

Haguro Shugendo
The Autumn Peak
(extended English narration and commentary)

Introduction

Sacred mountains have been revered in Japan from ancient times. Over the centuries practices and ideas related to mountains took specific shape, under the influence of Buddhism, Daoism and other religious forms, until they emerged recognizably in the medieval period as Shugendo. Shugendo was long characterized by its acceptance as objects of devotion and practice both the native deities called kami and the various Buddhist divinities. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and the resurgence of imperial authority, the new government prohibited kami-buddha admixture in temples and shrines, and banned Shugendo. In some places Buddhism came under direct attack and much physical destruction occurred. The shrine-temple complex on Mt Haguro, which had until this time been very powerful both as a Shugendo centre and as a regional economic force, was turned into an imperial shrine under the banner of the new ideology, Shinto, and Haguro Shugendo received a near-mortal blow. Despite the ban on Shugendo, however, the traditions of Haguro Shugendo were maintained, often with great difficulty, through the temple of Kotakuji, the former inner precinct of the shrine-temple complex, deep in the mountain. These traditions live on today through the annual ritual practice called the Autumn Peak, or Akinomine.

The secret practice

The film opens with a view of Gassan and the luxuriant forests that clothe its lower slopes. A *sendatsu* (one of the five key officials of the Autumn Peak) tips a teapot against a teabowl, in a ritual called *ho no mi*, symbolizing, through the imaginary sake being poured, the receiving of the life of the universe into the self. Then the *doshi*, the *sendatsu* in charge of the conduct of the Autumn Peak overall, speaks.

Shugenja!

This place is the sacred peak where the strictest secrecy is maintained.

You may under no circumstance speak of it to outsiders.

Traditionally it is forbidden for Shugendo practitioners (*shugenja*) to speak of what goes on during the Autumn Peak, and they strike a gong to confirm their vow of silence.

The Three Mountains of Dewa- the Buddhist cosmos

Mountains in Japan have been venerated from the distant past as the source of the water that sustains all life, and as places where the spirits of the dead go to dwell. Gassan (1984 m) is the highest of the

Three Mountains of Dewa (Dewa Sanzan), which run from north to south through the centre of Yamagata Prefecture. Gassan is considered to be a manifestation or avatar of the Buddha Amida, or Amitabha, whose radiant compassion brings all those who ask to rebirth in his Pure Land, Sukhavati. The second mountain is Mt **Yudono** (1504 m), actually a spur of Gassan. It is the innermost sanctuary of the Three Mountains and regarded as the Pure Land of the cosmic Buddha Dainichi, (Mahavairochana). The third mountain is Mt Haguro (419 m). Its presiding deity is the bodhisattva Kannon, or Avalokiteshvara. People pray to Kannon for peace and tranquillity in this life.

Entry into the Mountain I

On August 24 each year people arrive from all over the country at the temple of Shozennin, in the pilgrimage centre of Toge, at the foot of Mt Haguro. They are here to take part in the Autumn Peak, a mountain-entry ritual which still retains strong associations with its medieval origins. Men and women of all ages and occupations are making their preparations inside Shozennin. In everyday life they are company workers, civil servants, retired people, farmers, tradespeople, academics...

I'm retired. Coming here is something to take with me to the next world. I could go any time.
(First-time participant)

This is the twentieth year I've taken part. I'm ordinarily a salaried worker, and I work hard. I don't want to be criticised for being a yamabushi. (A long time participant)

Knowing that I'll be back each year is a real pleasure. I couldn't come if I wasn't in good health, though (An older man)

Women were not allowed to take part in the Autumn Peak until 1947. Since then their numbers have been increasing. This year (2003) there are 105 participants, and twenty-three are taking part for the first time. People put on the distinctive clothes of Haguro Shugendo. One of the newcomers is being shown how to wear the *tokin*, the small black round cap worn high on the forehead.

You're not a Buddha yet, so turn it so the inverted piece is to the top. You put it on this way at the end, when we come back down the mountain.

This is actually my first time, so I hope you will help me.

My work involves acupuncture and eastern medicine. I've come here because I want to strengthen my own power.

