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**BUDDHIST RITUALS AND FESTIVALS IN JAPAN;  
CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND EVOLUTION**

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## **Buddhist Rituals and Festivals in Japan; Cultural Significance and Evolution**

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### **Abstract**

This article delves into the captivating realm of Buddhist rituals and festivals in Japan, exploring their profound significance as conduits between spiritual beliefs and cultural expressions. It traces the introduction of Buddhism to Japan and its subsequent integration into the fabric of the nation's identity. Through a comprehensive examination, the article navigates the intricate ceremonial stages of Buddhism in Japan, shedding light on the transformative journey of individuals and communities as they engage with these practices. The narrative unfolds by delving into the historical underpinnings of Buddhism's arrival in Japan, detailing how the philosophy gradually took root and evolved to harmonize with indigenous beliefs. Against this backdrop, the article unveils a vibrant tapestry of Buddhist festivals that punctuate the Japanese calendar. From the solemnity of Hanamatsuri,<sup>1</sup> celebrating Buddha's birth, to the vibrant dances of the Bon-Odori during O-Bon, each festival carries its unique rituals, symbolism, and communal bonds. Central to the exploration are the ceremonial stages of Buddhist life, each representing a transformative juncture. The article dissects these stages, from birth and naming ceremonies to the introspective practices surrounding death and memorial services. By dissecting the meticulous rituals and symbolic gestures that define these moments, the article illustrates the interplay between the material and the metaphysical, creating a holistic experience that transcends generations. Ultimately, this article underscores how Buddhist rituals and festivals in Japan encapsulate a vibrant cultural heritage, embodying a philosophy that encourages mindfulness, unity, and a connection to

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<sup>1</sup> Hanamatsuri - It is a Japanese terminology for Flower Festivals which is celebrated in Japan.

the larger cosmos. As society evolves, these traditions stand as steadfast reminders of the enduring power of spirituality and the importance of preserving cultural legacies. Through their timeless essence, Buddhist rituals and festivals continue to beckon individuals to partake in a journey of self-discovery, community, and enlightenment, fostering a harmonious relationship between the human experience and the sacred.

## Introduction

Buddhism found its way to the land of rising sun in either A.D. 538 or A.D.552, when the Korean ruler of Baekje gifted the Japanese Emperor Kinmei<sup>2</sup>, a magnificent statue of the Shakyamuni Buddha, text scrolls, and jewels. Emperor Kinmei, who ruled Japan at the time with the help of his court nobility, immediately sparked debate about whether to embrace a foreign cult of that nature. Because Japan already had its own historic and indigenous religion in the form of Shinto, the orthodox Mononobe and Nakatomi clans fiercely rejected this new religion. But the powerful Soga clan preferred Buddhism because they thought it had a lot to offer in terms of enhancing their culture. Thus, in spite of disagreements among the court nobles, the emperor ultimately referred the matter to the Soga clan. Few years later, the devout Prince Regent Shotoku (A.D. 574-621), who was chosen to serve as the Empress Suiko's regent, proclaimed Buddhism to be the state religion. Great politician Prince Shotoku was also a devoted Buddhist. He was adamant that Buddhism was the only way he could unite and advance the culture of Japan. The 17-Article Constitution, which Prince Shotoku promulgated in 604, placed a strong emphasis on Buddhist and Confucian ideas. Article II of this injunction states, "Fervently respect the Three Treasures." —the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These should be revered

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<sup>2</sup> **Emperor Kinmei** (欽明天皇, *Kinmei-tennō*, 509–571) was the 29th Emperor of Japan, according to the traditional order of succession. His reign is said to have spanned the years from 539 to 571.

fervently by everybody as the ultimate and unmistakable source of wisdom. Not only this, but he also ordered to the government to construct various Buddhist temples. Among those, Horyu-ji Temple, which is currently located close to the former capital of Nara is considered as the world's oldest wooden construction.

