

**BUDDHISM  
and  
SHINTO  
in  
JAPAN**

*An Introduction*

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## *Workshop Overview*

This workshop introduces the history and background, basic teachings, and social influences of Japan's two major religions. It includes resources for the classroom as well as a slide presentation of temples and shrines.

## *Introductory Comments*

By no means does this presentation represent an exhaustive examination of these two religions—they are too complex for such a cursory study. Rather, I hope to offer a layman's perspective into the cultural richness and academic benefit that can result by incorporating the topics into a classroom. It is a by-product of my interest in religious systems as well as part of a follow-on plan from a study tour of Japan sponsored by the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund.

“...it is impossible to make explicit and clear that which fundamentally by its very nature is vague.”

Dr. Sokyō Ono  
Professor, Kokugakuin Shinto University

# BUDDHISM

Of Japan's two major religions, Buddhism is better known; as such, less time will be spent discussing it. The Buddha personified, in the eyes of his followers, compassion and self-sacrifice. He modeled a code whereby one overcomes suffering through right living. This lifestyle would usher one to spiritual enlightenment.

## **HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

### ***Beginnings*** ➔

The stories of Guatama's early life may vary from source to source, but the central ideas remain the same. A son of privilege and luxury, Guatama became disillusioned by the riches around him. As he ventured from the security of his home, he encountered various forms of suffering. According to legend, he faced—either by vision or by actual journey—four different scenes: an elderly frail, helpless man; a man suffering in an advanced diseased state; a grieving family carrying a corpse; and a mendicant who lived a life of meditation (Buddhism 2). Neither the meditation nor the asceticism offered through Hinduism relieved Guatama's anguish. He pursued a "Middle Path" which ultimately brought him to Enlightenment, a life devoid of impurities.

Buddha, as he became called, traveled the countryside teaching his path to Enlightenment. He taught an alternative to Hinduism. This new doctrine appealed to many who felt confined by the caste system inherent in traditional Indian society. It offered a practical means by which they could enter a higher spiritual realm in subsequent rebirths until attaining Nirvana.

Following Buddha's death, different sects arose based primarily on geographic distribution and secondarily on spiritual interpretations. Most scholars acknowledge three broad distinctions of Buddhist thought: Theravada Buddhism (Southern Buddhism as practiced in Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and parts of Vietnam); Mahayana Buddhism (Northern Buddhism as practiced in China, Japan, Korea, and much of Vietnam); and Vajrayana Buddhism (Tantric Buddhism as practiced in parts of China, Tibet, Mongolia, and Russia) (Traditions 1-2). The various strands of Buddhism weave a unified philosophy as it "demands no blind faith from its adherents, expounds no dogmatic creeds, encourages no superstitious rites and ceremonies, but advocates a golden mean that guides a disciple through pure living and pure thinking..." (Mahathera 5).

### ***Sacred Texts*** ➔

A large body of writing comprises Buddhist literature. The earlier works were less a statement of doctrine than they were a chronicle of the Buddha's life. Myth and legend play a large role in the holy texts as subsequent leaders fashioned the tales to conform to their contemporary needs.

The bulk of Buddha's teachings were categorized by his disciples following his death, and eventually written down. The *Tripitaka* contains the "essence of Buddha's teachings" organized in three "baskets" as described below (Mahathera, p 6).

- The Basket of Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka)—it describes the rules and regulations for the conduct of monks and nuns, chronicles the life of the Buddha, and offers insight into Indian customs and practice;
- The Basket of Discourses (Sutta Pitaka)—it holds the actual teachings promulgated by the Buddha for conventional living; and
- The Basket of Doctrine (Abhidhamma Pitaka)—it discusses the philosophical and more "illuminating" teachings of the Buddha.

Each school of Buddhism has developed its own body of writings to expound its particular creed. Scholars write and debate the implications of Buddha's teachings as do scholars of other faiths.

### **BASIC TEACHINGS**

The foundation of Buddhism lies in "The Four Noble Truths".

- **Dukkha**—all life is suffering
- **Tanha**—thirst; desire and greed are the sources of suffering
- **Nirodha**—suffering and desire can end
- **Marga**—following the "Eightfold Path" (separated into three trainings) brings happiness
  - **Sila**--Ethical conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood)
  - **Samadhi**--Mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration)
  - **Panna**--Wisdom (right understanding, right thought) (Core beliefs 4)

The "Precepts" could roughly parallel the Christian ideals of the Ten Commandments, establishing a moral code to refrain from...

- taking of life
- taking what is not given
- illegal sexual pleasures
- lying
- intoxicants which tend to cloud the mind
- eating after the midday meal
- dancing, music, and unseemly shows
- garlands, perfumes, and personal adornments
- using high and luxurious seats
- accepting gold and silver (Clarke 161)

The first Buddhist missionaries arrived in Japan in 552 (Hamilton xiv); by 592 it had become the official religion (Ono 16). Its appearance paralleled the general influx of Chinese culture into Japan. Several features distinguish the Japanese version of Buddhism. The Tendai sect teaches Enlightenment can be attained by the laity as well as the monks. Meditation plays a central role. Nationalism represents a common theme as well. Zen Buddhism rose to prominence in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This style incorporates the use of everyday actions to aid in meditation, the development of intuition, and art forms as spiritual expressions (Clarke 163). The tending of ornate gardens, arranging flowers, painting, performing the rituals of the tea ceremony, and writing (calligraphy and poetry) are artistic methods to focus and enhance a meditative spirit.

