

The Wizard of En: How an Ancient Ascetic Mixed Two Faiths to Make Shugendo

For centuries, Japanese have celebrated Yoshino for its natural beauty, especially its 30,000 cherry trees. Why are there so many in Yoshino? They didn't grow here by chance. In fact, they are considered sacred trees, objects of religious devotion. This cherry tree faith originated with a mysterious ancient figure whose statue you will come across in Yoshino. He looks like an old, bearded hermit and is flanked two demons, his familiars Zenki and Goki. This is En no Gyoja, or En the Ascetic (634–ca. 700), a legendary mystic and sorcerer who is recognized as the founder of Shugendo, a highly syncretic belief system that combines mountain worship and folk beliefs with Shinto, Buddhism, and Esoteric Buddhism.

En no Gyoja's life is steeped in myth and little is certain about him. He was apparently born in the town of Gose in the Nara Basin, part of the eastern terminus of the Silk Road and a center for imported beliefs such as Buddhism. From a young age, he exhibited an aptitude for Buddhist learning and practiced spiritual austerities in the mountainous Katsuragi area. Over a period of 30 years, he is said to have accumulated a deep knowledge of herbs, developed supernatural powers, and compelled demons to become his followers.

Aiming to bring peace to humanity, En no Gyoja prayed for 1,000 days on Mt. Omine and was visited by the Buddha and the bodhisattvas Maitreya and Kannon. En no Gyoja thought their gentleness would not convince people to change their wicked ways, and he pleaded with the trio to address this problem. They ascended into the heavens, which erupted into lightning and fire. In their place descended a newly created deity: Zao Gongen, a manifestation of three Buddhist deities with origins in an amalgamation of Shinto gods. Its face bore a fierce expression to scare people into righteousness, but its body was blue, representing compassion. Moved by this sight, En no Gyoja carved Zao Gongen's likeness out of cherrywood, made Zao Gongen the principle deity of Shugendo, and founded the first Shugendo temple on Mt. Omine. In Yoshino, he later established the Kinpusenji Temple, the head temple of the Kinpusen Shugendo sect. Because En no Gyoja's followers revered cherry trees for their important role in the foundation of Shugendo, they planted them throughout Yoshino. These 30,000 cherry trees represent the greatest cherry tree crop in Japan.

There are many legends about En no Gyoja (also known as En no Ozunu), but he is also mentioned in an official chronicle. According to the *Shoku Nihongi*, a record of imperial rulers completed in 797, "Ozunu was able to manipulate demonic spirits,

making them draw water and gather firewood. When they disobeyed, he used sorcery to tie them up.” When one of his followers, Karakuni no Hirotari, grew jealous of him and falsely accused him of practicing black magic, the imperial court banished En no Gyoja to the island of Izu Oshima in 699. He was declared innocent in 701 and returned to the imperial court. Karakuni no Hirotari became head apothecary after En no Gyoja’s death and made use of his herbal knowledge to benefit the imperial family.

Despite En no Gyoja’s exile, his teachings continued to draw believers to the Yoshino mountains. Shugendo, which can be translated as “the way to spiritual power through discipline,” became a loose system of beliefs, including traditional Japanese shamanism and Shingon Buddhism. Shugendo adherents have attributed the authorship of a Buddhist scripture known as the *Unlimited Life of the Threefold Body Sutra* to En no Gyoja, but this attribution is uncertain.

In a 1799 ceremony commemorating the 1,100-year anniversary of En no Gyoja’s death, his followers conferred upon him the title “Miraculous Great Bodhisattva.” Seventy-three years later, the Japanese government outlawed Shugendo because it mixed multiple faiths, but the faith was revived under the postwar Constitution, which guarantees religious freedom.

Today, En no Gyoja continues to be a revered figure not only in Yoshino but in other centers of Shugendo, including Kyoto, Okayama, and Yamagata Prefectures. His ascetic followers undergo spiritual training in the mountains to seek peace, safety, and security for the public.