

The Spiritual Power of Flowers

Ikebana and Shinto

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Why did I feel so different?

It was a cold Friday evening in Tokyo with a dusty and dry wind blowing through the underground passage to the subway station. I suddenly realised that my body felt light and refreshed. Great joy and excitement kept bubbling up inside me. I couldn't stop smiling.

Only two hours before I had felt so tired. It had been another long week at the US based company where I was in charge of three sections. My job had me moving from one desk to another, checking the progress of various projects. My brain felt physically heavy. It was hard to stand up straight and I could feel a headache coming on.

Despite my exhaustion, I had dragged myself to the Ikebana class I usually attended after work on Fridays. What had happened during the class to give me such energy? I was given some flowers and some branches. I focused on the touch and smell of my materials. I needed to concentrate to create a design that really brought out their most beautiful elements. There were only five of us in a large classroom that could accommodate more than hundred students, but we were all so focused we seemed to fill the space. The two hours passed quickly and quietly. At the end of the class our teacher, the late Sogetsu Head Master, Hiroshi Teshigahara shared his insights and advice on our arrangements with us.

I tried to think of what could have caused such a change in my mental state. Something was tugging at the edge of mind. There was something special about my experience. What was it? Then I remembered something similar had happened to me before.

The presence of God

Once when I was a young boy, I went to the local Shinto shrine for the summer festival and joined in the folk dance. There was a large crowd milling around, some dancing, some enjoying the atmosphere - the beat of the drums, the light of candles, the thrill of being part of a large group all moving in unison at night. I had a transcendental experience just like the feeling I had that Friday night in Tokyo many years later.

The extraordinary mental state people experience during Shinto festivals has been well studied. Before I talk about the spiritual experiences in a Shinto festival and its

similarity to my Ikebana experience, I should perhaps briefly explain a little about Shinto, a really fascinating and often misunderstood religion.

Shinto and Buddhism are the two main religions in Japan. While Buddhism was introduced from India through China and Korea to Japan in the 6th century, Shinto is Japan's native religion based on its ancient folk beliefs.

The two religions are so embedded in Japanese society that both Buddhist and Shinto rites play an important part in most people's lives. Many people have weddings at Shinto shrines and funerals at Buddhist temples. If asked about their religion, however, many Japanese would say that they don't have any!

The imported world religion of Buddhism and the home-grown folk religion of Shinto have influenced one another and coexisted in Japan for centuries, despite their different philosophies. Neither of them has dominated or suppressed the other except when Shinto was made the state religion from 1868 to 1945.

When the world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Islam formed around the same era in human history and spread world wide, they often supplanted native traditional religious beliefs. The Japanese people, however, were able to accept Buddhism while at the same time maintaining their indigenous beliefs. This is perhaps due to the nature of Shinto.

Here are some of the key characters of Shinto.

1. Shinto is polytheistic. In Shinto there are millions of gods or deities. The deities include a wide range of spirit-beings, natural and supernatural forces and extraordinary beings. Some deities are famous and worshiped by many and some are evil! Importantly, the reverence Japanese feel for nature is based on the Shinto belief that spirits-beings govern the natural world.
2. Equality and rebirth are fundamental Shinto beliefs. There is no clear distinction between human beings and other natural beings on the spiritual level. Human beings don't own or control the natural world. All living things including human beings, animals, plants and mountains are equally spiritual. Once dead, all things reincarnate and are reborn. Life is eternal and continuous. There are important lessons here for us today, given the fragile state of ecological systems around the world.
3. There is no clear boundary between human beings and deities. Whether good or bad, once dead, all are equally able to become deities and to be worshiped. "How about the war criminals in the World War II? Shouldn't they go to hell?" The shortest answer is "No". One of the most significant ethical principles of Shinto is purity. Renewal and purification are persistent themes in Shinto. Even someone who has committed terrible sins can be purified after death through Shinto practices. This optimistic belief can be both good and bad. In the worst case, of course, the potential for absolution for any sins can lead to irresponsibility.

4. Shinto belief is firmly based on family and community rather than the individual. Most Shinto festivals are celebrated in local communities based around a Shinto shrine. Some say that in modern society the company has replaced the local community in the Japanese psyche, and argue that, because of Shinto, Japanese are group oriented and work hard for their companies and that this is the key to the economic success of contemporary Japan.

Traditionally, those who take part in a Shinto festival pass through three stages, *Kegare*, *Hare* and *Ke*.

1. Through Shinto practices, one prepares to recover from *Kegare*, a state of bad energy or a lack of vital force. *Kegare* is associated with various states of negativity such as bad luck, disease, evil, disorder, lack of completion and defilement. These preparatory Shinto practices take many forms but they usually restrict daily activities and encourage people to be clean, peaceful and quiet. The practices aim to create an atmosphere conducive to interaction with the Shinto deities.
2. During the festival, participants and the deity become one. This is usually occurs at the highlight of a festival and involves physical activities such as dancing and carrying portable shrines. At this time participants can reach *Hare*, the state of sacredness and purity.
3. To return from *Hare* to *Ke*, the state of everyday life, there is a celebration. Special food and wine play an important part in this process.

In a sense, a Shinto festival is like a recharger. After a festival you are recharged and full of energy. But as time goes by, you lose your energy bit by bit in everyday life and at some point you need another festival to recover.