The *oi*, or portable altar, is carried into the mountain with the shugenja. It embodies a variety of symbolic meanings during the Autumn Peak. It represents a coffin during the first ritual, called Oikaragaki, or "Decorating the Portable Altar," which is actually considered a funeral ceremony for the shugenja. Within the curtained-off area, a ritual is taking place transferring the spirits of the shugenja into the *oi*. The *Heart Sutra* is recited to the sound of the conch shell and the rasp of the thick wooden prayer beads that shugenja use. Mountains have long been thought of as places where

the spirits of the dead dwell. This is why the shugenja have to die before setting foot in the realm beyond death that is the mountain. Dying in order to cast off their polluted physical form, they seek rebirth by going into the mountains. The lion mark on the shugenja's surcoat symbolizes Monju, the bodhisattva of enlightened wisdom, whose vehicle is a lion. It embodies the shugenja's aspiration to attain enlightenment through his practice. At the end of the service, the curtain is taken down. At this stage, the spirits of the shugenja are said to be lodged in the *oi*. A celebratory meal then follows, as the shugenja, now dead, celebrate their journey into death.

The presiding figure of the Autumn Peak is called the Sho-Daisendatsu. He is the head priest of Shozennin, Shimazu Kokai. In addition there are five other officials called *sendatsu* who are the ritual and symbolic centre of the Autumn Peak. The senior of these is called the Tobu Daisendatsu. Next in seniority is the Doshi, whose surcoat is purple-checked. He instructs participants in all aspects of ritual practice. Then there is the Kogi no Sendatsu, wearing green, who performs ritual functions concerning wood ("kogi"), and the Aka no Sendatsu, wearing red, who is in charge of everything to do with water ("aka" from Sanskrit *argha*). Finally there is the Kari no Sendatsu, in brown, who acts as guide to sacred places in the mountains ("kari" implies finding a path through the mountains). ["I'll do my best to do my job."] And with the first rituals of the Autumn Peak, a funeral ceremony and a feast, completed, night falls over Shozennin.

Entry into the Mountain II

In Toge on August 25, shugenja make last preparations before journeying in procession to Kotakuji, in the depths of Mt Haguro. They eat their last meal for the next three days. The Tobu Daisendatsu wraps a sheet of white paper folded into the shape of a sword over his leggings. This is identical to what is placed on the head of a dead person for the funeral. It symbolizes the separation of death from life, and in addition is a representation of the sword of Fudo Myoo, a divinity closely associated with Shugendo. The white robes that both he and the Sho-Daisendatsu wear are identical to those worn by the dead. The last item of clothing to be put on is the *yuigesa*, a kind of surplice made distinctive by six white tufts, symbolizing the six perfections. It represents a folded-up version of the long robe that priests wear around their shoulder. Just as a priest's robe signals his sacred function, shugenja wear the *yuigesa* when they train in the mountains.

In the early afternoon, shugenja cross to the Koganedo, opposite Shozennin, in what is likened both to a funeral procession and a wedding march. In a short time a ritual will take place which symbolizes conception, the formation of new life. Shugenja recite the *Sanjo Shakujo*.

With a pure mind I venerate the Three Jewels;

Showing forth a pure mind, I venerate the Three Jewels.

The Tobu Daisendatsu wears a floppy hat decorated with white paper strips, called the *ayaigasa*, and

carries the *oi* on his back. Through the ritual that he is about to perform, the *oi* changes from being a “coffin,” where the spirits of the dead are lodged, to a “womb.” This ritual is a sacred marriage, which follows the mythical example of the deities Izanagi and Izanami, who are venerated in the Koganedo. The Tobu Daisendatsu takes up the *bonten*, a long pole topped with strips of white paper. It represents the male organ, and is also a cosmic symbol. When the *bonten* is thrown up the steps of the Koganedo, sexual intercourse is considered to have taken place. As a result, life is conceived and lodged within the womb of the *oi*. In this way, the spirits of the dead have gained rebirth.

Entry into the mountain III

Just after the procession leaves Koganedo, a ceremony called *Matsu no rei*, marking the formal beginning of the Autumn Peak, is held. It underscores the determination of the shugenja to complete the practice successfully. The Sho-Daisendatsu passes down the announcement to each of the sendatsu, who in turn pass it on to the shugenja.

“Tobu daisendatsu, we are now going into the mountain!”

“Uketamau, uketa, uketamau” (It is understood.)

“Kogi no sendatsu, we are now going into the mountain!”

