

# **SPIRITUALITY IN JAPAN**

## **A BEGINNER'S GUIDE**

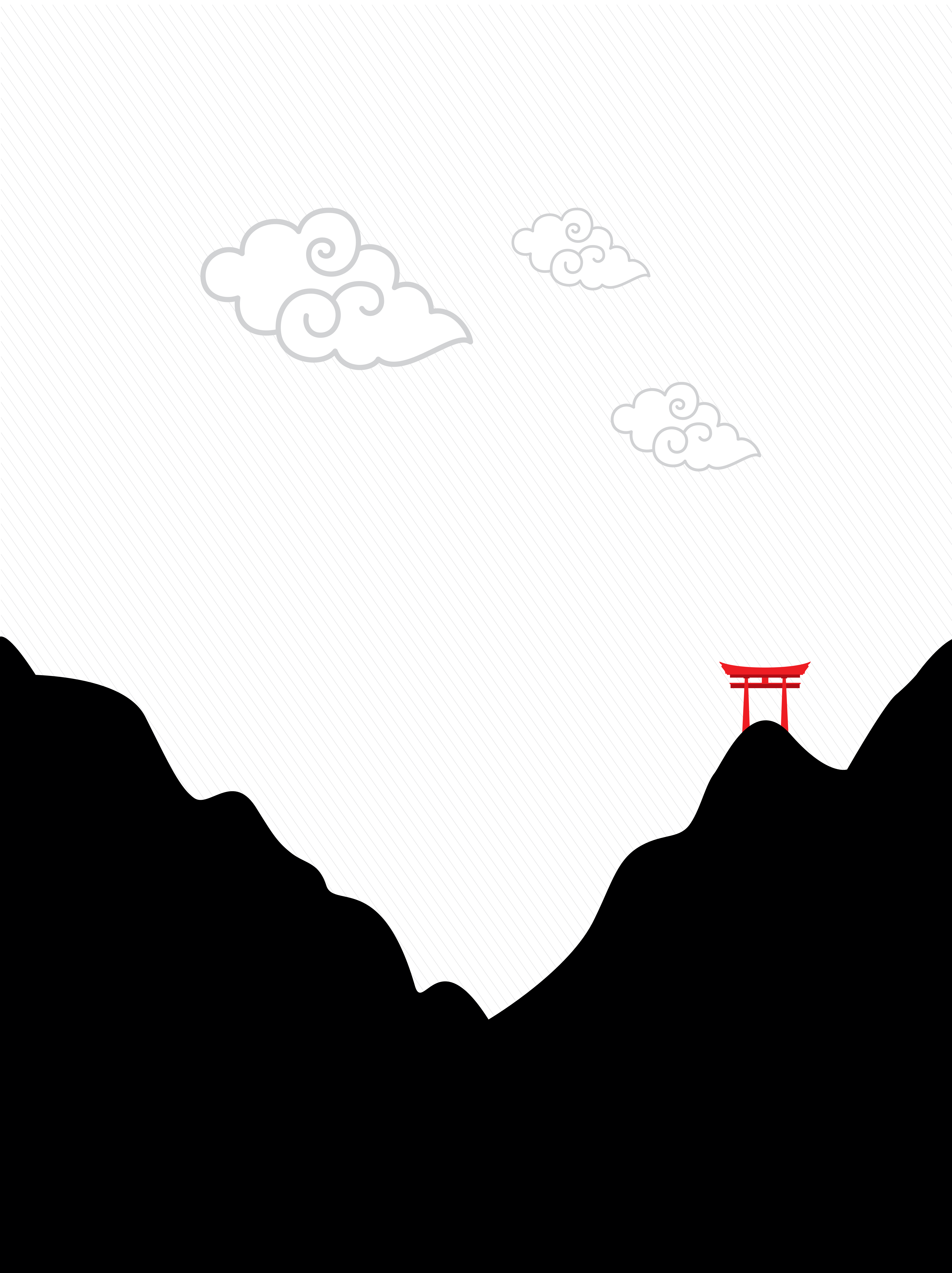


## **WHY TALKING ABOUT THIS?**

If you found my blog, you are probably getting curious about Japan. And if you are getting curious, then the idea of a trip over there could be in your bucket list.

