

## **Shinto & Buddhism: Wellsprings of Japanese Spirituality**

1           The Japanese religious tradition is rich and complex, encompassing within it both complementary and contradictory trends in religious thought and practice with an ease that may occasionally puzzle the Western observer. At the very heart of the tradition stand Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, and Buddhism, the Indian religion that reached Japan in the sixth through eighth centuries C.E. from Korea and China. Throughout the long course of Japanese history, it has been these two religions that have contributed most to the Japanese understanding of themselves and their world.

### **Shinto**

2           Shinto was the earliest Japanese religion, its obscure beginnings dating back at least to the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. Until approximately the sixth century C.E., when the Japanese began a period of rapid adoption of continental civilization, it existed as an amorphous mix of nature worship, fertility cults, divination techniques, hero worship, and shamanism. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, it had no founder and it did not develop sacred scriptures, an explicit religious philosophy, or a specific moral code. Indeed, so unself-conscious were the early Japanese about their religious life that they had no single term by which they could refer to it. The word *Shinto*, or “the Way of the *kami* (gods or spirits),” came into use only after the sixth century, when the Japanese sought to distinguish their own tradition from the foreign religions of Buddhism and Confucianism that they were then encountering. Thus, in its origins, Shinto was the religion of a pristine people who, above all, were sensitive to the spiritual forces that pervaded the world of nature in which they lived. As one ancient chronicle reports: in their world myriad spirits shone like fireflies and every tree and bush could speak.

3           Remarkably, neither Shinto’s relatively primitive original character nor the introduction of more sophisticated religions, such as Buddhism and Confucianism, caused the religion to wane in importance. In part its continued existence can be explained by pointing to changes that took place within Shinto, for after the sixth century, it was gradually transformed into a religion of shrines, both grand and small, with set festivals and rituals that were overseen by a distinct priestly class. However, such developments have had little effect on basic Shinto attitudes and values. More crucial to Shinto’s survival, therefore, have been its deep roots in the daily and national life of the Japanese people and a strong conservative strain in Japanese culture.

4           The Shinto world view is fundamentally bright and optimistic, as befits a religion in which the main deity is a sun goddess. While it is not unaware of the darker aspects of human existence, Shinto’s chief *raison d’être* is the celebration and enrichment of life.

5           Much can be learned about Shinto’s world view from Japanese mythology. Two eighth-century works, the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) and the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), include the story of the creation of the Japanese islands by the divine couple, Izanagi and his mate, Izanami; the subsequent birth of numerous gods and goddesses—the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, chief among them; and the descent of representatives of the Sun Goddess’ line to rule the islands. Two aspects of the mythology are particularly noteworthy. The first is its this-worldly orientation. Other worlds are mentioned in the mythology—the High Plain of Heaven, for example, and the Dark Land, an unclean land of the dead—yet we receive only the

haziest impressions of them. Blessed with a mild climate, fertile seas, and impressive mountain landscapes, the early Japanese seem to have felt little compulsion to look far beyond their present existence.

6 A second important feature of the mythology is the close link among the gods, the world they created, and human beings. The tensions present in Western religion between the Creator and the created, and the human and natural realms, are conspicuously absent. In the Shinto view, the natural state of the cosmos is one of harmony in which divine, natural, and human elements are all intimately related. Moreover, human nature is seen as inherently good, and evil is thought to stem from the individual's contact with external forces or agents that pollute our pure nature and cause us to act in ways disruptive of the primordial harmony.

7 Shinto deities are referred to as *kami*. The term is frequently translated "god" or "gods," but it expresses a concept of divinity significantly different from that found in Western religion. In particular, Shinto deities do not share the characteristics of utter transcendence and omnipotence often associated with the concept of god in the West. In the broadest sense, a *kami* may be anything that is extraordinary and that inspires awe or reverence. Consequently, a wide variety of *kami* exist in Shinto: there are *kami* related to natural objects and creatures—the spirits of mountains, seas, rivers, rocks, trees, animals, and the like; there are guardian *kami* of particular locales and clans; also considered *kami* are exceptional human beings, including all but the last in Japan's long line of emperors. Finally, the abstract, creative forces are recognized as *kami*. Evil spirits are also known in Shinto, but few seem irredeemably so. While a god may first call attention to its presence through a display of rowdy or even destructive behavior, generally speaking, the *kami* are benign. Their role is to sustain and protect.

8 Worship in Shinto is undertaken to express gratitude to the gods and to secure their continued favor. Worship may take the form of one of the many large communal festivals that occur at fixed times during the year, celebrating such events as spring planting, the fall harvest, or some special occasion in the history of a shrine. However, it may also be carried out privately in a much abbreviated fashion in the home or at the neighborhood shrine. Although a festival may continue for several days, shifting at times in mood from the solemn to the lighthearted or even raucous, individual worship may require only a few moments to complete. In spite of such contrasts, both types of Shinto worship have three essential elements in common. Both begin with the all-important act of purification, which ordinarily involves the use of water; in both an offering is presented to the *kami*, today usually money but often food; and in both a prayer or petition is made. We may further note that in general Shinto worship is performed at a shrine. These structures, which are made only of natural materials and located on sites selected for their abodes for the *kami* rather than as shelters for the worshipers.

