

## Mountain High: The Ascetic Practices of Shugendo's *Yamabushi* Monks

Shugendo practitioners have a reputation for toughness. These mountain ascetics (*yamabushi*, “those who sleep in the mountains” or *shugenja*, “those who undergo spiritual training”) subject themselves to freezing cold and stifling heat, as well as fasting, meditation, and long-distance endurance treks in the wilderness, all to develop spiritual powers and help protect their communities.

As a loose collection of belief systems, Shugendo is open to all people, including ordained monks and lay practitioners; laymen are known as *ubasoku* and laywomen *ubai*. While some of its sacred mountains are off-limits to women due to ancient beliefs about the jealousy of Shinto kami goddesses, there are many female practitioners.

Yamabushi can often be identified by their distinctive costume. Although there are variations according to sect, they usually wear small black caps (*token*), yellow or white robes (*suzukake*), pelts (*hisshiki*), and straw sandals (*yatsume waraji*). The accouterments may include a staff (*shakujo*), pompom sash (*yuigesa*), and conch trumpet (*hora*). These clothes and tools are important equipment for journeying into the mountains for spiritual training. The main exercises of Shugendo are known as *nyubu* or *mineiri*, “entering a mountain,” and involve walking in the mountains and climbing a sacred peak.

The ascetic practices of *yamabushi* may be as extreme as chanting Buddhist sutras while dangling from the top of a cliff, which is aimed at conquering fear, or as simple as walking meditation along mountain paths, a practice akin to moving Zen meditation. The Omine-Okugake Trail, a Shugendo training path, links Yoshino and Mt. Omine to the Kumano region, the site of three grand Shinto shrines known as the Kumano-sanzan. The route, which winds through panoramic vistas from Yoshino to Kumano Hongu Taisha shrine, is nearly 100 kilometers long and takes about five days to complete. Along these trails are multiple places to undergo spiritual training, including caves, cliffs, and rivers. Shugendo practitioners embark on training courses of varying lengths that can be split up into shorter treks. The 1,000-day Mt. Omine training course, which has been completed only twice in the past 1,300 years, is said to take more than seven years to complete.

Training in and around one's village home is another form of Shugendo practice. This can be something as simple as praying for peace, or something more elaborate like the

fire ritual held at Shugendo temples, which involves intense chanting of sutras while sitting before and feeding a steadily intensifying bonfire. The ritual is a prayer for world peace, for the recovery of a sick person, or for spiritual purification.

Shugendo, though, is inseparable from mountain asceticism. Aside from leaving behind the ordinary, profane world to enter a sacred space in the wilderness, *yamabushi* are also symbolically undertaking a mystic journey into the realm of the dead, who were traditionally believed to reside in the mountains. In a Buddhist context, *yamabushi* also cleanse themselves of former lives in previous reincarnations. The mountain ranges in the Koyasan, Yoshino, Omine, and Kumano regions of the Kii Peninsula are considered representative of both the Womb Realm and the Diamond Realm, which are central to the cosmology of Esoteric Buddhism. By communing with these spirits, the *yamabushi* can pray for the safety and enlightenment of all people.