

THE ASAKUSA KANNON TEMPLE

SENSŌJI

Note: The following articles about the Asakusa Kannon Temple and Buddhist Worship for the Masses were provided some months ago by the late Reverend Shinjō Kamimura, one of the temple priests.

They are intended to present this form of worship as it is viewed by the priests and the people. During the past few years a number of articles have been published in this journal dealing with various academic aspects of Buddhism, but only one article has presented the faith of the people as expressed in what is often referred to as "Temple Buddhism." This was entitled "Buddhism for Our Time" by the Reverend Kōshō Ōtani and was concerned with the faith of True Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo Shin-shū).

In these essays the reader can get a glimpse of one of the most popular forms of worship in this country and the attitude of the priests who serve in temples devoted to the faith on which this worship is based. These are not intended to be learned essays; they are a revelation of some phases of the Japanese religious mind. An evaluation of this faith and "the propriety and efficacy of these practices" is, as the author suggests, "a separate question" which we hope can be discussed on another occasion.

The Rev. Shinjō Kamimura died suddenly on March 18, 1964. He was a friend of many years, ever cheerful, courteous, and above all hospitable. He went out of his way to help guests of the Institute who wished to understand the faith and practices of Sensōji worshippers. He was deeply respected, and will be greatly missed. To his family and associates the editor extends his sincere sympathy in their bereavement. W. P. W

Origin

Sensōji, the main temple of the Shō Kannon Sect, is located in Asakusa Park, Daitō Ward, Tokyo, where in ancient days

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a delta was formed at the estuary of the Sumida River. Since the place was an important junction point, as well as a scenic spot, it was only natural that it was selected as the site for a temple.

If we rely on the tradition handed down at Sensōji, the origin of the temple goes back to the 36th year of the reign of the Empress Suiko (628 A. D.). On March 18 of that year, while Hinokuma-no-Hamanari and his brother Takenari were fishing on the seashore near the mouth of the Sumida River, in the neighborhood of a place now called Komagata, an image was caught in their net which turned out to be a statue of Kannon.

At first ten young grass mowers — so tradition goes — built a small shrine for the image. Later, when the master of the two brothers, a man called Haji-no-Atai Nakatomo, learned that it was an image of Kannon, he transformed his house into a temple, placed the image in it, and thereafter devoted his life to the veneration and service of the Goddess of Mercy. Such is the traditional origin of the present main sanctuary.

Asakusa Shrine, which stands in a separate precinct on the West adjacent to the temple, is dedicated to the three fishermen, Nakatomo, Hamanari, and Takenari, whose spirits have been worshipped by subsequent generations as the tutelary kami (deities) of the locality.

History

Some twenty years after the traditional discovery of the image, that is, about the year 645 A. D., a certain priest, who later became Saint Shōkai, came to the region on a pilgrimage. Deciding to make his permanent residence there, he built a

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magnificent temple for Kannon on the present site of Sensōji and became its first chief priest. He is, therefore, regarded as the temple's founder. Then, following a revelation in a dream, he ordained that the Kannon statue should become a "hidden image," that is, one that was never to be exposed to human eyes, and since then it has been strictly guarded. However, at the beginning of the Heian era, that is, about the middle of the ninth century, another statue, the work of the Great Teacher (*Daishi*), Jikaku, was installed as the main image for public veneration. It is this statue that is displayed for worship each year on December 12th by opening the doors of the altar repository.

During the Tenryō period (938—946) Taira-no-Kimimasa built a gorgeous temple as a votive offering to Kannon and endowed it with rice fields. Thus, the temple, which had always enjoyed the confidence of the common people, gained the devotion of the military class and gradually developed into an important religious center. When Tokugawa Ieyasu established his military government in Edo (Tokyo) in 1590, Asakusa Temple became a place of worship for the Tokugawa family and was designated as an official institution to offer prayers for the shogunate. Naturally this led to the district around the temple becoming even more popular. In fact it soon became one of the most prosperous quarters in the nation and has remained so. Even though it has been destroyed several times by fire, a new structure has always been built on the same site on a more magnificent scale.

