

● “Shugendo (修験道)” is a religion practiced by Yamabushis. If asked, “What is a Yamabushi?” the answer would be – “One who practices Shugendo.”

Shugendo is a religion leading us to enlightenment through ascetic practices in the mountains. A person who practices Shugendo is called Shugenja (修験者) or Yamabushi (山伏). What exactly, then, is Shugendo? Allow me to explain from four viewpoints.

Definition of Shugendo - Part1: It is a mountain religion

First and foremost, Shugendo is a “mountain religion.” Shugendo cannot exist without mountains. It is a religion studied in the mountains, where a mountain becomes a dojo, and is worshiped for its existence. To state more clearly, mountains themselves are believed to be deities and sutras. That is one of the key characteristics of Shugendo.

To begin with, we have to understand the background surrounding the origin of Shugendo which is attributable to the mountainous geography of Japan. It is also rooted in the unique religious viewpoint of Japanese people who have worshiped nature through ancient times with a particular awe for the mountains, which they believe have spiritual powers. The goal of Shugendo is to achieve spiritual enlightenment through process of training deep in the mountain, a place with powers unbeknownst to man; and immersing in the vast nature of the mountain to sharpen wisdom through discipline of both body and mind.

To this day, Omine-okugake, a practice of mountain asceticism held every summer at Mt. Omine, is a must for every Yamabushi. Whether pouring rain or pouring spears, participants are compelled to walk a designated route stoically for approximately 13 hours a day. This is a pilgrimage towards enlightenment and we embark with deep gratitude for being allowed to integrate with nature, to have an opportunity to train in sanctity known as the mountain, and to spend time inside the sacred body itself.

Definition of Shugendo - Patr2: It is a practical religion

Second point in defining Shugendo is that it is a “practical religion.” What does it mean to be a practical religion? Indeed, it means to “practice using the physical body.” Shugendo is practiced by fully awakening our five senses. It is not a faith practiced through reading abstract textbooks; it is not a dogma or an ideology.

The practical aspect of Shugendo is expressed quite simply in how the name “Yamabushi (山伏)” is written. Nowadays we commonly write “Yamabushi (山伏)” but there was a time when it was written “Yamabushi (山臥)” also. The Chinese character “山 (yama)” means “mountain” and “臥 (bushi)” means “lie down.” We sleep and wake in the mountain as our domicile and study in the mountain as our classroom, just as the name “Yamabushi (山臥)” signifies. As followers of that ancient tradition we train our bodies and minds in nature.

Shugen (修験) is an abbreviation of “shugyo- tokken (修行得験)” or “Jisshu-jikken (実修実験).” It means capturing and applying our learnings with our “body” or, in other words, embodying “Shirushi (験)=effects” of one’s learning with one’s own body. This is the meaning of Shugendo practice. We push ourselves to our physical limit as we practice with our bodies, roaming over hills (跋涉=Bassho) and dales (山谷=Sanya). We gain awareness towards various spiritual atmosphere and their effects as we continue these practices.

Hiking into mountains, worshiping deities, submerging into waterfalls and meditating are all Shugendo practices. They are all aspects of practical training with our physical bodies. We seek enlightenment by repeating this process, which is not based on reason but on physical acumen gained through our five senses. Therefore, those who capture “Genriki (験力)” — sacred power of nature and supernatural power of our deities — are given the title “Shugenja (修験者)” which means one who captured these powers.

It is worth mentioning that practical training of Yamabushi is not limited to the mountains. Shugenja who obtained spiritual power in the mountains operate various activities in their community. This includes Goma (Homa) fire ritual, rainmaking, offering prayers for good harvest, good health and many others, according to needs of the lay people. Not only actions in the mountains but actions at home — serving the people — is an important part of Shugenja practice.

Definition of Shugendo - Part3: It is a Syncretization of Shintoism with Buddhism

Third point to be raised is that Shugendo is syncretization of Shintoism and Buddhism.

Comparing it to a family - father would be Buddhism, mother Shintoism, and Shugendo their baby.

Shugendo was established when Buddhist ritual was inserted into traditional

Japanese religious culture which worshiped nature and mountain with great awe and respect. Shugendo also absorbed Taoism, Yin- Yang philosophy from China, and other elemental beliefs related to nature; finally combining with various styles of prayer which had been performed by lay people.

Since nearly 70 percent of the land in Japan is mountainous, Japanese treasure the mountains believing them to be sacred places where deities live. For an example, Miwa Shrine is known as the oldest in Yamato region but it is without a main architectural shrine. The only building that exists is a worship hall in the district compound. This is because the object of worship enshrined is Mt. Miwa itself. Another example is Kasuga Shrine at Mt. Kasuga, a mountain designated as a sacred mountain where logging has been strictly prohibited. This is how the Kasugayama Primeval Forest has been preserved as it currently stands, allowing us to carry the legacy to present day.

Japanese worship not only mountains, but also rocks and forests as places where divine spirits reside.

Influenced by Shintoism, Japanese say there are “Yao Yorozu No Kami (eight million gods).” Starting with the sun-goddess named 'Amaterasu O-mikami', there is also the fire-god, the water-god, and the other gods from kitchen to the toilet. We believe gods exist everywhere.

Gods are all around us and constantly watching over us. For this reason, we are taught to “live right in the sight of god and man” which has long been the rule of how to live our lives.

It was in the 6th century when Buddhism arrived to this land of Shintoism. Because Japan had a broad-minded religious concept of “Yao Yorozu No Kami (eight million gods)” to begin with, Buddha was adopted as a new god among others. This can be seen in Japanese words such as “Adashikuni-no-kami (蕃神=gods from foreign nation)” and “Imaki- no- kami (今来の神=New comer gods)” that were used to refer to Buddhist deities. Japanese had accepted them as new gods from foreign countries, subsequently becoming followers of both Shinto and Buddhism without religious conflict.

