

## **En no Gyoja – The Founder of Shugendo**

Many legends surround En no Gyoja (634–701), the founder of Shugendo, an ascetic form of mountain worship that combines ancient Japanese nature worship, Buddhist beliefs, and Taoism. He is credited with founding Kinpusenji Temple.

According to legend, En no Gyoja was born in what is now the city of Gose in Nara Prefecture. From a young age, he was drawn to the tall mountains that surrounded his home, and grew up to become a renowned shaman. Later in life, he devoted himself to asceticism, and spent the remainder of his years traveling extensively, climbing sacred mountains, and establishing a number of Shugendo sanctuaries around the country, including those on Yoshinoyama and Mt. Omine.

He is believed to have gained superhuman powers through his strict and rigorous training, including an ability to control demons (*oni*). Statues of En no Gyoja often show him flanked by two demons, Zenki and Goki, who served him after he tamed them in the mountains.

Devotees of Shugendo, usually called *shugenja* or *yamabushi*, seek to reach enlightenment through training in the mountains. Their best-known ritual is the undertaking of long-distance treks across mountains. Practitioners believe that through

these trials they can attain superhuman powers in the same way the religion's founder did, and that this will allow them to save people.