Worldly Benefits

The assumption that searching for this-worldly benefits and using practices linked to magic and materialism are characteristic of false religions not only gives a pejorative reading of the new religions but misrepresents the nature of Buddhism and other religious traditions. As we shall see, the promise of this-worldly benefits is an intrinsic element within Japanese religion in general. To a great extent the materialism and economics of worldly benefits are in fact typical of Japanese religion, including Buddhism, and, if the matter were to be pursued further, of religion in general. Buddhist temples have long been as active as the new religions in promoting the practical benefits that can be acquired through venerating their figures of worship and through prayers, petitions, and the purchase of talismans and amulets. Such temples are by no means the exceptions; indeed, they are often located right at the heart of supposedly normative Buddhism. Many head temples of Buddhist sects are renowned as centers of this-worldly benefits: Ikegami Honmonji, one of the four head temples of the Nichiren Buddhist sect, is renowned for its role as a protector of children; Sensoji, otherwise known as Asakusa Kannon, the head temple of the Shō Kannon sect, is renowned for protection from danger (yaku yoke).
Many guidebooks available in bookstores throughout Japan denote, outline, and discuss this-worldly benefits in terms of the places where they may be sought. Such guidebooks, which we shall focus on particularly in Chapter 7, generally center not on the new religions but on Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples—that is, on the religious institutions of the established religions of Japan. In such accounts of the benefits that can be sought, and the places where one may petition for them, one is liable to find numerous well-known Buddhist temples most commonly associated with austere religious practice and behavior. Thus an entry for the renowned head temple of the Sōtō Zen sect, Eiheiji in Fukui prefecture, which is famed for its austerities and for the monastic training of its monks, can be found in a popular guidebook of this-worldly benefits. There it is lauded as an efficacious place to pray for career advancement—efficacious in part because of the severe practice of its monks, which endows the temple with spiritual power and thus makes prayers said there especially potent. The Sōtō sect itself represents a good example of how deeply rooted praying for this-worldly benefits is, how closely associated it is with other core Buddhist practices such as meditation, and how inseparable it is from the monastic aspects of Buddhist training. Sōtō Zen Buddhism expanded in Japan during the Muromachi period and its doctrines penetrated into Japanese society in general; it achieved this penetration through the use of prayer formulas that promised this-worldly benefits, at times even using prayers supposedly addressed to its founder Dōgen.

Several important Sōtō Zen temples have become famed as prayer temples (kitōdera), auspicious locations at which to petition for worldly benefits. In particular the sect has three major prayer temples (sandai kigansho), usually cited as Saijōji in Kanagawa prefecture, Myōgonji, also known as Toyokawa Inari, in Aichi prefecture, and Kasuisai in Shizuoka. Saijōji is one of the largest and most dominant temples in the sect, head of its second largest temple lineage with over four thousand affiliated temples, and famed, because of its association with the ascetic mountain hermit Dōryō, as a center for all manner of benefits including (at least in recent years) increasing one’s monetary wealth, for which the temple sells lucky talismans. Myōgonji is one of the most famous centers for the veneration of Inari, the deity most commonly associated with Shinto but also venerated in certain forms in Buddhist temples. Among the benefits it is known for are the opening up of good fortune (kaiun) and business prosperity (shōbai hanjo). Kasuisai is renowned for providing protection against fires (kanan yoke). Occasionally another Sōtō temple, Zenpōji at Tsuruoka in Yamagata prefecture, is also counted (instead
of either Myōgonji or Kasuisai) as one of the three great Sōtō prayer temples.

What characterizes all four of these temples is that they are among the small number (less than thirty in all) of temples classed as special monastic training centers (senmon sōdō) where monks undergo training to become priests and practice meditation and other spiritual austerities. Like the guidebook mentioned earlier, which considered Sōtō’s most famous monastic training center, Eiheiji, to be a good place to pray for worldly benefits because of its focus on austerities, the publications of these other monastic training centers see no contradiction between worldly prayers and spiritual training.

Thus the commemorative volume produced by Saijōjī on the six-hundredth anniversary of its founding focuses on the temple as a training center for monks and as a famed place of prayer whose protective guardian is the spirit of the fourteenth-century ascetic monk Dōryō. Dōryō continues to guard the temple and provide petitioners with worldly benefits, showing his presence “with mysterious occurrences and by his responsiveness to prayer.” The two predominant aspects of the temple—its focus as a center of Zen Buddhist meditation designed to achieve enlightenment and its role as a prayer temple where people come to seek this-worldly benefits—are complementary, not contradictory, as a senior monk at the temple told one of us during a visit in April 1996. Whether performing Zen meditation or praying to the gods and buddhas for help, one is “throwing away” one’s self, affirming one’s faith, and achieving rewards for behaving well. In this monk’s interpretation, this-worldly benefits come as a reward for prayer and faith: they do not reflect self-seeking and immoral activities so much as ethical and highly religious ones.

We shall return to these issues in later chapters. Here we have drawn attention to the incidence of this-worldly benefits in one particular Buddhist organization, Sōtō Zen Buddhism, to indicate the centrality of this topic to Buddhism in Japan and to show that monasticism and seeking this-worldly benefits occur within the same location and are not contradictory so much as complementary. Indeed, commentators from the Buddhist tradition who criticize the new religions are perhaps being disingenuous, for the term “ryaku” itself is originally a Buddhist word relating to the benefits granted through the grace of buddhas and the merits of the law of Buddhism. The concept of ryaku and Buddhism’s power to bring benefits is integral to the Buddhist tradition, particularly as it has developed in Japan, and, as Chapter 2 demonstrates, can be found amply in the scriptures and practices that attend the passage of Buddhism from the Asian continent to Japan. The suggestion that Buddhism is neither practical nor beneficial is anathema to its central claim of being an effec-
tive remedy for the pains of existence. It is therefore not surprising that *genze ryaku* should be held in great esteem even at the highest levels of understanding. The promise of practical benefits has had a wide appeal to all classes of people and has served as a common ground giving rise to abstruse philosophies as well as folk stories telling of the powers of this religion and its deities. The stories and tales that have developed within the Buddhist tradition in Japan resonate well with the account of Michiko given earlier and establish in dramatically clear ways the tangible rewards for those who commit themselves to belief and exert themselves in practice. All of this is consonant with classical Buddhist ideas such as karma and causality, which make it nearly impossible to affirm that things happen by chance. Practical benefits are not accidental but, as we shall see in Chapter 3, result from deliberate, ethical, and correct action.

Buddhism, after all, was introduced to the Japanese in precisely such terms: as a religion that rewarded commitment with material benefits. When the Korean king of Paekche in the sixth century sought to interest the Japanese court in Buddhism, he did not assert its philosophical richness or claim that it could provide an otherworldly path of transcendence. He did not even speak of enlightenment, nirvana, emptiness, or any of the other philosophical explanations of Buddhism that he admits can hardly be understood. Nor, indeed, did he speak of the potential for this new religion to pacify the souls of the dead or help them in their passage to other realms (roles that became central to Buddhism in Japan in later ages). Rather, he introduced Buddhism as a means of attaining benefits and even affirmed the goodness of desire, which had been denounced by other doctrinal formulations such as the Four Noble Truths:

This doctrine is amongst all doctrines the most excellent. But it is hard to explain, and hard to comprehend. Even the Duke of Chou and Confucius had not attained to a knowledge of it. This doctrine can create religious merit and retribution without measure and without bounds, and so lead on to a full appreciation of the highest wisdom. Imagine a man in possession of treasures to his heart’s content, so that he might satisfy all his wishes in proportion as he used them. Thus it is with the treasure of this wonderful doctrine. Every prayer is fulfilled and naught is wanting.  

