

# Japan culture essay



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In Japan today, religion is freely practiced and, at least in small numbers, a multitude of religions are present. The religious beliefs of Japan's populace breakdown to 91% Shinto, 72% Buddhist, and 13% other (less than 1% is Christian). Although in the West religious faiths are viewed as mutually exclusive, in Japan it is common for a person to adopt beliefs from more than one theology. The majority of the population therefore is both Buddhist and Shinto. Both of these faiths center upon nonmaterial, group values.

Buddhism stresses oneness; people are not isolated, but are instead part of a network of souls. Buddhists traditionally eschew material possessions and strive to reach nirvana, becoming one with the universal spirit and thus throwing off the yoke of their individual identities. Similarly, Shinto beliefs hold that all things possess spirits; Shinto stresses the importance of nature and ancestral bonds. A nationalistic religion, it too values the group over the individual. Buddhist and Shinto beliefs fuse well with one another and, since they have coexisted for more than 1, 500 years, much cross-fertilization has occurred between the two religions, resulting in what is often referred to as “Ryobu-Shinto,” or “Double Shinto.”

However, many unique traits still separate the two. Japan is a nation widely associated with the practice of “cultural borrowing.” The Japanese have liberally borrowed culture traits from their geographic neighbors (particularly China) over the course of their history, adapting the traits that suited them while always altering them to make them distinctly Japanese. In this way, the Japanese have acquired many of their defining culture traits, including one of their major religions. Buddhism arrived in Japan in the sixth century.

Although it originated in India, Buddhism came to Japan via China and Korea,

so much of the religion retained a distinctive Chinese flair (as evidenced still today in the architecture, decoration, and the style of the representations of Buddha and the bodhisattvas found of in many Pure Land temples throughout Japan).

The Japanese embraced Buddhism and, by the eighth century, had absorbed the religion so readily into their own culture that it took on a national character and its far-flung roots were all but forgotten. Founded by Siddhartha Gotama around 500 B. C. , Buddhism is based upon what he called the “ Four Noble Truths. The first noble truth, Dukkha, says that life is full of suffering. The second noble truth is Samudaya; it states that people’s suffering is caused by their desire for things.

It is greed and self-centeredness that bring suffering, because desire can never be satisfied. The third noble truth, Nirodha, says that it is possible to end suffering if one is aware of one’s desires and puts an end to them. This can open the door to lasting peace. The fourth noble truth, Magga, is the noble truth of the path.

According to Magga, one can reach a new awakening by changing one’s thinking and behavior. This awakening, known as the Middle Way, can be reached through Buddha’s Eightfold Path (which is also called the Wheel of Law); its eight steps (often represented as eight spokes of a wheel) are right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right work, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. By following them, one can bring an end to his or her own karma and be released from the cycle of

rebirth). A set of laws, known as the Five Precepts, also govern Buddhist thought.

The Five Precepts, as Arquilevich describes them in *World Religions*, are: 1. do not harm any living thing 2. do not steal; take only what is given 3. avoid over-stimulation 4.

do not say unkind things 5. do not take alcohol or drugs Although the basic tenets of Buddhism remain the same, how it is practiced varies widely.

Within Buddhism, there are many different branches; the most common in Japan are Mahayana and Zen Buddhism. Mahayana, although divided into many schools (the “ PureLand” sect is prevalent within Japan), uniformly emphasizes scriptures and bodhisattvas, which are deities (or saints, depending on the sect) that are believed to help practitioners enter nirvana. In contrast, Zen stresses that only direct experience can lead to enlightenment.

Practitioners meditate to increase awareness and purify their minds. Zen finds expression in many forms throughout Japan, including martial arts, gardening, poetry (most notably, the haiku) and the minimalist aesthetic characteristic in Japanese art. Shinto is the native religion of Japan; early Shinto mythology indicated that the Japanese were descended from divine beings; this civil religion helped fuel nationalistic fervor during World War II. After World War II, the state religion was abolished and Shinto became a matter of personal choice.

Today, many Japanese may not necessarily practice Shinto as a religion, but still, often almost unconsciously, incorporate its customs and traditions into

their daily lives. Shinto is basically the worship of, or paying of reverence to, all things in nature, including one's ancestors. Often defined as an animistic, in Shinto, all things, both animate and inanimate, have their own kami (spirits or gods). Traditionally, the line between the living and the dead (kami) is permeable.

Kami are worshipped at shrines, represented by a distinctive gate, or torii. Today, there are over 100, 000 Shinto shrines scattered throughout Japan. Shinto's general principles are known as the "Correct Way." Essentially, practitioners seek to enhance the way of the kami by being grateful for the kami's blessings, devoting themselves to ritual practices, seeking to serve the world and other people, leading a harmonious life, and praying for national prosperity and a peaceful coexistence with the rest of the world. Central to Shinto is the belief that community life and religion are one; the greatest personal destiny is one that is merged with the greater destiny of the nation. This link can be traced to feudal times, and the concept of one's "ie," or household.

The ie was the key unit of Japanese society. More than just a family, it was defined primarily by participation in the ie economy, and unrelated persons could be adopted into it. Furthermore, an ie continued through succeeding generations, including not only living members, but also dead ancestors and unborn descendants. A village was a group of ie.

Even commercial enterprises were organized as ie. In the ie, one learned to embrace group identity and suppress the self. This concept of Japan as a

single community of ie, or a “ family-state,” remained essential to the Japanese paradigm until 1945.