“Uketamau, uketa, uktamau.”

“Aka no sendatsu, we are now going into the mountain!”

“Uketamau, uketa, uktamau.”

“Shugenja, we are now going into the mountain!”

“Uketamau, uketa, uktamau.”

Before continuing, the Tobu Daisendatsu passes the *oi* and the *ayaigasa* to the Doshi. This is to signal that the growth of the foetus in the womb. The *ayaigasa*, the floppy hat, represents the placenta which protects the foetus in the womb. However it is not yet placed on top of the *oi*, as will happen later, because the foetus is still too immature for the placenta to have formed in the womb.

Amatsukami kunitsukami (Kami of heaven, kami of earth.)

Led by the Doshi, the procession moves down the main road of Toge, and in the course of the journey into the mountain, the foetus inside the *oi* gradually matures. At Yakushi Shrine (the former temple Mine no Yakushi), it is thought to gain physical form. Here too shugenja offer a recitation of the *Sanjo Shakujo*.

I take hold of my staff

And make this vow for the sake of all living beings:

To organize great gatherings

To show forth the true way

And venerate the Three Treasures.

To organize great gatherings

To show forth the true way

And venerate the Three Treasures.

Here, a senior shugenja called the *oiokuri* (“*oi* bearer”) takes over the *oi* from the Doshi. An oblong box, the *katabako*, representing the father, is placed on top of the *oi*, and the *ayaigasa*, representing the placenta, is placed over it. The foetus has now become stable in the womb and is protected by the newly-formed placenta.

Rokkon shojo (The six senses are purified)

The long axe which leads the procession functions to remove all obstacles which might obstruct the path into the mountain. Other objects carried in the procession include the *torii* (also called *oitate*) which represents the vagina of the mother, through which the foetus will eventually be born, a long box containing a hanging scroll with a portrait of the founder of Haguro Shugendo, and 108 sticks, called *kogi*, divided into three bundles, which symbolize the 108 defilements that plague humankind. The Zuishinmon is the gateway to the Three Mountains of Dewa. Before 1870, when the kami-buddha separation orders were put into effect here, it was the Niomon, the main gate of the temple Jakkoji, and two great statues of the guardian kings stood in the niches on either side. Here the Doshi announces:

“Shugenja! All those who are taking part for the first time should now return to your lodgings and rest.”

In actual fact this is only a formality nowadays and the shugenja all pass through the gate together and descend into the valley of the Harai river.

Namai danbo (I place my trust in Amida Buddha)

Here they offer a sutra to Hakusan Gongen, the kami of the mountain called Hakusan in central Japan, also once a great Shugendo centre. Hakusan was considered an avatar of the Eleven-Headed Kannon, and also a representation of the kami Izanami. At this point the foetus in the *oi* is thought to have acquired blood and flesh. At the bottom of the valley, a red bridge spans the Harai river, above which hangs a waterfall. Ahead is a five-storied pagoda, which vividly reminds us that at one time the Three Mountains of Dewa were a sacred area which venerated both the native deities, the kami, and the divinities of Buddhism. Inside the pagoda, the three Haguro deities used to be enshrined. Represented here on a hanging scroll, they are the bodhisattva Myoken, the deification of the Pole Star and the Dipper constellation, Gundari Myoo, which represents the six marker stars of the south, and the central divinity, Kannon.

(Sanjo shakujo) Showing forth a pure heart, I venerate the Three Treasures

Vowing to purify my heart, I venerate the Three Treasures.

Since a pagoda was traditionally considered the place where the Buddha’s relics were stored, it is appropriate that the shugenja should visualize here that the foetus has gained bones.

A stair of 2446 stone steps extends out of the valley to the summit of Mt Haguro. At

specific places en route, Chokaisan, a mountain with Shugendo connections once considered to be one of the Three Mountains of Dewa, Yudonosan and Gassan are venerated with a sutra recitation. On the summit is Hachiko Shrine, before 1870 the Founder's Hall.

(Sanjo shakujo) I take hold of my staff
And make this vow for the benefit of all living beings
To organize great gatherings
And venerate the Three Treasures.