It could be said, however, that kings are not always endowed with philosophical skills and the king’s interest in practical benefits might be excused as resulting from the limited understanding of a pragmatic politician. The king’s compromised understanding might be explained in a more respectable way, perhaps, by resorting to the expedient idea of skillful means. This doctrinal tenet can be cited to
explain the king’s lack of a higher understanding and thereby to preserve what otherwise would have to be regarded as a degenerate interpretation.

The importance of the concept of skillful means in Mahāyāna Buddhism is widely recognized. Explained in texts such as the Lotus Sutra, the concept asserts that Buddhism, in its drive toward universal truth and the establishment of the unchanging Buddhist law that can bring full enlightenment to all beings, has had to avert its gaze from the higher standards—not in order to lower its expectations but to bring people closer to its ultimate aims—and must utilize various means at its disposal, including the assimilation of ideas and rituals seemingly incompatible with its ultimate ends, in order to create a more fertile ground. The stories in the Lotus Sutra that show the Buddha using various tricks to get his message across are widely cited cases of skillful means in action. Likewise Buddhism’s accommodating stance toward the ancestors and Confucian family ideals is occasionally cited as an example of the expediency of a religion whose primary focus was on monastic celibacy, withdrawal from the world, and the affirmation of impermanence—in marked contrast to the notion of ancestorhood and its belief in a permanent soul that retains some connection with this world after death. Buddhism in such terms is seen as using skillful means in order to come to terms with local religious and social mores, thereby enabling it to establish roots in the culture and spread its message. The promise of practical benefits can thus be justified as one of these expedient tricks used to lead people to the higher objective of renunciation and transcendental wisdom: by affirming the powers of Buddhism, and of the buddhas, to grant practical benefits, those who promote the creed of Buddhism are effectively making belief. They are seeking to develop faith in those who have received benefits or believe that they might do so.

Although skillful means as a concept affirms the role of Buddhism in pointing toward an absolute truth (and in such contexts Buddhism itself may be seen as a skillful means carrying out this role of mediating between conventional truth and the absolute), it is often utilized by scholars and Buddhist priests alike to draw distinctions within the realms of Buddhist practice and activity—between, for example, supposedly pure Buddhist practices, such as meditation, and others that somehow look more appropriately classified as the accretions of popular folk religion assumed by Buddhism through its desire to bring all beings closer to the truth. Japanese Buddhist priests who perform memorial services for ancestors or sell amulets for good fortune and personal benefit at their temples, for example, may (as many have done in conversation with the authors) readily turn to a discussion of skillful means to explain why they do so. The concept
also allows academics who are disturbed by Japanese Buddhism’s apparent focus on worldly concerns to explain it in terms that imply that these are not parts of true Buddhism but accretions gleaned from the folk tradition through Buddhism’s desire to expand its influence and reach greater numbers of people.

Whatever the intent of the concept, it has provided a means through which those who wish to do so can legitimize the apparent accretions and assimilations from the folk tradition and therefore reaffirm many of the notions about high religion as opposed to popular and folk religion, notions advanced in the critiques of true versus false religion to which we alluded earlier. But such a perspective merely reinforces what we consider to be an untenable differentiation between religion as doctrine and religion as practice. Thus the concept of skillful means—helpful though it has been to scholars and priests in giving expedient answers to questions about how and why a religious tradition such as Buddhism has developed from its roots in monastic enlightenment beneath the bodhi tree to its role of provider of good fortune, business prosperity, and ancestor veneration in modern Japan—has in a way problematized more than it has clarified our general understanding of Buddhism. By providing a plausible “answer” to why such things happen, it has facilitated the continuing image of Buddhism as a religion engaged in mundane and material pursuits only as a device and stratagem, rather than as matters of proper religious concern. Within the context of Japanese religion and Buddhism in general, as we shall see, Buddhist activities of providing magical efficacy are central to its dynamic rather than ephemeral or expedient. The doctrine of skillful means, rather than being a truly central dynamic that leads people to, and legitimates, the practice of seeking practical benefits, is actually closer to being an afterword: it is the centrality of practical benefits to Buddhism that creates the need for the doctrine of skillful means for those who invoke it rather than the doctrine creating the need to promote practical benefits.

Shinto and Practical Benefits

If Buddhism is intimately associated with the pursuit of benefits, so too is Shinto. One of the major differences is that Shinto priests as well as academics studying Shinto have had little problem in accepting the idea that religion may be concerned with worldly benefits as normative. Indeed, this is its raison d’être: Shinto deities are constantly invoked for the benefits they are believed to provide, while the whole thrust of Shinto mythology and legends, as set out in texts such as the *Kojiki*, speaks of the role of Shinto deities (*kami*) in providing
the good things that contribute to fruitful human life. Shinto shrines dedicated to deities such as Hachiman, Tenjin, and Inari draw large crowds of petitioners seeking blessings, good luck, and protection from misfortune. Deities such as Inari are called upon to support a good harvest, bless new business ventures, or assist in their particular spheres of influence. Tenjin, the god of education, is prayed to by Japanese students seeking help in passing examinations or entering a college of their choice.

Shinto in general terms has provided ready affirmation of the availability of this-worldly benefits through faith and veneration at its shrines, while numerous religious groups registered as Shinto organizations in Japan stress the importance of this-worldly benefits in their doctrinal structures and teachings. This is usually done within the context of emphasizing the importance of worshiping the particular kami venerated within the particular Shinto organization and hence affirming the close relationship between faith and the acquisition of practical benefits. The Shintō Kotohirakyo (a sect or kyo ha Shinto organization based on Kotohira Shrine in Shikoku), for instance, affirms that through reverence for its kami, and through prayer at their shrines, one can attain such benefits as being blessed with children, business prosperity, and family safety. Shinto has never renounced the desirability of the good things in life. It has been a comfortable advocate of the powers of its deities to help people secure practical benefits and thus has provided a ready ally to the buddhas and bodhisattvas who could do the same.

**Genze riyaku in Japanese Religion**

As the preceding comments illustrate, the promise and pursuit of this-worldly benefits are not limited to the new religions. Thus critiques accusing new religions of being focused on this-worldly benefits are themselves unreasonable: while new religions are, in general, centered on issues related to genze riyaku, this is because they tend to follow a normative path within Japanese religion, not because they are in any way a perversion or aberration of Japanese religious traditions.

This book is centered on the role, meaning, and nature of genze riyaku in Japanese religion. Our basic argument is that genze riyaku is a normative and central theme in the structure and framework of religion in Japan—sought through numerous ritual practices, symbolized by various religious objects such as talismans and amulets, and affirmed in doctrinal terms in various religious organizations as well through textual traditions. It is, as we shall see, vigorously proselytized not just by the new religions but by established ones as well. And
in this proselytization the established religions and their institutions proclaim a similar underlying meaning as that of the religion the office lady Michiko joined: a religion that is true because it accomplishes things.

The range of complexities and themes related to the seemingly simple notion of a benefit (riyaku) that is attained, enjoyed, and experienced in this life (genze) will become more evident as the book continues. Here, however, we note that when we talk of genze riyaku (and the various English translations, such as “practical benefits,” that we introduced earlier) we are, in effect, using a shorthand for the interlocking framework of themes, concepts, practices, and meanings that are associated with the seemingly simple act of asking a deity to provide one with something of practical use in one’s life. In framing this book around the nature, role, and position of genze riyaku in Japanese religion, we see genze riyaku both as a descriptive term, referring to a particular phenomenon and practice, and as a means through which, by examining the various elements that are associated with it, we can begin to understand the nature and dynamics of religion in Japan.