In order to better understand this country, it is necessary to know where are you going, and apart from the language and the basic cultural notions, the particular Japanese spirituality plays a significant, central role if you are willing to understand not only the difference between a temple and a shrine, but more important to understand the way in which the Japanese live this particular dimension.





# WHAT IS RELIGION?

The Japanese word for religion is **shukyo**.

However, it has a very complex history, closely connected with the relationship between modern Japan and the West. Before the encounter with the western colonial powers, different terms were commonly employed, such as **do** or **michi**, (path, way, system, as in, Shinto, "The way of the Gods"), while we have no proper equivalent for the European and American notion of religion: moreover, lacking Aristotele's influence, Japanese culture favoured the compromise rather than interpret different thought systems as irreconcilable, and the interest for the similarities and the shared elements.

## THE DIFFERENT RELIGIONS OF JAPAN

The majority of the Japanese tend not to identify themselves within one religious faith, and include in their religious landscape elements from different traditions, in what can be considered a serene freedom of practice.

The principal faith that characterize the Japanese culture are Shinto (lit. The Way of the Gods) and Buddhism; beside them, we find the strong influence of the Confucianism that, even if it never evolved into a proper cult in Japan, penetrated deeply in the local society, in particular in the organization of the family and in the ancestor worship.

Moreover, we find the so-called New Religion (sometimes also New New Religions), a definition that points to a wide range of religious movements, usually quite recent (from the early XX century on), which arose from the charismatic figures of (often female) healers and shamans, and which include shintoist, Buddhist and Christian elements.

Finally, we have some religious minorities among which we find Christianity (with 1 to 3 millions believers), Islam, Hinduism, Bahai religion, Jainism and the indigenous Okinawan traditions.

**SHINTO**



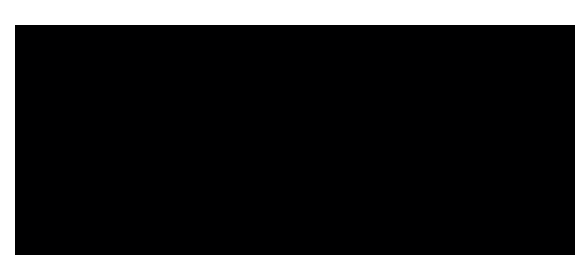
**BUDDHISM**



**CHRISTIANITY**



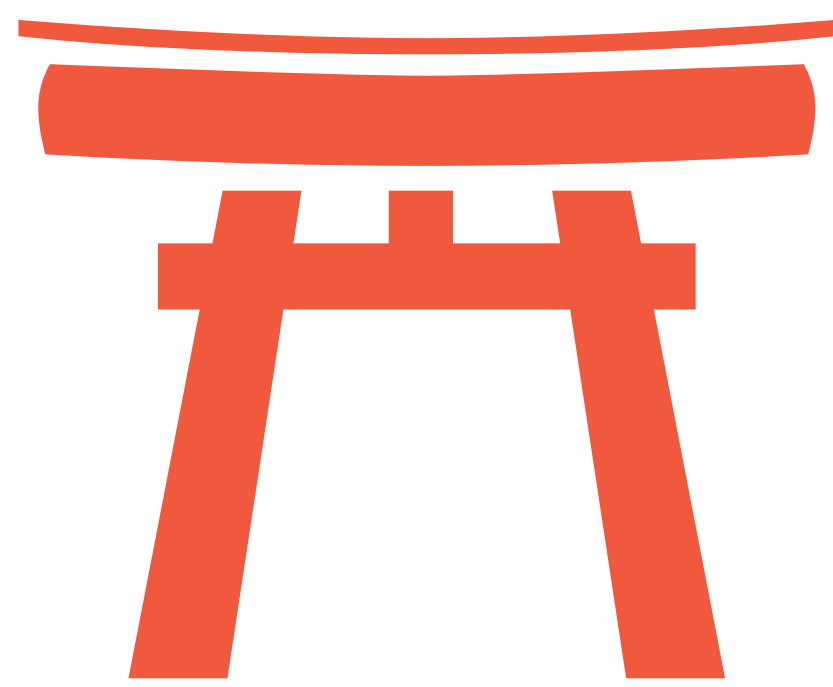
**OTHERS**





# SHINTŌ

We usually consider Shinto as a polytheistic, animistic religion, whose rituals and practices represent the deepest spirit of Japanese people. However, we must remember that (like any other cultural phenomenon) Shinto interacted with different realities, and went through different phases that led to the present day situation.