The founder of Haguro Shugendo is Nojo Taishi, who is said to have come to Haguro early in the seventh century. He was given the title of Shoken Daibosatsu in the 19th century. Legend says he was the third son of the late sixth century emperor Sushun, and the cousin of the famous Shotoku Taishi. He is depicted as a strange being, dark of skin and with exaggerated facial features, his mouth extending from ear to ear. It was to a place called Akoya, in a narrow valley full of thick growth, with a waterfall at one end, that Nojo Taishi was guided by a mystical three-legged crow, and it was here that he first did ascetic training. Here also he found a statue of Kannon and it was from here that he opened the three mountains as a Shugendo site.

The Sanjin Gosaiden of Dewa Sanzan Shrine was formerly the Main Hall of the Buddhist temple Jakkoji. The most sacred object of veneration here is a rock called Goshinpi, secreted below the floor of the shrine. In front of the shrine is a sacred pond called Mitarashi. More than 600 small votive bronze mirrors, dating from the 12th to the 18th century have been found here. Beside the pond is a shrine dedicated to Benzaiten, the goddess of eloquence, art, wealth and longevity. This deity is depicted with a kami of good fortune called Ugajin on its head. Ugajin has the face of an old man and the body of a snake.

(Sanjo shakujo) I take hold of my staff
And make this vow for the benefit of all living beings
To organize great gatherings
And venerate the Three Treasures.
I make this vow for the benefit of all living beings
To organize great gatherings
And venerate the Three Treasures.

At the Main Shrine, the shugenja venerate the deities from below the ten steps; they do not ascend because they have not yet completed the ten realms practice. Originally the three buddhas associated with the three mountains were enshrined here.: Dainichi, the main deity of Yudono, Amida, the main deity of Gassan, and Kannon, the main deity of Haguro.

Amatsukami kunitsukami (Kami of heaven, kami of earth)

Practice within the mountain is likened to being within the mother's womb. Shugenja principally stay in seclusion in a single place, rather than moving from place to place. The earliest

records say that the practice once lasted 75 days, a figure loosely associated with 275 days, the amount of time the baby is in the womb. It was reduced to 15 days in the latter part of the seventeenth century, and further this century to the present nine days. Before 1874, the practice was physically divided into three lodgings, but now the entire time is spent at Kotakuji. Kotakuji is the inner precinct of Mt Haguro, and as such is one of the most sacred places on the mountain. The temple itself is regarded as the womb, within which shugenja undertake their training for rebirth.

On arrival at Kotakuji, the shugenja are given general instructions and assigned sleeping space.

“Nyudo!” (Entry into a sacred place – shugenja kneel on one knee)

“At the first sound of the conch shell: wake up.

“At the second sound of the conch shell: get dressed.

“At the third sound of the conch shell: go to the daisendatsu.

(Shugenja) Uketamau.

Entry into the mountain IV

The six realms of rebirth

This scroll, from Daien'in in Hayama, is a mandala showing the ten realms of rebirth. These are the same ten realms that the shugenja traverses during the Autumn Peak, enacting each within the mountain. We see first the figure of King Enma, the chief judge of the underworld. The ten realms are divided into two stages, the six realms of rebirth, where living beings continue to experience the suffering of transmigration, and the four realms of enlightenment. The six realms of rebirth, are, in ascending order, the hells, the hungry spirits, the animals, the violent beings known as ashuras (depicted as mounted warriors), human beings and heavenly beings. It is only by being liberated from these six realms that a person can gain the realms of enlightenment.

Entry into the mountain V

Sutra-chanting

The first part of the Autumn Peak practice is called the First Lodging (Ichi no shuku). August 26 begins, in the middle of the night, with *goya gongyo*, the late night service, the later of the two services that will be held every night from now on. The sound of the conch shell rouses shugenja from their sleep, and they are urged out of their covers by the insistent beating of a gong. As they dress, a second blow of the conch shell warns them to hurry. Once shugenja are seated in their places, the sendatsu and other officials arrive in small groups, and make their obeisance to the Founder.

Namu kie chorai Kaisan Shoken Daibosatsu (I place my trust in the Founder, the Great Bodhisattva Shoken)

Before the service starts, the names of the shugenja are checked. This is called *toko-shirabe*. During

the time they are in the mountain, shugenja use the names they have been given by the Daisendatsu, ending in the syllable *-in*. Those who are doing the practice for the first time receive their new name now, but for the duration of the First Lodging it is suffixed by the syllable *-bo*.