There are two primary points we wish to introduce here that will provide both the framework for the chapters that follow and the definitional focus to the wider subject we are discussing. The first is that, in affirming the centrality of genze riyaku, we are arguing that Japanese religion in general is governed by a world-affirming religious viewpoint. This does not mean that we are disregarding the importance of various ideas and practices relating to salvation and death and what happens afterwards: funeral customs, concepts about the spirit after death, views about postdeath salvation, and such concerns are extremely important. Indeed, in terms of engagement in religious activities, few practices are as important in Japan as activities related to the ancestors and to rituals and practices centered on the deceased and their graves, and few concepts have been more powerful or so hopefully held than the promise of salvation and entry into the Pure Land after death. While one can argue that such practices themselves contain a this-worldly orientation (by venerating and ritualizing ancestors, the living are seeking their protection and favor in this life, and ancestors are regarded as a potential source of benefits, while faith in postdeath salvation is an important element in the development of this-worldly peace of mind), one must also consider the importance of these issues in the wider understanding of religion in Japan as well as Japanese religious practices. Since these issues have been the subject of far greater study than the topic of genze riyaku, we would suggest they have led to a more otherworldly nuance being placed on many aspects of Japanese religion—and a disproportion-
ate sense of the weight of otherworldly as opposed to this-worldly views—than the situation demands.

The second point is that the practice of seeking this-worldly benefits should not be seen as simply or even primarily materialistic. As we shall see, a number of other qualities and spiritual states, including peace of mind and salvation, are closely related to these practices and the meanings upon which they are based. If we understand materialism to imply that it is through material advances alone that happiness is achieved, and that materialism is a way of thinking which emphasizes above all the acquisition of material wealth and goods, it is not parallel to the concept of genze riyaku. As we shall discover in Chapter 3, there is a strong moral underpinning to the concept and practice, which relates most directly to living a good, happy, and positive life in the present—a concept that is perhaps most clearly articulated in new religions such as Tenrikyō, which sees it as a moral injunction to live a yokigurashi, a bright and happy life, but which permeates much of the Japanese religious spectrum.

Riyaku (also goriyaku) are material and this-worldly in that they improve the living circumstances of the petitioner in a direct and immediate way by offering educational success, happy marriage, safe childbirth, traffic safety, business prosperity, and so on. They also reflect the understanding that happiness itself requires freedom from anxiety (hence the prayers for safety as a means of reassurance) and a certain level of material support. This is different from saying that the concept and pursuit of riyaku are synonymous with materialism. While the pursuit of riyaku suggests the acquisition of material benefits, it is rarely framed in terms of suggesting that material advance alone is good.

A number of prayers seek benefits that are intangible (health, safety) or seek to protect the supplicant from misfortune. Nevertheless, they will clearly improve the seeker’s quality of life. They are externalizations of inner wishes that manifest the realities of what people see as important in life. Such inner wishes, reflected in prayers for success, amelioration, good health, safety, and so on, express what are commonly accepted as essential human needs and essential aspects of living a satisfied life, one with meaning and value.

The concept and practices related to the pursuit of this-worldly benefits demonstrate a worldview in which psychic causation is considered to play a major part in the actualization of events. Just as spirits or ancestors, when not treated properly, may be seen as causes of illness (a view that affirms the psychic worldview in which spiritual causes are manifest as physical events, a dominant theme in Japanese religious culture that is strongly articulated in the present day by many of the new religions), so does the expression of inner
thoughts reflect an important part of the process of actualization. Praying for benefits also reflects an implicit recognition that human beings are unable to accomplish everything by themselves: they need some support, or at least a feeling that they are being supported, in their endeavors. Implicit, too, in such prayers is the notion of cooperation: in praying for a god or buddha’s aid, one is effectively pledging one’s willingness to act in accordance with the deity or buddha one prays to, thus committing oneself to a particular course of action based on faith and ethical duty.

In connection with these spiritual and material questions, we should mention here three terms that are linked to the concept and practices surrounding genze riyaku. These terms are “peace of mind” (anshin), “faith” (shinkō), and “salvation” (kyūsai), all of which would no doubt be considered germane to “spiritual” questions. As we shall see throughout this book, however, all of these terms are so closely related to the concept and practices surrounding genze riyaku that at times they are virtually inseparable from it. This is especially so regarding anshin (peace of mind) and shinkō (faith). Both terms have occurred frequently during the interviews with priests. One of the first discussions with a Buddhist priest on the topic of genze riyaku was less a formal interview than a relaxed conversation with the head priest after the New Year’s celebrations at a Sōtō Zen temple in northern Japan. Questions were based on relative inexperience, for this was the interviewer’s first visit to Japan and he was still attempting to comprehend the seeming contradictions between what he had read about Buddhism as a religion emphasizing nonmaterialism and the prayers and rituals for worldly advancement and success that were being made by the priest on behalf of visitors who paid him for this service.

The gist of his response was quite straightforward: by praying to the buddhas, displaying faith, and acquiring their benevolent grace, one attains peace of mind. He did not dispute that praying to the Buddhist figures of worship would lead to the acquisition of their grace and benevolence: as befits his position as a Buddhist priest and guardian of a number of sacred images, a priest whose role at the temple was to perform such rituals of supplication, he naturally had deep faith in the power of the buddhas and in the efficacy and benevolence of their response. The peace of mind that results from having prayed and acquired a sign (an amulet or some other tangible object) of the grace of the buddhas has the effect, he stated, of enabling one to focus one’s mind on the task at hand, such as studying for an examination or driving carefully. This recognition that one can operate more efficaciously when one is in a good mental state is simple enough, but it shows how closely anshin and genze riyaku are related.
Peace of mind, in such terms, leads to practical benefits. It also leads
to deeper faith: in making supplications to a buddha, or indeed any
deity, one is expressing some form of faith, at the very least in the abil-
ity of the deity to “hear” that prayer and act on it. As the priest put it,
the acquisition of the benefits sought will deepen the supplicant’s
faith. Shinkō is thus deepened and extended through the process of
seeking and receiving benefits. Again, one should note that the priest
did not question that benefits would result from praying to the bud-
dhas he served at his temple.

In this explanation, then, we see that anshin and shinkō are related
to, are components of, and are also to some degree products of genze
riyaku. As the conversation with the priest was neither sophisticated
nor especially deep, it may be suggested that the linkage between
these issues, anshin, shinkō, and genze riyaku, is rather simplistic. However,
there are times when the simple and straightforward explana-
tion is not just the most direct but also the most reasonable. This, we
would suggest, is the case here. It is an explanation that has emerged,
in some form or other, in many subsequent conversations and inter-
views with other priests. While there are many layers and themes in-
terwoven into the question of practical benefits and their relationship
to peace of mind, faith, and the like, we want to affirm here that it is
important to pay attention to the simple and direct and not always
seek deeper and more complex meanings and “answers” to questions
that are, like Japanese religion itself, direct and readily understand-
able without recourse to abstruse speculations that make things more
indistinct than they actually are and often lead to the erosion of clear
arguments and to the privileging of theory over reality.

In suggesting that peace of mind was the immediate product of
prayers to the buddhas and was thus the precursor of genze riyaku, it
might be considered that the priest was in effect stating that peace of
mind, rather than practical benefits, was the real goal of prayer. This,
indeed, is a response we have heard from other Buddhist priests
many times in the course of discussions. Practical benefits, in such a
perspective, are side products of a search for the spiritual state of an-
shin rather than goals. Indeed, the notion of anshin itself presents pit-
falls for the researcher. Like the skillful means argument discussed
earlier, it provides a convenient argument, if not excuse, for priests of
all religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, to explain (or explain
away) the issue of genze riyaku.