With the beginning of the Meiji era (1868—1912), when Edo was renamed Tokyo and the influx of Western civilization was

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at high tide, the Asakusa district underwent some cultural face-lifting and the area around the temple was converted into Asakusa Park which still surrounds it today.

Separation of Asakusa Shrine

Historically the shrine dedicated to the fishermen who found the image was administered by the temple; but early in the Meiji era as a result of the separation of Shinto and Buddhism, it was detached and placed under the administration of the Shrine Bureau of the Ministry of Home Affairs. From ancient times the annual festival of the shrine, which falls on May 17 and 18, has been a spectacular affair with over a hundred sacred palanquin or portable shrines (*mikoshi*) from the surrounding districts and three big floats participating in the colorful celebration.

Destruction in 1945 and Subsequent Rebuilding

The main temple sanctuary, a five-storied pagoda, and the Niō Gate, built in 1649 by the third Tokugawa Shōgun, Iyemitsu, were destroyed by the air raid fires of March, 1945, and consequently had to be rebuilt. The estimated cost of \$ 1.1 million, was so far beyond the ability of the parishioners and worshippers to provide, that part of the cost had to be defrayed by selling temple property. Soon after the termination of hostilities rehabilitation plans were discussed, but it was not until May 19, 1951 that reconstruction was started. Four years later, in May, 1955, the main part of the sanctuary was completed and the ceremony of transferring the image from the temporary sanctuary to the main temple hall was performed. Then, starting

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October 17, 1958, a 45-day festival commemorating the completion of the building was observed. Believers from all over the country came to Tokyo for this great occasion.

The measurements of the new main temple area are : front — 114 ft., depth — 108 ft., total floor space — 37,152 sq. ft., height — 97 ft. The central altar of the sanctuary, where the main main image is enshrined, is gold-plated. The altar next to this on the worshipper's right is dedicated to Fudō Myō-ō, or *Acala vidyārāja*, and the one on the worshipper's left to Aizen Myō-ō or *Raga vidyārāja*. The center ceiling of the Outer Hall, where ordinary Worshippers enter without taking off their shoes, is decorated with the painting, "The Dragon," by the artist, Ryūshi Kawabata, and "The Goddess" by Inshō Dōmoto. Also hanging there are eight famous votive paintings (*emagaku*) which were presented to the temple after the Tokugawa period.

After the main sanctuary was completed, the Miō gate was restored ; and recently the gate immediately in front of the main sanctuary was completed. Subsequently a pagoda will be erected.

Social Welfare

For many years Sensōji carried on a variety of social and educational undertakings, but after World War II, because of inflation and changed conditions, much of this work was taken over by the government. Moreover, up to the present time the energy of the temple authorities has been absorbed entirely in the reconstruction of the destroyed structures. Nevertheless, there has been time and resources to conduct Sensōji Hospital, a dormitory for nurses, a kindergarten, a study hall, and an association for reading the *Kannon Sutra*. Other activities in-

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clude cultural lectures, study of the tea ceremony, a group for the recital of Buddhist hymns, and various organizations for the faithful. By managing a variety of welfare and instructional activities, the temple is fulfilling the will of the people.

SOCIAL WELFARE WORK OF SENSŌJI

In translating the mercy of Kannon into social practice, Sensōji operates a number of social welfare projects.

Nursery school: In 1923 a day nursery was set up in one corner of the temple's precinct. In 1931 this was reorganized as a nursery school. As time passed, it was equipped with up-to-date facilities for child education. At present there are ten trained teachers and 277 children are enrolled. Special consideration is paid to the development of religious sentiment.

Supplementary school: This school was opened in April, 1956, to offer supplementary classes for primary and middle school students. Every evening members of the temple's education department staff and university students conduct classes for about thirty primary and middle school pupils.

Sensōji Hospital: This hospital was first started as an emergency first aid station at the time of the big Kanto flood in August, 1910. Today it is a general hospital serving the interests of the general public. All the workers at the hospital are instructed to serve the public in the spirit of Kannon. At present the hospital has 28 physicians, 51 nurses, and 37 clerical workers. In 1962, 34,000 in-patients and 18,600 out-patients were treated at the hospital.

