

### Shintō (神道) - The Way of Gods

Shintō is an ancient Japanese religion. Starting about 500 BCE (or earlier) it was originally "*an amorphous mix of nature worship, fertility cults, divination techniques, hero worship, and shamanism.*" Its name was derived from the Chinese words "*shin tao*" ("*The Way of the Gods*") in the 8th century CE. At that time, the Yamato dynasty consolidated its rule over most of Japan. Divine origins were ascribed to the imperial family. Shintō established itself as an official religion of Japan, along with Buddhism.

Unlike most other religions, Shintō has no real founder, no written scriptures, no body of religious law, and only a very loosely-organized priesthood.

Shintō beliefs:

Shintō creation stories tell of the history and lives of the "Kami" (deities). Among them was a divine couple, Izanagi-no-mikoto and Izanami-no-mikoto, who gave birth to the Japanese islands. Their children became the deities of the various Japanese clans. Amaterasu Ōmikami (Sun Goddess) was one of their daughters. She is the ancestress of the Imperial Family and is regarded as the chief deity. Her shrine is at Ise. Her descendants unified the country. Her brother, Susanoo came down from heaven and roamed throughout the earth. He is famous for killing a great evil serpent. (The mythological birth of Japanese performing arts is attributed to one of the Amaterasu-Susanoo episodes.)

The Kami are the Shintō deities. The word "Kami" is generally translated "god" or "gods." However, the Kami bear little resemblance to the gods of monotheistic religions. There are no concepts which compare to the Christian beliefs in the wrath of God, his omnipotence and omni-presence, or the separation of God from humanity due to sin. There are numerous other deities who are conceptualized in many forms: Those related to natural objects and creatures, from "*food to rivers to rocks.*"

About 84% of the population of Japan follow two religions: both Shintō and Buddhism. As in much of Asia, Christianity is very much a minority religion. Fewer than 1% of Japanese adults are Christians. Buddhism first arrived in Japan from Korea and China during the 6th through 8th centuries CE. The two religions share a basic optimism about human nature, and for the world. Within Shintō, the Buddha was viewed as another Kami. Meanwhile, Buddhism in Japan regarded the Kami as being manifestations of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Most weddings are performed by Shintō priests; funerals are performed by Buddhist priests.

Shintō does not have as fully developed a theology as do most other religions. It does not have its own moral code. Their religious texts discuss the "*High Plain of Heaven*" and the "*Dark Land*" which is an unclean land of the dead, but give few details of the afterlife. Ancestors are deeply revered and worshipped.

All of humanity is regarded as "*Kami's child.*" Thus all human life and human nature is sacred. Believers revere "*musuhi,*" the Kamis' creative and harmonizing powers. They aspire to have "*makoto*", sincerity or true heart. This is regarded as the way or will of Kami. Morality is based upon that which is of benefit to the group. "*Shintō emphasizes right practice, sensibility, and attitude.*"

There are "*Four Affirmations*" in Shintō:

- 1 *Tradition and the family:* The family is seen as the main mechanism by which traditions are preserved. Their main celebrations relate to birth and marriage.
- 2 *Love of nature:* Nature is sacred; to be in contact with nature is to be close to the Gods. Natural objects are worshipped as sacred spirits.
- 3 *Physical cleanliness:* Followers of Shintō take baths, wash their hands, and rinse out their mouth often.
- 4 "*Matsuri*": The worship and honor given to the Kami and ancestral spirits.

Shintō practices:

Shintō recognizes many sacred places: mountains, springs, etc. Each shrine is dedicated to a specific Kami who has a divine personality and responds to sincere prayers of the faithful. When entering a shrine, one passes through a *Torii* a special gateway for the Gods. It marks the demarcation between the finite world and the infinite world of the Gods.

In the past, believers practiced "*misogi,*" the washing of their bodies in a river near the shrine. In recent years they only wash their hands and wash out their mouths in a wash basin provided within the shrine grounds.