To explain genze riyaku primarily in terms of anshin (that is, to treat
pleasant material benefits as side effects of “true” spiritual goals) pro-
vides another useful means of explaining why temples say prayers for
practical benefits and why they sell objects (the amulets and so on)
that are purchased in this practice. But this is a form of explanation
not dissimilar to the skillful means argument: plausible, useful, and yet, we would contend, ultimately incomplete. If peace of mind were the real goal of supplicants, it would be what they prayed for—yet as a rule they do not. As we shall see in Chapter 1, people do not make oblique requests: they pray for direct, often tangible, but always practical things, normally for themselves or their social group. It is normal to make blunt requests and demands of the gods, ranging from petitions for protection and safety to petitions for wealth and entry into good schools. Is it not disingenuous, looking at these overt prayers, to assume that the “real” intention of the petitioners was peace of mind? After all, there is nothing to prevent someone asking directly for peace of mind in a prayer. Yet requests (onegai) to the gods and buddhas usually focus on a particular benefit. When requests are directed toward peace of mind, they often do so via a specific and materially oriented request. Consider the following message on a votive tablet seen at the temple Kokawa-dera in Wakayama prefecture (in June 1988). In this case the supplicant sought spiritual solace in connection with a practical aim: “May I pay back the money I have borrowed quickly so as to become spiritually at ease (shakkin o hayaku kaeshite seishinteki ni ochitsukemasu yō ni).” The person appended a second wish, as well, asking that she might be cured of an illness.45

Were anshin the primary goal of petitioners, it would be more clearly expressed as such in their petitions. To “explain” the practice of seeking benefits as really centered on peace of mind is to downplay the crucial importance of practical circumstances as essential elements, for most people, in the attainment of happiness. Certainly peace of mind may be a major desire of those who pray at shrines and temples, but it is rarely a direct and pragmatic goal. It is, instead, one that is intertwined with other needs and concerns which may be material and may be more urgent. Peace of mind is a goal that is most readily expressed within the context of attainment: I will (or might) be happy and attain peace of mind when I have passed my examination and got into a good college, when my business prospers enough for me to afford a better house and car, and so on.

Anshin cannot properly exist in normal terms without material substance. It rests, for the vast majority, on one’s day-to-day conditions, one’s work, the success of one’s business, good health, one’s children’s health and (most certainly in Japan) their academic success, and so on. One person we talked to regularly used traffic safety amulets but had had a number of traffic accidents. To some eyes this series of accidents might suggest that the amulets were ineffective. Her interpretation was very different: she had not been injured in any of the accidents, and this was proof of the amulets’ effectiveness. The accidents, rather than eroding her faith in the merits of amulets, ac-
ually increased it: each accident without injury was a reaffirmation of the amulet’s efficacy and the religious power it signified. Thus she was constantly reassured by the amulets in her car, and this contributed to her peace of mind when driving. The practical benefit, the *riyaku*, of traffic safety was also a spiritual benefit, manifested as peace of mind and deepening faith.

This woman’s faith in the amulets reflects the other aspect of the priest’s comment—that the acquisition of a sought-after benefit would intensify faith—and demonstrates the close relationship between faith and benefits. While some degree of faith is often a precursor of the search for benefits (in that one might need at least the inklings of faith to engage in the process of praying for benefits), the attainment of benefits is sometimes equated with the possession of faith. In his introduction to a popular guidebook to shrines and temples in the Kansai region of Japan famed for their provision of worldly benefits, the priest Imai Shōmyō has written that in visiting such places and having one’s wishes realized, “the mind of the believer becomes peaceful and at ease, sufferings are swept away, and one penetrates into the spirit of the law.”

Arai Ken, writing about the new religions, has argued in this context that benefits are the products of faith, not its aim. The Honmon Butsuryūshū, a Nichiren-based group that claims to teach the true Buddhism of Shakyamuni, speaks of “practical benefits as the actual proof” (generously gojirakustu) of faith.

This view was expressed by a priest at the temple Ichibata Yakushi in Shimane prefecture in outlining the temple’s foundation legend (engi), which affirms the importance of faith as a producer of benefits. The temple’s foundation story, which dates the origins of the temple to 894 C.E., centers on the miraculous healing of the blind mother of a poor fisherman who lived on the Japan Sea coast. The fisherman, named Yuichi, who was devoted to his mother and a model of filial piety, found a statue of the Buddha of Healing, Yakushi, in the sea, enshrined it in his home, and prayed earnestly to it. His faith was rewarded with a number of wonderful events, the most dramatic being the restoration of his mother’s sight. The temple that developed around this statue and legend has become widely known for the benefit of healing eye problems and has been at various times in the past affiliated with different Buddhist sects—first the Tendai sect and then the Myōshinji branch of the Rinzai Zen Buddhist sect. In the modern era it separated itself from the Rinzai Myōshinji sect and became the main temple of an independent Buddhist sect, the Ichibata Yakushi Kyōdan, although still classified under the Rinzai lineage. Despite these changes of sectarian affiliation, its central focus has remained constant: belief in the healing powers of Yakushi and the ability of that buddha, in that location, to provide
benefits, especially in relation to eye problems, to petitioners. This in itself is an indication of the central role the concept of benefits plays in Japanese religion: it is the concept of benefits, based on faith in the power of a Buddhist deity, that has been the primary factor in the history of the temple and has withstood changes of sectarian affiliation. Tendai or Rinzai sectarian affiliation would thus appear to be less important, in terms of the temple’s function, than faith in the provision of practical benefits.

Ichibata Yakushi is by no means the only temple with such a history of experiencing sectarian change while retaining a fundamental faith in the provision of practical benefits. This process can be seen also in the history of Saijō Inari in Okayama prefecture. Once a Tendai temple, it became a temple in the Ikegami branch of the Nichiren sect in the sixteenth century and in 1954 became head temple of an independent sect of Nichiren Buddhism, known as Saijō Inarikyō. The temple is famous as a center for praying for worldly benefits, and this has been a constant factor in its history despite sectarian changes.50

Such changes of sectarian affirmation are quite common in Japan. Yet as we shall see in the discussion of temples, shrines, and guidebooks in Chapter 7 these changes do not appear to affect the central place played by practical benefits in their histories. Ichibata Yakushi and Saijō Inari, both of which have emerged as head temples of their own Buddhist organizations, demonstrate that genze riaku is not just a vital element that survives such transitions but a core organizing principle around which temples function and develop. It is also a principle that can provide doctrinal focus and definitions of faith. Ichibata Yakushi today receives hundreds of thousands of visitors from all over Japan and is the center of a small sect focused on the benefits provided by its main image of worship. The Ichibata Yakushi Kyōdan as an independent Buddhist sect affirms the importance of genze riaku as a central point of its doctrines (kyōgi):51 benefits are, as the priest affirmed, the result of faith, and the sect’s doctrine thus links faith and benefits together. The doctrines of Ichibata Yakushi Kyōdan as set out in the organization’s registration as a religious corporation under the Religious Corporations Law (shūkyō hojin hō) affirm that practical benefits, such as the healing of eye problems, can be acquired through ritual practices carried out at the temple and through faith in Yakushi.52 Faith and benefits, therefore, are intimately linked: the former produces the latter; the latter reinforces the former and is central to the doctrines that one has faith in.

We shall return in subsequent chapters to the question of faith. Here we want to emphasize that the concept of seeking practical benefits is closely linked not only to questions of peace of mind but
also to issues of faith, its development, and its intensification. It is also in many respects associated with notions of salvation (kyūsaï), which may contain a this-worldly dimension. Shimazono Susumu has demonstrated for the new religions that salvation is related to the attainment of happiness in this world and can therefore be considered in this-worldly terms: indeed, as he shows, new religions are very often religions of this-worldly salvation. The promise of this-worldly salvation is not a prerogative of the new religions alone, however, for it can be framed also in Buddhist terms. The cult of faith in the bodhisattva Kannon (Kannon shinkō) in the Nara and early Heian era was strengthened by notions of this-worldly salvation in Kannon’s Pure Land (Fudaraku), which was believed to be located within the terrestrial domain of Japan, in the mountains of Kumano. Pilgrims were certainly motivated by the promises in texts and stories associated with Kannon that they could attain this-worldly salvation through journeying to the region of Fudaraku.

