



Japanese Religions

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The Japanese religious tradition is made up of several major components, including Shinto, Japan's earliest religion, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Christianity has been only a minor movement in Japan. However, the so-called "new religions" that arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are a prominent feature of Japanese religious life today.

Shinto. Shinto, or the "way of the spirits or deities," began to take form in Japan's pre-historic period before the sixth century C. E. In this early phase, Shinto was the religion of a pre-literate society that was organized around the central social unit of the clan. Shinto deities or *kami* were seen as permeating the natural world. Uniquely shaped or awe-inspiring trees, mountains, rivers, and rocks, all could be considered *kami*, but human beings could also be viewed as *kami*. An early mythology developed by the leading clan of the sixth and seventh centuries, the Yamato clan, later known as the Imperial family, holds that the leader of the clan, the emperor, was a descendent of their protector *kami*, the sun goddess Amaterasu. But great warriors and poets, for example, have also been recognized as *kami* by virtue of their special abilities.

Since early Shinto did not have a founder or produce sacred texts, it was through communal rituals that the religion was transmitted. The goal of the rituals was to maintain or reinstate the harmony between nature, humans and the *kami* that the early Japanese appear to have taken as the norm. As the Japanese began to adopt agriculture around the third century B.C.E., Shinto rituals became closely tied to the agricultural year. Communal festivals were conducted at times of planting or harvest, or at important times in the history of a community. Major rituals contained four parts: purification, offerings, recitations or prayers, and a concluding meal. All members of the community took part, if only symbolically, in the final meal, thus bringing harmony again to the relationship of humans and the *kami*.

Although Shinto had no sacred structures in its earliest phase, by the sixth and seventh centuries C.E., the Japanese began to build shrines that housed symbolic representations of the *kami* and that provided a site for rituals. 1

It is worth noting that, while Japanese government leaders used Shinto to legitimate Japan's War in the Pacific from 1937 to 1945, throughout most of its history, Shinto was a religion linked to nature, agriculture and local communities.

Buddhism. Buddhism arose in India in the sixth century B.C.E and, after passing through China and Korea, arrived in Japan in the sixth century C.E. As originally presented by the historical Buddha, Buddhism was a path of practice that an individual could take up to gain release from suffering. The Buddha taught that, regardless of the relative degrees of happiness that one might achieve in life, all living beings eventually become ill, grow old and die. And because he accepted the Indian idea of rebirth according to karma, suffering was understood to extend indefinitely into the future. The Buddha held that to gain release from suffering one had to attain a new understanding of reality. In particular one had to see that persons and things do not exist autonomously, on the basis of individual "selves," but rather that all things are linked in a network of interdependency. To overcome the self-centeredness of the ignorant, one had to transform one's way of thinking and acting through the practice of Buddhist morality, meditation and wisdom or study.

A new branch of the religion called Mahayana, or the Greater Vehicle, arose in the first century B.C.E. Mahayana continued to transmit the path of morality, meditation and wisdom as the way to liberation, but it also developed new forms of thought and practice in order to reach out to as many people as possible. Mahayana leaders added hundreds of new sutras or scriptures to the Buddhist canon, texts that introduce Buddhas and bodhisattvas (enlightened assistants to the Buddhas) that were not seen in the earlier tradition.

Some of the new sutras recommend a path of devotion to these enlightened beings as a way of taking the first step toward liberation, or in some few texts, as a way of gaining rebirth in the pure land of one of these Buddhas. Moreover, like virtually all religious traditions, both early Buddhism (usually called Theravada or "The Teachings of the Elders" today) and Mahayana Buddhism transmitted a strain of magic that promised followers relief from a variety of calamities. It was Mahayana Buddhism that spread to China, Korea, and Japan. 2

When Buddhism reached Japan in the sixth century from Korea and China, its sophisticated philosophical message was difficult for most Japanese to understand. A small elite was then learning Chinese (Japan's first written language) and some of them began to study Chinese Buddhist texts, as scholars and members of the clergy do in Japan down to the present. However, most Japanese were first attracted to Buddhist art, to Buddhist magic or to the possibility of closer ties with the advanced civilization of China, where Buddhism had already spread. Whatever the attraction, by the eighth century, when the Japanese established their first permanent capital in the city of Nara, the Japanese court had embraced Buddhism as well as Shinto.

