



## SHINTO

### JINJA HONCHO - THE ASSOCIATION OF SHINTO SHRINES

This indigenous Japanese faith has approximately 90 million members with 81,000 Shinto shrines throughout the country. These shrines are built largely of wood and form the heart of the villages and local communities of Japan. Often the only extensive areas where trees and greenery flourish in Japanese cities and towns are around holy shrines. Shintos see themselves as protected by creation. It is the forests and not the buildings that mark the true shrines of Shintoism. The deities are invited to these forests, where they and their environment are protected by the local community, which in turn is protected by the deities.

#### **Shinto Faith**

Since ancient times, Japanese have expressed the divine energy or life-force of the natural world as kami. Kami is a word that corresponds to 'deity' in English. Kami derived from nature, such as the kami of rain, the kami of wind, the kami of the mountains, the kami of the sea, and the kami of thunder have a deep relationship with our lives and a profound influence over our activities.

Nature's severity, does not take human comfort and convenience into consideration. The sun, which gives life to all living things, sometimes parches the earth, causing drought and famine. The oceans, where life first appeared, may suddenly rise, sending violent tidal waves onto the land, causing much destruction and grief. The blossom scented wind, a harbinger of spring, can become a wild storm. Even the smallest animals can bring harm—the mouse that eats our grain and carries disease, and the locust that devastates our crops. It is to the kami that the Japanese turn to pacify this sometimes calm but at times raging aspect of nature.

Shinto places great value in the virtues of purity and honesty, yet as a faith, Shinto has no dogma, doctrine, or founder. Its origin can be seen in the relationship between the

ancient Japanese and the power they found in the natural world. It is a relationship that continues to this day, defined by a great reverence for nature's strength, and gratitude for nature's bounty. Only by both receiving the blessings of nature and accepting its rage can we maintain a harmonious connection to the world around us.

### **Activities for the Future**

Having the Shinto faith as background, Jinja Honcho has been involved in various activities to promote the sense of nature conservation, the traditional value of Japan. One of such activities is 'Plant a Tree Festival'. Japan experienced a great disaster in 2011. Some Shinto shrines were destroyed by tsunami and many shrine forests, or chinju no mori were lost. Chinju no mori is not only a forest but is a place that people gather for local shrine festival to strengthen their bond as a community. To recover these forests, Jinja Honcho has organized a series of events for people to gather at a Shinto shrine and plant saplings so that the forest can grow with people around the shrine. In 2015, more than 30,000 saplings were planted and they are slowly but firmly growing.

This activity is not only for environment but also for fostering spirituality. For children, Shinto shrine is a place to play in nature. By touching lives of animals, insects and other living things in a shrine forest directly, children can learn what life is. And as children grow up, they learn the significant role that the forest plays as a part of environment, and they gradually recognize that human beings is not ruling the world but is a part of nature.

Parents also take part in this event. By taking part in, many of them recall their youth and re-recognize that they were children of forests. They tell their children what they were taught by their parents, and hopefully, children will teach what they feel to the next generation.

Conservation and sustainability is not a matter of science or technology. It is a matter of spirituality. Fostering the sense of 'being a part of nature' is essential for the future. Therefore, Jinja Honcho's activities related to shrine forest are projects for the future.

### **No Long Term Plan**

Since the sense of conservation is already built in the Shinto faith, it is sometimes argued that there is no need to emphasize the importance of conservation. Traditionally speaking, Japanese people were very much aware of maintaining the balance between human activities and nature. For example, planting a sapling after logging was a long tradition for Japanese woodmen. By doing so, Japan could maintain the landscape in

green. From today's perspective, what our ancestors did can be called as activities of maintaining sustainability.

However, after so called modernization, there was a tendency of pursuing economical merit and financial benefit, and there was a time when many parts of Japanese forest disappeared. This happened not only in Japan but also in abroad where Japanese companies went out to obtain cheaper resource and supply.

Recently, such attitude is changing. Especially after the earthquake, Japanese people including politicians and economical figures gradually recognize the significance of the Japanese traditional value of coexisting with nature. This is a very good time for Jinja Honcho to promote Shinto based way of thinking or Japanese traditional value. Even after the modernization, the root of Japanese spirituality is still alive in Japanese people.

Standing in such situation, it is usual to set a special plan, such as a 10-year long term plan. But Jinja Honcho has been involved in the activities to recover and promote the Japanese traditional values since its establishment in 1946. So, for Jinja Honcho, there is no need to set a new plan. All that needed is to continue on existing activities.