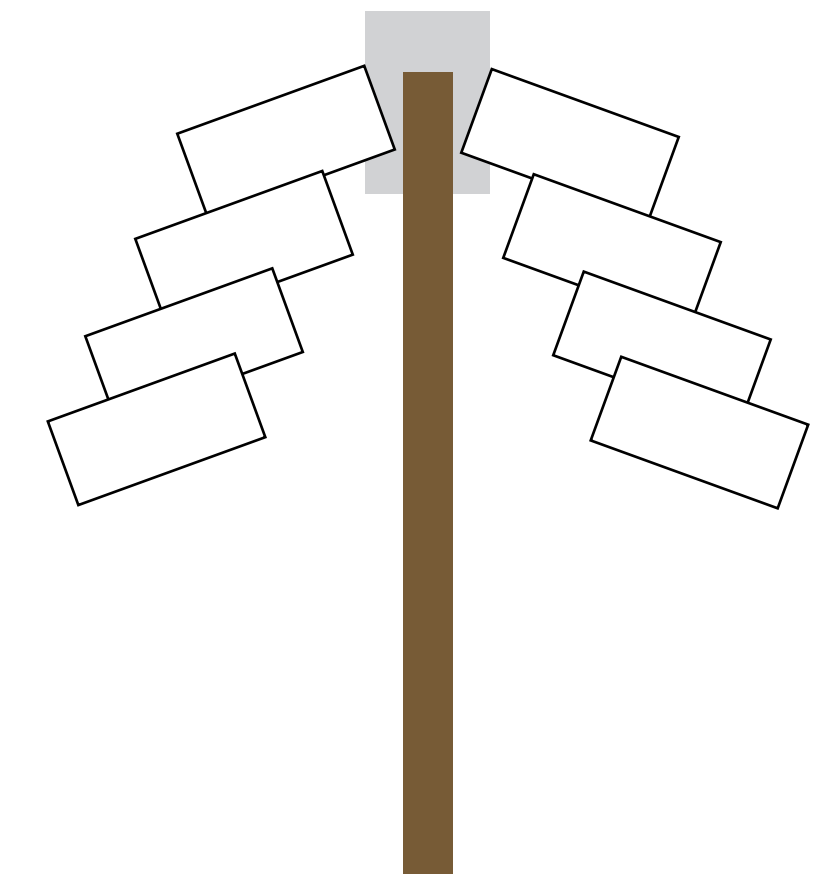
Shinto is associated with shrines – **Jinja or Jingu** (for the more important ones)

The most important shrines across the country are: **Ise Jin-gu, Izumo Jinja, Atsuta Jinja, Itsukushima Jinja and Fushimi Inari Taisha**



The rituals are held by priests called **kannushi**

They are often assisted by female priestess called **miko**



The most important Shinto rituals are the New Year, **Osho-gatsu**, the **purification** rituals like Oharai and the several Misogi at the entrance of the shrines, and an immense series of Matsuri who revive the Japanese year in every season.

The different gods and deities are called **kami** (lit. god), which represent the different aspect of nature. They express the sense of the sacred that human beings feel in front of the natural elements, both terrible and beautiful, vicious and benevolent.

The most popular kami are: **Amaterasu Omikami**, the sun goddess from which the emperor is believed to descend; **Susano-wo**, his brother with a double nature of the god of wrath and destruction and the founding hero of Japan; the original couple, **Izanami and Izanagi**, the parents of all that exists and from which all kami and nature are born.

Moreover, kami represent the divine element that resides in every aspect of life in its everyday flowing, with a complete removal of any ontological distinction between human and super-human. Men and kami share the same essence, they simply are different points on the same continuous line



Many researchers point the apparent lack of interest of Shinto doctrine towards ethics. There seems to be a superimposition of evil and dirty, ugly. This is evident in the complex notion of kegare, impure, by means society differentiate between what is good and what is evil, what is compliant to the norm, and what is deviant.