Thus, the new concept of “Shinbutsu-shugo (神仏習合) and “Shinbutsu-wago (神仏和合)”, otherwise known as syncretization of Shintoism and Buddhism, was established. At the basis is an acceptance that both gods and Buddha come from the same source, which evolved into following beliefs:

- Buddha arrived as a Japanese god
- Source of Japanese gods is Buddha
- Japanese gods are an incarnation of Buddha
- Buddha appeared as god in response to people's needs

Principal object of worship for Shugendo is based on these beliefs and at the very basis is the concept of “Gongen (権現=incarnation)” that is widely accepted.

Definition of Shugendo - Part4: Its doctrine is for lay people

Lastly, I want to point out the most important feature of Shugendo—it is a religion for

“Ubasoku (優婆塞= lay people).”

In Buddhism, male monks are called “Biku (比丘)” and female monks are called “Bikuni (比丘尼).” In contrast, lay practitioners are called “Ubasoku (優婆塞= male lay practitioners)” or “Ubai (優婆夷= female lay practitioners).” Shugendo is primarily practiced by living in the world as a layman but it does not discriminate between those who practice as a layman or those who practice by renouncing the world for a committed life in a temple. As a matter of fact, there are many like myself practicing Shugendo who dress and serve as actual monks.

En No Gyoja (役行者), who is said to be the founder of Shugendo, never received ordination during his life, practicing throughout as a layman. As a lay person he was called “En No Ubasoku(役行者優婆塞)” and we praise him by chanting, “On Gyaku Gyaku En No Ubasoku A Ran Kya Sowaka.” Ever since the days of En No Gyoja, we value the faith of Ubasoku and the faith of lay people in Shugendo. We are taught to get out from the inner temple and work for the salvation of ordinary people in lay society. This is another key characteristic of Shugendo.

Shugendo is a religion for Ubasoku and Ubais (laymen), and these laymen themselves are the operators. It is a religion not bound by doctrine or theory, but one which supported lay people's pure religious devotion as they went about their hectic lives.

Shugendo is the most typical Japanese religion

Without discrimination, gods and Buddha are worshiped as respectable

beings in Shugendo. This is not unique to Shugendo as Japanese people have worshiped both gods and Buddha the same from ancient times. I believe this is the origin of Japanese religion. As such, Japanese mountain worship which already existed before the spread of Shinto and Buddhism can be referred to as the basis of religion.

In ancient times, mountain people believed in a mountain god who ruled animals and forests in deep mountains. Paddy farmers (rice field) also believed in the mountain god as the guardian of agriculture. This god was later recognized as an ancestral god and was worshiped by the people who erected a small shrine at the foot of the mountains.

Thereafter, some people started to confine themselves to a mountain for ascetic practices. The most prominent practitioner was Ozune En who played an important role during the Asuka period. The fact that Shugendo came together with Mikkyo, which was popular during Saicho and Kukai eras, particularly had an effect. One can say it is then that the term Shugenja (修験者) started being used to refer to those who attained supernatural powers through austere mountain training.

To this day, Shugenja regard the mountain as another world where gods and ancestral spirits live. Sacred beings reside in the mountains and we pay great respect; integrating with the vast nature and gaining the spirit of the mountains as we train. Residents of the mountain and the land all view the mountain as a place where gods reside. As such, pilgrimages guided by Shugenjas have become popular allowing people to worship the holy mountain embodied with spiritual powers.

The difference in how Japanese perceive a mountain can be seen distinctly by comparing it to western culture. Westerners do not have a religion looking to the mountain as a god. For instance, *The Magic Mountain* written by Thomas Mann, and movies *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* series, regard mountains as the devil's dwelling. It was just 200 years ago that westerners started entering mountains willingly when, thanks to scientific advances, people finally understood there were no devils in the mountains but instead large mass of rocks or ice. That is when mountaineering began to take off, so despite common beliefs held by Japanese people, western mountaineering is quite a new sport.

Western religions' (e.g. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc.) concept of nature is very different from Japan which is based on the culture of "Yao Yorozu No Kami (eight million gods)." God, as is known in a religion such as Christianity,

does not exist in nature. God is the creator of nature but is not one with nature. God is always an absolute being above and outside of nature.

From that perspective, nature is god's gift to humans who enter an eternal covenant with their absolute god. Therefore, nature is a gift and humans are permitted to cut down or treat nature as they please based on the covenant between god and man. This is western culture's concept towards nature according to the spirit of Christian faith. Majority of forests in the west have been deforested to oust the devil and won over as newly replanted forests.

For the Japanese, the forest itself is a sacred place. That is how Japanese view nature. It is through such perspective that forests in Japan have been carefully assimilated as places where gods and Buddha live.

Entering a forest means to interact with holy spirits and to acquire energy from the great power of nature. Shugendo has connected deeply with these basic concepts of Japanese theology.

Shugendo and the Yamabushi religion came together through syncretization of old mountain religion with Japanese Shinto and religions from foreign countries such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Yin Yang from Asia. For these reasons, Shugendo is a religion that is deeply rooted in Japanese senses and is the most typical religion of Japan.

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Mr. Riten Tanaka is a former chief executive priest of Kinpusen-ji Temple. He started his practice of Shugendo when he was at the age 5 under his father's guidance. Thanks to Mr. Riten Tanaka and his willing partners' efforts, Kii-sanchi no Reijou to Sankei-do (Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range) was registered as UNESCO world heritage site (cultural heritage) in 2004.