

# SHINTO AND SELF-FULFILLMENT

HOW THE PRACTICES OF SHINTO CAN BE INTERPRETED AND USED TO LEAD A MORE FULFILLING LIFE



What's the point? No, seriously. What *is* the point of it all? This is a question many of us often will ask ourselves when things don't exactly go the way we intend. Whether it's because that job interview didn't go as planned or because that last math test was a real doozy, we as humans have a tendency to lose our sense of direction and motivation. One little misstep or hiccup in the plans we lay out can throw us for a loop. "How can I fix this! How can I make sense of such a nonsensical world!" you may be asking. If this sounds like you, then you've come to the right place. Look no further than the Japanese religion of Shinto. Perhaps you've heard of it before, or at the very least have seen photographs of the iconic shinto gates, also known as Torii. Regardless of your background knowledge, the lessons and lifestyle advocated by

Shinto is something many of us could incorporate into our lives. "But won't that take too much time? Besides, I already practice a religion." you say. Fret not! Shinto is incredibly straightforward and your background has no effect on how you are perceived or accepted by Shinto priests. It focuses on your actions more so than your beliefs, meaning that whether you are Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, or Martian, doesn't matter! All are welcome to come and appreciate the relaxing benefits of Shinto. Before we go any further, let's slow things down a bit. You may have many questions, like what god/gods does Shinto have if any? Is there a weekly service like church? Will this take up all of my time? Before explaining *how* to effectively incorporate the beliefs of Shinto into your life, allow me to explain what Shinto even is.

# KAMI

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There is no easy way to explain to explain the Kami of Shinto. This is because there simply is no word in English to explain the concept of them. They often are compared to Gods of other mythologies, such as Zeus or Poseidon. However, this comparison isn't entirely accurate. For one part, Kami are not omnipotent and omniscient like other gods. Not only this, but there are said to be millions of Kami throughout the world!



The reason for this is the fact that Kami are not only god like figures, but also inhabit all non-living and living things. From the foxes running in the forests to the lowly farmer's hut among the rice paddies, all things are inhabited by Kami. While the Kami are not all powerful, they can still act as protectors over the people of Japan, which is why they are revered so highly. Much like Greek mythology there are certain Kami that pertain to important entities and ideas in our world. For example, there is the Kami of the Sun, Amaterasu, who controls the rising and setting of the sun, or Hachiman, the Kami of war who is best known for sending the monsoons to rid the threat of Mongol Invasion. There are also Kami equivalent of Adam and Eve, two Kami who created the island and people of Japan, as well as many other Kami. Whether a Kami controls night and day or simply overlooks and protects a household, they all have something to offer and are worth showing some respect in return for some kind of fortune.



# WORSHIP

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So why worship the Kami? Isn't it just another thing to take time out of your day? Thanks to the wide variety of Kami and straightforward offering process, worshipping the Kami is not only easy, but can offer you peace of mind. That means anybody can praise the kami! Yes, you heard that right! Anybody!

“But how!” You proclaim. Allow me to give a very simple example. Let’s say you have a big test coming up, maybe something like the SAT. Pretty important, right? You’ve studied, you’re prepared, but a little extra luck couldn’t hurt, right? So you mosey on down to the local shinto shrine (or perhaps just a local park if none are available), and you being your prayer to Tenjin, the Kami of academia. Throw a coin other than a penny towards the offering box, or perhaps a pond/fountain, and deeply bow twice. After bowing, clap twice and silently pray to Tenjin. Once you are finished, bow deeply once more and then you’re done! No communion, no confession, no confirmations, no nothing! Unlike other religions, the time commitment and lifestyle allowed by Shinto is quite easy. Some may think it involves becoming a monk in the mountains for months on end, but in actuality it could not be further from the that. Rather than trying to make you feel guilty or focus on existence of death, Shinto simply advocates for a lifestyle for peace of mind. The root philosophy of Shinto even goes past worshipping the Kami and giving offerings to shrines. At its core, Shinto is about respecting the world around us. Respect the mountains and beaches for their beauty, respect your fellow man and recognize his hardships, and respect yourself and your own capabilities as a person. As simple as it sounds, can be more challenging of a concept to adhere to than you might at first think. Whether you maintain this lifestyle through offerings to the Kami or through self discipline, it is something we all can benefit from.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

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I’ve been using the term “religion” quite loosely. When you break it down to its key components, Shinto is more of a philosophy towards life rather than a faith. As a matter of fact, there wasn’t even a word in Japanese for Shinto until 6th century, despite it existing for centuries before that! Not only that, but the word didn’t come into regular use until the 18th century anyway. On top of that, only a fraction of the Japanese people identify as “shintoist”. 60% of the population identifies as non-religious, yet despite this just under 70% attend shinto rituals and shrines attest once or twice a year! This goes to show how easily the practices of Shinto can fit into our life and how flexible it is with other beliefs. So, what’s the wait? Now that you understand the Shinto lifestyle, it’s never too soon to work on leading a more fulfilling life.

