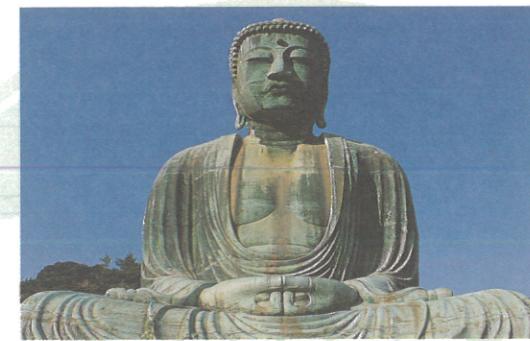




## Chapter Seven

# JAPANESE TRADITIONS

C. Scott Littleton



A statue of the Buddha at Kamakura, Japan. He is depicted seated zazen (in the lotus position), the ideal posture for meditation, according to Zen Buddhists.

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OPPOSITE Worshippers in the traditional dress of a pilgrim bow before a Shinto shrine at Karatsu on Kyushu island during the annual Kunchi festival in November (see also p.262).

238 - 46  
48 - 49  
251 Lotus on 14  
252 - 55, 266 - 67  
268 - 71 1<sup>nd</sup> dead / 256 - 64 2<sup>nd</sup> return

## INTRODUCTION



Offerings left by pilgrims on Koya-san (Mount Koya), the headquarters of Shingon, founded by Kobo-daishi in the ninth century CE (see p.243) and one of the major sects of Japanese Buddhism.

The inhabitants of Japan simultaneously espouse two major faiths, Shinto and Buddhism, which have coexisted and influenced one another for the past fifteen hundred years. Shinto is indigenous to Japan, while Japanese Buddhism is a branch of a world religion that commands the devotion of hundreds of millions of people throughout east and south-east Asia and in the West.

Japan's indigenous religion is called the "Way of the Gods (or Spirits)," which is expressed both by the native phrase *Kami no Michi* and the synonymous term Shinto, a Japanese articulation of Chinese *shen* ("spirit") and *dao* ("way"). Both phrases are written with the Chinese characters for *shen* and *dao*. Shinto has been the more usual expression since the resurgence of the religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—ironically, since the promoters of the revival tended to be anti-Chinese (see p.255).

The roots of Shinto lie deep in Japanese prehistory. Its most ancient and fundamental concept, that of the *kami* ("spirit," "divine being," or "god/goddess"; see pp.246–9), is still central to the Japanese religious consciousness. Buddhism's ultimate source was far from Japan, in India (see chapter 5). However, like most trappings of Japanese civilization, the new faith arrived by way of China, the great mother-civilization of east Asia, whence it was brought to Japan, via Korea, in the mid-sixth century CE. At this time Japan had no writing, but Buddhism brought literacy in its wake. The Buddhist scriptures were available only in Chinese translations, so the newly converted Japanese aristocrats—it would be several centuries before Buddhism spread widely throughout the population—were obliged to learn to read Chinese characters.

Confucianism and Daoism also made their appearance in Japan in this period, and both had a profound impact on Shinto and the development of Japanese Buddhism. But only rarely (such as at the Tokugawa court ca. 1700CE) did they attain the status of true religious sects.

Despite the huge impact of Chinese religious beliefs, philosophy, and arts, Japan always remained distinct from its neighbor across the sea. The nation's deep-rooted tendency to readapt and transform what it borrows from other cultures soon manifested itself. Hence the Mahayana Buddhist sects that took root or emerged in Japan—the "Nara Schools," Tendai, Shingon, Jodo-shu and Jodo-shinshu, Nichiren-shu and Nichiren-shoshu, Zen, and others—soon became, and have remained, uniquely Japanese. Thus, the line between Buddhism and Shintoism can sometimes be somewhat hazy—as demonstrated by the fact that many Buddhist deities came to be worshipped as Shinto *kami* (see p.249).

In more recent years, Japan has witnessed the establishment of the

### SACRED JAPAN

There are many hundreds of places of religious significance all over Japan, and some of the most important are shown on the maps on this page. As well as formal places of worship such as Buddhist

temples (*tera*) and Shinto shrines (*jinja*), countless natural features, for example Mount Fuji and Mount Koya, are also revered for their sacred significance and are the objects of pilgrimage.

- Key**
- ▲ Sacred mountain
  - Site of special religious significance
  - Other town or city



so-called “New Religions” (see pp.270–71), and the reemergence of Christianity, which first came to Japan in the sixteenth century but was subsequently suppressed (see p.244). The growth of these faiths was stimulated respectively by the social chaos of the last three decades (1837–67) of the Tokugawa shogunate and by the rapid economic development that followed the Second World War. But in each case the end result has been quintessentially Japanese, a relatively seamless blend of foreign and indigenous ideas, customs, rites, and beliefs.

**Syncretism**, the fusion of disparate beliefs and practices into a single system, has long since been a feature of religious life in Japan, together with what in the West might be considered a high degree of “ambiguity tolerance.” With some important exceptions, most Japanese people would probably consider themselves to be both Shintoists and Buddhists and would perceive no contradiction in practising two faiths with such radically different roots. Many might put it this way: Shinto is the “life religion” and Buddhism is the “death religion.” Thus, for example, by far the majority of Japanese weddings are held according to Shinto rites, while an equally overwhelming majority of funerals are Buddhist and most cemeteries are attached to Buddhist temples. Broadly speaking, Shinto focuses

on matters relating to this world, on procreation, the promotion of fertility, on spiritual purity, and physical well-being. Buddhism, on the other hand, although it does not reject the real world, has always placed far greater emphasis on salvation and the possibility of an afterlife. Indeed, the “Pure Land” sects took shape specifically to meet this need.

Any assessment of the role played by religion in ancient or modern Japan must take into account certain fundamental aspects of Japanese culture. Most important is the subordination of the individual to the group, epitomized in the Japanese expression “the nail that sticks up will be hammered down.” Many scholars believe that this ethos has its roots in the close cooperation and collective decision-making necessitated by wet-rice cultivation, until very recently Japan’s prime source of sustenance. The rice paddy, introduced to Japan in the late first millennium BCE, is extremely labor-intensive; before mechanization, each rice plant had to be individually inserted into the wet ground. Even in modern times, all members of a household subordinate their personal inclinations to work together for the good of the crop—and, by extension, for mutual survival. At a broader level, it is a village affair, in which a cluster of households assist one another in planting, weeding, and harvesting.

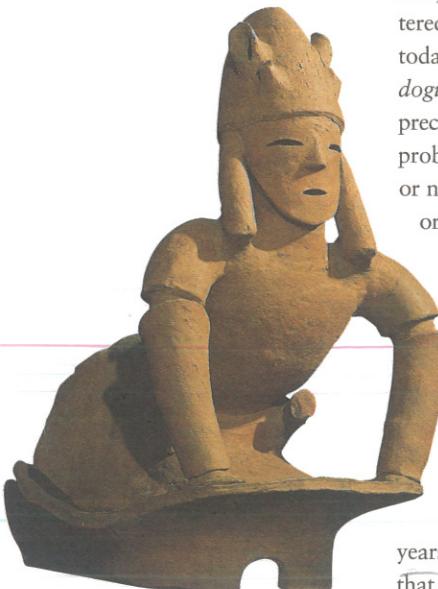
Such social cooperation, and the concomitant absence of marked individualism, have characterized both Shinto and Japanese Buddhism from the outset. Over the centuries, both religions have always made a prime virtue of subordination to the well-being of the larger social unit, whether that unit be a household, a rice-growing village, a feudal domain dominated by a close-knit *samurai* élite, or the body of “salary-men” employed by a modern multinational corporation.

CHRONOLOGY All dates are CE, except where stated	
<b>PREHISTORIC PERIOD</b>	
Jomon Era (ca. 11,000–300BCE)	• Earliest fertility cults
Yayoi Era (ca. 300BCE–300CE)	• New people arrive from south-east Asia; beginnings of Shinto
Kofun Era (ca. 300–552)	ca. 400 • Mounted nomads from central Asia introduce <i>kofun</i> (tumulus) burials and <i>haniwa</i> figurines
<b>HISTORIC PERIOD</b>	
Asuka Era (552–646)	552 or 538 • Introduction of Buddhism
Hakuho Era (646–710)	592 • The regent Shotoku makes Buddhism the court religion
Nara Era (710–794)	• Four of the six “Nara Schools” of Buddhism founded
Heian Era (794–1185)	• Other two “Nara Schools” founded; first great flowering of Japanese Buddhism 712 • Ono Yasumaro compiles <i>Kojiki</i> 720 • Composition of <i>Nihonshoki</i>
Momoyama Era (1568–1603)	1549 • Jesuit mission of Francis Xavier inaugurates Japan’s “Christian century”
Ashikaga Era (1333–1568)	1571 • Oda Nobunaga destroys the great Tendai Buddhist temple complex on Mount Hiei; he flirts with Catholicism
Tokugawa Era (1603–1868)	1615 • Christian missionaries expelled 1638 • <i>Shogun</i> Iemitsu enforces anti-Christian edicts; Buddhism ascendant mid-1700s • Beginnings of Shinto revival early 1800s • “New Religions” begin to appear (e.g. Tenrikyo, 1838) Meiji Era (1868–1912) 1872 • Emperor Meiji repeals anti-Christian edicts; beginnings of “State Shinto”; Buddhism persecuted for a brief period
Taisho Era (1912–26)	• Revival of Buddhism
Showa Era (1926–1989)	1945 • Following Japan’s defeat in the Second World War, the US occupying powers enforce the abolition of State Shinto and Emperor Hirohito’s renunciation of divine status of the Japanese imperial line 1950s–60s • “New Religions,” such as Soka Gakkai, flourish
Heisei Era (1989–)	1995 • Gas attack by Aum Shinrikyo sect on Tokyo subway



Gankakeema (prayer tablets) left by devotees at the Kiyomizu Buddhist temple at Kyoto. The city was Japan's imperial capital from 794CE (when it was called Heian) until 1868 and one of the most important centers of Japanese Buddhism.

## FAITH AND COEXISTENCE



A haniwa figurine of a warrior—perhaps engaged in an act of devotion to a deity or lord—found at Yamato-mura in Ibaraki prefecture, eastern Honshu.

*vijayini*

The origins of Shinto lie deep in prehistory. It is open to question whether the prehistoric Jomon culture (ca. 11,000–300BCE) possessed a faith centered on the reverence of *kami*, at least in anything like the form known today. These preliterate, seminomadic foragers and fisherfolk produced *dogu*, stylized female figurines that emphasized the hips and breasts. The precise nature of the beliefs surrounding *dogu* is unknown, although they probably reflect the existence of a fertility cult. *Dogu* were often placed in or near graves after being deliberately broken, perhaps ritually “killed” in order to release the spiritual “essence” of the *dogu*. But whether this “essence” was conceived in terms of anything resembling a prototypical Shinto *kami* remains entirely a matter of speculation.

However, strikingly Shintoistic iconographic evidence begins to appear with the arrival of the more complex Yayoi culture (ca. 300BCE–300CE). Among the grave goods associated with the Yayoi—rice cultivators whose homeland probably lay somewhere in southeast Asia or south China—are small images of grain storehouses that are remarkably similar to the architecture of the shrine of Ise, which has remained unaltered for at least twelve hundred years (see p.258). Female fertility images also occur, as well as stone clubs that appear to have a phallic symbolism. The introduction of paddy rice agriculture seems to have brought with it rituals associated with sowing and harvesting that were probably fundamentally similar to rice-related Shinto rituals that persist to this day in rural Japan.

Closely associated with the Yayoi fertility cult are comma-shaped jewels called *magatama*, ceremonial mirrors, and sacred swords, all of which play a significant role in Shinto mythology and form part of the imperial regalia to this day. Many scholars suspect that the majority of the *ujigami*, the tutelary deities associated with the most ancient recorded Japanese *uji* (clans), date from this period. The most important *ujigami* was (and is) Amaterasu, the sun goddess (see p.247), the mythological progenitor of the Yamato *uji* (“Sun clan”), that is, the Japanese imperial family.

In the fourth century CE, Japan was conquered by horse-riding nomads from central Asia—almost certainly a ruling élite rather than an invading population—and a new form of chieftain’s tomb appeared: the *kofun*, or tumulus. *Haniwa*, votive figurines of horses and warriors, were often placed around the periphery of these massive, keyhole-shaped mounds to accompany the deceased warlord on his journey to the afterworld.

By the beginning of the sixth century CE, the Yamato emperor, based in the region that still bears this name, exercised authority over most of the country to the south and west of the Kanto plain (see map, p.239). It was

to this embryonic state that the first substantial contingent of Buddhist missionaries traveled, in 552CE according to tradition, although scholars think 538CE a more likely date. According to the *Nihonshoki* of 720CE (see p.250), the recently converted king of Paekche in southwest Korea sent missionaries to the Yamato court recommending the new religion from far-off India to his Japanese “brother.”