After the death of Prince Regent Shotoku, Buddhism continued to flourish in Japan. The emperor Shomu<sup>3</sup> constructed national Buddhist temples, or *kokubunji*, in every province. Chinese Buddhist texts were introduced to Japan, where Japanese monks studied them without many changes. Two Chinese Buddhist sects were brought to Japan during the early Heian Period: Saicho introduced the Tendai sect in 805 and Kukai introduced the Shingon sect in 806. Honen established the Jodo sect (also known as the Pure Land sect) in 1175. One of Honen's pupils, Shinran, formed the Jodo-Shin sect (True Pure Land sect) in 1224 with even more streamlined teachings. The Zen sect was introduced from China in 1191. Nichiren created the Nichiren sect in 1253.

With a rise in the number of monks, they were progressively divided into the six Buddhist schools<sup>4</sup>— Three Treatises (*Sanron*), Dharma Characteristics (*Hosso*), Flower Garland (*Kegon*), Precepts (*Ritsu*), Dharma Analysis Treasury (*Kusha*), and Establishment of Truth (*Jojitsu*). These schools were direct importations from China and were studied at numerous temples that were built by the government.

With the passage of time, Buddhism continues to flourish in Japan through rituals and festivals. This paper mainly focuses on the Buddhist rituals

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<sup>3</sup> **Emperor Shōmu** (聖武天皇, *Shōmu-tennō*, September 22, 701 – June 4, 756) was the 45th emperor of Japan, according to the traditional order of succession. Shōmu's reign spanned the years 724 through 749, during the Nara period.

<sup>4</sup> The Six Schools of Nara Buddhism, also known as the *Rokushū* 六宗 (also *Rokushuu/Rokushu*), were academic Buddhist sects. These schools came to Japan from Korea and China during the late 6th and early 7th centuries.

and festivals in Japan. And, how these rituals and festivals plays an important role in preserving Japanese faith and believe in Buddhism in the contemporary Japan.

## **Significance of Buddhism In Ceremonial Stages of Life in Japan**

Country like Japan has its own indigenous culture and tradition. Buddhism can be traced among culture and etiquette. There are three periods of life that involve rituals: rituals for young people, celebrations of the union of two souls, and services honouring the lives of the departed.

### ***Tanjou (Birth)***

On the seventh day following a child's birth, the first family feast, or Oshichiya, is held. Parents take their baby to the nearest Shinto shrine for the blessing of the birth by the guardian deities who are said to protect and ensure the baby's well-being. However, some devoted Buddhists take their young child to a temple or ancestor's tomb, where they report and pledge to abide by the Buddha's teachings and the advice of their forefathers.

### ***Seijinshiki (Coming-of-age ceremony)***

Japan celebrates Coming of Age Day (called as Seijin-shiki, Seijin “becoming an adult,” Shiki is a “ceremony.”) as a national holiday every year on the second Monday in January. It takes place to congratulate and encourage everyone who has already reached adulthood. Sometimes, the Sejinshiki takes place at the Buddhist temple. In Buddhist temple one receives a white cotton cloth with the name of the Buddha printed on it as part of the confirmation ritual. Usually, this ceremony takes place during a special anniversary service or when the chief abbot is present.

In Honmon Butsuryu Shu<sup>5</sup> youth expresses gratitude to the Gohonzon (all of the Primordial Buddha, other Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, guardian deities of the Lotus Sutra, and three great masters: Nichiren, Nichiryu, and Nissen Shonin) on the occasion of Seijinshiki for protection throughout his or her entire life and makes a vow to make additional contributions to the spread of the religion.

### ***Kekkonshiki (Marriage Ritual)***

A Shinto ceremony is the norm for weddings in Japan, but there are also an increasing number of Buddhist, Christian, and secular unions. A pledge to the Buddha and the wedding procession are the solemn beginnings of a Buddhist wedding ceremony. Following the Buddha's incense offering, couple is given water that has been ritually purified by the presiding priest. Next, the couple sips sacred rice wine that has been offered to the Buddha from three wine cups, with the bride and groom sipping three times each to represent respect for the Buddha's three treasures. The san-san-kudo pledge (three times three equals nine sips) is what is referred to as doing this. At this point, the wedding rings are exchanged and the juzu, or Buddhist rosary, is typically handed to the couple. The ceremony is over when the priest performing the marriage confirms the commitment, at this point everyone present leaves the reception hall.

