

Mountain Mystics: Exploring Yoshino's Shugendo Faith

For most Japanese and foreign visitors, Yoshino evokes cherry trees and cherry blossom viewing, but if you look a little closer, you might also spot people dressed in distinctive yellow or white robes, carrying staffs and conch shells. These are mountain ascetics (*yamabushi* or *shugenja*), and they practice Shugendo, a unique Japanese belief system of mountain asceticism with deep roots in Yoshino as well as on Mt. Koya, or Koyasan, to the southwest.

Shugendo literally means “the way of *shugen*,” which refers to ascetic practices such as fasting, meditation, chanting sutras, and praying under waterfalls. Founded in the 7th century by En no Gyoja or En the Ascetic (634–ca. 700), a legendary mystic and sorcerer, Shugendo is a highly syncretic belief system. It fuses the ancient worship of mountains as sacred spaces where spirits of the dead reside with folk beliefs such as shamanism and elements from Shinto, Buddhism, and Esoteric Buddhism. Shugendo developed into a coherent belief system in the late 12th century but only recently came to be affiliated with the Esoteric Buddhist sects of Tendai and Shingon. The Honzan-ha school of Shugendo is associated with Tendai Buddhism and the Tozan-ha school associated with Shingon.

The sacred mountains of Shugendo include Mt. Omine and Mt. Katsuragi in Nara Prefecture as well as mountains in the Kumano region of Wakayama Prefecture and the Mountains of Dewa in Yamagata Prefecture. Practitioners undergo austerities and physical hardships in the mountains in order to develop spiritual powers that can benefit the larger community. Entering the mountains represents a transition from a profane to a sacred realm, including the realm of the dead, and austerities symbolically elevate practitioners into Buddhas.

But Shugendo involves more than mountain asceticism. It also has a rich history of temple worship. The principle temple of Shugendo in the Yoshino region is Kinpusenji, which is traditionally believed to have been founded by En no Gyoja in the seventh century. Since then, this temple has been an important stop on pilgrimage routes. Zaodo, the main hall, was completed in 1592 and is now both a National Treasure and the second-largest wooden building in Japan (after the Great Buddha Hall of Todaiji Temple). The main deity Zao Gongen, originally Shinto gods that are also a manifestation of the historical Buddha and of the bodhisattvas Maitreya and Kannon. With its monumental height of roughly seven meters and its bared teeth on a fierce countenance, the cherry wood statue of Zao Gongen in the Zaodo cuts an

imposing figure. The deity's wrath, however, is that of a stern parent scolding the children as it directs the people of the world to the path of enlightenment. Also a manifestation of the historical Buddha, the deity is flanked by similar giant Zao Gongen statues representing the bodhisattvas, Miroku and Kannon.

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), the government tried to impose a separation of Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, effectively outlawing syncretic faiths such as Shugendo. Nearly all its sites became either Shinto or Buddhist, and practitioners were forced to become Shinto priests or Buddhist monks. This changed with the 1947 Constitution's guarantee of religious freedom, and today Shugendo is a thriving community of lay practitioners and ordained monks striving for spiritual growth through communion with nature and rigorous training.