As might be expected, a number of influential Buddhist sects arose over the course of Japanese history. Three examples may provide some insight into unique features of the Japanese Buddhist tradition.

At the end of the eighth century, Japan's capital was moved from Nara to Heian-kyo, the forerunner of present-day Kyoto. During the Heian period (794-1185), a form of Buddhism usually called Tantric Buddhism in India, but Esoteric Buddhism in Japan became widely popular. The Shingon (True Word or Mantra) sect, founded by Kūkai (774-835), was one of two Esoteric sects to spread at this time.

Shingon was associated with a unique style of meditation that involved *mandalas* (artistic representations of various Buddhas and bodhisattvas or of the world as seen by those enlightened beings), *mudras* (symbolic hand positions associated with each Buddha and bodhisattva in the mandalas), and *mantras* (sacred Sanskrit verses associated with these figures). By focusing the mind on one of the images in the mandala, by mimicking the hand position of the Buddha or bodhisattva on which one was concentrating, and by reciting the mantra associated with that being, one might evoke an awareness of one's own identity with the Buddhas in body, speech, and mind.

For many Japanese practitioners, however, gaining union with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the mandalas was also a way of gaining supernatural powers. In their minds, this meditation could lead to the attainment of the ability to cast out offensive spirits, heal the sick or cause rain. Further, Esoteric Buddhism sought to incorporate Shinto into its interpretation of the world, arguing that the

Shinto kami were Japanese manifestations of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.³

Two other influential Japanese Buddhist movements, Zen and Pure Land, arose in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The eleventh and twelfth centuries were a time of political disorder and warfare. Japan's samurai or warrior class rose to power in the late twelfth century to establish a feudal political system headed in theory by the emperor but in reality by the shogun or leading general of the country. This new leadership class was attracted not to Esoteric Buddhism but to Zen. The Zen or Meditation sect had arisen in China in the sixth through ninth centuries. As it presented itself to the Japanese in the twelfth century, Zen was famous for the discipline and frugality of its monastic traditions, for its stress on meditation as the key to attaining liberation, for its use of the *koan* (a brief and enigmatic exchange between a Zen master and disciple that was sometimes used as an aid in meditation) and for its history of Zen masters willing to do almost anything to drive their students to enlightenment "now." The samurai class was especially drawn to Zen's stress on discipline and its seriousness about life. Zen also became closely associated with certain arts in Japan (monochrome ink painting, the tea ceremony, and others) and, through them, it has had a broad impact on Japanese culture.⁴

The devotional tradition in Mahayana Buddhism also came to the fore in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Because of the warfare of the twelfth century as well as a series of natural disasters that struck the capital region, many Japanese believed that the country was entering a dark period in its history that they called the "degenerate age of the Dharma (or Buddha's teachings)" (*mappo*). They argued that during such a period few human beings were able to achieve enlightenment through traditional methods. Honen (1133-1212), the founder of the Pure Land sect in Japan, taught that all one could do in the degenerate age is call on the name of Amida (Amitabha in Sanskrit), a Buddha who in certain Pure Land Sutras said that he would bring to his pure land all who call on him in faith. No other practice was required. Honen's disciple, Shinran (1173-1262), the originator of the True Pure Land Sect, took an even more radical interpretation of the texts. To show that there was nothing that one could do to achieve liberation in a degenerate age, Shinran rejected completely the celibate, vegetarian life of the monastery. Subsequently all leaders of the True Pure Land Sect have lived as lay folk. Shinran was the first monk in the mainstream Buddhist tradition to reject the monastic life.

Confucianism. Like Buddhism, Confucianism also entered Japan from Korea and China. The tradition was founded in China by Confucius (551-479 B.C.E), whose teachings were passed on to posterity by his disciples in the *Analects* or Sayings of Confucius. Having lived at a time of political unrest, Confucius tried to lead his world back to peace and stability by urging people to cultivate virtue. In particular he emphasized the values of filial piety or respect for parents and elders, decorum or proper conduct, duty, loyalty, learning, and benevolence. His sayings suggest that he saw stable families as the basis for stable governments. Although he had little interest in the numerous deities that his contemporaries recognized, he did see his social vision as legitimated by a sacred force that he called *T'ien* or Heaven.