### ***Ososhiki (Death)***

Contrary to weddings in Japan, which are typically Shinto, funerals in Japan follows Buddhist customs. During funeral one has to take Buddhist prayer beads and condolence money (known as kōden) for the family of the deceased. The day before the funeral ceremony, there would typically be an *Otsuya*, or ceremonial wake, where family and friends will assemble to bid the dearly

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<sup>5</sup> The Honmon Butsuryū-shū is a branch of the Honmon Hokke Shū sect (one of the most ancient sects of Nichiren Buddhism). It was founded by Nagamatsu Nissen and a group of followers the 12th of January 1857 with the name of Honmon Butsuryu Ko

departed farewell. In addition to the bereaved offering incense, a Buddhist monk would be there to chant a sutra. The *Ososhiki* includes the cremation ritual, which is a cornerstone of Buddhism. Cremation takes between one and one and a half hours. The ashes are subsequently collected by the family members and placed in a container to be interred in a temple's repository or buried beneath a gravestone. The grieving family is given an *ihai*, or wooden tablet, on which the posthumous name in Buddhism is inscribed.

## Impact of Buddhism on Japanese Culture

Buddhism is a way to live a life in a peaceful manner. It is not a system or set of rules which can only be acquired by monks or can only be acquired within the temples. It is a spontaneous experience that anyone, regardless of gender, status, ideology can encounter at any moment in daily life. In this paper we will discuss few examples which shows that how Buddhism has become one of the prominent habits of Japanese lifestyle.

1) **Daruma Dolls** - Daruma dolls are tiny, elaborately adorned figures that depict the roots of the Zen/Chan Buddhist tradition physically. The founder of the Zen/Chan school of Buddhism is the monk Bodhidharma, known as Daruma in Japan. The dolls are called "daruma" dolls because of this. Although the founding legends of Zen (Japanese) and Chan (Chinese) Buddhism are similar, the daruma doll is unique to individuals who practice the Japanese school of Zen Buddhism. Early modern Japan saw a rise in the use of dolls as a means of representing Bodhidharma's memory. According to history, the great monk travelled to a Shaolin temple, sat in zazen meditation with his legs tucked beneath him, and dove into a nine-year period of intense meditation. After a long period of time, his arms and legs started to deteriorate and eventually separated from his body. Because of this, Daruma dolls have circular bodies with faces instead of arms and legs. In contemporary Japan, the daruma doll has become a symbol of

the ability to commit oneself to a significant, life-changing task until its completed. Traditionally, people paint one of the eyes of Daruma at a time of praying for a particular wish and when the wish comes true, the second eye get painted. The Daruma's eyes are subsequently opened in this manner. The dolls, which come in a variety of sizes, are modelled after Bodhidharma. The saying, "stumbling seven times and righting oneself eight like Daruma," is related to the story of Bodhidharma, a man who persevered despite numerous difficulties.

2) **Furoshiki** - Furoshiki originated in Japan around 710 B.C. during the Nara period. The name of furoshiki comes from "furo" (bath) and "shiki" (ceremony). It is a square-shaped Japanese traditional wrapping cloth that is eco-friendly and mostly used for wrapping gift, carrying goods or just as a decoration. When twisted, it can be used as a rope as well. The Mahayana Buddhist<sup>6</sup> idea of no outer-limitation or extension is reminiscent of the Japanese culture's multifaceted nature.

## **Buddhist Festivals in Japan**

Festivals plays a prominent role not only in binding the people but also to preserve the rituals and culture from ages. Country like Japan has numerous festivals in a year. Among those festivals many are known as Buddhist festivals. In this paper we will discuss various Buddhist festivals celebrated in Japan and analyse how these festivals preserve the Buddhist culture in Japan.