Many Yamato courtiers enthusiastically embraced the new religion—albeit for the most part in a highly Shintoistic way, worshipping statues of the Buddha as manifestations of a powerful *kami*—while others resented its intrusion. However, in 592CE, the regent Shotoku declared Buddhism the official religion of the imperial court.

In the following two centuries, Buddhism rapidly expanded its influence among the imperial aristocracy. But most Japanese remained untouched by the religion until the early Heian era (794–1185CE). In 806CE, the monks Kobo-daishi and Dengyo-daishi returned from sojourns in China to found two new sects on Chinese models, respectively Shingon (from Chinese *Zhen yan*, “True Word”) and Tendai (from Tiantai, a mountain and sect in eastern China). Both had their headquarters on mountains near the new capital of Heian (Kyoto)—Shingon on Mount Koya and Tendai on Mount Hiei. From these bastions, mis-

### THE NARA SCHOOLS

Between 625 and 738, six important schools of Buddhism were founded in or near Nara, the first Japanese capital, by Japanese monks who had studied in China: Jojitsu (625), Sanron (625), Hosso (654), Kusha (658), Kegon (736), and Ritsu (738). Each of these “Nara Schools” had links with a parent temple in China. The best known of the Nara Schools is probably Kegon, whose massive wooden headquarters, the Todai-ji temple in Nara, houses a huge bronze statue of the Buddha and is one of the most famous buildings in Japan.

*Shingon + Tendai*

### PRINCE SHOTOKU

The second son of the emperor Yomei, Prince Shotoku (Shotoku Taishi), was born in 574CE, barely two decades after the arrival of the first Buddhist missionaries. His father was one of the first emperors to embrace the new faith and saw to it that his son was exposed to Buddhist ideas almost from the time he was born.

In 587 the future of Buddhism in Japan was assured when the Soga clan, which championed the new faith, defeated a conservative coalition headed by the Mononobe family. Subsequently, after the young Shotoku was appointed regent on behalf of his aunt, the empress Suiko, he was able in 592 to declare Buddhism the official religion of the Yamato court.

Shortly thereafter he founded (and perhaps designed) a major Buddhist temple complex at Horyuji, near Nara, and throughout his reign he worked tirelessly to advance the Buddhist cause. For this reason, Shotoku is often described as the “founder of Japanese Buddhism.”

But his contribution to the development of Japanese religion were not limited to his activities on behalf of Buddhism. He was also steeped in the Chinese classics and did as much as anyone to introduce Confucianism and Daoism to Japan. In 604 he promulgated his famous “Seventeen Article Constitution,” which drew heavily on both Buddhist and Confucian ethical principles. By the time of Shotoku’s death in 622, Japan had moved from being a peripheral, barely literate proto-state to become a civilized and highly sophisticated empire closely modeled on that of China.



Prince Shotoku: a hanging scroll of ca. 1850. The founder of Buddhism in Japan, the prince himself became the object of popular veneration.

sionaries from the new sects journeyed through the countryside, and the number of converts to Buddhism rose rapidly in the ninth and tenth centuries. Later, Kyoto became the headquarters of the Zen sects introduced from China during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (see p.252).

Buddhists did not attempt to undermine or supplant Shinto, but simply founded their temples next to Shinto shrines and proclaimed that there was no fundamental conflict between the two faiths. Toward the end of the Heian era, this sense of inclusiveness led to the development of Ryōbu Shinto, or "Double Shinto," in which Shinto *kami* and Buddhist *bosatsu* (*bodhisattvas*; see pp.176–7) were formally combined into single divine entities. This theological fusion was often visually represented by images of



#### CHRISTIANITY IN JAPAN

In 1549, Francis Xavier, a Portuguese priest and a founder of the Jesuit order, arrived in Japan at the head of a Christian mission, just four years after the visit of the first Portuguese merchant ships. The new religion was supported, at least implicitly, by the powerful *daimyo* (warlord) Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), who made effective use of European weaponry. The new faith spread rapidly and, by the early 1580s, virtually all of the *daimyo* of Kyushu island had converted, along with their subjects. There were also large pockets of Christians in other regions, including the capital, Kyoto, and the total number of converts cannot have been far short of a million. There is no firm evidence that Nobunaga himself converted to Catholicism, but one of the last portraits of him depicts him wearing a crucifix.

In 1582, Nobunaga was assassinated by a subordinate. He was succeeded by his chief general, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98), who in 1587 reversed the policy of tolerance. A number of Japanese Jesuit novices were crucified—the "Japanese Martyrs"—and missionaries were expelled. Christianity was officially banned in 1596. The persecution



The monument to the "Japanese Martyrs" in Nagasaki—formerly, as today, the seat of the Roman Catholic church in Japan. They were put to death during the persecution of Christians under Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

A handful of Japanese Catholics continued to practice in secret, mostly in and around Nagasaki. By the time the anti-Christian edicts were repealed in 1872, they had had no contact with Rome for over two centuries and much of their practice had become far removed from mainstream Christianity (for example, devotion to Jesus and Mary had come to resemble the worship of powerful Shinto *kami* or Buddhist *bosatsu*). Most refused to rejoin the Catholic church, and this Christian offshoot now forms a tiny piece of the Japanese religious mosaic. Today, there are about 600,000 Christians in Japan, out of a population of almost 130 million.



*kami* in human form "dreaming" of their *bosatsu* counterparts.

The last years of the Heian era were marked by a bloody civil war that culminated in the appointment of Minamoto no Yoritomo to the new imperial office of *shogun*, or "generalissimo." Four centuries of almost constant internal strife followed, leading many priests to suspect that *mappo*, the Mahayana Buddhist "age of chaos" (see pp.266–7), had come. Early in the Kamakura era (1185–1333CE), three sects arose in response to the spiritual challenge: Jodo-shu (the "Pure Land sect"), Jodo-shinshu ("True Pure Land sect"), and Nichiren-shu ("Nichiren sect"). The founders of these new strands of Buddhism, respectively Honen (1133–1212), Shinran (1173–1263), and Nichiren (1222–82), were all trained at the great Tendai Buddhist complex on Mount Hiei.

The most significant religious development of the Ashikaga and Momoyama eras (1333–1603CE) was the arrival of Christianity in 1549, but its initial gains were reversed following the death of its early patron, Oda Nobunaga (see box, opposite). Under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868), Buddhism was in the ascendant, especially the "Pure Land" sects. The Tokugawa also espoused the hierarchical philosophy of Chinese Neoconfucianism (see p.205); Tokyo's only Confucian temple was founded in 1690 by the fifth Tokugawa *shogun*. Daoism also came to occupy an important position, at least among the court intelligentsia.

In the late eighteenth century, the efforts of Motoori Norinaga (1730–1800) and other Shinto scholars led to a renewed interest in the *Kojiki*, *Nihonshoki*, and other ancient Shinto texts (see p.250). A century later, this Shinto revival, which strongly emphasized the imperial cult, was a major factor in the collapse of the by then economically moribund shogunate and the restoration in 1868 of imperial power under the emperor Meiji. In the years immediately following the Meiji restoration, Shinto became the official religion of Japan (known as "State Shinto") and Buddhism went into a brief eclipse (see sidebar).

In the 1870s, missionaries from a variety of Christian denominations returned to a newly tolerant Japan, but few Japanese saw any merit in switching from Shinto, a faith closely associated with the imperial regime and hence also with the growing prosperity that was the result of the government's policy of Western-style industrialization. Today only around six hundred thousand Japanese profess the Christian faith.

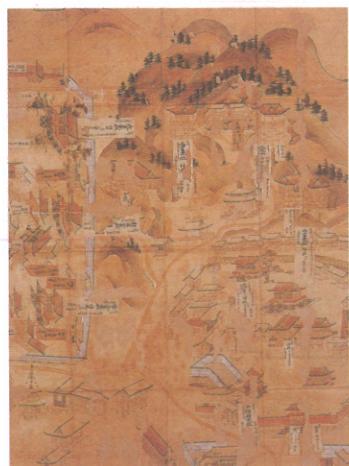
An important phenomenon in the recent history of Japanese religion is the growth of the Shinko Shukyo ("New Religions"), a term used to cover the many new sects that began to arise in the early nineteenth century amid the social chaos that marked the collapse of *shogun* feudalism. For the most part, these sects were blends of Shinto and Buddhism, but since the Meiji restoration some have adopted elements of Christianity and other faiths (see pp.270–71).

#### THE BUDDHIST PERSECUTION

The triumph of Shinto after the Meiji restoration resulted in a backlash against Buddhism, which had been favored by the shogunate. Long-standing Buddhist symbols and practices were forcibly removed from major shrines by the new imperialist regime, and in the 1870s the Buddhist clergy dramatically lost the influence it had enjoyed under the Tokugawa. Museums and collectors in Europe and America provided a ready market for priceless artifacts looted from temples by anti-Buddhist zealots, with the authorities often turning a blind eye.

However, in the late 1880s, the imperial government put an end to the backlash, and the Buddhist establishment made a rapid comeback. Shinto remained the state religion until 1945, but the historic balance between the two faiths was restored and persists to the present. State Shinto was disestablished after the end of the Second World War, and since then no faith has enjoyed official status.

*An 18th-century map of the Tendai Buddhist complex on Hieizan (Mount Hiei) near Kyoto. Many great founder figures of Japanese Buddhism trained here, including Honen, Shinran, Nichiren, Eisai, and Dogen (see pp.252–5).*



2<sup>nd</sup>  
wave  
of  
sects



Jimmu Tenno on the quest that will establish him as the first emperor of Japan. A 19th-century print.

#### THE IMPERIAL MYTH

The Izumo region of Japan made an important contribution to Shinto myth, in particular the story of the establishment of the rule of Jimmu Tenno, the first emperor, and the Japanese imperial line.

After Susano's banishment from heaven (see box, opposite), he descended to "the Reed Plain" (earth), where he saved a beautiful maiden from a dragon. Susano found a fabulous sword, Kusanagi, in one of its eight tails and gave it to his sister, the goddess Amaterasu, as a peace offering. He married the maiden, built a palace near Izumo, and fathered a dynasty of powerful deities who came to rule the earth. The greatest was Okuninushi, the "Great Lord of the Country." Alarmed at Okuninushi's power, Amaterasu sent her grandson Honinigi to reestablish her sovereignty over the earth. A compromise was reached: beginning with Honinigi's descendant, Jimmu Tenno, the earthly scions of Amaterasu would rule the earth as emperors, while Okuninushi would be the perpetual divine guardian of the land.

## A WORLD OF SPIRITS

The Japanese word *kami* is often translated as "deity" (a god or goddess), but in reality it designates an extremely wide range of spirit-beings together with a host of mysterious and supernatural forces and "essences." In the *Kojiki* (see p.250), it is said that there are eight million *kami*, which in Japanese is another way of saying that the number is infinite. They include countless vaguely defined tutelary divinities of clans, villages, and neighborhoods (*ujigami*); "spirits of place"—the essences of prominent geographical features, including mountains, rivers, and waterfalls; and other natural phenomena, such as the *kamikaze* ("divine wind"), the typhoon that saved Japan from a seaborne Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. Some *kami* are *oni*, demonic, vengeful spirits (see p.248); others are compounded of benign imported Buddhist and Daoist deities.

Ancestral spirits form another important category of *kami*. In Shinto, a person's soul is believed to become a *kami* after the death of its mortal "host," and the *kami* of a family's ancestors are revered at household shrines. Some ancestral *kami*, such as the spirits of the modernizing emperor Meiji (1867–1912) and other rulers, may become the foci of more widespread cults. For example, Meiji's shrine is the most important Shinto shrine in Tokyo. The *kami* of all Japan's war dead since 1872 continue to be worshipped at Tokyo's controversial Yasukuni shrine (see p.268).

The most widely known *kami* are the anthropomorphic gods and goddesses who emerged during what ancient texts call the "Age of the Gods" (see box, opposite). These are the "heavenly *kami*" (*amatsukami*), such as the widely venerated sun goddess, Amaterasu, and the "earthly *kami*" (*kunitsukami*), such as the popular Okuninushi, the guardian god of Japan and its emperors (see sidebar). Okuninushi is venerated at Izumo Taisha, the second most important Shinto shrine after that of Amaterasu at Ise.

Other major *kami* include Inari, the rice god, widely venerated as the deity who ensures an abundant rice harvest and, by extension, general prosperity. His cult is thus especially important to shopkeepers, merchants, and artisans. Inari's messenger and guardian is the fox, and images of this animal are prominent at all the god's shrines. In ancient times, Inari was also considered to be the patron of swordsmiths.

