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Japan priest speaks out on spiritual toll of nuclear crisis



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By [Chisa Fujioka](#)

TOKYO (Reuters Life!) - In Japan, where nature is believed to cleanse spirits, how do people cope when treasured mountains and oceans are tainted by leaks of radiation from a nuclear power plant?

Sokyū Genyū, a Buddhist priest from a temple just 45 km (28 miles) west of the damaged Fukushima Daiichi plant in northeast Japan, is drawing attention to the less visible scars from the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986.

As a member of a government panel to come up with a blueprint for rebuilding after the deadly earthquake and tsunami on March 11, Genyū is adding the people's voice -- and a different view -- to debate on dealing with the loss of homes, jobs and communities.

"We need to treat the situation in areas affected by radiation separately," said Genyū, head priest of the Fukujuji Temple and also an award-winning author, told Reuters.

"It's not just about getting compensation."

His small town of Miharu has welcomed thousands of residents who have evacuated from around the nuclear plant, still leaking radiation after being struck by the tsunami.

Damage to the environment has been especially hard on local communities, where farmers and fishermen have traditionally associated nature with god, building shrines to pray for rich harvests and to ward off accidents at sea, Genyū said.

"God is the symbol of nature, what people worship as a natural force that can be violent and is uncontrollable," he said.

CLEANSING SOULS

In turn, people have believed in nature cleansing their souls. For example, some Japanese go for a swim in the sea on New Year's Day as a purification ritual.

"Mountains and oceans have purified us but now those mountains and oceans are contaminated," he said.

"We could see the very foundation for our religious beliefs break down, because it is no longer able to purify us."

The government needs a plan soon to clean up the soil around the nuclear facility, he said. The 20-km "no-go" zone remains deserted three months after the disasters, with no clear outlook on when residents may return.

Despite the devastation, evacuees have found solace just by being with each other and in daily rituals such as listening to morning sutras, cooking and cleaning.

Genyu expected large gatherings at summer "Obon" festivals this year, a Buddhist custom with dancing in which families honor the spirits of the deceased. Nearly 24,000 are dead or missing.

"Obon has traditionally been an event that honors everyone. It brings people together and that feeling will be felt more than ever this year," he said.

"Until people feel they have honored those who passed away, they won't be able to move on."

The nuclear disaster has also taught Japanese to rethink materialistic lifestyles and return to a way of life that respects nature and consumes less energy, Genyu said.

"Why do we make things that ignore nature's cycles, why do we have summer vegetables in the winter?" he asked. Funerals should not have to stick to the custom of using chrysanthemums all-year round if that meant saving energy to grow them.

"Japanese people use paper screens as doors. That is how we have traditionally felt close to light and the wind," he said.

"Devotion for Buddhism and Shintoism comes from the desire to reap nature's blessings, even though nature can be frightening. I don't think we would have those beliefs if we thought we could be completely detached from nature."

(Reporting by Chisa Fujioka; editing by [Elaine Lies](#))

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