

The Japanese substratum religious sense and Japanese Buddhism

Many experts think that Japanese people's religious sense dates back to the Jomon-era(10,000BC-300BC), and is observed through Ainu people, the direct offspring of the Jomon people. Let's check it and give a thought to Japanese Buddhism.

The indigenous religious sense observed in the Iomante ritual(熊送り儀式=くまおくりぎしき)

The Ainu people's beliefs: Everything's soul is to go back to heaven and become a god when passing away.(Everything means bears, human beings, other animals, plants, and even non-sentient things) And, the soul in heaven is to return to this world again.

The bear came to this world from heaven with big gifts including its meat and skin for human beings; so, they have to kill it to show their respect for the bear. And after getting the delicious meat and good skin, the bear's soul should be sent back to heaven.

To achieve this cycle of life and death, the Ainu people must send the bear's soul back to heaven politely. Interestingly, the bear in heaven lives in the form of a human being, and when coming into this world, it disguises itself as a bear. And, at the end of the ritual, the people pray to their ancestors to show their respects to them. It's worthy of attention that ancestor worship is programmed into the process of reading a Mass ritual for the dead. From the analysis mentioned above, we can get an insight into the Japanese substratum religious sense:

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| (1) equality between all beings |
| (2) endless cycle of life and death, or reincarnation |
| (3) a set of a recited Mass & Ancestor worship |



Iomante ritual

(source: <http://www.frpac.or.jp/kodomo/html/bunka/girei/girei.html>)

(1) Equality between all beings in Japanese Buddhism

Since the Tendai sect founded by Saicho, one characteristic of Japanese Buddhism is equality: every sentient being has a Buddha nature which is equal with each other, so it can become a buddha with perfect equality. In Japan it's often said symbolically that "山川草木悉皆成仏(さんせんそうもくしかいじょうぶつ=sansensoumokushikkaijibutsu)," which means "Grasses, Trees, Mountains and Rivers All Become Buddhas." Needless to say that the words contain the meaning "human beings are not particularly high-value beings," and "Not only a particular sophist but anyone can attain enlightenment and become a buddha."

Here we can see the deep-seated equality sense, a kind of the Japanese substratum religious sense from the Jomon-era, has taken root in Japanese Buddhism.

In other words, such an indigenous religious sense prohibited the progress of some kind of Buddhism whose idea was: only certain people could be saved.

The table below represents the number of each Buddhism school's believers. (unit: thousand)

Jodo Shin	12,470	Shingon	8,770	Soto	1,570	source: Religion Almanac 1997
Jodo	6,030	Nichiren	3,810	Tendai	610	by Cultural Affairs Agency

All the 6 sects allege "anybody can get enlightenment and become a buddha." Saicho, the Tendai sect founder, first alleged this idea, and Honen, the Jodo sect founder, first taught the easy concrete way to attain that. Obviously only the Buddhism sects preaching that can prevail in Japan.



Saicho

the founder of the Tendai sect



Honen

the founder of the Jodo sect

(2) endless cycle of life and death

Shinran stressed 還相回向(gensoeko): When karmic bonds to this life end with death, people of the nembutsu go to the Pure Land. But with their fulfillment of perfect wisdom-compassion, they return immediately to this world in the dynamic activity of bringing all beings to awakening. The idea of "Been reborn when dying, and come back to this world" has completely coincided with the Japanese substratum religious sense.

In regard to this point, a folklorist, Yanagida Kunio, gave an interesting comment: When asked "where to go after passing away?" most Japanese reply "the Pure Land." But whether the Japanese really believe that way is questionable. Because most Japanese believe their ancestors return to their original home during the Equinox and Obon seasons from the top of the near mountain, while Buddhist scriptures say the Pure Land is too far to return.

In this respect, it's true that Japanese people are ambiguous: their ancestors may be on the top of the near mountain, and sometimes for certain reasons may be in the Pure Land. Japanese Buddhism is created upon such an ambiguity.

(3) a set of a recited Mass & Ancestor worship

Obon event started from the age of Shotokutaishi, who held a Mass for his father. A set of a recited Mass & Ancestor worship has long lasted since the early Japanese Buddhism age based on the Japanese substratum religious sense, and has been an important issue.



Shinran

the founder of the Jodo Shin sect



Shotokutaishi