Activities: Every Saturday afternoon at 2 o'clock about 150

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followers gather at the temple to read from the sacred *Kannon Sutra*. After the reading there is a sermon by a temple priest. Another group of followers visits the temple once a month on a given day to share in the drinking of tea that is offered to Kannon. Still another group visits the temple every month on the 1st, 15th and 28th at seven o'clock in the morning to read Kannon and Hannya sutras. Through these movements the popularity of the Kannon faith is increasing among the people.

WHAT IS KANNON?

— A Sermon —

Kannon (*Avalokiteśvara*) is the goddess of mercy who listens to your prayers and relieves your suffering in the way that is best suited to you.

Buddhas are spiritual manifestations of the inviolate laws of the universe. The word buddha may be interpreted as an appellation for those who have achieved self-enlightenment and attained the inviolate universal reasoning power.

Kannon, among many other buddhas, is meant for the merciful salvation of people who are stricken by misfortune.

Belief in Kannon is founded on the *Kannon Sutra*, that is, the *Fumon-bon*, or the 25th chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. This faith spread from India to China and Korea, and finally to Japan, where belief in Kannon soon became extremely popular. Among the masses the affectionate appellation, "Kannon Sama," is very common. Asakusa Temple is a representative sanctuary of the Kannon cult. For more than 1,300 years people have gone there to pray.

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Kannon is regarded as a bodhisattva, that is, the incarnation of the Buddha's compassion. This bodhisattva took a noble vow to save everyone afflicted with suffering, and incessantly carries out the work of salvation by assuming various forms.

Shō Kannon is only one of thirty-three different forms of Kannon.

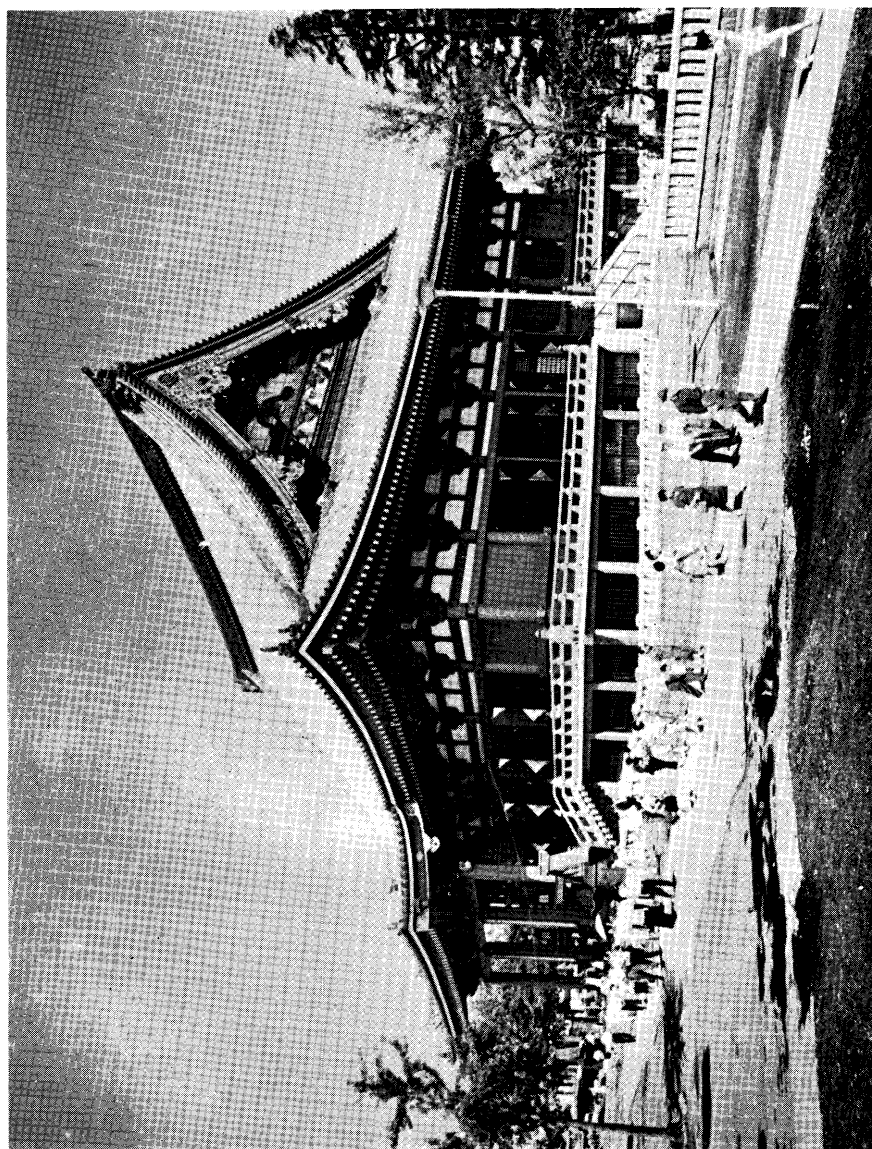
In worshipping Kannon, you are to utter *Namu Kanzeon Bosatsu* in prayer with all your heart, and at the same time recall Kannon in your mind. More formally this should take the form of reading the *Kannon Sutra*.