The so-called "Seven Lucky Gods" embody a variety of desirable characteristics. The most popular are Daikokuten and his son Ebisu, both of whom represent material abundance and are often enshrined together. Daikokuten, typically depicted with a large sack over his left shoulder, is particularly revered by cooks and restaurateurs. He is frequently assimilated to Okuninushi, who is also known as Daikokusama. Ebisu carries a fishing rod in his left hand and a sea bream under his right. The other five

#### "THE AGE OF THE GODS"

The stories of the great gods and goddesses of Shinto are told in the epics the *Kojiki* and the *Nihonshoki* (see pp.250–51). They give an account of the primeval era known as "the Age of the Gods," when deities were active on earth before establishing the rule of their mortal descendants, the emperors, and then withdrawing to the heavenly domain.

In the beginning, when the world was a fluid, turbulent, formless chaos, there arose seven successive generations of invisible *kami*. In the eighth generation, the god Izanagi and the goddess Izanami came into being and, standing on the "Floating Bridge of Heaven" (probably to be interpreted as a rainbow), they dipped a jeweled spear into the jelly-like mass and created an island, Onogoro. This was the first land.

Izanagi and Izanami descended to the island. At this point they became aware of their gender difference and had sexual intercourse. But Izanami's first offspring was a "leech-child" (that is, a monster), and the couple sought help from the older *kami*. Izanami then gave birth to an array of *kami* and also islands—the Japanese archipelago. But the birth of her last child, the fire god, caused her such severe burns that she died and went to Yomi, the land of the dead (see p.267).

Izanagi ventured into Yomi in a vain attempt to retrieve his beloved wife, but he disregarded her plea not to look upon

A 19th-century triptych showing Amaterasu, the sun goddess, emerging from the "Heavenly Cave of Darkness" in a blaze of light. She left the cave only after the other deities had tricked her into believing that her reflection in a mirror—a sacred Shinto symbol—was a more powerful sun goddess. It has been suggested that this episode was based on a solar eclipse.



her. He saw that Izanami had become a rotting, hideous demon, and fled in horror, pursued by Izanami and the so-called "Hags of Yomi." He barely escaped with his life.

To purify himself of Yomi's pollution, Izanagi bathed in the Hi river (see map, p.239). As he washed, the sun goddess Amaterasu was born from his left eye, the moon god Tsukuyomi from his right eye, and the storm god, Susano, from his nose. Izanagi then retired to northwest Kyushu island, where today there are a handful of shrines to him and Izanami. Before retiring, Izanagi handed power to his offspring: Amaterasu was to be supreme deity, Tsuki-yomi became lord of the night, and Susano lord of the sea.

But Susano was jealous of his sister and raged through heaven, causing chaos. Amaterasu's response was to shut herself away in the "Heavenly Cave of Darkness," making matters worse by depriving the world of sunlight and causing the crops to wither. She was eventually tricked into reappearing, and as she did so the sunlight returned.

After the sun goddess's reemergence, Susano was banished and Amaterasu's sovereignty was confirmed. Her descendant Jimmu became the first emperor (see sidebar), and with the establishment of the imperial line, the "Age of the Gods" came to an end.

### EVIL SPIRITS

In Japanese tradition, most evil spirits or *oni* ("demons") are invisible. Some are thought to be animal spirits who have the capacity to possess a person. Among the most feared is the fox spirit, possession by which can bring about all sorts of calamities, including illness and death. In parts of rural Japan, especially in the north, where old customs and beliefs tend to linger, the *yamabushi* ("mountain warriors"; see p.260), are considered particularly adept at exorcising such spirits and thereby restoring the victim to good health.

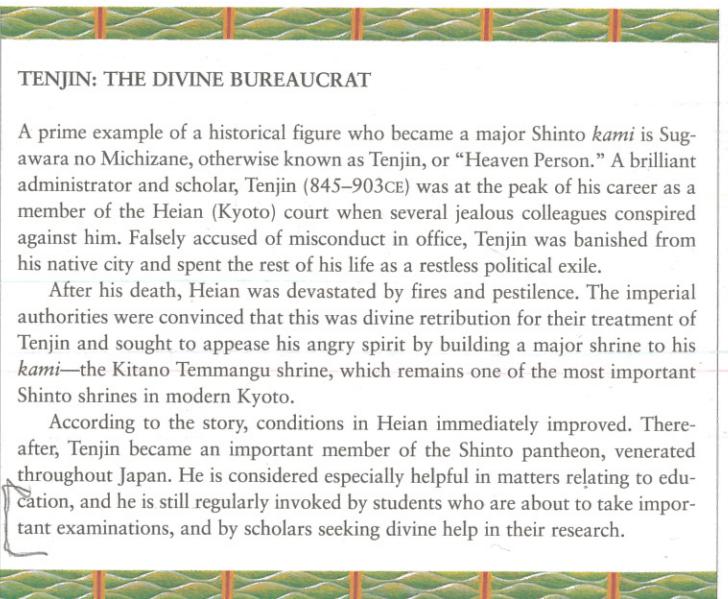
Another variety of evil spirit is the *obake*, or ghost. These entities, too, are believed capable of causing considerable harm, and they can be driven off with appropriate rituals.

are Benten (god of skill in music and other arts), Fukurokuju (god of popularity), Hotei (god of magnanimity), Jurojin (god of longevity), and Bishamonten (god of benevolent authority).

Japanese Buddhism, following the Mahayana tradition, venerates a broad array of sacred beings known as *butsu* (Sanskrit *buddha*) and *bosatsu* (Sanskrit *bodhisattva*; see pp.176–7). Three of these divine beings loom especially large in Japanese Buddhism: Amida, Kannon, and Jizo. Of these, the most important is the *butsu* Amida (Sanskrit *Amitabha*), who presides over the "Pure Land," or Western Paradise, which plays a central role in the Tendai sect and its Pure Land offshoots (see p.193).

After Amida, the most popular Buddhist divinity is Kannon, who derives directly from the Chinese goddess Guanyin (see p.211) and ultimately from the Indian male *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara (see p.176). Variously depicted as male or female, Kannon is the protector of children, dead souls, and women in childbirth; it is also the *bosatsu* to whom worshippers turn for mercy and forgiveness. Kannon is often depicted as "Kannon of the Thousand Arms," based on the idea that the deity possesses limitless compassion to dispense to the believer. Temples dedicated to Kannon are found in almost every Japanese community.

The *bosatsu* Jizo is also concerned with children, particularly with the souls of those who have died (including, in recent times, aborted fetuses). Tiny Jizo-yas, or temples to Jizo, are to be found everywhere in Japan, and are readily identifiable by their cluster of little images of the *bosatsu* wearing a red scarf and, often, a piece of clothing from a deceased child. Jizo is



TENJIN: THE DIVINE BUREAUCRAT

A prime example of a historical figure who became a major Shinto *kami* is Sugawara no Michizane, otherwise known as Tenjin, or "Heaven Person." A brilliant administrator and scholar, Tenjin (845–903CE) was at the peak of his career as a member of the Heian (Kyoto) court when several jealous colleagues conspired against him. Falsely accused of misconduct in office, Tenjin was banished from his native city and spent the rest of his life as a restless political exile.

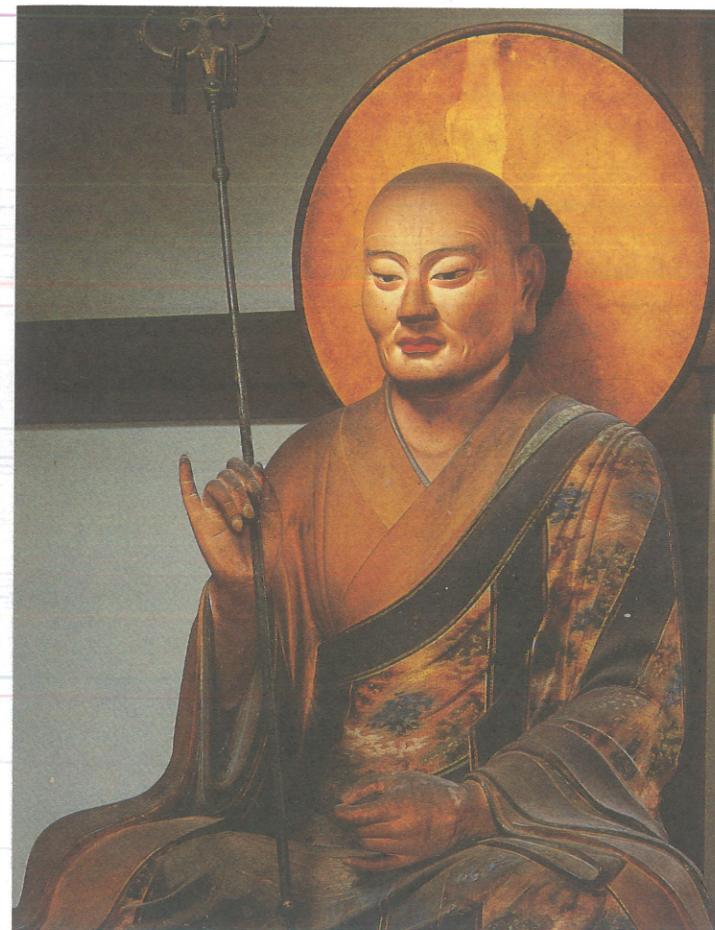
After his death, Heian was devastated by fires and pestilence. The imperial authorities were convinced that this was divine retribution for their treatment of Tenjin and sought to appease his angry spirit by building a major shrine to his *kami*—the Kitano Tenmangu shrine, which remains one of the most important Shinto shrines in modern Kyoto.

According to the story, conditions in Heian immediately improved. Thereafter, Tenjin became an important member of the Shinto pantheon, venerated throughout Japan. He is considered especially helpful in matters relating to education, and he is still regularly invoked by students who are about to take important examinations, and by scholars seeking divine help in their research.

the protector of all who suffer pain, and he is believed to be able to redeem souls from Jigoku ("Hell;" see p.267) and lead them to the Pure Land.

In popular worship, the distinction between Shinto *kami* and Buddhist *bosatsu* and *butsu* is very blurred. At times in the past Shinto priests have used the phrase "*kami*-nature" in a fashion analogous to the Buddhist "*buddha*-nature." Both *kami* and *bosatsu* are seen as essentially complementary, and a number of divinities are important to both faiths, such as Hachiman (see sidebar). Kannon and Jizo are also worshipped as *kami* by vast numbers of Japanese.

Hachiman is not the only deity with historical or quasihistorical roots. Others include Tenjin (see box), while the most recent include the emperor Meiji. Japanese Buddhists sometimes invoke the spirits of the Buddhist masters Honen, Shinran, and Nichiren (see pp.253–5) much as if they were *kami*—although they have never become the focus of major cults.

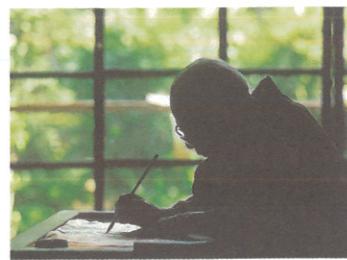


HACHIMAN

The Shinto *kami* Hachiman is an important warrior god largely derived from the semilegendary emperor Ojin (ca. 300CE). Hachiman is widely worshipped throughout Japan at both Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Most notably, he is the tutelary deity of the Todaiji temple in Nara (which also houses the largest statue of the Buddha in Japan) and of the Hachiman shrine in Kamakura.

Hachiman shrines are favorite venues for the ritual called *omiyamairi* in which infants—primarily boys in the case of Hachiman—are taken to shrines for the first time and purified (see p.264). At the same time, Hachiman's image is to be found in a great many Buddhist temples, where he is venerated as a *bosatsu*.

A statue of Hachiman by the sculptor Kaikei, who worked at Nara in the 13th century. The striking realism of this figure was typical of the Kamakura era (1185–1333). The god is represented in the habit of a Buddhist monk.



A Buddhist master calligrapher in Tokyo at work on a scroll. Calligraphy was introduced from China and became a major art form, especially after a simplified Japanese script was devised in the 9th century CE (see p.253).

#### THE NIHONSHOKI

The leading Japanese clans were apparently dissatisfied with the *Kojiki* even before Ono had completed it (see main text), largely because it emphasized the history of the imperial clan at the expense of their own. The court responded to their dissatisfaction by commissioning the *Nihonshoki* ("Chronicles of Japan") from a committee of couriers.

Ono had produced a relatively straightforward narrative, but the authors of the *Nihonshoki* felt compelled to retell each important mythological event from a variety of perspectives, reflecting the versions sacred to the several major clans. The result was a jumble of compromises, redundancies, and even contradictions. Nonetheless, the *Nihonshoki* is a treasure trove of tales that shed a great deal of light on the range and diversity of ancient Shinto mythology and its *kami*.

Unlike the *Kojiki*, the *Nihonshoki* is written in classical Chinese, although it includes poetic sections in archaic Japanese. Wherever possible, the authors presented the myths from a Chinese perspective, and the text contains a great many Chinese mythological themes and references. A good example is the Pan Gu story, a Chinese creation myth that recurs in almost identical form at several points in the *Nihonshoki*.