"...accept, digest, sophisticate..."

Mariko Bando  
Director/Professor  
Research Institute for Gender Equality  
Showa Women's University

# SHINTO

Japan's native religion stands out among religions of the world as one that apparently lacks clarity. No hierarchy organizes believers; no single volume summarizes its doctrines; no founder established the system. Rather than foster seeming contradiction, the vague elements of the faith demonstrate its universality.

## **HISTORY AND BACKGROUND**

### ***Beginnings*** ➔

Shinto is rooted in mythology. Similar to the Greeks and the Romans, the early Japanese explained their origins as interactions between the gods. The creation of the islands themselves is credited to spirit beings—Izanagi and Izanami. Jimmu Tenno, the first emperor of Japan and descendant of the gods (a direct line from the sun goddess Anaterasu) became endowed with their sacredness, establishing a divine line (Ono 6). This explains the reverence displayed toward the ruling family.

The word “Shinto” derives from Chinese characters “shin” (*kami*--deity) and “do” (way), from which comes the common phrase “way of the gods” (Ono 2). The word *kami* in general refers to spiritual beings or deities. However, in a more specific sense encompasses any “essence” including personal qualities (e.g. growth, fertility, protection), natural phenomenon (e.g. wind, thunder), objects of nature (e.g. mountains, the sun, rivers), and ancestral spirits. This explains the reverence followers direct toward nature.

Shinto evolved from legend to state religion. The creation myths gave a foundation. The *kami* cult developed in the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries as an insulator against Chinese culture. Elements of Buddhism merged with Shinto, eventually supplanting it as the dominant faith. However, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century followers of the *kami* recognized Buddhist doctrines as manifestations of their native religion, leading to a purification of Shinto in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries under shogun leadership (Clarke 199). The restoration of imperial power in 1868 under Emperor Meiji placed Shinto as the official state religion until 1945 when the new constitution separated political and religious authority.

### ***Sacred Texts*** ➔

Though no single volume encapsulates the doctrines of Shinto, several ancient writings chronicle the development of the faith.

- *Kojiki* (712) “Record of Ancient Matters” - the oldest record of Japanese history
- *Nihongi* (720) “Chronicles of Japan” - an accounting of the role of the *kami* in the imperial Japanese line
- *Manyoshu* (760) “Collection of 10,000 Leaves” - an anthology of poetry
- *Engishiki* (901-922) - a collection of prayers

## **BASIC TEACHINGS**

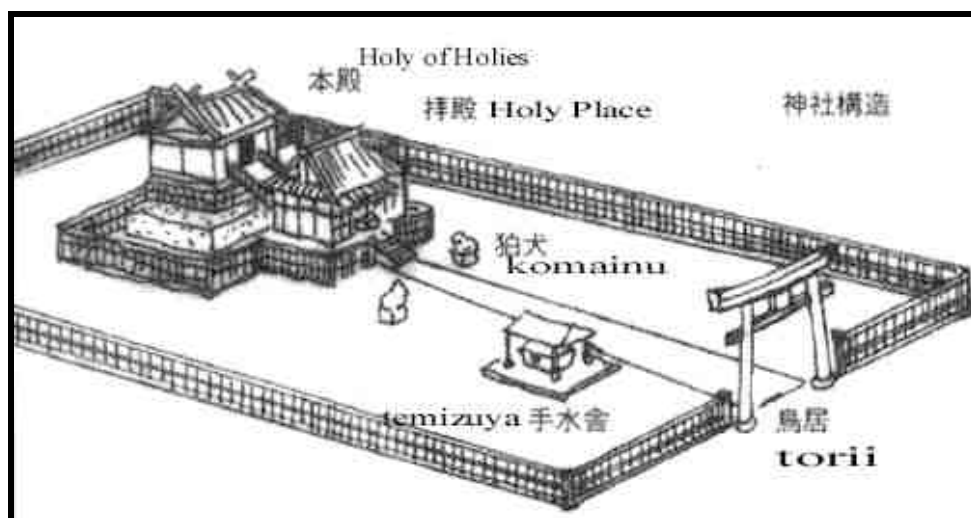
Shinto has three central principles: prioritization of group solidarity over individual identity; personal and ritual purity; and reverence for nature (Littleton 57). These three principles manifest themselves throughout everyday Japanese life. Japanese businessmen stress team-play and cooperation over individual advancement, often working their entire careers for the same firm. Shoes are removed before entering homes, restaurants, and many public places.

