

### **Shugendo and Mountain Religions**

The mountains of Nikko have been objects of worship as well as the location of religious worship and ascetic practice since at least 766, when the monk Shodo Shonin (735–817) arrived in the area. The mountains, according to Shodo and his followers, were manifestations of deities, and today they are still regarded as incarnations of both Buddhist and Shinto deities. The early ascetics practiced both Buddhism and what would become known as Shugendo, a syncretic blend of austere religious practices performed in the mountains.

Shodo and his followers established temples and shrines on many of the summits in this area. Their religious activities included long mountain treks over days and weeks, stopping at specific places for ritual practices such as praying, reading sutras, and performing *goma* fire rituals.

In the past, four long pilgrimages were held annually. Today, one aspect of the summer circuit remains: the Tohaisai during the first week of August. Beginning each night at midnight, participants climb Mt. Nantai, arriving at the summit to offer prayers as the sun rises.

### **Pictured below the map are items used for pilgrimages in the mountains.**

The short-handled staffs topped with metal rings are shaken when chanting songs of praise. These are a modified version of the staff that the life-sized figure of Shodo is holding.

The straw items are shoes and shin guards for use in the winter.

To the left of the staffs and shoes is a *hako-oi*, a wooden box or chest carried on the back. It contained items used on a pilgrimage, such as sutras, ritual implements, Buddhist images, and clothing.

### **Edo Period (1603–1867) and Beyond**

After first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu (1543–1616), was enshrined at Toshogu Shrine in 1617, Nikko became a popular destination for people to worship and offer their respects. Few made the difficult trip through the steep Kegon Valley, however, to visit Okunikko. Women were prohibited from entering the sacred mountains of Okunikko, and men needed to receive permission. Visitors could only reach the area on foot, as cattle and horses were also prohibited.

The restrictions were removed in 1871 after a series of government decrees in 1868 reformed religious practices across the country. The shrines and temples in Okunikko became increasingly popular as pilgrimage sites for lay practitioners. In 1872 the ban on women was lifted, and many inns opened along the banks of Lake Chuzenji to serve worshippers who climbed Mt. Nantai during the summer. Yet, owing to the harsh winters, it would be many years before anyone lived in Okunikko year-round.