

Current situation of Japanese religion

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There are many differences between India and Japan in custom, lifestyle, culture and so on, but there are also similarities between the two countries. This is probably because we share the religious and cultural tradition, especially Buddhist culture. While some people say that Japan is a “religious” country, others say it is not so. Moreover, many Japanese say, “I have no religion,” if they are asked about their religions. Why does such a thing happen? In this lecture, I would like to talk about the current situation of Japanese religions. And I would like to observe the cultural relationship between India and Japan.

■ Are the Japanese religious?

- Many Japanese tend to say that they are not religious. This is partly because the majority does not make a conscious decision to “join” a religious group. And it is partly because most of Japanese people do not pay much attention to the doctrines of the sect of Buddhism or the details of the deities of the Shinto shrines.
- Now I explain main Buddhist sects of Japan. Buddhism came originally from India to China. And it was transmitted from China to Korea and Japan. It was in the 6th century that Buddhism was first introduced from Korea and China. At first, only aristocrats embraced Buddhism. But in 12-13 cent., there was kind of reformation of Buddhism. After this period, Buddhism came to be embraced by common people.

The monk masters who made the reformation focus on the one single practice: that is either reciting a specific phrase regarding Buddha or Sutra or seated meditation.

- 南無阿彌陀仏 = Namo Amitābha-buddhāya, I will devote myself to Amitābha-Buddha, I will take refuge in Amitābha-Buddha.
- 南無妙法蓮華經 = Namo Saddharmapūṇḍarīka-sūtrāya, I will devote myself to the Lotus Sutra. Those phrases are similar to Hindu mantra. The believers of those sects recite this phrase many times on the occasion of the prayer.
- Zen (禪／禪那, dhyāna, meditation) is originated in Yoga in India.
- Although Japanese people are not so conscious about their own religions, they do participate in so-called “religious” events such as *hatsumode* (初詣, the first visit of the year to a shrine or temple). They pray for good health of their own and their family, success on examinations and prosperity in business and so on.
- It is safe to say that Japanese people are not religious in the Western sense. But they “are” religious in a cultural sense that is somewhat unique in Japan. They don’t choose and believe one particular religion consciously, but they join the various religious events and festivals.
- Japanese religion is also characterized as “syncretism” (combination or amalgam of Buddhism and Shintoism, which is an original religion in Japan before Buddhism came) The relationship between Buddha and deities of Shintoism is as follows: Buddha is original figure, and deities are avatāra (reincarnation) of the Buddha. It is those deities that are protect and save people as avatāra of the Buddha.

■ Are Japanese today believers in Buddhism or Shintoism?

- The Statistical Survey on Religion carried out annually by the Agency of Cultural Affairs reveals interesting statistics. According to the 2014 survey, there are more than 91 million adherents or believers of Shintoism (72%) and 87 million adherents or believers of Buddhism (70%) in Japan. These numbers do not include the other religions. However, in that year the Japanese population was only 1,26 million. (That means there is some overlap.)
- The numbers suggest that Japanese simultaneously hold several religions at one time. It is safer to say that most Japanese are not actively involved in religious activities. It is also safe to say that they are open to various religious traditions.

■ Current tendencies

◇ What impact has Christianity had on Japan?

- Christian missions established private schools from primary to university levels.

The Catholics established the universities now called Sophia University (Tokyo) and Nanzan University (Nagoya). Protestant groups established Doshisha University (Kyoto), Kansei Gakuin University (Nishinomiya, Hyogo) and so on.

- Most of the students at these universities are not Christian, but they are exposed to Christian beliefs through chapel services and regular classes.
- According to Japanese government statistics, about 2.4% of the Japanese population is Christian.

◇Why do some Japanese have Christian weddings?

- One survey says that in 2014 almost 55% of all weddings in Japan were “Christian” in style. This includes weddings at “chapels” in hotels where a person who is not a real “minister” or Christian priest performs the ceremonies. And most of the couples do not attend church regularly. The other weddings are Shinto in form, and few weddings are Buddhism in form.

◇What are “power spots”? (One of current tendencies)

- From around 2010, some people began to have faith in places where they believe they get some “power” to feel some sacred atmosphere or achieve difficult goals.
- Featured on TV and in magazines as “power spots,” those places become sites of pilgrimage. Sites include certain shrines, unique natural locales, trees, rocks and statues.
- This belief may be a new form of “spiritualism” or “animism”. Or it may result from an increase in the number of people who believes in luck rather than in making an effort.
- The famous “power spots” are, for examples, *Ise Jingu* (伊勢神宮, Shinto shrine, 7th cent.?) in Mie Prefecture, Koyasan Kongobuji (高野山金剛峯寺, Buddhist temple, 9th cent.) in Wakayama Prefecture, Kuramadera (鞍馬寺, Buddhist temple, 8 cent.) in Kyoto, Fushimi Inari Jinja (伏見稲荷神社, Shito shrine, 8 cent.) also in Kyoto. All are related with nature or particular mountains, which have been considered to be sacred by Japanese from ancient times.