## CHRONICLES AND HOLY WRITINGS

The most ancient and important written sources for Shinto are two epics of the early eighth century CE: the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*. Neither of these texts can be called "scripture" in the sense of divine revelation. Rather, they are both genealogically based chronicles that extend well into the early historic period. The *Kojiki* ("Record of Ancient Matters"), the oldest surviving text in Japanese, was compiled and edited in 712CE by the scholar-courtier Ono Yasumaro from a number of earlier sources. These sources, some written (and unfortunately long since lost) and others oral, were for the most part genealogies of the several powerful *uji*, or clans, that dominated Japanese political life in the Nara period (710–794CE), the most important being the imperial Yamato clan. Each genealogy traced the descent of the *uji* in question back to a particular *kami* (god or goddess).

At this period Japan was actively borrowing almost every conceivable cultural trait from China. Inspired by the Chinese genre of "imperial chronicle" that served to legitimize the ruling dynasty, the Japanese court commissioned Ono to compile a coherent Japanese chronicle that would establish for all time the supremacy of the Yamato clan. The early part of Ono's text contains the primary account of Shinto cosmology and theogony: the creation of the islands of Japan by the primordial deities Izanagi and Izanami; the birth of the sun goddess Amaterasu; the extension of her authority to the "Reed Plain" (Japan); and the appearance of her descendant Jimmu, the first emperor (see pp.246–7).

The *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* (compiled in 720CE as a sort of corrective to the *Kojiki*; see sidebar) are by no means the only sources of Shinto beliefs. Other writings include the *Manyoshu* (ca. 760CE), a vast anthology of poetry that embraces poems on religious, mythological, and secular themes; the *Fudoki*, provincial chronicles commissioned in 713CE that include legends of local *kami*; and the *Engishiki*, which dates from the late tenth century CE and includes a large body of *norito*, or ritual prayers for public ceremonies.

By far the most important text in Japanese Buddhism is the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokkyō*; see box). Next in significance is the *Dainichi-kyo*, or *Sun Sutra*, which underpins the Shingon sect introduced to Japan by Kobo-daishi (774–835CE). According to the *Sun Sutra*, the entire cosmos emanated from Vairochana, the Sun Buddha, and the goal of the worshipper is to understand the inner meaning of this process. Like the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Sun Sutra* holds that "buddha-nature" is inherent in every per-

son and that one can become enlightened in a single lifetime. However, the *Sun Sutra*'s route to salvation is via the esoteric knowledge contained in a highly complex *mandala* (a symbolic representation of the cosmos; see p.177), rather than via professions of faith in the *bodhisattvas*.

The many other revered texts in Japanese Buddhism include the original writings of great masters such as Kobo-daishi, Dengyo-daishi, Honen, Shinran, Nichiren, and the founders of Zen, Eisai and Dogen (see p.252). Zen is also noted for the *koan* (sacred riddle, from Chinese *gong an*), a *mantra*-like statement or enigmatic, sometimes seemingly impossible, question for contemplation. One famous *koan* is "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

#### THE LOTUS SUTRA

Purportedly based on sermons preached by the Buddha himself, the *Lotus Sutra* is one of the most important religious texts in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition (see also p.181). The *Lotus Sutra* came to Japan with the first Buddhist missionaries in the mid-sixth century CE, but it did not achieve supreme importance until the introduction of the Tendai (Chinese Tiantai) sect from China by Dengyo-daishi (762–822CE). All the major Japanese sects that sprang from Tendai are rooted in the *Lotus Sutra*, including the Pure Land sects preached by Honen and Shinran and especially the sect founded by Nichiren (see pp.254–5).

The central thesis of the *Lotus Sutra* is that all life contains, to a greater or lesser degree, "buddha-nature." This can be understood as the capacity for an all-embracing compassion, coupled with the serenity that comes with having renounced all desire. Salvation is possible only if one's "buddha-nature" can be fully realized, and to achieve this the worshipper must be devoted to a life of prayer and meditation, and seek the help of a variety of *bodhisattvas* (see pp.176–7). The realization of "buddha-nature" brings the devotee closer to the ultimate goal: *nirvana*, permanent release from the endless cycle of death and rebirth.

verses from the *Lotus Sutra* inscribed with gold ink in Chinese script on indigo paper. This very fine manuscript is believed to

事我今但略說  
一百阿羅漢心自在者作是  
未曾有若世尊各見授記如  
丘功德悉成滿當得斯淨土賢  
逝世間解無上士調御丈夫  
多羅三狼三菩提盡同一號  
劫賓那薄拘羅周陀沙伽陀  
提迦葉迦留陀夷優陀迦  
其五百阿羅漢優樓頻螺迦  
陳如比丘當供養六万二千  
為佛号曰普明如來應供正  
千二百阿羅漢我今當現前  
多羅三狼三菩提記於此衆  
亦快乎佛知此等心之所念  
千二百阿羅漢我今當現前  
未嘗有若世尊各見授記如  
丘功德悉成滿當得斯淨土賢

## LIGHTS OF WISDOM

In the last two thousand years great contributions to Japanese religious development have been made by individuals ranging from priests and monks to bureaucrats, princes, and emperors. Most of these revered figures have been Buddhists—the founders of new sects and schools. Between them, they established the religious framework that still governs Japanese Buddhism and has also had a profound impact on the evolution of Shinto, as the two faiths have sought to find common ground. Those who have featured prominently in the history of Shinto include scholars such as Ono Yasumaro (see p.250) and Motoori Norinaga (see p.255), who strove tirelessly to preserve the ancient stories of the *kami* faith.

Prominent among early Buddhist masters are Saicho (762–822CE) and Kukai (774–835CE), better known respectively as Dengyo-daishi and



### THE FOUNDATION OF ZEN

The Kamakura era witnessed the emergence of Zen—the branch of Japanese Buddhism that is best known outside Japan. Its founders were Eisai (1141–1215) and Dogen (1200–53), both of whom trained at the Tendai “seminary” on Mount Hiei (Hieizan).

Eisai became disillusioned with what he considered the lax monastic discipline on Hiei and in 1168 set out on a five-month pilgrimage to China, visiting the major temples of the Tiantai sect (from which Tendai had sprung) and collecting sacred texts as yet untranslated into Japanese. On a longer pilgrimage (1187–91), he became acquainted with Xu'an Huaichang, master of the Linji sect of Chan, a school of Buddhism centered on intensive meditation (the word “Chan” derives from Sanskrit *dhyana*; see p.219).

Inspired by Xu'an's teachings, Eisai returned to Japan to preach the doctrines of Linji Chan, or “Rinzai Zen” in the Japanese articulation. He left Hieizan and went to Kamakura, where he gained the patronage of the shogunate and produced several important writings, including *Shukke Taiko* (“Essentials of the Monastic Life,” 1192), *Kozan Gokku ron* (“The Promulgation of



*Eisai, the founder of Rinzai Zen. Rinzai spread rapidly among Japan's samurai élite, who found that the mental discipline of Zen made them better fighters.*

that the key to spiritual enlightenment lay in individual discipline focused on an intense understanding of one's own “buddha-nature.” He elaborated this idea in *Fukan Zazengi* (“A Universal Promotion of Zazen Principles,” 1227), one of his many influential treatises.

Zen as a Defense of the Nation,” 1198), and *Nihon Buppo Chuko gammon* (“A Plea for the Revival of Japanese Buddhism,” 1204).

Dogen, the founder of the Soto Zen sect, also studied on Hieizan, and like Eisai he became disenchanted with what he saw as its spiritual laxity. His doubts led Dogen to leave for nearby Kenninji, a Rinzai Zen monastery. Six years later, Dogen also made a pilgrimage to China, where he studied under a master of the Cuotong sect of Chan.

Dogen returned home to establish a Japanese sect of Cuotong Chan (“Soto Zen” in Japanese). Soto Zen is characterized by its emphasis on sitting *zazen*, that is, cross-legged in the “lotus position,” as a prerequisite for attaining *satori*, or enlightenment. Unlike Eisai, who advocated the study and contemplation of *koans* (see p.251), Dogen felt



*This modern print depicts the haloed figure of Honen, who established “Pure Land” Buddhism, seated on a high pedestal in the form of a lotus. He holds a rosary for chanting.*

Kobo-daishi, the founders of the Tendai and Shingon sects (see p.243–4). Both are still revered as sages by Japanese Buddhists generally—not just the members of their own sects—and Kobo-daishi is also traditionally credited with inventing *hiragana* and *katakana*, scripts that greatly simplified the writing of Japanese, based on the sounds represented by fifty-one Chinese characters.

The Kamakura era (1185–1333) produced several important Buddhist figures who received their fundamental religious training at the great Tendai temple complex on Mount Hiei, for centuries Japan's principal Buddhist “seminary.” These figures include the great masters Eisai and Dogen, who introduced Chan (Zen), the Chinese meditation school of Buddhism, as a major force in Japan (see box, opposite).

The first of the revered alumni from Mount Hiei in this period was Genku (1133–1212), better known as Honen, founder of the “Pure Land” sect (Jodo-shu). Honen became a Tendai monk at the age of fifteen but over the years he became dissatisfied with orthodox Tendai dogma. In the late 1170s he founded a new sect based on doctrines that had originated in China several centuries earlier and centered on the “Pure Land,” a celestial paradise presided over by Amida Buddha (see p.193). Reflecting on the social chaos of the time, Honen asserted that all human beings were inherently too wicked to achieve salvation on their own, even if they lived ostensibly perfect lives. The only hope, he asserted, was to throw oneself on the mercy of Amida. One could reach the Pure Land through *nembutsu*—the Tendai practice of reciting the phrase “*namu Amida Butsu*” (“I put my faith in Amida Buddha”)—as well as the teachings of the Chinese masters Daochuo, Shandao, and Zhiyi.

Honen's theology was predicated on the concept of *mappo*, the Mahayana Buddhist notion that the world had entered an age in which the power of the law (*dharma*) had declined, and faith rather than meditation had become the key to salvation. Honen preached that if one practiced *nembutsu* repeatedly, and especially just before death, Amida would take pity on the supplicant's soul and cause it to be reborn in the “Pure Land.” (See also pp.266–7.)

From 1207 until a few months before his death, Honen was banished from Hiei and went to live on the remote island of Shikoku. Most of his important works, including *Senchaku hongan nembutsu-shu* (“Treatise on the Selection of the Nembutsu of the Primal Vow”), which stresses the supreme importance of *nembutsu*, were written during this period of exile. Honen's sect eventually received formal recognition by the Tendai establishment and Jodo-shu became a major force in the subsequent history of Japanese spirituality.

An even more influential doctrine was preached by Honen's chief disciple, Shinran (1173–1263), the founder of Jodo-shinshu, the “True Pure

Honen (d.1212) – Pure L  
Eisai – Rinzai (koan)  
Dogen – Soto (sitting zazen)  
Shinran – True Pure Land  
→ reject celib.  
→ emph. faith in A over above nembutsu  
Nietzschean Lotus



A watercolor on silk depicting Shinran, who advocated faith in a personal relationship between the worshipper and Amida rather than reliance on the nembutsu, as advocated by Honen.

### SHINRAN: THE GREAT REFORMER

Few details are known of the early life of Shinran (1173–1263), the founder of Jodo-shinshu, the “True Pure Land” sect—at present Japanese Buddhism’s largest single sect. It is known that he began his monastic training at the age of eight and served as a *doso* (low-ranking monk) on Mount Hiei until 1201. He subsequently fell under the influence of Honen (see main text) and accompanied him into exile from 1207–11.

After Honen’s death in 1212, Shinran received a pardon from the authorities. By this time, Shinran’s own interpretation of the doctrine of *nembutsu* (see p.253) had begun to diverge from that of his master, and he had also rejected the doctrine of priestly celibacy. During his exile with Honen, he had become the first Buddhist priest to marry and raise a family (today, following Shinran’s example, many other Japanese Buddhist sects permit their priests to marry).

Shinran decided to migrate eastward to the Kanto region, gathering his own band of disciples in the process, and this period marks the beginning of Jodo-shinshu. Some years later, in 1235, Shinran returned to Kyoto, where he remained until his death at the age of ninety.

What sets Shinran apart from Honen is his emphasis upon what he called the “Primal Vow,” that is, an absolute commitment to Amida Buddha (see p.177) as one’s “personal savior,” to borrow a phrase from Christian theology. Shinran held that an all-embracing, intensely personal faith in the power of the divine—Amida—was the key to salvation (an idea remarkably similar to the Protestant doctrine of “justification by faith” formulated three centuries later by Martin Luther). Ultimately, what counted was this compact between the supplicant and Amida, and everything else was fundamentally peripheral: hence it did not matter how often one recited *nembutsu*, or whether one uttered it just prior to death, as Honen preached. A single, intensely fervent *nembutsu*, in which the supplicant opened his or her heart to Amida, was all that was required to gain eventual rebirth in the “Pure Land.”

