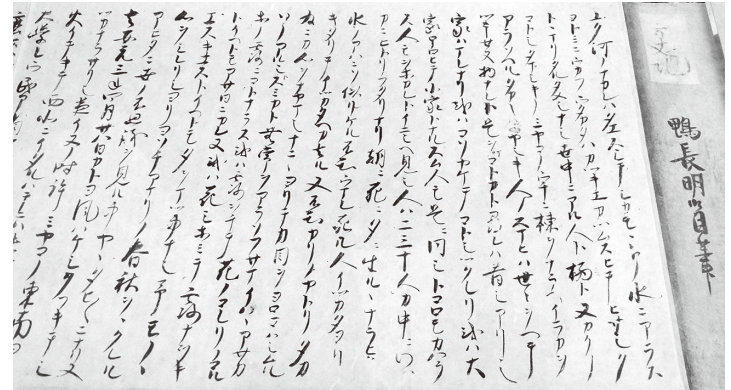


Preface: The great famine of the Yōwa period

I know this is a strange statement to begin a book with, but I would like you to imagine what Kyoto was like in the final years of the 12th century, around which time is when The Tale of the Heike is set around and Taira no Kiyomura died due to an illness. Kyoto was reduced to ruins due to famine, a plague, a catastrophic fire, and natural disasters, including dust devils.

The people back then changed the name of the era to Yōwa, hoping that doing so would put an end to their series of unlucky events. However, their lack of luck persisted. Springs and summers were dry, but autumns were struck by downpours accompanied by strong wind, with years of no harvest, which thereby rendered the cultivation of fields in the spring and planting of seeds in the summer meaningless. Subsequently, people abandoned their villages and homes, choosing to live in the mountains instead, where they practiced various rituals, such as praying to deities without success.

Back then, when it came to resources, Kyoto was entirely dependent on rural regions, where by then resources had already been depleted. It was a matter of time before people lost tolerance. Hoping to live another day, they tried to buy food and offered deals



Manuscript of Hōjōki by Kamo no Chōmei
(preserved at Kawai Shrine of Shimogamo Shrine)

at prices way above what they would have otherwise needed to pay. However, hardly anyone showed any interest, and when people did, they demanded to reduce the value of money and raise that of food. The streets of Kyoto were full of beggars crying in sorrow.

The people of Kyoto somehow made it through another year, hoping that the next one will be better. However, instead of putting an end to famine, the following year added a plague, worsening the situation. Life in Kyoto was nothing like it used to be. By this time, most people could no longer even move; they just laid down on the ground, waiting to die. There were also some who still refused to die. These people wore hats and fancy clothes but could barely walk. They dragged their legs, visiting one house after another to beg for food. However, after some time, they became senile, and



Frame of the Siddham script character "阿" (a)
hung in Ninna-ji temple's five-story pagoda

sooner or later, they fell and died as well. Against walls made of mud and along the roads laid countless number of corpses of those who starved to death. Since there was no one to dispose of such corpses, the smell of rotting bodies imbued the city. Corpses also occupied the roads along rivers, preventing carriages from traveling out.

The preceding paragraphs are somewhat loosely translated excerpts from Kamo no Chōmei's *Hōjōki*. Subsequently, in response to a request for help by Ryugyo—a Buddhist monk at Ninna-ji temple—groups of Buddhist monks came to the city of Kyoto. Covering their mouths and noses with cloth, the groups of monks divided into pairs and went from one corpse to another

throughout Kyoto. One looked into their faces and wrote a Siddham script character—"阿" (a)—on their foreheads while the other kept count in a notebook.

They wrote the character "阿" (a) in hope of helping the victims of famine and plague connect with Buddha.

Records tell us that the monks spent two months, April and May, on taking care of such corpses by traveling across the region south of Ichijo, north of Kujo, west of Kyogoku, and east of Suzaku streets. In present-day terms, the area they covered could be described as Rakuchu, because it comprises approximately five kilometers between Ichijo-dori (or Ichijo-modoribashi street) in the north and Kujo-dori (or the street on the south of Tō-ji temple) in the south and about 2.5 kilometers between Senbon-dori (or the street on the east of Nijō Station on JR West Railway's Sanin Main Line) in the west and Teramachi-dori (or the street also known as the Teramachi electronic-shop district) in the east.

The monks wrote the character "阿" (a) on the foreheads of more than 42,300 corpses, which included in addition to ones that had rotten, others partly eaten by dogs. Just imagining looking into the faces of such corpses and writing "阿" on their foreheads, likely with shivering hands, makes me feel ghastly and tremble.

I began this book with this appalling story because I believe the Japanese people's memories of this mass death during the Yōwa period influences their image of the world after death.



Hell Scroll (preserved at Tokyo National Museum)

The Hell Scroll and the Scroll of Hungry Ghosts were also produced in the Yōwa period, and they took as their model, the Yōwa famine, burning it into our memories as the world after death.

However, although the world after death exists as a concept, not a single person has ever returned from the so-called “world after death,” so there is no way of telling if it actually exists, and if it does, what the place truly is like. As if to separate the two states of life and death, we invented ceremonies for seeing off the dead. The idea of commemorating the dead works well under normal times. However, once our lives are threatened by wars, natural disasters, famine, and other emergencies, the view of death as something to celebrate with ceremonies suddenly shreds to pieces.

When actually faced by death, we switch to seeing it as something horrifying.

Could it be that the world after death that we are able to feel when alive is only the state of those suffering in a world resembling the scrolls?

