

Mountain Religion: Sangaku Shinko and Shugendo

Kinpusenji Temple is the head temple of Shugendo, a religion that combines aspects of Buddhism, ancient Japanese nature worship, and Taoism. Mountains have been venerated for centuries in Japan, both as places where deities (*kami*) dwell and as deities themselves.

After En no Gyoja (634–701) founded Shugendo in the seventh century, a great number of mountain peaks came to be venerated as sacred. Shugendo practitioners believe that the road to spiritual rebirth lies in intense physical training and trials, through which they purify themselves of sins and impure thoughts. Some training practices include long-distance treks across mountains with the aim of gaining superhuman powers, which they call *genriki*.

As was common before the forced separation of Buddhism and Shinto in the Meiji era (1868–1912), Shugendo reveres both Buddhist figures and Shinto gods, and is open to anyone seeking enlightenment. Followers do not have to be priests to practice the religion. En no Gyoja was not ordained during his lifetime and practiced throughout his life as a layperson. He wished to save humanity through practical acts of faith and by obtaining power from nature, a concept that remains central to Shugendo today.