1. ***Oshōgatsu*** - In Japanese New Year is called as Oshogatsu. On this day, the norm for the average Japanese person is to get up early and, if possible, see the first sunrise. For the first three – four days Toso, a rice wine and Mochi, Rice cakes are served as a breakfast for long and healthy life. Wearing formal attire,

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<sup>6</sup> Mahayana Buddhism, also known as the Great Vehicle, is the form of Buddhism prominent in North Asia, including China, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, and Japan. Mahayana is one of the main existing branches of Buddhism and the Sanskrit word "Mahayana" means great vehicle.



one pays a visit to a local or otherwise well-known Buddhist temple or shrine. It is found that 86 million Japanese citizens visited Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in 2003. When it comes to midnight customs, the Japanese stay up till midnight to hear the *joya no kane*<sup>7</sup>, or 108 chimes, of temple bells. Every temple in Japan rings its large bell 108 times just before midnight. Buddhism holds that ringing the bell 108 times will help individuals purge their hearts of their bad impulses and cravings, making them more virtuous for the following year. On the 31st, the bell is rung 107 times, including one beyond midnight.

2. ***Setsubun*** – Setsubun is a bean throwing festival in Japan. The Setsubun Service, which involves the throwing of beans, is held at houses, temples, and shrines during the day on February 3rd, which is the day before the start of spring according to the Japanese lunar calendar. On this day, people hurl roasted beans inside square wooden rice measurement bowls at doorways and into rooms while yelling, " Oni wa Soto, Fuku wa Uchi!" (demons out, luck in). This festival is celebrated in Buddhist temples and Shrines. For instance, Kuonji Temple in Minobu, Yamanashi is a Buddhist temple which celebrates Setsubun every year. Visitors congregate in the main temple of Kuonji Temple to witness guests such as well-known athletes or powerful politicians. Then the temple's halls are filled with the echo of an outstanding Buddhist incantation ceremony.

3. **Nehan Service** - Nehan-e, also known as Nehan-ko or Nehan-ki. In Japan, February 15 is celebrated as the day that Guatama Buddha attained Nirvana (parinirvana) around 2,500 years ago in Kushinara, India. A Butsu Nehan-zu (painting of the Buddha in nirvana), showing Shakamuni entering nirvana beneath a sal tree while lying with his head pointing to the north and his face facing west, surrounded by ten great followers<sup>8</sup>, was displayed during the

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<sup>7</sup> Nara's Todaiji Temple and Chion'in in Kyoto are known to have gigantic bells that require the combined force of 17 monks to ring them.

<sup>8</sup> A group of Bosatsu (Bodhisattva), Tenbu (deities who reside in a heavenly realm, one of six realms in which the souls of living beings transmigrate from one to another)

service. Illustrations of the Butsu Nehan-zu are offered depending on the service. The Nehan-e conducted at Yamashina-dera Temple was particularly well-known during the Heian era. It was also known as Joraku-e, and "Sanpo-e," a collection of Buddhist legends written in Japanese, describes it as the first of "Nenchu Shuyo Hoe," or "The Main Buddhist Services in Whole Year."

4. ***Hana Matsuri*** – Most Buddhist temples in Japan celebrate the historical Buddha's birth with a celebration called Hana Matsuri on April 8. Most Buddhist temples in Japan celebrate Hana Matsuri, except for those connected to the Nichiren sect. The Imperial Court brought the practice over from China in the seventh century, and it spread fast among the populace. People assemble around the shrine to replace the nectar that is claimed to have been showered on the infant Buddha's statue at the moment of his birth with sweet tea. Because of this, the service is also known as the Kambutsu (Anointing the Buddha) Service. In Japan one can celebrate Hana matsuri in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto etc. For instance, Gokoku-ji temple, Senso-ji temple, Tsukiji Hongan-ji temple, Shitenno-ji temple, Nishi Hongan-ji temple and Mibu-dera temple are such examples.