Land” sect (see box). Initially, Jodo-shinshu was a loosely organized set of congregations that Shinran had founded in the course of his travels around Japan, each of which interpreted their master’s teachings in its own way. The sect was only organized into a tightly-knit, hierarchical community some two centuries after Shinran’s death by the monk Rennyo (1414–99), who is known as Jodo-shinshu’s “second founder.”

A third, and far more controversial, master to emerge from Hieizan during this period was Nichiren (1222–82). From an early age Nichiren entertained many doubts about “Pure Land” beliefs—in particular the power of *nembutsu*—as well as those of the Zen sects (see p.252). He came to regard a single text, the *Lotus Sutra*, with its doctrine of universal salvation, as the supreme spiritual authority (see p.251). He imputed such awesome power to it that he encouraged his followers to chant the phrase known as the *daimoku*: “*Namu myoho renge kyo*” (“I take my refuge in the *Lotus*



*Sutra*”). Nichiren rejected all other Buddhist tenets, including the belief that Amida possessed the power to save souls.

In 1253, after leaving Hieizan, Nichiren began to preach against the “Pure Land” and Zen sects, and was exiled by the authorities to Izu—the first of a series of banishments and incarcerations. In 1268, Nichiren asserted that an impending Mongol seaborne invasion would be averted only if Japan adopted his doctrines as its sole religion. His denunciations of the government became so virulent that he was sentenced to death for treason—a penalty that was later revoked. (In the event, the Mongol fleet was destroyed by a typhoon hailed as a *kamikaze* or “divine wind.”)

Quarrelsome, charismatic, fanatical and ultra-patriotic, Nichiren cut against the Japanese grain. No other Buddhist claimed to preach the only truth, and this aspect of his teaching was widely resented from the beginning. As a result, the two sects based on his teachings, Nichiren-shu and the later Nichiren-shoshu, remained relatively insignificant until this century, when the latter, supported by an organization called the *Soka Gakkai* (the “Value-Creating Society”), launched a campaign to revive the teachings of Nichiren. Since the Second World War, *Soka Gakkai* and Nichiren-shoshu have gained millions of supporters, but remain controversial among mainstream Buddhists and Shintoists (see p.271).

Since Nichiren, Japan has produced many more religious thinkers and scholars, both Buddhist and Shinto, including the great eighteenth-century Shinto scholar Motoori Norinaga (see sidebar, right). However, none rival the stature of the galaxy of seminal figures who appeared in the century and a half between the birth of Honen and the death of Nichiren.

On his voyage into exile in the isles of Izu (about 160 km [100 miles] south of Tokyo), Nichiren calms the sea as the crew cower in terror. In this woodblock print by Kuniyoshi (1797–1861), Nichiren’s sacred chant, the *daimoku* (see main text) appears in the waves.

### THE SHINTO REVIVAL: MOTOORI

The greatest of all Shinto scholars was probably Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), who was largely responsible for bringing about the Shinto revival known as Kokugaku (“National Learning Movement”) from the late 1700s.

Motoori studied medicine before devoting himself to the study of Japanese mythological classics, especially the *Kojiki* and the *Nihonshoki* (see p.250). He was inspired by the Shingon Buddhist monk Keichū (1640–1701) and, more immediately, Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769). Both had sought to define Japanese national identity with reference to the ancient Shinto texts.

Motoori spent the rest of his life interpreting the *kami* faith and attracted a wide following. His masterpiece, the monumental, forty-four-volume *Kojiki den* (“Interpretation of the *Kojiki*,” 1798) is both an exhaustive exegesis of the *Kojiki*, and a vast compendium of knowledge about ancient Japan.

Motoori came to believe that Chinese influence—including Buddhism—had long obscured the essential Japanese character. Neither Motoori nor his two intellectual predecessors explicitly renounced Buddhism, but their attitude toward it was generally negative. Motoori attacked Buddhists and Confucian scholars for seeking to “know the unknowable.”

Anti-Chinese sentiment and the importance of the Shinto *kami*—both of which Motoori tirelessly promoted—were significant elements in Kokugaku and profoundly influenced the men who engineered the Meiji restoration in 1868.



A Zen priest in meditation. The adept of Zen (see sidebar, below) seeks to achieve intense mental focus, tranquility, and a paring down of extraneous thought.

#### ZEN AND SATORI

Rinzai Zen and Soto Zen are exceptions to the general Buddhist rule in that they are less concerned with achieving enlightenment (Sanskrit *bodhi*) as a step to *nirvana* and salvation (see main text), than with applying it to the demands of the present world. Such "practical enlightenment" is called *satori* ("spiritual awakening"), in which mind and body subjectively disappear in the course of meditation, and a direct awareness of the inner self is achieved.

Rinzai and Soto differ in the manner in which *satori* is attained. In Rinzai, the emphasis is on the *koans* (see p.251): *satori*, it is believed, often arrives in a flash, at the moment that the mind penetrates the inner meaning of one of these *mantra-like* sayings. However, Soto places primary emphasis on the meditation process itself, in other words, sitting *zazen* (in the lotus position). As the novice becomes more adept, the mind frees itself—gradually rather than in an instant of insight—from what the late Alan Watts (1915–73), one of the first Western practitioners of Zen, called "the internal conversation." Once this freedom is achieved, *satori* soon follows.

## HARMONY AND ENLIGHTENMENT

It has sometimes been said that the Japanese rely in all cases on their Buddhist heritage for ethical guidance. However, this can be disputed. At the core of Shinto theology lies the idea that a benign harmony, or *wa*, is inherent in nature and human relationships, and that anything that disrupts this state is bad. This helps to explain the widespread and deeply rooted Japanese belief that the individual is less important than the group, be it family, school, or workplace. Rules governing human behavior are considered necessary for the maintenance of *wa*, without which both society and the natural world would disintegrate into chaos.

Confucian and Daoist ideas imported from China also claimed that chaos would follow if social nonconformity were tolerated, but these concepts served principally to reinforce the existing Shinto ethic, which sprang from the clan-based society of prehistoric and ancient Japan. This ethic revolves around two fundamental and intimately related concepts: the need to maintain the "face" (*tatemae*) that a person presents to the outside world; and the extended household (*ie*), that includes all the ancestral spirits (see p.246). The idea that Japanese ethics are based on shame rather than guilt has been exaggerated, but it is nonetheless true that conformity is enforced to a large degree by the loss of *tatemae* that an individual—and consequently his or her *ie*, school, employer, or other social group—would suffer as a result of violating part of the social code. Depending on the seriousness of the loss of face, a person may atone by bowing deeply, through a ceremonial act of gift-giving, or by committing suicide (*jisatsu*). Even today, suicide is often blamed on a person's inability to cope with the shame of, say, failing an examination.

If a whole group is stigmatized, a collective act of atonement is made. For example, when Japan's famous Shinkansen "Bullet Train" is late, every employee from the engineer to the conductor, hostesses, and ticket sellers, feels responsible and will apologize profusely to delayed passengers. Once atonement is made, the shame and guilt cease and are not passed on.

The Shinto ethic reached its apogee during the "State Shinto" era (1872–1945), when obedience to the emperor became the noblest form of behavior—up to and including sacrificing one's life for his benefit. It is very much a "this-worldly" phenomenon, with little or no emphasis placed on reward or punishment in the afterlife (see pp.266–7). However, the state of the soul after death is very much the concern of Japan's Buddhist traditions. From the outset, Mahayana Buddhism has had a well-defined concept of inherent human wickedness, and the

Buddhist's ultimate goal is to achieve salvation in the form of *nirvana*, or "release," from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This cycle is fueled by the accumulation of merit and demerit, the concept known as *karma* (see pp.156, 192). In the Buddhist view, demerit springs from desire, and the loss of desire is thus the key to salvation.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the attainment of *nirvana* essentially depends on adherence to the "Noble Eightfold Path" (see pp.184–5). From the point of view of the "Pure Land" schools, there are simply two paths to salvation. The first, or "hard" way, involves leading a morally perfect life—avoiding the selfishness that lies at the root of desire and performing good works—and engaging in intense meditation in order to reach the state of enlightenment that is a prerequisite for *nirvana*. In Japan, the Buddhist insistence on suppressing personal desire complements the Shinto ethical tradition that demands subordination to the group in such a way that harmonious relationships (*wa*) are maintained.

The second, or "easy" way to grace, advocated by the "Pure Land" sects, reasons that the effort required to achieve salvation is too great for anyone living in this troubled and distracting world. It recommends professing utter faith in the Amida Buddha, who will lead the soul after death to the paradise of the "Pure Land," where salvation may be more easily pursued (see pp.266–7).

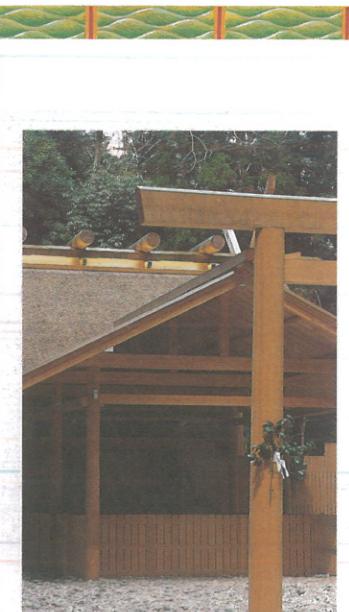
A Zen garden at Ryoanji Zen temple, Kyoto. Over the centuries, the discipline required to attain *satori* (see sidebar, opposite) inspired the Japanese aesthetic of "quiet and simple elegance" (shibui, or wabi-sabi) that may be seen in a wide range of Japanese arts, such as ikebana (flower arranging), haiku (a genre of poetry in which an idea or image is expressed in a mere 17 syllables), chanoyu ("tea ceremony," a precise ritual for serving tea), and garden design. The harmonious and simple design of the typical Zen garden is an ideal environment for contemplation.



## A LANDSCAPE OF SANCTUARIES

The two principal types of sacred building in Japan are the Buddhist temple (*otera*) and the Shinto shrine (*jinja*). There is also a considerable, though far smaller, number of Christian churches (*kyokai*), located mainly in the larger towns and cities.

China provided the prototypes for Japan's Buddhist temples. The first Japanese monks considered their temples to be the offspring of those they had visited in China, and followed the Chinese custom of building them on mountains. Hence, the word *san* or *zan* ("mountain"), from the Chinese *shan*, occurs frequently in the names of Japanese temples—even those on level terrain—in honor of the mountain-top location of their Chinese parent institution. Famous hilltop temples include the great Tendai complex on Mount Hiei (Hieizan; see p.245) and the Shingon holy places that adorn Mount Koya (Koya-san; see p.238).



THE ISE SHRINE

The destination of Japanese pilgrims for over a millennium, Ise is a grand complex of shrines near the coast southeast of Nara in Mie prefecture (see map, p.239). The site's most ancient shrine—and Shinto's holiest place—is the Naiku ("Inner Shrine"), dedicated to the sun goddess, Amaterasu. The complex also includes the Geku ("Outer Shrine") of the rice goddess, Toyouke-omikami.

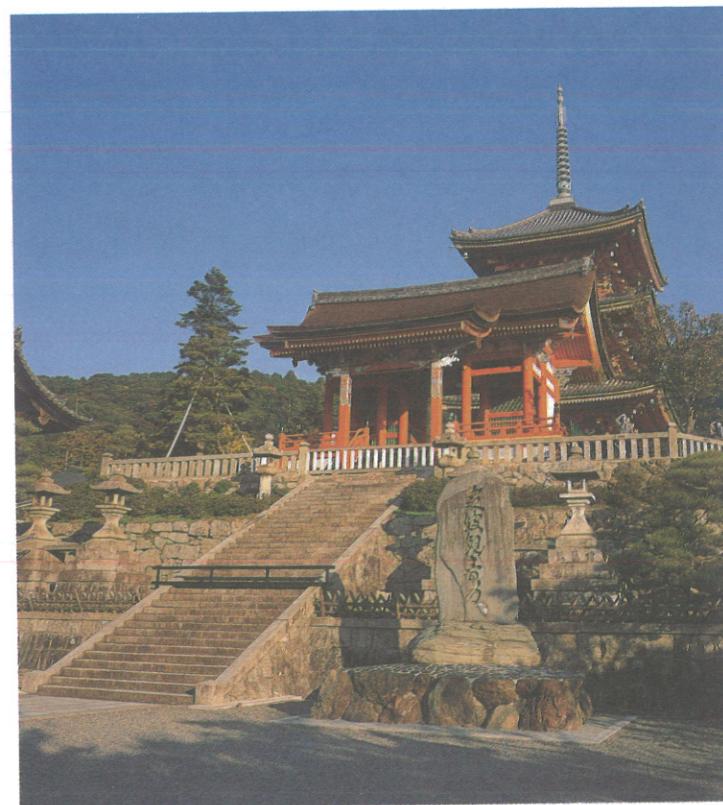
What makes Ise truly unique is the fact that, since the seventh century CE, all the buildings in the shrine complex have been replaced every twenty years by replicas that are exact copies down to the last wooden peg. Thus Ise is at once old and always new. The symbolism here is extremely important: with each rebuilding both the sun goddess (the divine ancestor of the imperial house) and the rice goddess acquire renewed vigor, and this by extension ensures the continuing vitality of both the imperial line and the rice crop, without either of which the nation could not survive.