Kannon is omnipresent in this universe. The best way to pray for the mercy of Kannon is to worship the image of Kannon. This is why Sensōji is drawing such big crowds day after day.

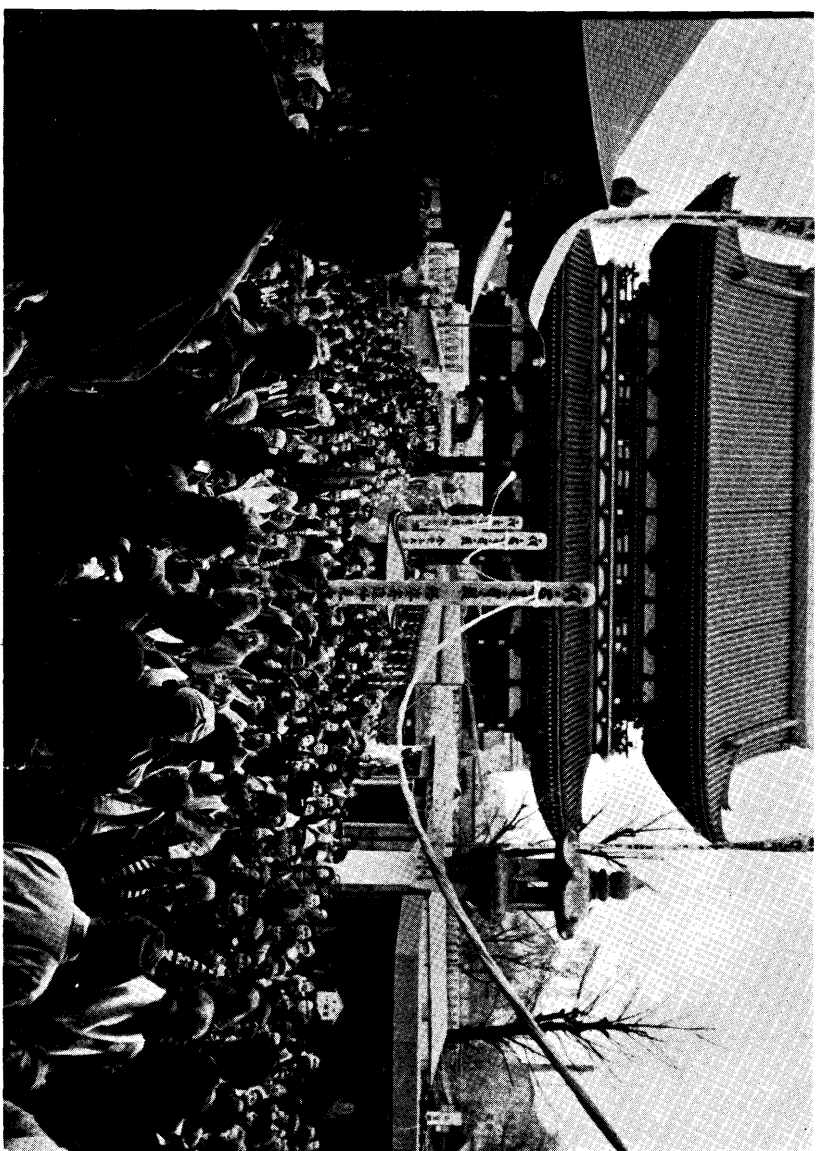
The practice of worshipping Kannon in Japan began as early as the sixth century. Religious faith must have started with the very beginning of human life on this earth.