Faith in Kannon is based on her ability to confer this-worldly benefits and to intercede in the form of miraculous interventions that save people from danger or even death. At the temple Honkakuji on the island of Shōdoshima, there is a votive tablet depicting a car crashing over a cliff and a “hair’s breadth Kannon” (Ippatsu Kannon) protecting the driver from injury. According to the inscription and to the story related at the temple, Kannon had saved the driver when the car went over the precipice. As a result of emerging wholly unscathed and for his salvation, he offered a votive tablet of thanks.

Salvation may be immediate rather than transcendent, therefore, and such salvific interventions are quite clearly practical benefits. Salvation may be of a more clearly spiritual kind, as indeed the experiences of people like Michiko, cited at the beginning of the chapter, show. Her reprieve from losing her job, which was so important to her life and continued happiness, represents a form of salvation in this world—a salvation brought about, she and her religious mentors would argue, because of her religious devotion and the religious practices she performed. Thus practical benefits can contribute to, and be closely associated with, the notion of salvation in this world, a point clearly emphasized in the new religions but present in Buddhism as well.

Indeed, Buddhist priests who deal on a day-to-day basis with the requests of people who visit their temples recognize that salvation—and religion in general—must have a this-worldly dimension that is not at all inconsistent with true religion. Matsumoto Jitsudō, the head priest of Hōzanji, a well-known temple near Osaka specializing in the provision of this-worldly benefits, linked these issues together in a booklet published by the temple and entitled Kankiten shinkō e no
Matsumoto writes as follows:

One thing I would like to state here is that there are some people who say that praying for this-worldly benefits such as the healing of illness and business prosperity is not true religion (tadashii shūkyō de wa nai), but in fact religion absolutely has to be something for living human beings. Religion itself, along with showing us the existence of the gods and buddhas, provides the spiritual foundations for human life, releases us from its sufferings and pains, gives rise to a joyful life, and teaches us an awareness of the way toward respecting the true nature of human beings. In the end, seeking the Pure Land and praying for its realization are nothing if not a this-worldly activity: after all, if there are no this-worldly benefits there can be no salvation. Is not, after all, seeking entry into the Pure Land a request for an extension of this-worldly benefits? Since present and future are inseparable, to disregard the present is in effect to disregard the future as indeed Shinran himself recognized when he wrote that "desire itself is the spirit of future rebirth."57

Matsumoto, who subsequently links worldly benefits to the expression of true faith,58 not only refutes the view that true religion has nothing to do with this-worldly benefits but firmly emphasizes that they are in fact central to its endeavors. By linking salvation to benefits he affirms the points we are making here—that the “materialistic” practice of seeking this-worldly benefits cannot be separated from “spiritual” elements of the religious enterprise. There is, in reality, no conflict between seemingly “spiritual” notions such as peace of mind, faith, and salvation, on the one hand, and apparently “material” ideas such as the pursuit and attainment of practical this-worldly benefits on the other. The latter are essential aspects of, at times even prerequisites for, the former. Any attempts to draw definitional lines between them in terms of “true” versus “false” religion, or materialism versus spirituality, are extremely problematic since they do not account for what people actually believe and practice.

A Common Religion

There is one more point we wish to emphasize in this Introduction: within the pursuit of this-worldly practical benefits there is a worldview that is so much part of the common ground—indeed, the bedrock—of Japanese religion that it operates as perhaps the most vital common religious denominator in Japan. In light of this religious common denominator many of the categories that have been used as conceptual tools in the study of religion—including the no-
tion that there are high and low, or true and corrupted, religions—
can be seen to fall apart. We have already stressed the invalidity of
such divisions, and it is now widely recognized in academic studies
that categorical divisions do not always work in practice.

In his comprehensive study of medieval English Catholicism, for
example, Eamon Duffy has noted that “no substantial gulf existed be-
tween the religion of the clergy and the educated elite on the one
hand and that of the people on the other.”59 In stating that “the
liturgy was the principal reservoir from which the religious paradigms
and beliefs of the people were drawn,”60 Duffy argues that the divi-
sions between “elite” and “popular” religion, which have been as-
sumed by scholars in discussing medieval religion, did not exist in re-
ality. Not only scholars focusing on “elite” religion have made this
assumption: those studying the “popular” traditions have done the
same. Duffy’s critique of Keith Thomas’s Religion and the Decline of
Magic,61 for example, is that Thomas pays virtually no attention to the
liturgy’s role in forming the religious worldview of medieval people.

Duffy’s arguments are pertinent to our own study. For as we have
indicated, there is much in Buddhist and other liturgy and scripture
that provides source materials for popular religious pursuits and en-
courages these practices. Moreover, as we shall see in later chapters,
Buddhist sutras, the supposed repository of doctrine and philosoph-
ical meaning, often serve as magical spells or incantations used to call
for spiritual grace and to petition for benefits. And Buddhist temples,
statues, and figures of worship that have been closely associated with
so-called high or elite culture (and have subsequently been design-
ated as National Treasures (kokuhō) or Important Cultural Proper-
ties (juyō bunkazai) have often been regarded as among the most
efficacious providers of benefits.

Within Japanese religion in general, there is no substantial gulf be-
tween what the clergy said and did, what the elites wanted and expe-
rienced in their religion, and what the people did, wanted, and ex-
perienced. The goal of many formal ritual practices conducted at
Buddhist temples in Japan is to achieve this-worldly benefits, and the
ritual implements include recitations of prayers and Buddhist sutras
offered by priests as part of the process of sanctifying amulets and tal-
ismans and petitioning for worldly benefits. To illustrate this lack of a
gulf between elites and the common people, let us briefly look at pil-
grimage, a topic we shall explore further in Chapter 5.

Pilgrimages developed as a lay religious activity during the Heian
era, at which time the practice was especially associated with the up-
per echelons of society: many of the pilgrims were aristocrats and
(especially in the pilgrimages to Kumano) retired emperors. Yet they
did not make these pilgrimages in a different guise or with different
intentions from those from the lower strata of society from the late Heian era onward. Although there was a class division in the modes of travel (the ordinary people walked, the aristocrats as a rule went by horseback accompanied by retinues of servants), the desire for acquiring practical benefits from their pilgrimages was shared by all. The aristocrats set out on their pilgrimages with the intention of getting practical benefits just as did the artisans. At times, perhaps, those with different stations in life would seek different types of benefit: the retired emperor or leading aristocrat involved in court intrigues would, for instance, be more likely to petition the gods and buddhas for benefits related to temporal power than would a simple artisan; the artisan would be more likely to pray for developing his work skills or for his business to prosper.

The requests were not always all that different, however. As Barbara Ambros points out in her study of female pilgrims to Kumano in the Heian period, seeking wealth and success was a common thread among rich and poor. While aristocratic women did not have the same financial needs as poor women, they wished to make successful marriages and advance in society and sought such benefits through their pilgrimages. Other needs, such as the wish to bear children and the desire to avoid or be cured of illnesses, were benefits commonly sought by aristocratic women, but of course were important to women at all levels of society. Social circumstances produce different manifestations of the need for benefits and divine support: they do not produce different types of religion. Despite the differing requests of the rich and poor, the elite and the common, the pursuit of benefits unites all. The elite pray for benefits just as do the ordinary people. To insert concepts of differentiation based on elite versus ordinary categories of people (in social and economic terms) is spurious.

Pilgrimages were also egalitarian in that every pilgrim—no matter how he or she made the pilgrimage—became equal at the temple gates. At the gateway to pilgrimage temples one often finds stones with the ideograms “geba” (dismount from your horse). Such markers can be seen, for example, at the gate of Matsunooadera in northern Kyoto prefecture, the twenty-ninth temple on the Saikoku pilgrimage, and on one of the paths leading to Shiromineji, the eighty-first site on the Shikoku pilgrimage. The ideology of convergence (that all pilgrims were the same, all equal, when wearing their common pilgrims’ robes) is prevalent in Japanese pilgrimage even if there remain important distinctions between them in practice. Pilgrimage thus serves as a good example of the unifying dynamics of the religion of practical benefits: it provides a means through which all can seek the benefits pertinent to their situation in a common setting.
Duffy, in arguing for the unity between “elite” and “popular” religious forms, is critical of the term “popular religion” because, as he notes, it is a “term laden with questionable assumptions about the nature of non-popular religion and the gap between the two.”

