

## **Daihizan Kannonji Temple and Bukkai Shonin**

Daihizan Kannonji Temple in central Murakami is the final resting place of Bukkai Shonin, Japan's last Buddhist mummy or *sokushinbutsu*.

Bukkai Shonin was born as Kondo Shojiro in 1828. He devoted himself to ascetic practice from the age of 16, when he became an apprentice at a Shingon temple on Mt. Yudono in Yamagata Prefecture, north of Murakami. Mt. Yudono is a center of a branch of the esoteric Shingon faith that espouses the practice of aspiring to Buddhahood in this life without the need to wait for rebirth. A devotee who aspired to becoming a *sokushinbutsu* would be able to retain their physical form while awaiting the arrival of the bodhisattva Miroku (Maitreya), who in Shingon doctrine is prophesied to bring about an enlightened world in the distant future.

Becoming a Buddha on earth included a process of self-mummification, which could take up to a decade to complete. Prospective *sokushinbutsu* would adopt an extremely strict diet to rid themselves of

tissue prone to decomposition. They ate no grains or sources of fat and sustained themselves instead on wild plants, leaves, bark, and roots. In order to minimize the amount of fluid in their bodies, they drank only a poisonous tea made from lacquer sap that slowly coated their internal organs, acting as a preservative.

When they felt the time had come, the ascetics would be enclosed in a small stone casket. Sitting in the lotus position, they would enter a deep meditative state until their breathing stopped and their heart ceased to beat.

Bukkai took this final step in 1903, asking his followers to extract his body three years later. However, they were prevented from doing so by a

law enacted in 1868 that made it illegal to disinter corpses. The law was part of a policy intended to discourage the *sokushinbutsu* practice. The mummy remained underground until 1961, when it was exhumed by a group of researchers.

The body of Bukkai Shonin, as well as the casket he was buried in, can be viewed at Daihizan Kannonji.