Belief in the benevolence of Kannon is derived from Buddhism which takes root in the inviolate laws of the universe.

The sacred image of Kannon enshrined in Sensōji, the internationally-known head temple of Sei Kannon Sect, has been worshiped by countless millions of people since the days of Empress Suiko (some 1,400 years), when the practice of believing in Kannon began in this country.



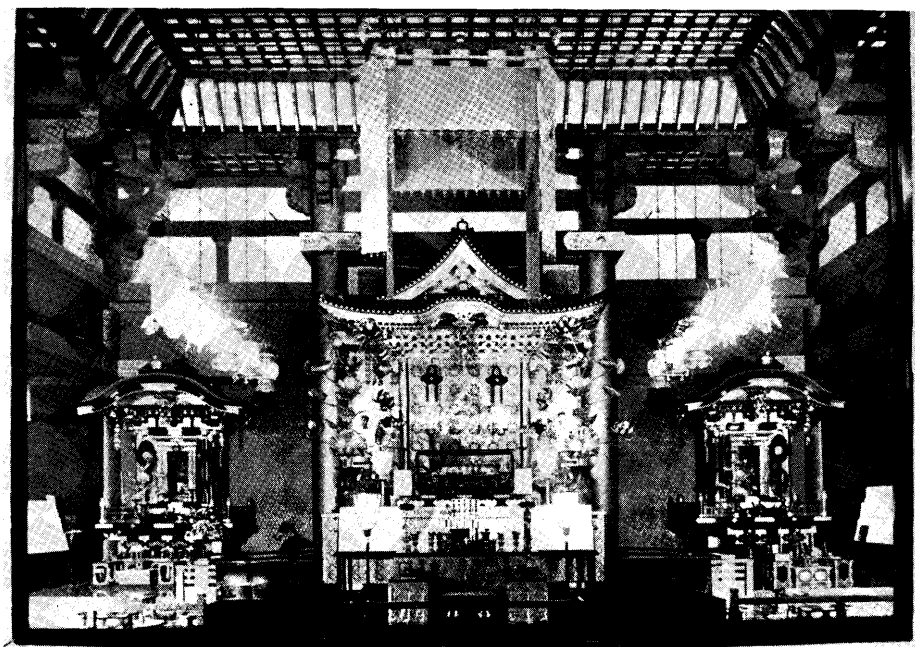
Asakusa Kannon Temple: Sensōji



Dedication of New Gate: Hôzômon
April 1, 1964



Ceiling pictures of the Main Hall



Altar to Aizen Myōō

Altar Enshrining Kannon

Altar to Fudō Myōō



Sensōji Kindergarten in the Temple Compound.

BUDDHIST WORSHIP FOR THE MASSES

Shinjō Kamimura

There are a large number of Buddhist institutons in Tokyo which could be used in a study of the actual state of Buddhist worship among the common people of Japan. However, if we concentrate our attention on only the so-called prayer temples, that is, temples which emphasize rites for the attainment of worldly benefits, three in Tokyo are particularly outstanding as far as the number of their worshippers is concerned. These are Sensōji in Asakusa, Shibamata Daikyōji in Katsushika Ward, and Ryūsenji in Meguro Ward. These temples are popularly known as Asakusa Kannon, Shibamata Taishakuten, and Meguro Fudōson, respectively. The average number of worshippers a year at these temples is estimated to be roughly as follows: Asakusa Kannon 30 million, Shibamata Taishskuten 1.5 million, and Meguro Fudōson 300,000.