Shinto interacted widely with Buddhism until the beginning of Meiji Era (1868) when it was declared state religion. With this huge change in the situation, Shinto developed a more cogent ethic discourse based on the loyalty to the emperor and the nation (kokoku-shugi), the realism (genjitsu-shugi) and the love and reverence for what is bright and pure (meijo-shugi).

However, the difference between this ethical system and that of other world religions (like Buddhism) is still significant.





# BUDDHISM

Buddhism is a religion that arose in VI century B.C. India, from the life and the teaching of Siddharta Gautama, later called Buddha, the Enlightened. This is a very elaborated religious system with many different sect and trends.

## WHO IS SIDDHARTA

Siddharta Gautama Sakyamuni (560 – 480 circa a.C.) was a prince of a small reign on the slopes of Himalaya, and as such grew up in a luxurious and wealthy environment, detached from poverty and the other hardships of life experienced by the common people; the legend goes on by telling that the young prince was unfulfilled with his own life, and that managed to escape his castle (in secrecy) to wander the streets of the city. In this occasion he experienced the four popular encounters that changed his life; and old men, a sick person, a funerary procession and an ascetic monk; these encounters were so traumatic as to push him to abandon his comfortable life to devote himself to the religious life.

After years of dedication and meditation, declaring that “everything is illusion”, he reached the enlightenment under the Three of Awakening, and finally became a Buddha. From here on he will consecrate his life to the teaching the path to enlightenment, until his death (when he was around 80 years old), entering Nirvana and freeing himself from the chains of the world.



### WHAT DOES THE BUDDHA TEACH?

The Buddha imparts a message that is connected to the Indian tradition, in particular to the notion of Karma and rebirth: these terms, now widespread in the common talks, point to a specific religious theory according to which all living beings are not limited to one existence with a beginning and an end, but are destined to an undetermined loop of death and rebirth (more or less fortunate). Each action of each living being will determine the subsequent rebirth. Each existence is thus conceived as the result of past karma (actions), in a cycle of rebirth called samsara. Good and bad rebirths in samsara are not conceived as rewards or punishments, but simply as the natural results of given actions

Buddhism keeps this previous view and introduces the notion of intention: this is now the starting point for the karmic cycle. Moreover, Buddhism interprets samasara as the first cause of sufferance, and aims to the total and complete liberation. Being and enlightened means to understand that the whole world is nothing but impermanence, and thus constant suffering; the Buddha is he who can free himself from the chains of this world and reach Nirvana, the absolute nothingness. In order to to so, the Buddhist practitioner need to eradicate every desire from his or her heart, in order to avoid new karma to accumulate and thus interrupt the cycle of the rebirths. To abandon every desire, it is necessary a strict moral and mental discipline that can lead the practitioner in the right direction and allow him to finally reach