We concur with such a critique. The term “popular religion,” referring to the religion of ordinary people, implies that somehow there is religion that is unpopular—and that what is unpopular is the religion that elites belong to. Thus it appears to affirm a division between what elites think and do and what ordinary people think and do. It also suggests that elites are focused on doctrine and adherence to the philosophical niceties of scripture, immune to what is often termed “superstition,” while the ordinary people are ignorant of doctrines, unaware of what is said in religious scriptures or performed in religious rituals, and almost entirely bound up with superstition and magical practices. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, such divisions are themselves inadequate and fictitious. We have already indicated that “popular” practices related to genze ryaku may be doctrines in Buddhist sects. The “elite” monks who read their Buddhist sutras were quite clearly aware, because the texts reiterate it so often, that their religion specifically promises practical benefits and offers rituals and other practices through which they may be obtained. The aristocratic elite who patronized Buddhist temples and other religious institutions may have affected an interest in spiritual disciplines such as meditation, but they were more commonly concerned with the benefits their religious patronage gave them whether through access to direct benefits or artistic accomplishments. Such religious practices as sutra copying, a highly popular religious activity among the elite in the Heian period, were accessible to the elite because they were literate, knew how to copy the ideograms of the texts, and were wealthy enough to have access to the brushes, ink, paper, and texts required for the practice. Yet the intention of sutra copying was little different from the practices of ordinary peasants standing before their gods: the aristocrats wanted their children to be born safely, their wives to conceive, their cattle to thrive, and their lands to be safe and prosperous. In our own time, when nearly everyone is literate in Japan, sutra copying is practiced by people in all walks of life.

There is little need here to emphasize further the lack of significant differentiation between the religions of the elite and the folk—or, to put it in other terms, the continuities between textual religion and religion in practice. We should, however, clarify our terminology. Many scholars have argued that there is a substratum of common ideas, practices, customs, beliefs, and ritual and festive activities that shapes religious consciousness in Japan. This substratum has been termed “folk religion” (in Japanese either minkan shinkō or

...
minzoku shūkyō). There are problems, however, in attempting to use “folk religion” as a suitable term to describe this common religious stratum. Folk religion as a category still implies the divisions mentioned earlier, between the elite and the ordinary people, divisions that are not real but imagined. The problem with the definitional term “folk religion” is that it implies a folk/elite division and implicitly denies doctrine, text, and scriptural tradition. The criticisms that Duffy levels against Thomas’s work on religion and magic can just as well be applied to Japanese studies of folk religion: text and sutra are barely mentioned and little attention is given to the role of liturgy in shaping the religious worldview of the people. The term implies, as does “popular religion,” that the “folk,” the ordinary people, did not know what was contained in elite traditions and scriptures and that their religious actions and beliefs were thus conditioned solely by (for want of a better word) superstitions. There is perhaps an implicit association between the words “folk” and “ignorance” that is too close for comfort. The term “folk religion,” in our view, is too problematic for what we are describing.

There are similar difficulties with “primal religion,” a term recently used by Michael Pye to denote what he terms the “wide, general pattern of religious activity with which all Japanese are more or less familiar.” Although the purpose is clear and important—to illustrate common religious characteristics that, Pye argues, have been the matrix of all postwar religious activity in Japan—and although Pye rightly notes that this religion is life-affirming, the nomenclature and indeed the scope of Pye’s “primal religion” are problematic. The term “primal,” indicating the primitive, is fraught with pejorative meanings. In anthropological studies of religion it is closely associated with preliterate societies and notions of mystical awareness as they have existed in such societies. It is questionable whether concepts, rituals, and practices added to Japanese religion by Buddhism among other faiths could be seen, in strict anthropological terms, as “primal.” The focus on activity mentioned by Pye suggests a similar problem to that criticized by Duffy: the problem of overlooking the role of liturgies and so-called elite religious influences.

To avoid the problems raised by such words as “popular religion,” Duffy has suggested a replacement: “traditional religion,” a term that “does more justice to the shared and inherited character of the religious beliefs and practices of the people” than the term “popular religion.” By “traditional” he does not mean unchanging or static: he is quite aware of the ways in which new saints, devotions, and practices emerged and replaced older ones in medieval religion. Medieval religion as he portrays it is dynamic and vibrant—perhaps more so than his espousal of the term “traditional religion” might
suggest. Duffy, however, is also aware that underlying this process of change and the replacement of old with new practices was a religious culture that had certain general characteristics “rooted in a repertoire of inherited and shared beliefs and symbols, while remaining capable of enormous flexibility and variety.”

In terms of its notions of shared beliefs and symbols subject to manipulation and change, Duffy’s concept of traditional religion is, despite his contention to the contrary, too close to notions of stasis. As such it fails to convey the flavor of dynamism that he otherwise portrays. In the Japanese context the word “traditional” is perhaps more problematic still, associated as it is with the status and support structures of the “traditional” established religions (kisei shūkyō). This is especially true given that the primary focus of the academic study of religion in the modern age has been on the new religions; thus the term and concept of “traditional religion” have acquired negative values and images of stagnation and the like. Moreover, the extent to which the image of the “traditional” has been used in contemporary cultural polemics and in advertising contexts in Japan—where so much emphasis is placed, in public rhetoric, on the image of tradition as a counterbalance to modernity—imparts a static nuance to the term “traditional.” It also suggests a cultural, ideological, and even ethnic orientation that is perhaps inappropriate here. In Japanese cultural polemics, as in advertising imagery, although “tradition” implies a sense of identity and belonging, it also signifies the unchanging and that which has been lost to modernity. It is redolent with a sense of nostalgia and speaks of the past rather than of the present, of the untouched and the pristine, of stasis rather than the dynamism that, as Duffy recognizes, is at the heart of the religious world he portrays. Thus, because of the images it evokes in Japanese contexts, it would be wrong to utilize the term “traditional.”

We recognize that any term used in this context to describe a shared and common set of religious ideas, values, practices, beliefs, and behavior is bound to provoke objections: it is easier, certainly, to show why terms are inappropriate than it is to agree on whether a term is useful. Nevertheless, we must use terms if we are to define the frameworks within which we are operating. Two words in particular, when linked to the noun “religion,” come close to the mark of what we are talking about. These terms are “shared” and “common,” as in “shared and common religious stratum.” Of the two we consider the term “common religion” to be the most appropriate for our purposes. Although “shared religion” conveys some of the ideas we are talking about, the word “shared” implies possession and ownership and therefore exclusion of those who have no share. Things that are shared are different from things held in common, and what we are
talking about are religious ideas and practices upon which no single
group, person, or institution can lay any claims of proprietorial
rights. Although they may be shared, they are in fact held in common.
In the old English legalistic meaning of the term as it related to the
common grazing ground and public space, no one held any propri-
etorial rights: the common was something “belonging to, open to, or
affecting the whole community.”

In such a sense we propose that “common religion” is the best term
to use in this case. We do not mean “common” in the negative sense
of being ordinary, hackneyed, or low: “common” is not a term limited
to the “low,” the “folk,” or even the “ordinary” people. By “common”
we mean something that belongs to the whole community and can be
used by anyone in the community, refined or coarse. It refers to a set
of sentiments, behavior, practices, beliefs, customs, and the like that
is shared by the vast number of people and is common to all classes
and groups in society, including the elites (aristocratic, economic, re-
ligious) and ordinary people. While recognizing that any term used
to label something has its drawbacks, we think it conveys the general
meanings considered in this volume.