Believers respect animals as messengers of the Gods. A pair of statues of "*Koma-inu*" (guard dogs) face each other within the temple grounds. Shrine ceremonies, which include cleansing, offerings, prayers, and dances are directed to the Kami.

*Kagura* are ritual dances accompanied by ancient musical instruments. The dances are performed by skilled and trained dancers. They consist of young virgin girls, a group of men, or a single man.

*Mamori* are charms worn as an aid in healing and protection. They come in many different forms for various purposes. An altar, the "*Kami-dana*" (Shelf of Gods), is given a central place in many homes.

Seasonal celebrations are held at spring planting, fall harvest, and special anniversaries of the history of a shrine or of a local patron spirit. A secular, country-wide *National Founding Day* is held on Feb-11 to commemorate the founding of Japan; this is the traditional date on which the first (mythical) emperor Jinmu ascended the throne in 660 BCE. Some shrines are believed to hold festivities on that day. Other festivals include: Jan 1-3 Shōgatsu (New Year); Mar-3 Hina-Matsuri (Girls' festival); May-5 Tango-no-Sekku (Boys' festival); Jul-7 Tanabata (Star festival). Followers are expected to visit Shintō shrines at the times of various life passages. For example, the Shichigosan (literally, 7-5-3) involves a blessing by the shrine Priest of girls aged three and seven and boys aged five. It is held on Nov-15.

Excerpted from <http://www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm>

### **Buddhism (Bukkyô 仏教) - The teachings of Buddha**

Buddhism originated in India in the 6th century BCE. It consists of the teachings of the Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha. Of the main branches of Buddhism, it is the Mahayana or "Greater Vehicle" Buddhism which found its way to Japan.

Buddhism was imported to Japan via China and Korea in form of a present from the friendly Korean kingdom of Kudara (Paikche) in the 6th century. While Buddhism was welcomed by the ruling nobles as Japan's new state religion, it did not initially spread among the common people due to its complex theories. There were also a few initial conflicts with Shintô, Japan's native religion, but the two religions were soon able to co-exist harmonically and even complemented each other.

During the early Heian period (794-1192), two new Buddhist sects were introduced from China: the Tendai sect in 805 by Saichô and the Shingon sect in 806 by Kûkai. More sects later branched off the Tendai sect. Among these, the most important ones are mentioned below:

In 1175, the Jôdo sect (Pure Land sect) was founded by Hônen. It found followers among all different social classes since its theories were simple and based on the principle that everybody can achieve salvation by strongly believing in the Buddha Amida. In 1224, the Jôdo-Shinshû (True Pure Land sect) was founded by Hônen's successor Shinran. The Jôdo sects continue to have millions of followers today.

In 1191, the Zen sect was introduced from China. Its complicated theories were popular particularly among the members of the samurai warrior class. According to Zen teachings, one can achieve self enlightenment through meditation and discipline. At present, Zen seems to enjoy a greater popularity overseas than within Japan.

The Lotus Hokke or Nichiren sect, was founded by Nichiren in 1253. The sect was exceptional due to its intolerant stance towards other Buddhist sects. Nichiren Buddhism still has many millions of followers today, and several "new religions" are based on Nichiren's teachings.

Nowadays about 90 million people consider themselves Buddhists in Japan. However, the religion does not directly affect the everyday life of the average Japanese very strongly. Funerals are usually carried out in a Buddhist way, and many households keep a small house altar in order to pay respect to their ancestors.

"The greatest achievement is selflessness.

The greatest worth is self-mastery.

The greatest quality is seeking to serve others.

The greatest precept is continual awareness.

The greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything.

The greatest action is not conforming with the worlds ways.

The greatest magic is transmuting the passions.

The greatest generosity is non-attachment.

The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind.

The greatest patience is humility.

The greatest effort is not concerned with results.

The greatest meditation is a mind that lets go.

The greatest wisdom is seeing through appearances." - Atisha.

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