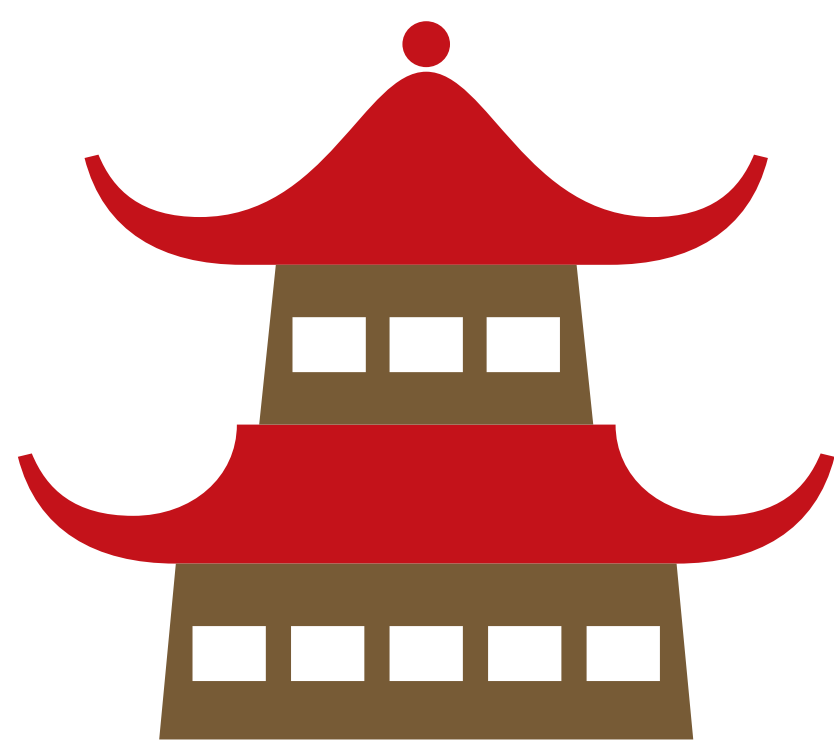


# BUDDHISM IN JAPAN

Buddhism entered Japan in VI century AD, through Korea.

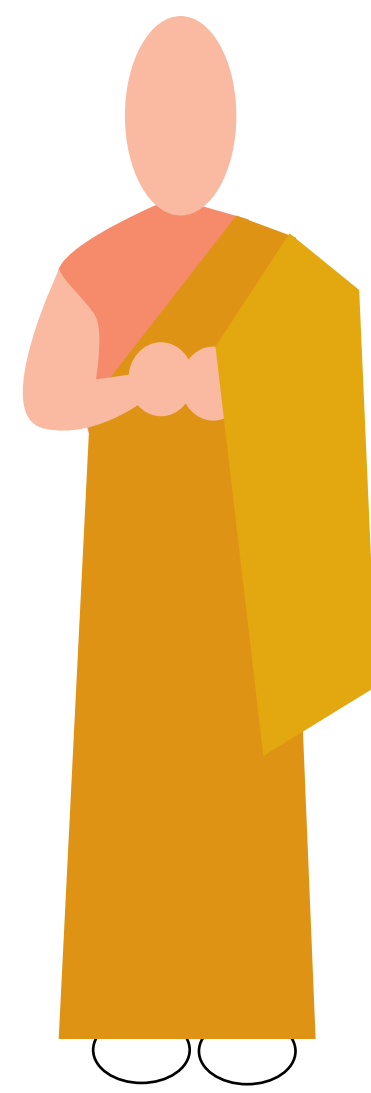
It spreads quickly in the country, and among the leading class for several reasons; first of all its conciliating and non-exclusivist character, which allows it to absorb local cults, practices and gods. It holds a logic of assimilation and absorption, interpreting local deities as aspect of the same universal truth. Moreover, it is a significant means of civilization and culture, introducing in Japan various element of the Chinese culture among which the most significant is of course the writing. Plus, Buddhism tends to make a wide use of images, element that on the contrary is lacking in Shinto and pre-buddhist practices, thus exercising a strong power over people.

After a first moment of harsh dispute (with the only religious war ever fought in Japan), Buddhism and Shinto began a process of mutual adaptation and influence, leading to particular forms of syncretism that lasted until present