5. ***O-Bon*** - Obon, a Buddhist festival honouring departed family members and ancestors, is observed in Japan every summer. The term O-Bon is an acronym for Ura-Bon, which is derived from the Sanskrit word ullambana, which meaning "deliverance from suffering." It alludes to the excruciating anguish one experiences when they are deliverance from suffering, whether it be physically or mentally. According to legend, there once lived in India a man by the name of Maudgalyayana (Mokuren in Japanese), who later joined the Buddha's followers and attained profound insight into the nature of existence. To his amazement, he discovered his dead mother in a starving, thirsty and suffering state. He promptly brought some food to her, but she was unable to eat it since she caught fire just as she was ready to eat the food. The shocked son raced back to the Buddha to explain what had happened and to inquire as to why she had to endure such

suffering. The Buddha replied subtly, "It was inevitable because no one had looked after her before or after her death." Before becoming the Buddha's pupil, Maudgalyana had been egocentric and only concerned about himself, and he felt repentance for that. When Maudgalyana pleaded with the Buddha for a means to save his mother, the Buddha told him to call all the monks present and organize a memorial service for her, providing food, clothing, and other requirements to the monks and the entire crowd. The Buddha also suggested that the service be held on July 15th as all of the monks would be fresh and purified spiritually after their summer retreat. The student was much comforted and performed the duty as instructed by the Buddha, saving his mother from starvation and loneliness in the other world. Obon is typically performed by a priest in front of a designated altar in Buddhist houses, where it is thought that ancestral spirits visit at this time of year. The first day of O-Bon is known as Mukae-Bon, which means the day of welcome, while the last day is known as Okuri-Bon, which means the day of departure.

6. ***Segaki Service*** - Segaki is a phrase used to describe a ritual that is frequently connected to Japanese Buddhism. Segaki means "feeding of hungry ghosts" according to its etymology. Segaki is practiced in Buddhist temples, although it is also done in homes. According to the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, Ananda, one of the Buddha's followers, was in excruciating pain when a devil materialized and foretold his impending death. The devil said that he would be safe if he supplied food and preached the noble doctrine in response to Ananda's perplexed question about whether there was a possibility for him to avoid his fate. He acted as instructed by the sutra and was thereby rescued. This emphasizes the value of helping those who are in genuine need. This thanksgiving service is occasionally done in conjunction with funerals for the deceased so that those in attendance are reminded to give to those other than their own ancestors.

By observing the mentioned Buddhist festivals one can analyse that even in the contemporary Japan Buddhism plays a prominent role. All rituals, customs and festivals are significant in binding people and preserve Buddhism over the centuries. One should be obliged to all the customs and rituals who bring all people together in a year and make people to people bond strong. Festivals not only spread happiness but also makes us realize the importance of our own culture and traditions. It passes legacy from generation to generation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the vibrant tapestry of Buddhist rituals and festivals in Japan unveils a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with spiritual beliefs. Throughout this exploration, we've witnessed how these rituals and festivals bridge the gap between the material and the metaphysical, creating a harmonious union between the people and their beliefs. From the mesmerizing dances of the Bon-Odori to the contemplative serenity of the O-Bon festival, each event serves as a reminder of the enduring power of tradition in a rapidly changing world. The essence of these practices lies not only in their outward expressions but in the underlying philosophies they uphold. The rituals, marked by their attention to detail and symbolic gestures, encourage mindfulness and the acknowledgment of the impermanence of existence. Likewise, the festivals, while joyous and celebratory, encourage introspection and a sense of community, fostering bonds that transcend generations. As we reflect on the role of Buddhist rituals and festivals in Japan, it's evident that they continue to shape the cultural landscape of the nation. These practices stand as a testament to the adaptability of Buddhism, which has seamlessly integrated into Japanese society, enriching the lives of countless individuals and communities. Moreover, they serve as a bridge between the past and the present, enabling people to connect with their ancestors and heritage while navigating the complexities of modern life.

In an era of globalization, where traditions are easily overshadowed by contemporary influences, the enduring presence of these rituals and festivals is a source of inspiration. They remind us of the importance of preserving cultural legacies and embracing spirituality in our lives. By immersing ourselves in these experiences, we not only gain insight into the profound teachings of Buddhism but also discover the timeless threads that connect humanity across time and space. In the end, the captivating world of Buddhist rituals and festivals in Japan invites us to partake in the beauty of tradition, the power of spirituality, and the unity of community. As we move forward, may we continue to honour and appreciate these cultural treasures that enrich our lives and remind us of the profound interconnectedness of all beings. With every incense offering, every intricate dance, and every heartfelt prayer, the spirit of Buddhism in Japan lives on, inviting us to join in its profound journey of self-discovery and enlightenment.

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