Asakusa Kannon The principal deity of Asakusa Kannon is Shō Kannon or *Aryavalokitesvara*. Its worshippers are the most numerous. As a matter of fact, year in and year out, the number of worshippers at this temple is the highest of any temple in the country. On ordinary days an average of 50,000 worshippers visit the temple. They are particularly numerous on lucky days, especially the 9th and 10th of January and July (which are called “46,000 days” because one visit on these days counts for 46,000 visits), the 16th of each month

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(which is considered as specially sacred to Kannon), and on the 1st, 15th, 18th, and 28th of each month.

Shibamata Taishakuten The chief deity of Shibamata Taishakuten is Taishakuten, the guardian deity of the east. Every 60th day, determined by Chinese divination involving *yang* and *yin* and the signs of the zodiac, is especially sacred.

Meguro Fudō The principal deity of Meguro Fudō is the Fudō Myō-ō, or *Acalagra Vidyaraja*, the same as at the more famous Fudō temple (Shinshōji) of Narita in Chiba Prefecture. The sacred day of the Meguro Fudō is the 28th of each month.

In each case, worship is primarily concerned with earthly gain. The purpose of the temple rites is to obtain happiness in a concrete and practical sense.

The common people, especially the believers belonging to these temples, come in large crowds on the sacred days, either individually or in organized groups, called associations of believers, because of the particularly strong relationship which these days have with the principal deity, that is, the object of their worship. These sacred days originated in China, but they have been observed in Japan from ancient times.

From about the 14th century until the latter half of the 19th century a special day was fixed for celebrating the virtues of each buddha and bodhisattva, and these were widely observed. However, no details are known about the origin of the sacred days of Buddhism that are celebrated by the common people and have been widely adopted as a means of promoting Buddhist religious practices. The institution of sacred days may

be considered in part as a kind of memorial day of the principal deity and partly as a means of promoting the religious life.

The worship of the masses at these temples raises numerous problems. The elements of popular religion which exist in Buddhism itself and the religious inclination of the masses are merged in this contemporary phenomena. For example, the devotion to Shō Kannon at Sensōji, to Taishakuten at Daikyōji, and to Fudōson at Ryūsenji, illustrate how Buddhism itself, the popular appeal of Buddhism, and the religious temperament of the masses are harmonized and perpetuated by means of special prayers.

Psychology of the Worshipers

While Japan has been under the influence of Buddhism for many centuries, historically speaking, Buddhism has experienced many ups and downs. At present, the ordinary Japanese may seem relatively indifferent towards Buddhism, but in this indifference the various phenomena of popular religious sentiment, which have become part and parcel of the daily life of the masses, should not be overlooked. By observing the people who gather at the temples, the religious sentiment of the masses can be understood.

We speak of popular worship, but if we observe the crowds gathering at a temple like Asakusa Kannon, various differences can soon be noted. Even a superficial glance reveals that there are several types of worshippers. There are not only differences in age, sex, living conditions, and individual ability, but also differences in attitude. Some are completely ignorant of the real meaning of religion and have only the mood of sightseers.

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Some are burdened with some kind of grief in their hearts and seek a practical solution. Some, having a special wish in their hearts, have fixed on a certain number of visits to the temple as a means of securing its fulfillment. And there are others who feel a certain satisfaction in a magical atmosphere rather than in true religious belief. In this connection it becomes evident that statistics on popular religious sentiment only partially touch the true state of things.

If we speak of the worship of the masses and bring out the common features which are present as a kind of undercurrent, there appear to be numerous elements that are based on instinctive religious needs. The comparison may not be quite valid but, like hunger and sleep, religion seems to possess a deep-rooted force in the lives of people.

Among the masses, very few accept the traditional doctrines or beliefs of Buddhism. The vast majority merely feel inclination to approach the object of worship because of some primitive or instinctive need or desire. There are many instances in which popular credulity connected with the power of suggestion and the imitative nature of the masses manifests itself.