At the end of the twenty-year cycle, the new shrine buildings are erected on a site alongside the old ones. For a brief period, the visitor might be forgiven for experiencing a sense of double vision, because the complex and its copy stand side-by-side until the sacred images have been ritually transferred to the new shrine by the distinctively clad Ise priests. Only then are the old structures dismantled and the ground cleared, to be carefully maintained until the rebuilding cycle comes around again. The dismantled buildings continue to be imbued with the powerful sacred essence of the goddesses and are not destroyed. Instead, pieces are distributed to shrines throughout Japan and incorporated into their walls, thereby spiritually reinvigorating the entire Shinto universe.

*Part of the Naiku, or Inner Shrine, of Amaterasu at Ise, before which stands the torii or sacred gateway (see p.260). Ise was last completely rebuilt in 1993.*

*Otera*, like their Chinese Buddhist counterparts, typically consist of a complex of buildings, rather in the manner of a medieval Christian monastery. The *kondo*, or main hall, contains sacred images of the Buddha, together with other *buddhas* and *bosatsus*. In addition there is a *daikodo*, or lecture hall, and various treasures, storehouses, priestly residences, and, usually, a five-story pagoda (*goju no to*), which traditionally houses sacred relics and is derived from the ancient *stupa* (see p.186). Wherever local geography allows, the complex is surrounded by a garden, some parts of which, like the famous Zen garden at Kyoto's Ryoanji temple, are themselves sacred places and foci of devotion. One of the first and most notable temple complexes was built in 607CE by Shotoku Taishi (see p.243) at Horyuji, near Nara, which is held to be the oldest surviving group of wooden buildings in the world. The complex includes ten major structures, several of which are officially designated "national treasures" by the Japanese government.

The typical Shinto *jinja* is also a complex of several buildings and, with the exception of the tiny shrines sometimes found on the roofs of department stores and other modern high-rise buildings, they are almost always



*The Ryoanji otera (Buddhist temple) at Kyoto. It was founded in the mid-15th century by the Hosokawa, one of many powerful contending dynasties of daimyo (feudal warlords) during this period.*

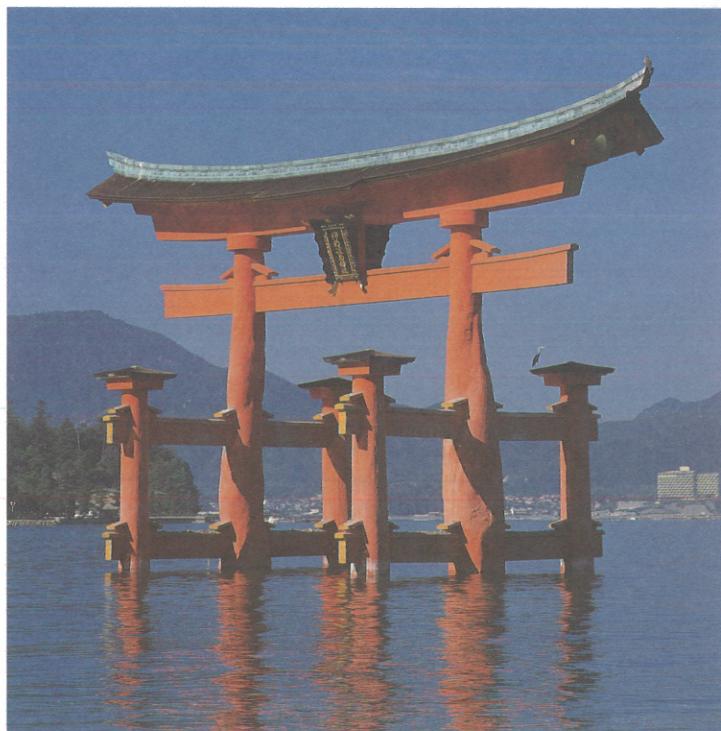
### SYNCRETISM AND SACRED ARCHITECTURE

It may be no coincidence that, as Shinto shrines adopted more Chinese architectural characteristics in the Nara period, and thus came to resemble Buddhist temples in appearance (see main text), the process of syncretism between the two faiths proceeded accordingly. Indeed, almost every major Buddhist temple (*otera*) includes at least one small Shinto shrine (*inja*).

A curious result of this process was the movement known as Shugendo ("Way of the Mountain"), which took shape in the Heian period (794–1185CE). Spread by mystics known as *yamabushi* (literally "mountain warriors"), it involved a fusion of Buddhist *bosatsu* and Shinto *kami* (see pp.246–7), especially the *kami* believed to live on mountains. Shugendo survives to this day in parts of northern Japan and is practiced in sacred buildings that are at once *otera* and *inja*.

located in natural settings, even if this consists of only a few trees shading an urban open space. The oldest *inja* were open-air sacred precincts, perhaps around a revered natural object such as a tree or stone. Enclosed shrines began to appear early in the Common Era. Many of these were for the veneration of rice deities and were modeled on thatched rice storehouses. The two most ancient are also the most sacred: those of Ise (see p.258) and Izumo. Dedicated to the patron god of the Izumo region, Okuninushi, "the Great Lord of the Country" (see p.246), the Izumo shrine is built of wood and thatch and, like Ise, has been rebuilt frequently to an identical design, although not at regular intervals.

During the Nara period (710–794CE), many Shinto shrines began to incorporate elements of Chinese design, such as upturned gables and bright vermilion paint instead of natural, unadorned wood. An important early example of the new Chinese style is the Kasuga-*inja* in Nara. From this time on, *inja* and *otera* came to look very similar. However, just as the presence of a pagoda is a common way of identifying an *otera*, the *inja* is instantly recognizable by its ceremonial sacred gateway, or *torii*. In its simplest form, as at Ise (see p.258), this consists of a pair of posts topped by two crossbars, one of which extends beyond the uprights. The *torii* serves to mark the boundary between the impure



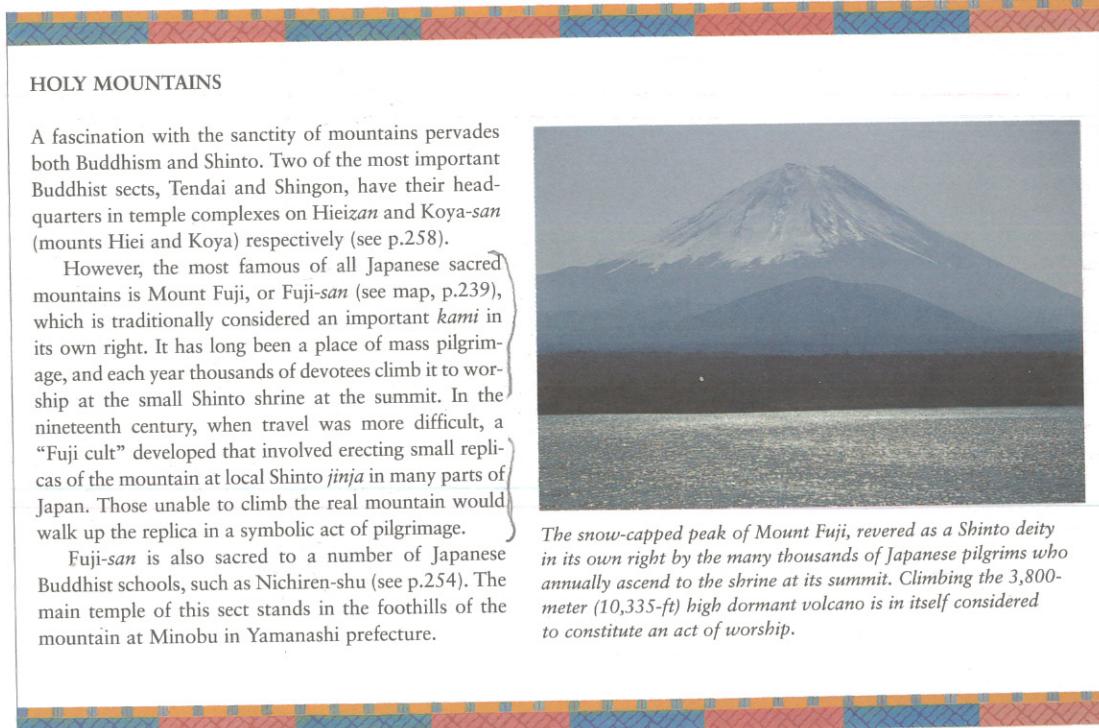
The famous "floating" ceremonial gateway, or *torii*, to the shrine of Itsukushima on Miyajima island in the bay of Hiroshima. Visitors must pass through the gateway by boat before entering the shrine, a great pilgrimage destination for many centuries. The Chinese-influenced design of the *torii* may be compared with the more ancient and simpler style of the gateway to the Inner Shrine of Ise (see p.258).

secular world and the sacred confines of the shrine. In passing through it, a visitor to the shrine symbolically undergoes a ritual purification of the pollution accumulated in the outer world.

Beyond the *torii*, the principal building of the *inja* is the *honden* (main hall), where the sacred image is kept of the *kami* to which the shrine is dedicated. There will also be one or more storehouses, an outer building before which worshippers pray and make offerings, and a stone water tank for the ritual ablutions—rinsing the hands and mouth—required before one approaches the image of the *kami*.

Several mountains have become sacred to one or other (and sometimes both) of Japan's two main faiths (see box, below), and countless other natural features are also held to be sacred. Indeed, almost every distinctive rock outcrop, river, hill, and waterfall is likely to have some association with a local temple, shrine, or both. One example is the magnificent Nachi waterfall in Wakayama prefecture (see map, p.239), which, like Fuji-san, is widely conceived to be a powerful *kami*.

Whole regions are also considered sacred from their association with particular Shinto deities. For example, the Yamato region is revered as the homeland of the imperial dynasty, which according to Shinto myth is of divine descent (see p.246).



The snow-capped peak of Mount Fuji, revered as a Shinto deity in its own right by the many thousands of Japanese pilgrims who annually ascend to the shrine at its summit. Climbing the 3,800-meter (10,335-ft) high dormant volcano is in itself considered to constitute an act of worship.

### THE REALM OF HOLY PURITY

A good example of a ritual that is unique to a single Buddhist sect is the famous *goma*, or fire purification ceremony, which occupies a central place in Shingon worship. It is accorded a special reverence by the Japanese due to its great antiquity: like most Buddhist rites it was brought to Japan from China, but it originated in India in Vedic times and is thought by some scholars to be related to the ancient Indian *soma* ceremonial (see p.131). *Goma* focuses on the purification of the worshippers, who seek to be transported symbolically to a higher realm of consciousness by the flames.

The Shingon priests pile up small strips of wood in a square, each strip inscribed with a prayer or passage from a sacred Buddhist *sutra*. As the priests intone holy chants, the pile is ignited, and sacred *goma* (sesame seed oil) is poured onto the flames, making them leap and dance.

As the sacred smoke rises, the priests fumigate various everyday objects handed to them by members of the congregation—photographs of loved ones, wallets, purses, drivers' licenses, and so on—thereby rendering them pure and, it is believed, safe from harm. At the close of the ceremony, each member of the congregation receives a dab of sesame seed oil on the forehead as a mark of purification and of his or her exposure to the esoteric realm symbolized by the flames and smoke.

An enormous lacquered fish is hauled through the streets of Karatsu on Kyushu island during the city's annual *Kunchi* matsuri. Giant colorful floats of various creatures are a feature of this 300-year-old festival (see also illustration, p.236.)

## SHARING IN THE SPIRIT

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of Japanese religion is its great abundance of local festivals and rituals, both Shinto and Buddhist. In addition to such widespread observances as the Japanese New Year (see sidebar, opposite) and the Obon ancestor festival (see p.264), each Shinto shrine and almost every Buddhist sect and temple has its own calendar of special rituals and ceremonies (see sidebar, left). The same is true of the “New Religions” (see pp.270–71). Other common rituals include funerals, almost all of which are conducted according to Buddhist rites, the chief exception being imperial obsequies, which are totally Shinto in form (see p.266).

As far as most communities are concerned, by far the most important Shinto ritual is the annual (or, in some cases, biennial) local festival or *matsuri*. Virtually every Japanese town, neighborhood, village, or *buraku* (village quarter) has such a festival, which centers on the shrine to the local Shinto *kami*. There are two basic types of *matsuri*. The first, an “ordinary festival,” or “shadow *matsuri*,” does not directly involve the local *kami*, but is still centered on the shrine, and culminates in the festive procession of a portable shrine, a *mikoshi*, around the neighborhood. The second type of *matsuri* is a *taisai*, or “big festival,” during which the



Traditional gigaku (sacred dance theater) performers at the Meiji-jingu, the shrine of the emperor Meiji in Tokyo. Millions of Japanese visit the shrine during Shogatsu Matsuri, the Japanese New Year festival (see below).