“Common religion” involves the customs, beliefs, and practices
that are broadly accepted within a culture—including the scriptural
influences and liturgical traditions, as well as the artistic and icono-
graphic ones, that have shaped these customs, beliefs, and practices.
In utilizing the term “common religion” and affirming that it includes
popular customs and beliefs and scriptural influences and traditions,
we are not asserting the preeminence of the “little” tradition (of cus-
toms and local beliefs) over the “great” tradition (of organized, his-
torical, and textually based doctrinal systems). It is not a case of one
triumphing over the other, but an interaction between different reli-
gious strands, some of which are frequently attributed to the “great”
tradition of historical religions and others to the “little” tradition of
folk religion.

In the Japanese case, this common religion involves common ac-
ceptance of various spiritual entities, such as gods (kami) and bud-
dhas, as well as ancestral spirits and spirits of powerful humans who
have become deities after death. It also includes the idea that such
spirits can confer protection and success on the living and that peti-
tioning for such benefits is a fundamental and highly ethical religious
value. It also incorporates the various teachings expressed in the ma-
jor scriptural traditions that have shaped Japanese religious history—
notably Buddhism, its textual traditions, and the doctrinal formul-
tions they have imparted but also Shinto and the mythic structures
and ideas it has propagated. It comprises also the liturgical systems
and ritual practices that have in many cases been formulated at the
elite level of the temples and shrines by the ordained priesthoods but have themselves played a major role in producing the patterns of worship and practice expressed among ordinary and not-so-ordinary people.

To take but one example: people petitioning the buddhas for grace and favors frequently use Buddhist scriptures and liturgies in this process. Common Buddhist texts such as the Hannya shingyō, the shorter Heart Sutra, themselves pregnant with doctrinal meaning, are chanted as part of the ritual of supplication and may be used as ritual devices designed to bring about the intercession of the buddhas thereby petitioned. Mantras and other such liturgical devices may also be intoned to gain the attention and powerful support of the buddhas invoked. It may be argued that the ordinary people who do these things do not realize the textual complexities and subtleties of a sutra such as the Hannya shingyō—that what they chant are “mere” ritual formulas, just sounds without meaning. We take note, however, of two things here. First, there is no guarantee that the so-called elite religious specialists are much different: Buddhist priests are more likely to be trained as ritual specialists capable of carrying out ritual performances and services than they are to be trained in the intellectual analysis of scriptures. This is hardly surprising. After all, it is the ritual efficacy of the text that is important in creating the correct environment in which efficacious religious results may occur.

Second, one should not assume that just because sutras are intoned as ritual formulas the people reciting them do not comprehend their meaning. There are many configurations within the Hannya shingyō whose meanings are well known to many of those who chant them, such as the famous sequence shikizokuzekū, kūzokuzeshiki (form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form). Moreover, there are plentiful opportunities for people to gain knowledge of the sutras they chant as ritual invocations and to understand why these sutras are both doctrinal propositions and ritual tools. Countless volumes, including manga (cartoon) books, are produced in Japan to explain the sutras (and indeed virtually every aspect of religion) at a variety of levels from the highly intellectual to the simple. Such popular explanatory books—and the Hannya shingyō is one of the most popular texts in this genre—often sell in large numbers. Priests lecture on scriptures such as the Hannya shingyō (or sections of it) regularly: one of us, for example, has heard a number of explanations of different parts of this text during priests’ sermons at pilgrimage temples in Shikoku. It would perhaps be more appropriate to suggest that, rather than not knowing the content of the text they are chanting, most Japanese who know it as a ritual formula are aware of some of its inner content and meaning and know that its efficacy as a
spell is related to its meaning as a text. In other words, the apparent division between the textual religion of priests and the practical religion of people is true in such a limited sense that it borders on being false: the two rest on common ground and complement each other.

At the heart of this common religion is the practice of seeking this-worldly benefits. This common religion provides an open-access, total-care system for its members. This statement requires three stages of definition. By “its members” we mean Japanese people in general without, however, excluding foreigners. While there are some Japanese who do not join in any of the numerous practices, from calendrical rituals to individual prayers and petitions, and who either eschew religious behavior entirely or belong to exclusivist religious groups, most Japanese do participate in a variety of religious practices—ranging from the customary first shrine visit of the year (hatsu-sama), to festivals, to touristic visits to temples and shrines as part of their leisure activities—in which prayers for benefits are made.

The term “open access” relates to this broad conceptualization of the common religion’s accessibility to virtually all Japanese. By this term we refer to the fact that there is a fluidity to religious practice in Japan in which no prior commitment or affiliation is required: anyone who wishes to seek the aid of a deity for any purpose may go to a shrine or temple to make a supplication without ever having had a previous commitment to that place. Furthermore, the system is “open access” in that the level at which the supplicant relates to it is determined by his or her own needs and inclinations. As we shall see in Chapter 5, for example, practitioners determine at what level they wish to interact with the deity or buddha being petitioned.

The meanings surrounding the term “total-care system” have to do with the provision for every individual need and requirement in spiritual and material terms throughout one’s life, from birth to death and even the afterlife. The baby who is blessed and placed under the protection of the local gods may grow into a child needing help at examination times throughout his or her academic career; into an adult seeking a good spouse, suitable job, and healthy children; and into a senior citizen wanting, perhaps, to beseech one of the Buddhist figures of worship, such as Kannon, for help in avoiding senility and getting a swift, painless, and merciful death. Besides such life-cycle activities, there are also calendrical festivals and ritual occasions that provide scope and structure for petitions and prayers, as well as facilities for individuals to visit and petition deities in relation to their needs at the time. It is a program that covers one from cradle to grave.

Although the term “system” might appear to imply a formalized structure with a single framework, this is not the case here. The “system” is not so much constructed by a hierarchy or set of officials who
determine its parameters unilaterally; it is determined by each of its participants on a personal basis conditioned by place of residence and local custom. By "system" we are referring to a vast array of places and practices that offer the individual as well as the community avenues for dealing with their every need, concern, worry, and aspiration, as well as the underlying principles, ethics, and dynamics inherent within the pursuit of practical benefits. By calling it a "system" we also indicate that although it is broad, flexible, and innovative, the common religion of this-worldly benefits is not amorphous and ill-defined but takes shape in distinct and fascinating ways that make it possible, fortunately for us, to describe it with precision.

Overview of the Book

Since these points are developed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, we leave them now and turn to a brief overview of the shape and structure of this book. Chapter 1 provides a general description of the types, scope, and nature of benefits that are commonly sought, along with an outline of the ritual settings in which these are expressed, including various rites connected to the calendar, community, and individual life cycle. We show also that sacred places such as shrines and temples have their own specialties and traditions, forming a geography of benefits that provides a localized framework for this common religion and conveys a sense of local identity and belonging. Chapter 2 examines some of the scriptures from the Buddhist and other religious traditions to demonstrate that, not only is genze riyaku legitimated and affirmed by such sources of "high religion," but it is repeatedly emphasized as a vital religious value, not just as an expedient device or skillful means or a compromise with folk or popular practices.

Nor, indeed, can the pursuit of benefits be considered the simple manifestation of a materialism that is contrary to the genuine nature of religion. Michiko’s success was not achieved without some effort on her part: As we shall see in Chapter 3, rarely are benefits merely portioned out. Supplicants, even those who simply buy an amulet for good luck at a shrine or temple, have to do something, to take part in a practice. There is a basically ethical nature to the practice and an affirmation, too, that the fulfillment of desires is not a matter deserving condemnation. The stories, tales, and histories told to promote the efficacy of specific religious centers, statues, deities, and saints contain an intrinsically moral dimension that asserts correct and incorrect modes of behavior and, frequently, demonstrates the negative side of benefits lost or punishments suffered through failing to pursue the correct patterns of behavior. At this point it becomes appar-
ent that the Weberian assessment of the relationship between ethical and magical aspects of religion—which suggests that as ethical considerations increase within a religious culture its magical orientations diminish—is inaccurate. Rather, magical and ethical means work together to form one whole, which illustrates the morality implicit in magical performance. Morality and magic, furthermore, join forces in this common religion to control the anarchy of their common foe called chance or luck. It is not surprising that we should find the ubiquity of charms and talismans for good luck. On one level these objects can be seen as superficial, but they represent at the same time an attempt to address a moral problem that may not be as serious as that of evil but is bedeviling nonetheless: happenings beyond our control.

