

Many religions and beliefs shape Japanese purpose in life

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Shinto is believed to be the offspring of the deities Izanagi and Izanami, who created the islands of Japan. Photo from public domain.

What happens if a tree falls in the woods, but no one is around to hear it? Does it still make a sound?

Since ancient times, Japanese philosophers have pondered such challenging questions about the natural world. Japan's stunning natural beauty evoked a sense of awe and wonder among its people. The early Japanese believed the world around them was inhabited by gods and spirits. These higher beings were thought to be present in everything from cascading waterfalls to streaks of mist high in the mountains.

Shinto: Purification

Ancient Japanese elevated this fascination with nature into a belief system that was later called Shinto, or "the Way of the Gods." Shinto held that every mountain, every stream and even large trees contained a divine spirit. These deities, known as kami, were considered cheerful and friendly to humans. If kept satisfied, they would watch over human affairs and would not cause natural disasters.

However, if angered, the kami would not hesitate to unleash their wrath. What angered them most came when humans failed to maintain physical and spiritual cleanliness. To please the kami, worshipers underwent thorough purification before passing beneath the torii, the gate leading into the sacred grounds of a Shinto shrine. Clean humans meant happy kami, and happy kami meant a peaceful realm.

Many of the myths and legends of Shinto emphasized Japan's divine beginnings. For example, the Shinto creation myth tells of a pair of deities called Izanagi and Izanami who created the islands of Japan when droplets of water dropped down from Izanagi's spear. After the couple descended from the heavens to live on the islands, they had numerous divine offspring. Among them was the sun goddess Amaterasu, the most important god in Shinto.

Later generations of Japanese emperors claimed their divinity — and therefore their right to rule — by tracing their ancestry back to Amaterasu herself. As a direct descendant of the sun goddess, the emperor became a Living God. He was to be worshiped along with his all-illuminating divine ancestor.

Buddhism: Providing Answers

Shinto was already well established as the national religion when Buddhism reached Japan in the 6th century A.D. Buddhism first developed in India and then slowly spread throughout East Asia. As Buddhism gained popularity in Japan, it occasionally clashed with Shinto, but it did not replace the earlier religion. Rather, the two overlapped and complemented each other.

Buddhism had produced many more texts than Shinto and followed a strict moral code. Unlike Shinto, it provided detailed answers to questions about death, reincarnation and punishment for wrongdoing.

Two Buddhist teachings were particularly influential. One was the concept of impermanence, the idea that nothing lasts forever. The other was the concept of emptiness, which holds that nothing really has its own unique substance. Instead, everything develops out of something else and is in a process of continual change. These two ideas became ingrained in Japanese thought and are frequently expressed in the country's art and literature.

Zen: Open Mind

As in China, Buddhism in Japan splintered into numerous sects. Of the schools that still exist today — such as Tendai, Shingon, Nichiren and Zen — the Zen school is probably the most distinctive.

Zen Buddhists practice a form of meditation known as zazen, or sitting zen, in which the practitioner sits for hours on end. The goal is to free one's mind from the prison of worldly concerns.

A Zen master tries to help a beginner break through the mind's illusions so the student can discover the true nature of things. He does this by employing puzzling riddles known as kôans, which seemingly make no sense. Such riddles are used to throw off the mind's normal thinking process.



Here is one famous and typical kôan: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Try thinking about that question for a while. If you do, you will experience some of the mysteries of Zen.

Confucianism: China's Contribution

Shinto and the various sects of Buddhism have had the biggest influence on Japanese religious life. However, several belief systems imported from China have also influenced the way the Japanese view the world.

Confucianism, a philosophy and religion based on the teachings of Confucius, gained a foothold in Japan in the 7th century A.D. Its political theories and ideas on how family life should be ordered have persisted for centuries. Confucianism even became the official ideology of the state during the stable Tokugawa period (1600–1868), also known as Edo period.

Two other significant belief systems are Chinese astrology and feng-shui, which expresses the connection between people and the universe. In addition to these, Japan has adopted many other Chinese folk beliefs and practices.

Quiz

- 1 Which section highlights how Japanese religions reacted to the arrival of new spiritual ideas?
- (A) "Shinto: Purification"
 - (B) "Buddhism: Providing Answers"
 - (C) "Zen: Open Mind"
 - (D) "Confucianism: China's Contribution"
- 2 Which piece of evidence BEST explains the purpose of Zen Buddhism?
- (A) Zen Buddhists practice a form of meditation known as zazen, or sitting zen, in which the practitioner sits for hours on end.
 - (B) A Zen master tries to help a beginner break through the mind's illusions so the student can discover the true nature of things.
 - (C) He does this by employing puzzling riddles known as kōans, which seemingly make no sense.
 - (D) Such riddles are used to throw off the mind's normal thinking process.
- 3 Which two sentences express central ideas of the article?
- (A) Shinto is focused on providing moral guidance. Modern Japan has been greatly influenced by religions from other countries.
 - (B) The Shinto religion in Japan focused on spiritual purification. Later religions reinforced this focus on physical and mental cleanliness.
 - (C) Japanese spiritual life has been guided by the arrival of religions from other countries. All Japanese religions left extensive text records.
 - (D) The Japanese religions have focused on different aspects of spirituality. These religions mixed together to influence Japanese culture.

- 4 Which sentence would be BEST to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) Shinto, Buddhism and Confucianism have all influenced the Japanese understanding of spirituality.
 - (B) Shinto religion was later replaced by a combination of Buddhism and Confucianism.
 - (C) Tendai, Shingon and Nichiren are forms of Buddhism.
 - (D) Confucianism rose to become the official religion of Japan during the Edo period.