Kari no sendatsu: “Omukae, omukae, omukae” (I come to call you)

Kogi no sendatsu: “Uketamau, uketa, uketamau.”

The hall is then purified by the Tobu daisendatsu for the descent of the deities in a rite called *toko kaji*, using a five-pronged vajra and a secret hand sign.

Tobu daisendatsu: “Namu kie chorai Kaisan Shoken Daibosatsu.” (I place my trust in the Founder, the Great Bodhisattva Shoken)

Sho-daisendatsu: “Namu kie chorai Kaisan Shoken Daibosatsu.” (I place my trust in the Founder, the Great Bodhisattva Shoken)

Next the Doshi makes an announcement to the assembled shugenja:

“Shugenja! This place is where we practise the most profound secret teachings, the place where we reach the greatest results that our Shugendo can give us.” (Uketamau)

“When you are resting between practices, it is forbidden to fight, argue, sing, dance and vie with each other.” (Uketamau)

“Train hard at your shugen practice day and night, with the determination to repay the Founder for all he has done.” (Uketamau)

With an unfailing mind of faith, pray for the fulfilment of all your vows.” (“Uketamau”)

The ritual called *ho no mi*, “fruits of the Dharma,” joins all shugenja into the lineage of the Dainichi, the cosmic buddha. The so-called *oizake* (sake of the portable altar) that is symbolically poured represents the blood of Dainichi, and by receiving it, all become one with him. Next shugenja are fixed to their places in a ritual called *kouchigi*. *Kouchigi* are small logs of wood of differing sizes with the water symbol painted on each end. This ritual is a form of consecration, as the water symbolized by the sign on the end of the logs is poured over the heads of the *shugenja*, who are themselves now foetuses in the womb of the mountain. The two sendatsu who perform it first create a sacred boundary. They then move up each row of shugenja, bringing the *kouchigi* together over the head of each person with a loud clacking sound. This symbolizes too that the foetus now has gained the six sense faculties – eyes, ears, nose, and so on. The peculiar strides they take are called *henbai*, a mode of step derived from Daoism intended to stamp out evil spirits or malign influences.

“Shugenja! The kouchigi ritual has now been completed. It is strictly forbidden for you to leave your place.”

“Uketamau.”

As the service begins all perform the protection and purification ritual known as *goshinpo*, before reciting the *Heart Sutra*:

The Sutra of the Heart of Great Wisdom:

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara,
deeply contemplating the Great Wisdom,
clearly saw that the five *on* were empty,
thus completely going beyond all suffering and misfortune.
Form is nothing other than emptiness; emptiness nothing other than form.
Form is exactly emptiness; emptiness is exactly form.

At the end of the sutra, shugenja recite the mantra and holy name of the protector deity Sambo Kojin.

Namu Sambo Daikojin (three times)
On kenbaya kenbaya sowaka (three times)
(I place my trust in the great Kojin, protector of the Three Jewels)

Kojin, which symbolizes the wild and fearsome aspect of the deity, is here considered also to be a “placenta deity” (*enashin*) which protects the foetus. Next the main section of the service begins, the Hokke Senbo, or Lotus repentance ritual. This addresses the buddhas, and is the foetus’s repentance for and purification of the six sense organs. It is a long rite that is divided into a number of sections. It begins with verses of homage to the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the teachings and the community.

With all my heart I place my trust in the eternal Buddha of the ten directions
With all my heart I place my trust in the eternal Law (Dharma) of the ten directions
With all my heart I place my trust in the eternal community (Samgha) of the ten directions

Then follows the verse of offering.

Kneeling, I reverently hold this fragrant flower and make an offering according to the Dharma.

After this is the section of 33 verses offering homage to numerous buddhas and bodhisattvas.

With all my heart I place my trust westward in the Buddha Limitless Brilliance and all the all the buddhas in the west.

....

With all my heart I place my trust in the bodhisattva mahasattvas Wonderful Sound and Flower of Virtue

With all my heart I place my trust in the bodhisattva mahasattvas Ever Diligent and Attaining Great Energy

...

For the sake of all living beings in the Dharma realm I will rid myself of the three hindrances, taking refuge in the Three Treasures

The next section is a repentance for the defilements that arise out of each of the six sense organs.

I confess and repent with all my heart, together with all living beings of the Dharma realm, that from the far distant past until the present I have greedily craved things of material form

that come to me through the eyes.