Shrines provide a tangible representation of the intangible existence of the deities. They can be found throughout Japan, from formal sites (e.g. Ise shrine, Meiji Shrine in Tokyo, Toshogu Shrine in Nikko) to personal shrines in homes. They are dwelling places for the spirits. Typical public shrines include an entry gate (*torii*), stalls from which the faithful can purchase charms and fortunes, an ablution pavilion for ritual purification, an approach from the gate to the sanctuary, entry way for offerings and prayers, an inner compartment (*haiden*), and a “holy of holies” (*honden*) for the sacred symbol or relic (Ono 21). Devotees pass through a circular straw entry separating the sacred from the profane. By ringing a bell or clapping their hands at the *haiden*, the faithful announce their presence to the *kami* before praying and leaving an offering, then leave.

Though no specific catechism exists in Shinto, “Ten Precepts” can summarize practical living:

- Do not transgress the will of the gods;
- Do not forget your obligations to your ancestors;
- Do not offend by violating the decrees of the state;
- Do not forget the profound goodness of the gods, through which calamity and misfortunes are averted and sickness is healed;
- Do not forget that the world is one great family;
- Do not forget the limitations of your own person;
- Do not become angry even though others become angry;
- Do not be sluggish in your work;
- Do not bring blame to the teaching; and
- Do not be carried away by foreign teachings (Sivarnanda 2).

The final injunction would appear ironic; the Japanese pride themselves in learning from others, then perfecting what they learn to implement as their own. This element of syncretism characterizes the compatibility between Shinto and Buddhism. The former provides practical guidelines for daily living in the “here and now” while the latter offers hope for spiritual fulfillment in the afterlife.



# *Buddhism and Shinto in Japan*

## The Pennsylvania Academic Standards

### Government

- 5.1.12.C Evaluate the importance of the principles and ideals of civil life
- 5.1.12.K Analyze the roles of symbols and holidays in society
- 5.2.12.G Evaluate what makes a competent and responsible citizen
- 5.4.12.B Analyze the United States' interaction with other nations and government groups in world events
- 5.4.12.C Compare how past and present United States' policy interests have changed over time and analyze the impact on future international relationships

### Geography

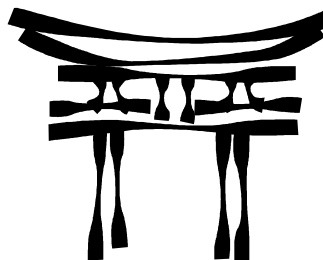
- 7.4.12.A Analyze the impact of physical systems on people
- 7.4.12.B Analyze the impacts of people on physical systems

### History

- 8.1.12.B Synthesize and evaluate historical sources
- 8.1.12.C Evaluate historical interpretation of events
- 8.4.9/12.A Evaluate the significance of individuals and groups who made major political and cultural contributions to world history
- 8.4.9/12.B Evaluate historical documents, material artifacts and historic sites important to world history
- 8.4.9/12.C Evaluate how continuity and change throughout history have impacted belief systems and religions
- 8.4.9/12.D Evaluate how conflict and cooperation among social groups and organizations impacted world history

## Arts and Humanities

- 9.2.12.B Relate works in the arts chronologically to historical events
- 9.2.12.C Relate works in the arts to varying styles and genres to the periods in which they were created
- 9.2.12.D Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective
- 9.2.12.E Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts
- 9.2.12.F Know and apply appropriate vocabulary used between social studies and the arts and humanities
- 9.2.12.G Relate works in the arts to geographic regions
- 9.2.12.I Identify, explain and analyze philosophical beliefs as they relate to works in the arts
- 9.2.12.J Identify, explain and analyze historical and cultural differences as they relate to works in the arts
- 9.2.12.K Identify, explain and analyze traditions as they relate to works in the arts
- 9.4.12.D Analyze and interpret a philosophical position identified in works in the arts and humanities





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# Vocabulary

## Buddhism

**Arahants:** the “worthy ones”; enlightened disciplines who have destroyed all passions

**Brahman:** the Supreme Being; Supreme Reality

**Buddha:** the Enlightened One

**Deva:** a god or deity of Hindu mythology; a shining or heavenly one

**Dharma:** teachings of Buddha

**Karma:** retribution of actions; the law of ethical consequence

**Mandala:** a sacred diagram used as psychological and spiritual “map” in meditation

**Mantra:** “tool for thinking”, “instrument of the mind”: e.g. a single sound or a short phrase

**Nirvana:** “going out”; a spiritual existence of complete and eternal bliss

**Sutra:** ancient Buddhist scriptures

**Vinaya:** code of rules for monks and nuns

## Shinto

**Emma:** votive plaques

**Gohei:** paired strips of paper symbolizing the presence of *kami*

**Guji:** chief priest

**Jinja:** shrine

**Kami:** deity; spirit beings, supernatural forces and all “essences”; applied to qualities (e.g. growth, fertility, and protection), natural phenomenon (e.g. wind and thunder), natural objects (e.g. sun, mountains, rivers, etc.), some animals, and ancestral spirits

**Matsuri:** festival

**Mikoshi:** portable shrines

**Omikuji:** fortunes

**Shimenawa:** straw rope from which zig-zag paper sheets hang, marking entrances to shrines or indicating sacred places

**Torii:** traditional gateway marking entrance into a shrine