An example of this is to be observed at the incense burner which stands in front of the Kannon Hall of the Asakusa Temple. The purpose of burning incense is to make an offering to the Buddha and to obtain a pure feeling. Thus it serves to express the religious sentiment of the worshipper. But, if we watch the behavior of the people who place incense in the great incense burner, instead of performing a simple act of worship, there are many who pass their hands through the smoke of the incense and then touch their heads, chests, or legs,

depending on their specific physical needs. They have not been taught to do this by the temple. On the contrary, it has developed naturally as a popular custom, which shows how man's natural religious desires reveal a shamanistic tendency.

Buddhist temples which cater chiefly to popular worship understand well the mass behavior psychology of the common people. They encourage it by inscribing the names of the donors on articles and ornaments for the Buddhist family altar, by creating a mystical atmosphere in the temple, by distributing amulets in compliance with popular demand, and by performing prayers for a particular purpose. The propriety or efficacy of these practices is a separate question, but they are representative of the ways in which the temples are serving popular worship.

Characteristics of the Religious Rites

In order to create a real feeling of satisfaction corresponding to human desires, rites such as prayers and the reading of sutras for healing are frequently observed in temples which seek to provide worship for the masses. In many cases such rites have been influenced by the form of prayers practiced by esoteric sects, where the earnest prayer of the officiating priest becomes one with the saving power which dwells in the principal deity. In this way the heart of the believer is filled with a feeling that his earnest desire will be satisfied, whereas mere form without the contribution of a priest would not show any result.

Asakusa Kannon, Shibamata Taishakuten, and Meguro Fudō normally perform Buddhist rites in the morning and evening in honor of the main deities, that is, the Bodhisattvas Shō Kanzeon (*Aryavalokite-svara*), Taishakuten (*Indra deva*) and

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Fudōson (*Acalagra vidyaraaja*); but the rites which are performed at the special request of the faithful are prayers practiced by esoteric Buddhist sects. For example, a rite which uses fire for divination, called in Japanese *goma*, is particularly common in the case of Fudōson. It is also a kind of prayer.

Such prayers or religious rites are practiced by the temples according to their tradition and in conformity with their doctrines, irrespective of the understanding of the believers. Consequently, there appears a clear difference between the instinctive manner of worship of the great masses of people and the religious observances practiced by the temple priests in line with their long traditions. However, it also happens that the faithful and the priests frequently join together in the rite of chanting the sutras. If the people were left out, they would fall into atheism or stray into superstition; but the priests by emphasizing religious instruction are able to awaken and cultivate the religious sentiment of the common people, and to develop true Buddhist piety among the masses. An example of this is to be seen in a meeting which is held every Saturday afternoon at Asakusa Kannon temple for the purpose of promoting the reading of the Kannon Sutra. Up to the present, this sutra has been recited many hundreds of thousands of times, and as a result the religious consciousness of the members of this group shows a remarkably high degree of religious sentiment compared to people with a weaker relation to Buddhism. The quality of the Buddhist faith among the masses will certainly improve in proportion to the zeal shown by the priests in giving correct religious instruction.

This does not mean that at Asakusa Kannon and other temples

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nothing else is done but to offer prayers in compliance with the requests of the believers. On the contrary, a serious effort is being made to enhance the popular desire for religious instruction and to promote social welfare activities which clearly show the true role of Buddhist temples in modern society.

GLOSSARY

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|----------------|------|-----------------------|-------|
| Asakusa | 浅草 | Meguro Fudōson | 目黒不動尊 |
| Asakusa Kannon | 浅草観音 | Myōō | 明王 |
| Daikyōji | 題経寺 | Ryūsenji | 竜泉寺 |
| Fudō Myōō | 不動明王 | Sensōji | 浅草寺 |
| Fudō son | 不動尊 | Shibamata | 柴又 |
| Kannon | 観音 | Shibamata Taishakuten | 柴又帝釈天 |
| Katsushika | 葛飾 | Shō Kannon | 聖観音 |
| Meguro | 目黒 | Taishakuten | 帝釈天 |