

## **Worshipping at the Summit**

### **A Lost Buddhist World**

Mt. Fuji worship was a syncretistic fusion of Shinto and Buddhist beliefs, like many religious practices in Japan after Buddhism was introduced in the sixth century. In particular, the otherworldly terrain above the tree line was identified with Amida Buddha's Pure Land, a paradisaical realm far to the west believed to be where the departed prepare to enter nirvana.

The highest reaches of the mountain were compared to a great lotus flower, a traditional Buddhist symbol. The irregular rim of peaks around the vast central crater were called the Ohachiyo, or Eight Petals, with each "petal" associated with a different Buddhist deity. The vast interior of the crater was believed to be the domain of the Great Bodhisattva Sengen, that is, Asama no Kami, who was considered an avatar of Dainichi Nyorai, the Primordial Buddha, under the Shinto-Buddhist syncretism of the time.

Pilgrims on the Ohachi Meguri, or Crater Pilgrimage Circuit, traveled clockwise around the crater visiting each of these petals in turn and paying reverence to sculptures of Buddhist deities.

From 1868, however, the new Meiji government ordered a strict separation of Shinto and Buddhism. All traces of Buddhist belief were erased from Mt. Fuji. Statues were dragged off the mountain or simply destroyed. Even the names of the individual peaks on the rim were changed. Yakushidake, named after Yakushi Nyorai, the Medicine Buddha, became Kusushidake. Kannondake, named for Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, became Izudake. The Buddhist microcosm that once spanned Mt. Fuji's summit now exists only in memory.