■New religions: positive and negative aspects

◇What is Aum Shinrikyo (Aleph) (New religion, negative aspect)

- Aum Shinrikyo (オウム真理教) was founded by Matsumoto Chizuo in 1987. He changed his name to Asahara Shoko. On March 20, 1995, members of Aum Shinrikyo released sarin nerve gas (deadly poison) on five Tokyo subway cars,

killing 12 people and injuring more than 5,500.

- Asahara and other members were arrested and stood trial. In the meantime, the group changed its name to Aleph. The sensational sarin attacks has created considerable concern in Japan regarding new religious sects. In Japan, it is usually so safe, and terrorist attacks are very rare. Since then, people tend to keep away from religions.

■ Shinto or Buddhist traditional festivals and customs (especially in Kyoto)

◇ What is the Gion Festivals? (Shinto festival)

- The Gion (祇園) Festival is held in July. The main event is on July 17. On that day, floats (called dashi) decorated with spears and others parade through the streets. The festival began in 866 when a plague or epidemic (disease) struck Kyoto. Tall spears (called hoko) representing each province of Japan were set up at Yasaka Shrine. Prayers were offered in order to stop the epidemic that was spreading across the city. The float in the picture looks a bit like Rathayatra festival in Puri.
- I will explain little a bit the origin of the word “Gion.”
- Gion=祇園=Jetavana (Prince Jeta’s park) Prince Jeta and a merchant Sudatta. Sudatta tried to covered the whole park with gold coins. Finally he could donate the land. The guardian deity of that park was Gozu-tenno=Gomaya-griva-deva-rajā (having a head of cow). This deity is believed to be one of avatara of Indra. Gozu-tenno has been believed to spread epidemic when he gets angry.

◇ What happens at Obon?

- Obon, the Bon Festival, is the most important annual event of the Buddhist calendar. It is the Buddhist Festival of the Dead and it last from the 12th through the 16th of August.
- On the evening of August 12, families may light a small fire at the door of their home in order to welcome back the souls of the dead people. These small fires are called mukae-bi (welcoming fire). A similar fire is lit on August 16th to send the souls off, and this is called okuri-bi (sending fire). The Gozan Okuri-bi in Kyoto is a famous example of this custom.
- A thing made of eggplant or aubergine and sticks is the imitation of cow, and a thing made of cucumber is the imitation of horse. An ancestor’s soul comes back from another world, or the heaven. So, since family members of their ancestor want the soul to come home soon, they make the imitation of horse, which is running fast. Similarly, since the family members want the soul to go back to the

heaven slowly, they make the imitation of cow.

◇What is haka mairi?

- At higan or o-higan (the certain period around March 20 and September 20), Obon and other times through the year, family members visit the graves (usually ashes and bones of the departed are put inside the graves) of their ancestors. They bring water in a bucket to clean the tombstone. They weed around it and pick up any trash they find. Then they offer flowers and incense and offer a prayer.

■An example of folk beliefs

◇Who are the Seven Deities of Good Fortune?

- The Seven Deities of Good Fortune, Shichifukujin, became popular during the 15th through 17th centuries. They include Hindu, Buddhist and Chinese Daoist deities and sages from India, China and Japan. They are usually pictured riding on a treasure ship, takarabune.
- Bishamonten (from India, originally considered to be Vaiśravaṇa or Kubera) is the god of warriors and protects against harm and injury.
- Daikokuten (from India, originally considered to be Shiva) protects farmers and the kitchen and prevents floods. This deity is often shown with a magic mallet or small hammer, with which he can give one whatever he/she wants.
- Benzaiten (from India, originally Sarasvati), the only female deity, is the patron of music, literature and the arts.
- Fukurokuju (from China) is the deity of long life and fertility. He is often shown with a drinking gourd (some kind of water bottle), a long stick and a scroll.
- Hotei (from China) is the deity of happiness and contentment. It is said that he was a actual person and a Buddhist monk. He is also called the Laughing Buddha, and rubbing his big belly is said to bring good luck.
- Jurojin (from China) brings long life and good fortune. He carries a drinking gourd (a water bottle) filled with rice wine.
- Ebisu (Japan) is the deity who protects fishermen, business and wealth. He is often shown with a sea bream (tai) which symbolizes congratulations.

■Topics and Questions

1. What are the differences between the religious situations in Japan and India?
2. Are Indian people “religious” or not? What do you think?
3. How do people view “religion” in Japan and India?

4. What does “religion” or “god” mean to Indian and Japanese people?
5. Do Indian people also have the concept of “power spots”?
6. What is the relationship between marriage and religion in India?
7. What is the relationship among religions in Indian and Japan?