*mikoshi* contains the sacred image of the local *kami*. *Taisai* typically occur every three years, although they may occur more frequently and even annually at certain major shrines. In both types of *matsuri*, the three groupings that represent the local community—the merchants’ association (*shotenkai*), the neighborhood residents’ association (*chokai*), and the shrine elders’ association (*sodaikai*)—cooperate to present a positive image of the local community, and at the same time to reinforce their own sense of social solidarity and local pride (see box on p.265).

In addition to participating in communal household rites and local festivals, a great many Japanese go to temples and shrines individually to seek the blessings of the local *bosatsu* or *kami*, especially when faced with some personal crisis. In a Buddhist temple, this usually involves burning a stick of incense as an offering to the deity and wafting the smoke over oneself. At a shrine, the worshipper first performs a purifying ablution, rinsing out the mouth and washing the hands, before approaching the outer part of the shrine and dropping an offering, usually money, into a collection box.

Then, in order to alert the deity to his or her presence, the worshipper claps twice or pulls a rope to ring a bell, or both. Next, with head respectfully bowed and hands clasped, the supplicant makes a request for assistance. For example, a mother might ask the *kami* to help her child pass an entrance examination. Other requests might include asking the *kami* to heal a sick infant or ensure the fertility of a marriage. The worshipper claps again to signify that the request has been made and leaves the shrine. If the request is granted, good manners dictate that the petitioner should return to the shrine in order to thank the *kami* for his or her beneficence.

### THE NEW YEAR FESTIVAL

The three-day Japanese New Year festival, Shogatsu Matsuri, has been celebrated from January 1–3 since Japan abandoned the Chinese lunar calendar in favor of the Gregorian on January 1, 1873. In the days immediately preceding the New Year, people scrub their houses clean in order to begin the year with as little pollution as possible. There are family meals (*osechi*) that include a special soup (*ozoni*) and pounded rice cakes (*mochi*); and gifts are given to superiors as tokens of appreciation.

But the most important activity of Shogatsu Matsuri is a ceremonial visit to a shrine or temple to make an offering and pray for prosperity and good health in the coming months. In some Shinto cults, the miniature household shrines, which sit atop *kamidana* and the tablets bearing the names of family ancestors (see sidebar, p.264), are ritually burned and replaced with new ones.

### THE RETURN OF THE DEAD

One of the most widely celebrated of all Japanese festivals is Obon, the Buddhist celebration of the annual return of the dead to their ancestral homes in mid-August. At Obon, the date of which is still determined by the lunar calendar, people return to their own hometowns if possible and clean family gravestones. They say prayers for the dead, especially the newly departed, and join in Bon-odori, a traditional dance to honor the deceased.

At other times of the year, regular ancestor rites take place in the home. From the Shinto standpoint, the souls of the dead become a low level of deity; from the Buddhist they are souls seeking salvation. But both concepts are accepted, reflecting Japanese "ambiguity tolerance" in spiritual matters.

Some domestic ancestor rituals, especially during Obon, involve burning incense on the *butsudan*, the domestic Buddhist altar, and offering small dishes of rice to the souls of the family's ancestors. Seven days after death, the soul is given a "death-name" (*kaimyo*) that is inscribed on one of the ancestral tablets (*ihai*) kept in the *butsudan*. The same ancestral souls are also revered as Shinto *tama* (see p.266) or *kami*, represented by tablets on the  *kamidana*, the domestic "god-shelf," often directly above the *butsudan*. Offerings are also made to these family *kami*. Most domestic rites are performed in the early morning, a time considered sacred in both Buddhism and Shinto.

One of the most common Shinto rites of passage is the birth ritual known as *omiyamairi*, literally "honorable shrine visit" (*omiya* is a synonym for *jinja*), when the infant is welcomed into the community of its family. Some months after the birth, the parents take the child to a shrine to be purified by the *kannushi* (Shinto priest). Typically, the child's extended family—grandparents, uncles, aunts, and so on—are also present, and afterward there will be a festive meal. At major shrines, such as the Meiji-*jingu* in Tokyo, the party is held in a special room in the shrine grounds.

*Oharai*, the act of ritual purification, forms a central part of most Shinto ceremonies. Waving a sacred branch of *sakaki* ("prospering tree," *cleyera ochnacea*, an evergreen bush of the pine family) and chanting appropriate prayers (*norito*), the *kannushi* or *guji* (senior priest of a shrine) seeks to remove any spiritual pollution contaminating the person, place, or thing. This pollution can include possession by evil spirits, or *oni* (see p.248).

Purification of the bride and groom is central to traditional Japanese wedding ceremonies, which are typically performed by Shinto priests. However, for the most part these take place not at shrines but in hotels and "wedding palaces" built for that purpose.



A Shinto priest intones prayers as part of the annual Saigusa Matsuri (Lily Festival) at the Isagawa shrine in Nara. During the festival, which dates back to the 8th century CE, offerings of lilies are made as charms against disease.

### A TYPICAL TOKYO TAISAI

The local *matsuri* (festival) celebrated in the northwest Tokyo neighborhood of Nishi-Waseda (in the district 3-chome) is a triennial *taisai* ("big festival") in honor of the sun goddess Amaterasu, who is the *kami* of the local shrine, the Tenso-*jinja*. It is one of thousands of shrines to the goddess throughout Japan, the most important being at Ise (the Ise-*jingu*; see p.258).

The *matsuri* traditionally takes place over a two-day period in early September. On the morning of the first day, children carry a children's *mikoshi*, a portable shrine about a quarter of the size of the adult version, around the neighborhood. The Tenso-*jinja* is too small to have its own *guji* (senior Shinto priest, as opposed to an ordinary priest, or *kannushi*), so the *taisai* organizers call upon the services of a *guji* from another shrine nearby. In the afternoon, assisted by the local *sodai* (shrine elders), the acting *guji* performs a ceremony in which he chants Shinto prayers and purifies the shrine and its contents by waving a branch of *sakaki* (sacred pine tree; see main text, opposite).

Later, in the evening, there is public entertainment in the grounds of the shrine. In some years this might be performed by a traditional dance group, and in others by a Shinto theater troupe, who stage *kagura*, sacred Japanese theater (see p.268). Itinerant *matsuri* concessionaires, called *roten*, set up their stalls and sell souvenirs and traditional festival foods, such as *okonomiyakai*—an egg dish prepared on a grill—and fried noodles.

Early the next morning the *guji* removes the sacred (and rarely seen) image of Amaterasu from the inner



In this photograph taken by the author, the children's mikoshi procession prepares to depart on the first morning of the Nishi-Waseda festival. The involvement of boys and girls in the *taisai* is considered essential for passing on the traditions of the festival to a new generation. The mikoshi processions were originally all-male affairs, but girls and young women have participated since 1978 (see p.269).

precincts of the shrine and places it in the waiting *mikoshi*. Then, rotating teams of thirty or forty young men and women carry the portable shrine up one narrow street and down another, chanting "Wa shoi! Wa shoi!" (an untranslatable cry somewhat like "Hurrah!"). The procession, which halts frequently for liquid refreshments, is led by the *guji* and includes singers, a drummer, a young man impersonating Tengu—the guardian demon of the shrine—and the *sodai*. After about six or seven hours, the procession finally returns to the grounds of the shrine, and the priest removes the image from the *mikoshi*.

He returns it to its place in the inner shrine, where it will remain until the next *taisai*.

The fundamental purpose of this ritual is to sanctify the neighborhood served by the *jinja* by periodically exposing it to the sacred aura emitted by the divine image paraded in the *mikoshi*, which also, of course, sanctifies the *mikoshi* bearers. A *matsuri* is therefore a joyous occasion, one in which the participants feel that they partake of the divine essence of the local *kami*. In the process, they may experience feelings close to ecstasy.

After a final prayer by the priest, the *mikoshi* carriers share a meal at the *mikoshi*, or festival headquarters, which stands in the grounds of a small Buddhist temple to the *bosatsu* Jizo (see p.248), some distance from the Tenso-*jinja*.

## HEAVENS AND HELL



In this 18th-century woodblock print, a devotee of Amida Buddha experiences a vision of Amida enthroned in the celestial "Pure Land."

### BIDDING FAREWELL TO THE DEAD

Professing faith in Amida Buddha was to become a vital part of the Japanese way of death, and today the great majority of Japanese choose to be cremated with Buddhist rites and to have their ashes interred in a Buddhist cemetery. Almost all Japanese cemeteries are attached to temples, especially those of the "Pure Land" sects (Jodo-shu and Jodo-shinshu).

However, it is possible to be buried according to Shinto rites, and there are at least two Shinto cemeteries in Tokyo. One of them is reserved for the imperial family, whose funerals are traditionally Shinto in form. The most recent was that of the late Showa emperor (Hirohito) in 1989, which was presided over by Shinto priests (*kannushi*) from Ise and other important shrines.

It has been noted that, for the Japanese, Shinto is essentially the "life religion" and is primarily concerned with the here and now, the abundance of nature, and human and animal fertility. Since the advent of Buddhism, specifically Shinto ideas of life after death and the salvation of the soul have become confined to the belief that a person's spirit persists after death and remains effective for the benefit of the living. The ancestral spirits, or *tama*, are considered part of the social group to whom one is duty-bound not to fall into a state of shame (see p.256). The *tama* of the newly deceased are therefore nourished with offerings at the domestic Shinto shrine, or *kamidana* (see p.264); in return, they are expected to bless and protect the living.

Matters of death and what happens afterward are central to most of Japan's Buddhist traditions. There are numerous Buddhist "heavens," of which the most pervasive is the "Pure Land" (see p.193). For the "Pure Land" Buddhist sects, the route to ultimate "salvation" (*nirvana*, the release from the cycle of life and death; see p.257) lies in rebirth in the eponymous "Pure Land," a celestial region where, free from earthly disturbances, the deceased will be able to attain enlightenment and eventually *nirvana*. The "Pure Land" is thus a sort of "half-way heaven" between the pain and suffering of the mortal world and final and perpetual release. The key to being reborn in this paradise is absolute faith in the figure of Amida Buddha, expressed in the utterance of the *nembutsu* (see pp.253-4). Amida is believed to possess an almost unbounded compassion for human beings, to the extent that although he has himself attained the enlightened state of a *buddha*, he has undertaken to refrain from entering *nirvana* in order to help others to reach the haven of the "Pure Land."

It is still theoretically possible for a person to achieve *nirvana* directly via the "hard path" of intense meditation and attention to spiritual cleansing. But Honen, the founder of the "Pure Land" sect (see p.253), was convinced that faith in Amida is necessary because most human beings are so inherently wicked that even a near-perfect spiritual life in this world is probably not enough to achieve ultimate salvation.

The assistance of Amida was made more necessary by the widespread assumption on the part of most Buddhist clergy that the universe had reached its "third age," the epoch of increasing chaos known in Japanese as *mappo*. In this period, growing confusion, disorder, and evil would make it difficult for more than a handful of people to find the peace necessary to enable them to follow the "hard" path to salvation. If they failed, they might (in the "Pure Land" view) be consigned to the

fires of the Buddhist Hell, Jigoku (see box, below). "Pure Land" Buddhists rely on Amida to aid the mass of the faithful to avoid this fate.

According to the "Pure Land" sects, anyone who has not been "saved" by Amida can look to another important figure in Buddhist eschatology, the *bodhisattva* Maitreya ("Benevolent One," Japanese Miroku), the "*buddha* of the future age." Maitreya, it is said, will come to restore the teachings of the Buddha (the Dharma) and create an earthly Buddhist paradise when the current world-age ends, at the conclusion of *mappo*. No one can say when this apocalypse will be, but some Buddhist-based "New Religions" have made apocalyptic predictions, most recently (and notoriously) the Aum Shinrikyu group that carried out fatal sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo metro system in 1995.

### LANDS OF THE DEAD

Japan's prehistoric religion appears to have had a well-developed concept of an afterlife. A great deal of attention was paid to the disposition of the body, and during the Kofun period (ca. 300-552CE) elaborate tumuli were constructed to house the spirits of dead emperors. Ancient Shinto does seem to have possessed the concept of a Hades-like infernal region, as seen in the image of Yomi in the *Kojiki*, but save for the celebrated episode in which the primal god Izanagi visits this subterranean realm in a vain attempt to retrieve his dead spouse (see p.247), there is no further mention of the place and it plays no role in modern Shinto theology.

Buddhist ideas have superseded most Shinto concepts of regions of the dead, but not entirely. After thirty-three years, the *tama*, or spirit of a deceased ancestor (see main text), is believed to lose its individual nature and to merge with the collective body of family ancestral spirits or *kami*. These are said to dwell on a sacred mountain, often in the Kumano, Yoshino, or another mountainous region of the heartland of ancient Japan. The amorphous family *kami* are also invoked in ritual, but at a more abstract level than the *tama* of a family member who has recently passed away (see also p.264).