The magic and morality that make gods, saints, temples, shrines, and participants work together in what might be called a system are effectively explained by the language of commerce. Indeed, the term for “profit” in Japanese (rieki) is written with the same characters as “benefits” (riyaku is the Buddhist pronunciation), so the overlap of meaning can hardly be disregarded. The transactional nature of Japanese religious behavior is evident in the system of benefits and lends itself to explanation by exchange theories. In his modified version of exchange theory, Winston Davis notes that while conventional exchange theory explains transactions in the context of cultural values, it does not pay enough attention to obligatory expectations such as duty, devotion, and loyalty to family and social institutions. Building on the work of Albert Schutz, Davis devises his own paradigm for transactions in two parts: motivated action—giving or doing something “in order to” solicit a response—and obligated activity arising “because of” the need to return the favor of things received. Although Davis explains the practice of seeking material benefits in terms of motivated action in order to get something, this part of his paradigm, in our view, does not adequately account for obligatory behavior and—since obligation is only one kind of moral action—for morality in general in the context of seeking benefits. In Chapter 3 we propose that goods and benefits are not so much exchanged as they are bought. The model of commercial transactions, or what might be called purchase theory, accounts for a dynamic of paying and receiving that includes the crucial function of morality that is lacking in exchange theory and Davis’s “in order to” paradigm. In making a purchase, the buyer pays a material and a moral price to try to ensure that the good things in life can be guaranteed, and the bad kept at a distance, rather than being left to chance.

The pursuit of practical benefits by contracting with the gods to eliminate chance is an ambitious undertaking filled with imaginative,
sometimes complex, details. In Chapter 4 we explore the providers of practical benefits—the vast host of gods and deities, buddhas, bodhisattvas, saints, and other spiritual figures, each with their own specialties, powers, rituals, and requirements. No distinction is made between Buddhist and Shinto deities, all of whom can be petitioned by anyone regardless of religious, social, or sectarian identification. This phenomenon, however, is not explained by the much-discussed notion that Buddhism and Shinto have converged to produce a syncretism in Japan, since it is difficult to see the vaunted assimilation of the gods and the buddhas in shrines that are decidedly for kami and temples that are mostly reserved for buddhas and bodhisattvas. The Buddhist and Shinto religions, while they count each other as close friends, are still largely segregated and normally allow only their own deities on their main altars. To account for the convergence of the kami and the buddhas we need a larger rubric that encompasses them both. And that greater category, we propose, is the conceptual and ritual framework of this-worldly benefits that holds them—and them it—in common. Saints and founders are called upon in this process, as well, especially since they are immediately accessible in human terms of respect and intimacy. In Chapter 4 we shall look in some detail at Kōbō Daishi, the Buddhist holy figure and founder of the Shingon Buddhist sect who is in certain ways the paragon of benefactors.

In Chapter 5 we turn our attention to practice and the ways in which people petition for benefits. Besides considering the forms such actions take, we look at some of the locations where they occur. Like real people, real places are important in a system that leaves little to pure abstraction, even in its symbols and metaphors, all of which feeds effort and performance. As has been widely recognized, action and ritual are intrinsic to Asian religion in general and to Japanese religion in particular. The pursuit of benefits is a basic religious activity expressed through the performance of rituals and actions most often, though not exclusively, in the formal religious settings of shrines and temples. Sometimes the pursuit of benefits may be closely associated with ludic activities (such as visiting religious places at holiday times or attending festivals), and in Chapter 5 we draw attention to the close relationship between entertainment and religious practice.

The culture of practical benefits, both in its means and its ends, is decidedly material. A wide array of objects is used, some bizarre, others mundane. Amulets, talismans, bumper stickers, trinkets, food, and more are part of the currency used to purchase benefits. Amulets alone can be found as pieces of paper, carvings, brocade, bells, pencils, dried reeds, porcelain, and a wide variety of other materials and
forms. Although we introduce the subject of amulets and suchlike in Chapter 5, in Chapter 6 we expand on this theme by looking at how these objects are marketed and how new forms of amulets relating to changing needs may be developed. In this chapter we examine the whole process of selling benefits and its interrelated theme of promoting temples and shrines and, indeed, spreading religious teachings. As has been widely noted, the practical benefits and miraculous deeds provided by the spiritual powers enshrined at temples and shrines, according to legend and repute, caused these places to become popular, to attract clienteles, and to become centers of faith.82 Thus we look at the role of practical benefits in the development of religious institutions. How have temples and shrines promoted practical benefits, and how have they sought to create faith and, simultaneously, to thereby ensure their own survival and stimulate their economic development? We also look at how, in so doing, religious centers have adapted to the times. Finding a need and filling it is good advice for temples and shrines as well as entrepreneurs, and resourceful priests have often repackaged old benefits (fertility, for instance) and related them to new concerns (such as sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS). And if the need does not exist, it can be manufactured. We also consider how much of what is sold can be seen to be responding to social needs, and how much can be seen as creating uncertainty, a process that some Japanese scholars call fuan sangyo, the manufacturing of anxiety.83 In discussing the trading of benefits—the buying and the selling—we also consider how people experience benefits and how, through making claims about the efficacy of the benefits they can provide, religious institutions and movements are effectively making truth claims that mark them out from their rivals.

In Chapter 7 we develop this focus on the selling of religion by examining a popular genre of literature that provides immense amounts of information on, and insights into, the dynamics of genze riyaku as well as the stories, legends, and places associated with it. This chapter looks at the various guidebooks that furnish information on shrines and temples that have developed reputations for providing genze riyaku. In essence, the chapter presents a mini-guide to some of the many temples and shrines in Japan that deal with this topic, while introducing some of the fascinating amulets and talismans that demonstrate the underlying humor and themes of entertainment that pervade the topic. In Chapters 6 and 7 we also examine the question of reputation—how certain places have acquired reputations for particular benefits, how these places and benefits are described in guidebooks and the like, and how, indeed, a whole genre of religious
literature has developed to inform people about the different benefits and the religious institutions that can be visited for such purposes.

The pursuit of benefits, we contend, is intrinsic to Japanese religion and constitutes a core theme of all the religious customs, traditions, and doctrines (whether Shinto, Buddhist, folk religion, or new religion) that are active—visible and invisible. That benefits are so central to Japanese religion informs us that the primary aims of religion in Japan are focused (not surprisingly) on the pursuit of a happy and positive life in which ultimate meaning is to be found in this world. Although the new religions have emphasized this point more clearly than have the formal teachings of Buddhism, we demonstrate that the practices of Buddhism place an equal emphasis upon the good things in this world. In Chapter 8, “Conclusions,” we discuss these points more fully and show how closely religious success in Japan is related to the question of genze riyaku. The chapter returns us to our starting point by affirming that there is a core set of values, a common religion centered on worldly benefits, and a this-worldly affirmative stance that is central to the worldview of Japanese religion. This, indeed, is the form of religion that visitors to Japan are most likely to see, not just through festivals and other famed rituals, but through their visits to shrines and temples. Temples such as Asakusa Kannon and shrines such as Meiji Shrine in Tokyo receive large numbers of tourists for whom the visible surface of Japanese religion displays amulets, votive tablets, and prayers and practices that are focused on the pursuit of worldly benefits. Thus far, however, this topic has been given far less attention in academic studies than it deserves.84 The aim of this volume is to bring the topic center stage in the study of Japanese religion and give it the prominence it merits.