9 Since Shinto is without scriptures, dogmas, and creeds, worship has always had a central place in the religion. Rather than through sermons or study, it has been through its festivals and rituals, as well as the physical features of the shrine itself, that Shinto has transmitted its characteristic attitudes and values. Most prominent among these are a sense of gratitude and respect for life, a deep appreciation of the beauty and power of nature, a love of purity and—by extension—cleanliness, and a preference for the simple and unadorned in the area of aesthetics.

### **Buddhism**

10 By the time Buddhism entered Japan in the sixth century C.E., it had already become a world religion with a history of a thousand years. The form of Buddhism that from the start was

dominant in Japan is known as Mahayana, the Buddhism of the Greater Vehicle, and it brought with it an enormous canon of religious literature, an elaborate body of doctrine, a well-organized priesthood, and a dazzling tradition of religious art and architecture—all of which Shinto lacked in the sixth century. Although its view of the world and mankind differed markedly from that of Shinto, it is important to understand that within the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism both differences from and similarities to the native tradition could be found. On the one hand, for example, Buddhism regarded the world as transient and saw it as a source of suffering for those who remained attached to it, a view that contrasts sharply with Shinto's ready acceptance of the world. On the other hand, however, there was an optimism in Mahayana Buddhism that meshed well with Shinto—an optimism about human nature, for it was committed to the belief that all human beings had the potential to attain the wisdom that brings an end to suffering, and an ultimate optimism about the world itself, since it taught that once human attachments are discarded, the world takes on a new and positive significance.

11 It is no wonder that at first the Japanese were unable to appreciate Buddhism on its own terms. They regarded the Buddha as simply another *kami* and were drawn to the religion by the beauty of its art and the hope of such concrete benefits as wealth and longevity that, on the popular level, Buddhism did not disdain to promise. By the seventh century, however, individuals capable of grasping Buddhism's message began to emerge. In general, we may understand the subsequent development of Buddhism in Japan as the result of constant interaction between the foreign religion and the native religious tradition. For its part, Buddhism consciously sought to develop a positive connection with Shinto. This was eventually accomplished by identifying the Shinto *kami* as manifestations of various Buddhas and bodhisattvas that had grown up within Mahayana Buddhism. By this conception, the Buddhists were able to introduce many of their own ideas into Shinto, and, in the end, argue that Shinto and Buddhism were complementary versions of the same fundamental truth—a view that gained wide acceptance in Japan.

12 The effect of the native religious tradition on Buddhism was to bring to the fore within it those aspects that best suited Japanese tastes. This can be illustrated by brief references to three Buddhist sects that represent uniquely Japanese developments: Kukai's (774-835) Shingon sect; Shinran's (1173-1262) True Pure Land sect; and the sect founded by Nichiren (1222-1282) and known by his name. All of these sects are still active today. The Shingon sect stands in the mainstream of Buddhism in terms of doctrine—emphasizing the transient nature of existence and calling upon its followers to transcend the ordinary world of suffering—and in the broad outline of its practices, which stress the importance of ethical conduct, meditation, and study. However, Shingon Buddhism advocates a distinctive type of meditation. More intricate than traditional meditation, it involves the use of symbolic hand gestures and speech, that is, mudras and mantras, as well as a form of Buddhist art known as a *mandala*. The *mandala* represents the universe as it is seen by the enlightened and serves as the object of meditation. The sheer complexity of Shingon meditation, coupled with the rich symbolism and beauty of the *mandala*, give this sect an air of mystery that has proven particularly attractive to millions of Japanese from Kukai's age to the present.

13 In the True Pure Land sect, we encounter a very different kind of Buddhism, one that advocates salvation by faith rather than the attainment of enlightenment through the practice of morality and meditation. Based upon the belief that as time passes human beings find it increasingly difficult to follow the example of the historical Buddha—an idea that can be traced all the way back to India—it teaches that in the present era salvation can be gained only by

relying on the saving grace of the celestial Buddha Amida, who resides in a Pure Land to the West. This belief had been embraced by other Buddhists, not only in Japan, but in China and India as well; but Shinran was the first in the history of Buddhism to draw the radical conclusion that acceptance of it must lead to the complete abandonment of monastic discipline. Consequently, from Shinran's day on, it has been common for True Pure Land priests to marry and live as lay persons, and the sect has been one of the most popular to develop in Japan.

14 Finally, in the Nichiren sect, we see surfacing in Buddhism, in a dramatic fashion, the strong sense of national pride that has frequently been related to religious sentiment in Japan. Nichiren was an impassioned reformer who envisioned both himself and Japan at the center of a worldwide movement to revive what he considered to be true Buddhism.

15 These figures and sects do not, of course, reflect all of the many ways in which Buddhism was transformed in Japan; nevertheless, in them we can glimpse some of the salient characteristics of Japanese Buddhism. In Shingon, we see a strong attraction to the mystical and mysterious, as well as to aesthetic modes of apprehension and expression; in the True Pure Land sect, we observe a preference for a kind of Buddhism that can be followed within the context of everyday life; and in the Nichiren sect, we detect an ever-present consciousness of national identity. Given Shinto's emphasis on ritual and the aesthetic features of the shrine, its this-worldly orientation, and its close connection to the myth of Japan's origins and the Imperial line, it is not difficult to discern the influence of the native religion and the background of these developments.

### Citation Information

Watt, Paul. "Shinto and Buddhism: Wellsprings of Japanese Spirituality." *Asian Religions* 2.1 (1982): 21-23. Print.