The Buddhist sects introduced a number of afterworld concepts, including paradisiacal regions presided over by the Buddha himself (the Nichiren sects), the Vairochana Buddha (the Shingon sect), the Maitreya, and Kannon. They also introduced the concept of divine judgment, in which, forty-nine days after death, the soul is assessed by a being called Emma (Sanskrit Yama). Depending on his judgment, the soul is assigned either to a paradise, or to one of the demonic regions of Jigoku (Hell), or to rebirth as a beast, a deity, or a new human being. However, the most pervasive Buddhist afterworld concept was that of the "Pure Land," a paradise where souls could escape the torments of Jigoku and eventually achieve permanent release, *nirvana*.

The Shintoist belief in the soul as both *tama* and *kami* is held simultaneously with the Buddhist belief that the soul is assigned to hell or paradise and reincarnation. As so often, Japanese religion sees no conflict in embracing both notions, however contradictory they may at first appear.



Emma, the lord of Jigoku (top), judges the karma (balance of merits and demerits) of the dead; those with excess demerit are consigned to a punishment region. An 18th-century print.

### THE YASUKUNI SHRINE

The specter of Japan's militaristic past occasionally raises its head in the context of the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo. The *kami* enshrined in this *jinja* are the souls of Japan's war dead from the creation of the Imperial Army in 1871 to the end of the Second World War. As such, the shrine continues to be the center of controversy, especially when prominent members of the government—sometimes even the prime minister—call to pay their respects.

Such occasions may not be common, but they always receive heavy coverage in the Japanese media. The Japanese Left, evoking prewar State Shinto (see p.245) and its intensely nationalist ideology, accuses politicians involved of violating Japan's 1947 constitution, which clearly prohibits the state from involvement in any religion. The Right counters with the claim that the Yasukuni shrine is a private religious institution and that those who pray there do so as private individuals.

Complicating matters is the fact that in recent years there have been repeated attempts to turn the Yasukuni-jinja into Japan's equivalent of a "tomb of the unknown soldier," a place where visiting foreign dignitaries may lay wreaths. But the sensitivities of the Left on this issue resonate across much of the Japanese political spectrum, and so far the measure has failed to receive sufficient backing in the Japanese Diet (parliament).

## OLD FAITHS IN THE MODERN WORLD

Ancient Japanese society was organized into *uji*, or clans, and the roots of Shinto were intimately intertwined with the collective values fostered by this all-encompassing social unit. Indeed, the tutelary *kami* enshrined in a local Shinto shrine is still called the *ujigami*, or "clan deity," despite the fact that the *uji* system, as a major force in Japanese life, has been defunct for more than a millennium. More recently, the *ie*, or extended household, which supplanted the *uji* as the dominant social unit as feudalism took hold after ca. 1185CE, has given rise to a deep-seated emphasis on the family in both Shinto and the more popular Buddhist sects (see p.256). Shrine or temple membership is still determined by a person's *ie*, a fact that has contributed to the rise of the so-called "New Religions" (see pp.270–71).

For centuries, women have played a relatively minor role in the country's religious life, although there were reigning empresses until well into the early historic period: Shotoku Taishi was regent for one (see p.243), and the *Kojiki* (see p.250) was commissioned by another. There were also high priestesses of Ise, the shrine of the sun goddess (see p.258). But by ca. 800CE the impact of Chinese Confucianism and its heavily patriarchal ideology had effectively put an end to this early equality of status. Since that time all emperors and most priests have been male, even though Amaterasu remains Shinto's most revered deity.

In recent years, the worldwide women's movement has begun to exert an influence on traditional Japanese beliefs and practices. An increasing number of Shinto shrines now permit young women to carry *mikoshi* (portable shrines) during festivals (see box, opposite). There has also been



Female dancers taking part in *kagura*, sacred Shinto theater, at a shrine in Nara. Women have long taken part in Shinto ceremonies as musicians or dancers, but until recently they were largely excluded from officiating as priests.

an increase in the number of women Shinto priests, in spite of opposition from the more conservative shrines. In 1996, out of 21,091 priests, ten percent were women, compared with nine percent in 1993.

Shinto's past association with the state militarism that existed until 1945 still occasionally gives rise to controversy (see sidebar, opposite). However, while the Buddhist sects have generally steered clear of politics, they have also been less responsive to the kind of pressure for change that has led to women entering the Shinto priesthood. Japanese Buddhism has few, if any, women priests. There have been Buddhist nuns for centuries, but they constitute a very conservative element of Japanese religious life.

The one Buddhist sect that has become controversial in modern times is Nichiren-shoshu (see p.255), or more particularly its lay organization, Soka Gakkai ("Value-Creating Society"; see p.271).

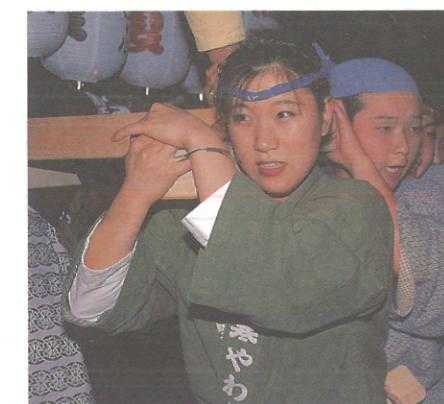


### WOMEN SHRINE BEARERS

The act of carrying the *mikoshi*, or portable shrine, during a local festival or *matsuri* (see p.262–3) is regarded as a considerable privilege, especially on those occasions when the *mikoshi* contains the image of the deity from the local Shinto shrine. Traditionally, the task of *mikoshi* bearing was reserved for young men: women were expected to play a supportive role in *matsuri* processions, providing refreshments for *mikoshi* bearers and cooking dinner after the portable shrine had been returned to the main shrine.

However, this began to change in the late 1970s, with women in one neighborhood after another gaining the right to join their brothers and husbands in carrying the *kami* through the streets.

In the Tokyo neighborhood of Nishi-Waseda (see p.265), this change occurred in 1978. In March of that year, six months before the annual "shadow *matsuri*" (see p.262) a member of the women's committee of the neighborhood residents' association (*chokai*)—the head of which has overall responsibility for the festival—pointed out that young women were carrying *mikoshi* in nearby *matsuri*,



Female shrine bearers are now a common sight at local Shinto festivals. These women are taking part in a matsuri at Asahikawa on Hokkaido island.

and suggested that the time had come for their own neighborhood to follow suit.

The process of decision-making that followed was typically Japanese, with courteous discussion rather than polarized argument. The idea was considered by the main bodies involved in organizing the *matsuri*: the *chokai*, the shrine elders' association, and the local merchants' association (most of the would-be shrine-bearers were shopkeepers' daughters). The *guji* (chief priest) of a neighboring shrine, who regularly officiated during the Nishi-Waseda *matsuri*, was also consulted. He approved the change, citing as a

precedent the fact that there were once high priestesses of Amaterasu at Ise (see main text)—Amaterasu is also the local deity of Nishi-Waseda.

Several months later, after every important group involved had discussed the proposal informally and approved it, the change was formally agreed by the head of the *chokai*. A week or so before the *matsuri* a group of young women were duly incorporated into the roster of *mikoshi* bearers.



## THE "NEW RELIGIONS"

Since the early nineteenth century, Japan has spawned a host of spiritual movements that have collectively come to be called the "New Religions" (Shinko Shukyo). The great majority of these are derivatives of Shinto, although most are heavily infused with ideas drawn from a variety of sources, including Buddhism, Chinese traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism, Christianity, and, in modern times, even Western occultism. Despite occasional excesses and sometimes garbled theological underpinnings, the New Religions provide vivid evidence that the ancient impetus to religious innovation is very much alive and well in modern Japan.

The first New Religions arose against the background of growing social chaos that accompanied the breakdown of the Tokugawa shogunate. At this time, a number of successful new sects sprang up, usually led by charismatic individuals. Their success continued in the Meiji period (1868–1912), by the end of which thirteen Shinto-based sects, including Tenrikyo (see box, below), had been recognized by the Japanese government. Several movements have also arisen directly from Buddhist traditions, the most influential being Soka Gakkai ("Value Creating Society"),

### THE TENRIKYO SECT

In 1838, while nursing her sick son, Miki Nakayama (1798–1887) was possessed by a *kami* who identified himself as Ten-taishogun, the "Great Heavenly Overlord." In the course of the next few years, Ten-taishogun told Nakayama that he and his nine subordinate entities were the only true *kami*, and that they had chosen her to spread what came to be called the "Heavenly Truth," or *tenri*. Thus was born the Tenrikyo sect.

The *kami*'s message was eventually written down in a long poem, completed in 1883, called the *Ofudesaki*, "The Tip of the Divine Writing Brush." In it can be found the collected revelations the founder received about the nature of heaven and especially of the *kami* who dwell there. Their relationship to human beings was analogous to that of a parent to his or her children. Thus, the prime manifestation of the



Devotees at Tenrikyo's main sanctuary in Tenri City, or Oyasato, the "Parental Home." In Tenrikyo belief, it is here that "God the Parent" created humanity.

intense profession of faith, in this instance in the power of Oyakami, and a well-defined afterworld.

From its base at Tenri City, near Nara, the faith spread throughout Japan and in recent years it has been carried to Hawaii, North America, Brazil, and other countries with sizeable Japanese immigrant populations.

godhead in the Tenrikyo faith is called the Oyakami, "God the Parent."

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Tenrikyo had become a recognized Shinto sect, and it remains today one of the most successful of the New Religions. Although it is primarily rooted in the Shinto concept of a hierarchy of *kami*, the religion founded by Miki Nakayama (or Oyasama, "Honored Parent") incorporates concepts borrowed from "Pure Land" Buddhism, including the concept of "salvation" through an



founded in the late 1920s by Makiguchi Tsuesaburo (1871–1944) and closely linked to the existing Nichiren-shoshu sect. By the Second World War, Tsuesaburo and his disciple, Toda Josei (1900–58), had only attracted a few thousand disciples before their devotion to the teachings of Nichiren (see p.255) led to their suppression. But after 1945, under Toda, the movement grew rapidly, spurred by the social upheavals that accompanied Japan's rapid post-war economic growth (see sidebar, right).

Soka Gakkai's appeal was primarily to the masses who had migrated to the cities from rural areas and had lost touch with the social networks that are so important to Japanese life. Attendance at a temple or shrine was based on one's *ie*, or family (see p.256), so those new to an area often found it difficult to join a place of worship. Many New Religions arose to meet the spiritual needs of such people. The more "mainstream" New Religions, such as Tenrikyo, have become much like the older Japanese sects in their promotion of "family values." However, a small minority of new sects have been accused of behaving like the more notorious cults in the West, for example targeting and "brainwashing" susceptible young people. One such was Aum Shinrikyo, an apocalyptic Buddhist-based sect responsible for a gas attack on the Tokyo metro in 1995 that killed several people.

According to one estimate there are some two hundred thousand New Religions today, although many have tiny followings. A good example of a smaller movement is Shukyo Mahikari, or "Divine Light," founded in the early 1960s. It emphasizes healing and has an extraordinarily broad-based theology that draws on Shinto, Buddhism, and a host of other elements—including the legend of Atlantis. Like other New Religions, Shukyo Mahikari demonstrates the continuing vitality of the Japanese genius for blending elements of many different spiritual and cultural traditions.

A contemporary woodblock print by the artist Yoshitoshi depicting one of Commodore Matthew C. Perry's US Navy warships off Uraga, Edo (Tokyo), in 1853. The end of the shogunate began when Perry's "Black Ships" forcibly broke Japan's two-centuries-old self-imposed blockade. From this time, Japan was once more receptive to outside influences, which lent great impetus to the burgeoning New Religions. Many of the latter sprang up in response to conditions in the last decades of the shogunate, when organized Shinto and Buddhism had grown stagnant and unresponsive to changing social conditions.

### SOKA GAKKAI

By the late 1960s, led by Toda Josei's successor, Daisaku Ikeda (1928–), Soka Gakkai had attracted over eleven million members. The movement has also recruited many non-Japanese members, particularly in the United States.

Soka Gakkai's strict hierarchy, quasimilitary organization, mass rallies, and demand for almost total commitment from its members raised suspicions that it was a front for militarist subversives. This suspicion—subsequently proved totally incorrect—was fueled when it launched Komeito, the "Clean Government Party," in the 1960s. Komeito was widely seen as an attempt to politicize Nichiren-shoshu or even seize power. This sentiment lingers, despite the fact that Komeito severed all official connections with Soka Gakkai over twenty years ago (and, indeed, recently dissolved itself).

Another source of unease is Soka Gakkai's intense efforts to win converts, which goes against the grain of Japan's traditional inclusivist attitude toward different religions. But in spite of a recent decline in membership, financial scandals, and a rift with the Nichiren priesthood, Soka Gakkai remains an important force in Japanese religious life.