

2. In what way do you incorporate Shinto practices into your daily life? Could you give examples, if you have any?

One of the first words I taught my children was "Itadakimasu". Those familiar with Japanese culture may know that this is a phrase that is said before a meal. When my kids were very young, I would say "Itadakimasu" before eating with them and they learned to say this phrase before eating too. Now, they automatically recite these words when they cook their meals and even when they eat alone.

Japanese people at this time do not associate "Itadakimasu" with any kind of religion, but it does have roots in Shintoism and Buddhism. In Japanese seasonal festivals, there is a long-standing custom of eating offerings to the gods called Shinjinkyoshoku(神人共食). There is a theory that this is the origin of "Itadakimasu". Shijin Kyoshoku is an attempt to strengthen the intimacy between God and man by enjoying the same food.

The full expression would be "Inochi-o Itadakimasu". The meaning and the exact Kanji cannot be translated literally. Loosely translated, "Inochi-o" means "To take life" and "Itadakimasu" means "To receive, eat, or consume". Putting the two together, it is a prayer for lives taken to sustain other lives.

This is based on the Shinto belief that God dwells in all things and the Buddhist belief that not only humans but also animals and plants have the potential to become a Buddha.

"Inochi-o Itadakimasu" expresses gratitude towards the animals and plants that were sacrificed to become our meals, along with the work of the farmers, fishermen, factory workers, drivers, supermarket clerks, all the other people/things even wisdom that made our meals possible.

"Inochi-o Itadakimasu" expresses our gratitude for everything, including the animals and plants sacrificed to become our food, and

all the people and things that make our meals possible, including farmers, fishermen, factory workers, drivers, supermarket clerks, and even wisdom.

By chanting Itadakimasu before each meal, we recognize that there are lives that have been sacrificed. We reflect on the weight and value of life, with the recognition that we must be repentant for consuming the lives of others. In this sense, food wastage becomes a grave sin, as it wastes the value of life.

It also leads us to be conscious of what we do with our lives, as we live with so many other lives within us. This is something I remind myself and my children for every meal.

Another word I taught my kids is "Arigatou". While its common translation is "Thank you", the literal phrase "有難う (Arigatou)" means "difficult to exist" and implies a sense of uniqueness and rarity. "有 (Ari)" means "existing" and "難う (gatou)" from "難い (gatai)" means difficult. The phrase refers to a thing or an act that is difficult to get or find, and thus precious and deserving of gratitude.

The original use of "Arigatou" was as an expression of emotion towards the value and preciousness of life. Over time, it somehow came to be used to express gratitude. The Japanese word for "Thank you" is a reminder that good things can be rare and are always precious and valuable.

The antonym of "Arigatou" is "Atarimae", meaning "obvious and ordinary".

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stern reminder of how fragile our "ordinary" is. Daily activities like taking a train, going to school, or going shopping became dangerous. Many who have fallen to inertia with the comforts of daily life found exactly how much they were taking for granted. It is only in times of emergency do we realize how thankful we should be for the things that are routine.

In this world, nothing is truly "Atarimae". Everything is something to be grateful (Arigatou) for.

At the heart of Shinto is gratitude for all that keeps us alive.