Confucianism was known to the Japanese from the sixth C.E. on; however, it was not until the Edo or Tokugawa period (1600-1868) that it became a leading ideology of state and a pervasive teaching in Japanese society. At the time, the Japanese had emerged from another period of political chaos, and the new warrior family that took power, the Tokugawa, saw the value of Confucian teachings, along with Buddhism and Shinto, in their effort to establish a lasting peace. The Tokugawa government eventually set up a Confucian school, the *Shoheiko* or "The School of Prosperous Peace," and heads of the feudal domains that the Tokugawa controlled established similar schools. Several teachers advanced a special ethical code for the warrior class, known as *bushido*, the way of the warrior, that brought together Zen's emphasis on discipline and

frugality, Shinto's love of the country, and the Confucian values of filial piety, loyalty, dedication to duty, and learning. Such values and attitudes were spread throughout Japanese society by popular teachers like Baigan Ishida (1685-1744), who taught a syncretism or blending of Confucianism, Buddhism and Shinto.⁵ As many scholars of modern Japan have noted, the spread of such values helped the Japanese modernize rapidly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Christianity and the New Religion. Two other noteworthy components of the Japanese religious tradition are Christianity and the new religions. Christianity entered Japan first in the sixteenth century, when Catholicism was introduced in 1549. It gained few followers at the time, and the Tokugawa family suppressed Christianity in the seventeenth century. After the collapse of Tokugawa control and the opening of Japan to the world in the Meiji period (1868-1914), Christianity was again introduced by Protestant missionaries. Christian missionaries and teachers built schools and hospitals and were an important conduit for knowledge of the West. They also gave particular attention to the needs of women and workers. However, in this period as well, Christian adherents never made up more than one percent of the Japanese population. Two stumbling blocks to the religion's spread were Christianity's demand for exclusive allegiance (which stood in sharp contrast to the more inclusive approach of the Japanese), and the condescending attitude toward Japanese culture that some missionaries exhibited.

The so-called new religions of Japan arose by the thousands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of these religions have only a few hundred or thousand followers, but some, like Soka gakkai ("The Value Creation Society"), a Buddhist-based group, claim several million. These groups tend to share a number of characteristics in common. They usually have a charismatic leader who has overcome hardships. They tend to promise concrete benefits, such as health, wealth and the solution to family problems. Although they may have a primary association with Shinto or Buddhism, they often blend elements from several religions. They tend to be critical of the older religious institutions and they usually involve their followers more intensely in religious practice. Some observers of the new religions have estimated that as much as one-quarter of the Japanese population may have some involvement in the new religions. However, one should not infer from this fact that the Japanese today consider themselves to be "religious." On the contrary, most Japanese think of themselves as secular, having only occasional contact with religious institutions at times of weddings, funerals or major holidays such as New Year's Day. Yet many of the values that the traditional religions legitimated have become part of the fabric of everyday life.

Notes

1 For a visual introduction to Shinto, see http://ias.berkeley.edu/orias/visuals/japan_visuals/shinto.HTM. A straightforward discussion of Shinto ritual can be found in Ono Sokyo, *Shinto, The Kami Way* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1962), 50-57.

2 A general introduction to Buddhism that also touches on the religion's spread to Japan is Damien Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

3 For more on Kukai and Shingon, see Paul B. Watt, "Kukai," *Buddhist Spirituality: Later China, Korea, Japan and the Modern World* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 174-185.

4 An instructive video on Zen is *The Principles and Practice of Zen* (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities, 1988). Parts of the video can be used to introduce both life within a Zen monastery and the cultural impact of Zen.

5 On Baigan Ishida's movement, known as Shingaku, see Paul B. Watt, "The Buddhist Element in Shingaku," *Buddhist Spirituality: Later China, Korea, Japan and the Modern World* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1999), 337-347.

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