

A BASIC INTRODUCTION TO SHINTO

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Shinto, the way of the gods, is the indigenous faith of the Japanese people and it is as old as the Japanese people. The word Shinto is written with two Chinese characters: *shin*, to write the native Japanese word *kami*, meaning divinity or numinous entity; *to*, to write the native word *michi*, meaning way.

Shinto has no founder and no official scripture, though its mythology is collected in the *Kojiki*, Records of Ancient Matters and *Nihon shoki* Chronicles of Japan. These works were written in the eighth century.

There are no teachings about any life beyond. When one prays it is for basics like food, happiness or to express thanks. There are gods and goddesses that represent all human interests and all of nature. There is divinity in everything. There is nothing supernatural. All of the gods are descendants of the original divine mythology. Izanagi the Sky father and Izanami, the Earth mother.

The center of Shinto worship is the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu Omikami, the symbol of that which is most sacred in Japanese life. Amaterasu sent her grandson to Japan to rule. He brought three sacred objects: The imperial jewels that represent obedience and gentleness; The sword that represents wisdom and justice; The mirror that represents righteousness and purity. All are symbols of the divine mandate by which emperor's rule.

There are no absolutes in Shinto, even though there is a most important goddess, the Sun Goddess Amaterasu whose shrine is at Ise. Shinto is a very optimistic faith. It is thought that all humans are fundamentally good and that all evil is caused by evil spirits. The purpose of most of the rituals is to avoid evil spirits by purification, offerings and prayers.

In modern times by decree of an emperor, no emperor is to be viewed as a descendent of the Sun Goddess. But this did not seem to have any affect since the Japanese people continue the way of the gods. Shinto lives on today but is not as influential as it once was. Japanese people do not use images of their gods. They use symbols. On their god-shelf in their home one places the names of the gods one wants to honor. On shrines on outside the home one finds at the entrance of every one of them a Torii. It is a structure, a gateway into the shrine.

Shinto places importance on right practice; right sensibility; and right attitude. There are four main traditions in Shinto: Tradition and the Family; Love of Nature; Physical cleanliness; and *Matsuri*.

Family is central to and by which traditions are preserved; Nature is sacred. Natural objects are worshipped as sacred; Physical cleanliness involves baths, washing of hands and mouth; *Matsuri* is the worship and honor given to the *Kami* and ancestral spirits.

Shinto creation stories tell of the history and lives of the *Kami*. The *Kami* are the Shinto deities. The word *Kami* means god or gods.

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Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion; a complex of ancient folk belief and rituals; basically animistic religion that perceives the presence of gods or of the sacred in animals, in plants, and even in things which have no life, such as stones and waterfalls.

One is only a part of the living wonder of everything that exists. The same forces that move nature move us. There is no division between the divine and the human being. Religion and life itself are one.

Intuition is valued over intellectualization. Religious views are interwoven with ideas of nature and family.

Nature is awe inspiring in the beauty of its surroundings. Nature worship means worshipping trees, mountains, rocks and waves. Cherry trees are a good example. The cherry blossoms come to profuse bloom and then leave the branch and sail off into the wind. This is what life and nature display that is given example in gardens and waterfalls. Creativity is capturing the inspiration that life and nature offer.

In one's reverence for nature one becomes aware that one should be worthy of it. Two themes stand out: Loyalty and Honor. Both are divine

attributes that each person comes to embody. This brings together the inner and outer purity. This is why the outward cleansing is so important. But intellect tells us that inner purity does not need outward cleansing.

Shinto is a Japanese form of religious practice which enjoys close ties with people's everyday lives and which did so in the past too. It does not seem to have had the form of an organized or systematized religion. Shinto has little theology and no congregational worship.

Shinto can be regarded as a double-edged phenomenon. It is a loosely structured set of practices, creeds and attitudes rooted in local communities but also it is a strictly defined and organized religion at the imperial line and the state. These two basic aspects, which are not entirely separate, reflect fundamental natures of the Japanese national character as it is expressed in sociological structures and psychological attitudes.