**The Rock Garden: Ayahiro Falls**

The wooden toriigate with a *shimenawa* rope that stands in front of Ayahiro Falls indicates that the area is considered sacred. The falls cascade around ten meters into a plunge pool encircled by rocks.

Priests and pilgrims visit the falls to practice *takigyo*, the ritual cleansing of the mind, body, and soul through meditation beneath the cascading water. Several *shukubo* lodgings on Mt. Mitake offer a morning *takigyo* experience for their guests. The practice involves specific prayers and rituals, and so cannot be undertaken without guidance.

The waterfall flows into a stream in a narrow valley of moss-covered rocks surrounding a picturesque section of the stream known as the Rock Garden. A number of hiking routes start at the base of the steps leading to Musashi Mitake Shrine, and the Rock Garden trail is the most popular. The 1.5-kilometer trail loops through the valley past Ayahiro Falls and Nanayo Falls. On the way to Ayahiro Falls, hikers can see an outcropping known as Tengu Rock (Tengu-iwa), shaped like the long nose of the mythical bird-like goblin called a *tengu*. These *tengu* are believed to protect the forests and mountains.