As I was looking into Shinto I began to wonder if there might be some similarities between Shinto festivals and Ikebana. That feeling of having recharged my batteries after my Ikebana class was a lot like my feeling after a Shinto festival. But is there another similarity at a deeper spiritual level? At a Shinto festival people interact with a deity and in Ikebana people interact with flowers. Does it follow that touching flowers is equivalent to touching a deity?

What was the significance of flowers in ancient Japan?

I decided to look into the significance of flowers in Japanese Shinto tradition. I was particularly interested in the ancient forms of Shinto in which the origins are preserved. It came to me as I read that the roots of Ikebana may lie in those early Shinto beliefs.

Ikebana was established around 15th century and has two cultural bases. As you can guess, they are Shinto and Buddhism. Buddhism brought the profound philosophy and the practice of offering flowers to Buddha and other deities. The Japanese then refined and adapted the practice into an art form based on the Shinto reverence for nature. Ikebana is typical of many Japanese art forms in that it reflects the duality of Japanese cultural tradition.

My quest into the essence of Ikebana experience in terms of Shinto had two goals. One was to find the connection between Ikebana and the sacred experiences in Shinto on the personal level. The other was to identify the Shinto beliefs that contributed to the creation of Ikebana as an art form.

First, I looked up the original meaning of flowers in the Japanese language. In Japanese, flower is *Hana*, which also means nose. Flower and nose have the same pronunciation with slightly different accents. They share the meaning of being points of contact with the outside world, the divine.

Flowers are regarded as a contact point between humans and the natural world, which is governed by deities. The way flowers bloom and fall was thought to reflect the divine will. Spring flowers were omens for the autumn harvest. If there were plenty of flowers, cherry blossoms in particular, people expected good crops of rice.

Now, let's look into how flowers were regarded and treated in Shinto, particularly in the ancient era. *Kojiki* (712), the oldest surviving text in Japanese, is probably the best starting point. The text, a kind of imperial chronicle, was written to legitimize the ruling dynasty, the *Yamato* clan, which still exists as the Japanese royal family, the longest lasting royal family in the world today.

In my quest, the story of *Konohananosakuyahime* (I'll call her the Flower Princess) in *Kojiki* is of particular interest. Prince *Niniginomikoto*, great grand father of the first emperor, *Jimmu* (660-585 B.C.) met the beautiful Flower Princess in Kyushu, the southern island of Japan and fell in love with her at first sight. He asked the father of the Flower Princess, *Ooyamatsuminokami*, for her hand in marriage. *Ooyamatsuminokami* was so delighted that he gave the Prince the Flower Princess as well as her sister, *Iwanagahime* (the Stone Princess). Was the Prince happy to have two princesses at once? No, unfortunately, the Stone Princess was so ugly that he decided to send her back. Her father was incensed. He said, "I gave you Flower Princess so that your life will prosper like a flower. I gave you Stone Princess so that you life will last long like stone. But you returned Stone princess. Therefore, your life will be short and fragile like a flower." The author of *Kojiki* concludes that's why Japanese emperors don't tend to live very long.

It's interesting to find that the author of *Kojiki*, an official document, was allowed to write negative things about emperors and their ancestors. Actually there are many naughty (and sexually explicit!) stories too, but I won't go further.

So what can we learn about ancient beliefs regarding flowers from this story? The flower was a symbol of magical energy bringing prosperity. Although a fresh flower has such positive energy, its energy is transient as the father of Flower Princes pointed out. It is interesting that the energy of a flower was seen as transferable. By taking the Flower Princess as a wife, the Prince was inheriting some of her characteristics. It suggests that by touching and keeping flowers, the energy of the flower becomes part of you and brings positive results such as prosperity.

Having learned that the flower is a contact point with the sacred and that the flower was believed to have a magical energy which can be shared, I wanted to find out what role flowers played in those ancient Shinto rites.

In many areas of Japan, farmers climb mountains in early spring to pick branches and flowers. They make some simple arrangements and put them at the place where water enters a rice paddy. Then, they start planting rice seedlings. In some areas, the planting is accompanied by dance and music.

One way of interpreting this ritual is that the mountain deity arrives in spring with flowers blooming and young leaves coming out. The deity is considered to be the sacred spirit that brings vital energy for plants to be reborn. By bringing flowers from the mountains, the farmers also bring the magical energy of the sacred spirit of the mountain deity. Putting the flowers full of sacred spirit on a rice paddy was thought to transmit that energy to the rice. The farmers hope that the mountain deity will summon the rice deity who will remain there till autumn and help produce a good crop.

Planting rice seedlings was not just work but a sacred ritual where people interact with deity and experience *Hare*, the state of sacred and purity. It is just like a Shinto festival. Flowers played an important role in the ritual as sacred objects filled with magical vital energy.

In the Shinto tradition, a flower is a special entity that is related the sacred world. Touching it, in particular, has a significant meaning. By touching it we can receive and enjoy its sacred vital energy. This idea of the flower as a conduit to communication with the sacred has made arranging flowers a special activity in Japan. It has played an important role in the origin and development of Ikebana.

Conclusion

Ikebana and Shinto festival appear to be very different; one is an art form practiced all around the world and the other is a religious activity in Japan. But they have common factors at the deeper level. At the core of both experiences, we can interact with the sacred.

In my experience as an Ikebana teacher in Australia, such an experience is not culture specific but more universal. Ikebana students don't need to be Japanese or Shintoists to experience its spiritual essence. With some practice most of Ikebana students can experience a moment in which they are energised by flowers. They may rejoice in finding the sacred power of nature.

I hope that more people will recognise the spiritual power of flowers. It may just lead us to a better future, more in tune with our world.

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