The first document that ever depicted the world after death in Japan is the Kojiki.

The story of Izanagi and Izanami creating Japan goes as follows. Izanami, the wife of Izanagi, gives birth to the fire god and burns herself in the process, subsequently dying because of the burn. Unable to overcome her death, her husband, Izanagi, travels to the Yomi no kuni, or the world after death, to find her.

Izanagi finds Izanami in the world after death and says to her, “Will you please come home with me? I feel very lonely without you. Besides, remember that we haven’t yet finished building the country of Japan? Come on let’s go home!”

To this, Izanami however replies, “I’ve already eaten the food of the world after death, so I’m not supposed leave this world.” Yet, her husband seems unable to give up, so she tells him, “Alright, then, I’ll go and ask the god of the world after death whether I can leave. But please promise me that you won’t open the door to god’s palace while I’m inside asking for permission,” and then she enters the palace.

Izanagi waits and waits, practically living in front of the

palace. However, his wife does not return. Worried that something may have happened to her, Izanagi does the one thing he was asked not to do and enters the palace.

There he sees his wife dead and rotten with maggots coming out of her corpse.

The love he felt for her changes to fear and hatred in an instant, and Izanagi flees from the palace, crawling. Izanami, angry that Izanagi saw herself dead and infested by maggots, chases after her husband, crying, “I asked you to wait for me outside. Why did you enter the palace!”

Escaping safely from the palace, Izanagi closes the boundary between life and death with a large rock called the *senbiki no ishi* (the rock that draws the line), and due to his belief that the world after death is filthy, he performs his own rituals that he believes should purify him.

As his rituals, he washes his left eye, which gives birth to Amaterasu. Washing his right eye gives birth to Tsukuyomi-no-Mikoto, and doing the same with his nose gives birth to Susanoo-no-Mikoto. Thus, the god of Japan, Amaterasu, resulted from purifying the filth of the world after death, and Japanese mythology originated from the attempt to separate life from death.

The world after death seen from the eyes of the Japanese, in other words, is a world of filth. Toribeno and Adashino—regions in Kyoto which exist to this day—used to be places where corpses

were disposed of. Corpses would accumulate and rot there, giving off terrible smells, or would be hung from trees and fed to birds. These scenes must have given those who saw them the impression that death is something to be horrified of.

The Yōwa period of course is not the only time when mass death and unnatural deaths occurred in large numbers due to natural disasters and wars. In a sense, it is not an exaggeration to say that unnatural mass death is the history of humankind. For instance, in addition to the Yōwa famine, in 1231 (during the Kamakura period), there was the Kangi Famine. Refugees from nearby regions fled to Kyoto, subsequently died, and their corpses filled the roads of the city. The famine is said to have killed at least one-third of the country’s population. Additionally, in 1461, the Kanshō famine struck the entire nation, causing at least 82,000 deaths in Kyoto alone. Furthermore, during the 250-year governance of the Tokugawa shogunate, there were the Great Kan’ei Famine in 1642, the Kyōhō famine in 1732, the Hōreki famine in 1756, and the Great Tenmei Famine in 1783. These were caused by typhoons, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, fires, and wars, burning the fear of witnessing mass deaths each time in our hearts.

From there on, I assume such fear of death became passed on from the memories of individuals to all humankind as a species, and death became some undesirable thing to fear.

This book does not discuss whether a world after death exists

or not. The conclusion of it is that we exist not only while alive but also after death, or i.e., that we are consciousnesses.

In other words, the book claims that there is a world after death.

However, the image of death that I just described above is that of the Japanese. It is one produced from the perspective that our physical bodies are what we are, and that losing our physical bodies is thereby a horrifying event. Our image of hell is a product developed by such religions as Buddhism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, which image then likely gave rise to its opposites, such as Sukhavati, or Western Paradise, and similar concepts. I know the Eastern and Western worlds have different images of the world after death; but they share one thing—they were developed by the living.

This book is based on the perspective that we are not our physical bodies but are consciousnesses, and from that perspective, it aims to reexamine the world after death, or i.e., the meaning of death.

Therefore, if you disagree with the preceding perspective, then you should probably stop reading. The following is an abstract of this book to help you decide whether or not to continue reading.

Chapter one is a short story about myself—a history nerd—trying to escape from the fear of death by turning my attention to matters of the past. Chapter two is about how I came to meet Tomekichi Taike, then a principal of a public high school in Osaka, and received his help in facing my fear and was introduced to a

book titled *The Flow of Consciousness*. The chapter also touches on how I learned from Tomekichi Taike to reflect on my heart with the aim of finding out why I still feared to die after learning from him how to face the fear of death.

Chapter three, titled “A Letter to Professor Hameroff” is a little different. It introduces the world after death as studied in quantum mechanics, one of the cutting-edge fields of modern physics. The chapter discusses how science is approaching the mystery of our spirit and then points out that theories suggested by scientists of quantum mechanics lack the perspective of turning negative energies to positive ones and how that could be done through self-reflection.

Chapter four outlines the journey of consciousnesses by touching on the transition to the next dimension, which is what “*The Flow of Consciousness*” is and is the next step that consciousnesses will take.

Between each chapter, the book provides columns, written by different people, on their thoughts on facing death.

So that is a broad outline of this book. If you bought this book, interested in its title but without skimming thought it first and are disappointed, I am sorry but please consider it as an accident and read the whole thing anyway.

It may be an accident, but it won't kill you.