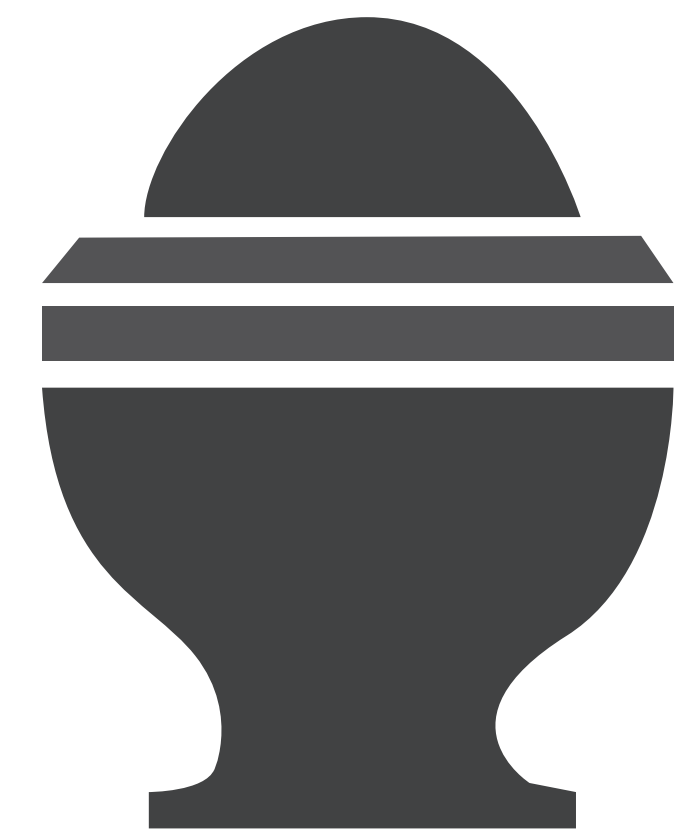


In Japan, the Buddhism place for the cultic activity is the temple, **tera** – or **-ji** in the compounds

The most important temples across the country are: Todai-ji, Kiyozumi-dera, Kinkaku-ji, Senso-ji, and Enryaku-ji



The central figure is the monk. Occasionally you will find some Buddhist nuns, but they tend to live isolated



The most important Buddhist rituals are funerals, and commemorations of the dead.

In Japan, we see the emergence of many sects and schools:

The six schools of Nara:

Jojitsu | Hosso | Sanron | Kegon | Risshu | Kusha-shu

The two esoteric schools:

Tendai | Shingon

The schools of Kamakura era:

Pure Land sects | Zen sects

Nichiren Buddhism



## SPACE AND TIME IN JAPAN

Japan experience a huge revolution around the 300 b.C., with the introduction of rice cultivation. The rice field became quickly the element around which revolved the structuration of space; its introduction entails a significant human innervation over the uncultivated lands, and requires the employment of techniques far more complex than the previous slash and burn agriculture. The rice paddy, *ta*, transform the territory, organizes and splits it. The new activities connected to the rice cultivation mark the time; human life and work begins to acquire specific rythms, based on water and the alternation of agricultural seasons.

From here, the village, *sato*, arises. Together with *ta*, it defines the human space, and imposes a clear-cut distinction between the plains of the human action and the mountain, *yama*, impenetrable, with a savage and dense vegetation, the reign of superhuman forces where man must never enter..

The mountain is also the abode of the dead, of the *kami*, of the various Buddha and bodhisattva; this is why in Japan mountains are sacred and gave birth to many ascetic practices over the centuries.

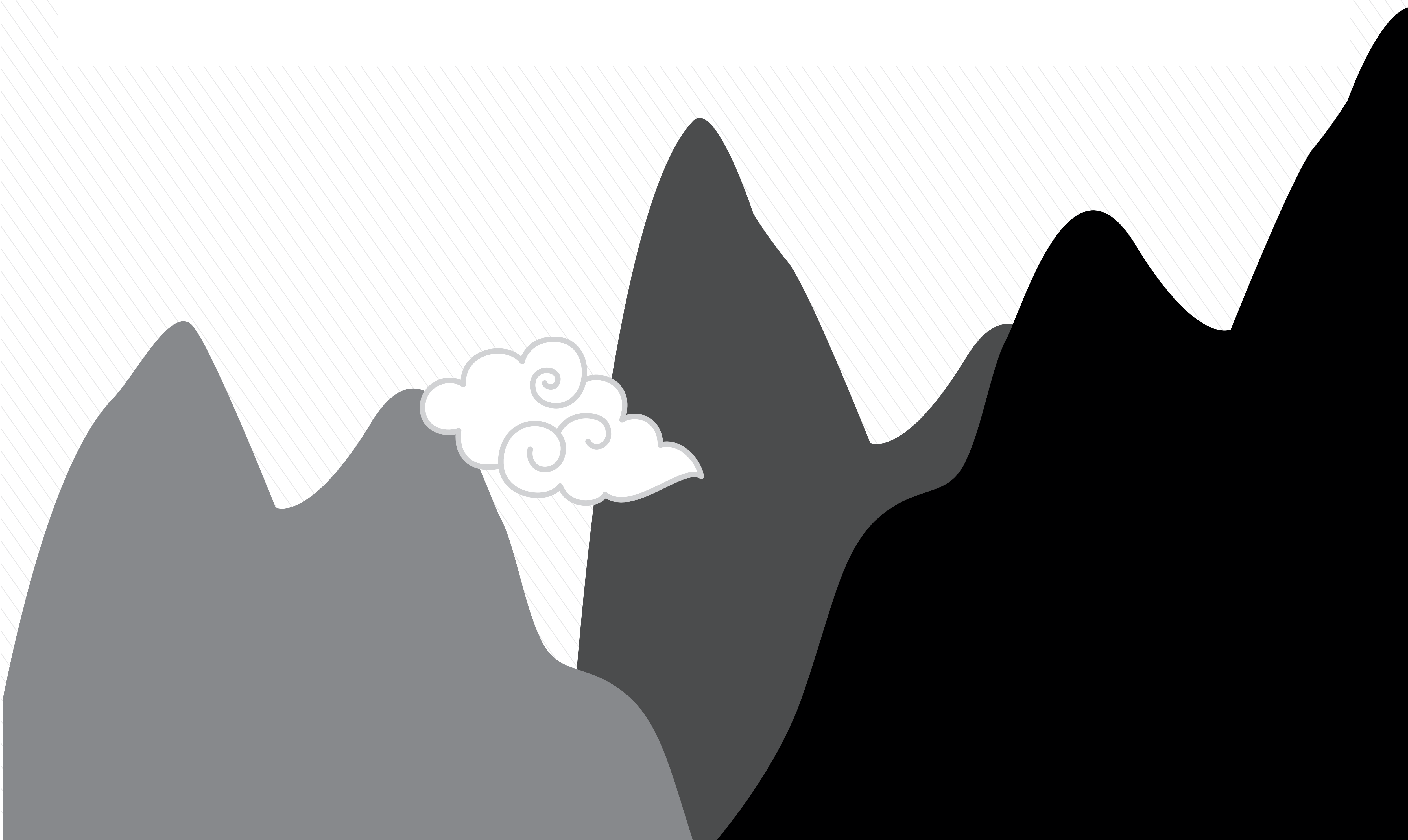
The mountain is the land of the sacred.

A similar relationship returns with two very widespread terms in Japan: **omote** and **ura**.

**Omote** is the face, but also the mask, the social visage.

On the opposite side, **ura** is the hidden part of things (and men); it is closely related to a third notion, **oku**, the most intimate soul of things.

The sacred can show only in the **oku**, in the hidden part of **ura**. This is why the sacred space is always conceived as a movement toward the hidden heart, the **oku**.





## IN-BETWEEN

Distinctions, however, are never this neat.

There are different borders and boundaries, gray areas, less organized (thus more dangerous) spaces where it is possible to meet the supernatural; this intermediate zone was often defined as **satoyama**, the area half way between the cultivated and the savage.

The relation between man and nature is here more precarious, between the possible human control over the natural element and at the same time a situation of human dependence from nature. This is the place where all the undefined figures dwell; they represent beings in transition, spilling from the established borders, like the angry ghosts that haunt the living because they can leave this world.

## DIFFERENT TIMES

Time too undergoes a reorganization with the rice cultivation, now characterized by regular and marked rhythms, source of safety and stability, and the human existence acquire a dimension of prevedibility.

With the rice paddy, man can impose his own pace over the unpredictability of nature; at the same time, give the particular character of the rice cultivation, human life acquires a cyclic nature.

The human time is marked by moments of passage, with the beginning and the end of given agricultural moments, and that enter the religious dimension.

The Japanese years is marked by several rituals and festive activities in the different moment of the agricultural activity; one of the most important was the **ta asobi**, which sanctify the beginning of the cultivation; from here on, every delicate phase is accompanied by specific rituals, until the harvest with the celebration of the **niinamesai**.

Aside from the ritual connected to agriculture, we see different rites that correspond to a specific moments of the year; the moments in which human activity is at its lowest. These are mainly the **Shogatsu** (New Year) and the **Obon**, in mid-summer; both these moments correspond to a pause, a reduction of human activity, and this different time flow correspond to the action of the supernatural powers. This is infact the time in which the dead come back.





I hope this was helpful, and maybe made you jump  
and buy a ticket to Japan.

If you have doubts, or you want to understand  
more, feel free to get in touch with me!

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