...

From the far distant past until the present the delusions caused by the nose are unending. At specific places, where each of the six sense organs is mentioned, a loud banging is heard. Men who act as assistants at the Autumn Peak beat the wooden shutters loudly. This is called *shirabe*, and it emphasizes the need to repent the evils committed because of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and the mind. *Shirabe* is also considered to be a form of *tamafuri* (the process by which the spirit of the universe becomes one with the shugenja), giving vitality to the newly-formed foetus and ensuring the free flowing of its life force.

All heavy sins caused by the mind, all evil actions aroused by the six sense organs, all that have occurred, are occurring and will occur: I pray that all will be completely purified.

The final section of this part of the Lotus Repentance is called "Raising the Vow."

With all my heart I request encouragement from the countless buddhas of the ten directions in the Dharma realm...

With all my heart I accept and rejoice in the merits and virtues of the buddhas and bodhisattvas...

In the boundless Dharma realm and into the limitless future, may the merits (of this recitation) be extended widely, so that all may seek the Buddha's teachings. Having made the transfer of merit, I honour the Three Treasures.

I vow that in the last moment of my life my spirit will not be disordered...

Namu Fugen Bosatsu (I place my trust in the Bodhisattva Fugen).

Part of the 14th chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, "A Happy Life," is then recited.

And if he does not observe

The consequences of action, higher, middle or lower,

Active or passive,

Consequences of action real or unreal;

Also if he does not discriminate

"This is a man" or "This is a woman;"

If he discovers no consequences of action

Nor recognizes nor sees them,

This then is called

A bodhisattva's sphere of action.

By performing the *Hokke Senbo*, the shugenja honour the buddhas and bodhisattvas, praying to attain buddhahood through the merits of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Namu jippo butsu (I place my trust in the buddhas of the ten directions)

Next a hymn to Shakyamuni, the historical buddha, is sung.

Because all causes and conditions were fulfilled,
Shakyamuni attained supreme enlightenment.
Because of the fruit of buddhahood,
The past and future no longer exist.
All living beings are drowning in the sea of birth and death.

...

Shakyamuni entered final nirvana during the night of the 15th of the 2nd month.
Our prayer is that we may be reborn in paradise.
Show the way of enlightenment to the animals, hungry spirits and living beings.
Unless we ask for the help of our Teacher, we can neither be led to paradise,
Nor attain immediate and supreme enlightenment.
I pray that any merits I may accrue be extended to all beings,
And that I and all beings may together attain enlightenment.

This is followed by the Verse to the Buddhas, which praises all buddhas as being purer than the lotus flower which is unsullied by the mud it grows in. Next the shugenja recite an extended verse praising the Buddha, his teachings and his community, which ends in the words:

May I, together with all living beings, arouse a mind to seek the path to enlightenment.

This is followed by the Verse of the Seven Buddhas

All the buddhas teach
That we must purify our minds
So that we commit no evil,
And do only good.

Next we hear the Shariraimon:

Homage to the relics of the Buddha of complete merit.
Homage to the body of truth, truth itself,
Which is a stupa for this world to benefit our present body.
Through his merits, and for our benefit,
The Buddha reveals himself,
He enters into us and we into him.

The service finishes, after more than two hours, with the chanting of the mantras and holy names of the deities associated with Haguro Shugendo.

On sorasobateiei sowaka (Benten)

On maka kyaraya sowaka (Daikokuten)

On beishiramanaya sowaka (Bishamonten)

Namu Kaisan Shoken Daibosatsu (I place my trust in the Founder, the Great Bodhisattva)

Shoken)

With the final mantra, *Boron*, (in combination with a hand gesture and a visualization) the shugenja become one with Dainichi, the cosmic Buddha. Immediately, the Doshi calls out to the men waiting outside:

Bring the braziers into the Upper Hall.

Bring the braziers into the Lower Hall.

Bring the medicinal herbs into the Upper Hall.

Bring the medicinal herbs into the Lower Hall.

This is the signal for start of the Brazier Ritual, more commonly known as Nanban ibushi (Burning the chili peppers). A mixture of rice bran and powdered chili is poured over the heated coals, and the smoke fanned through the hall. The pungent smoke makes the eyes water and if breathed, it causes severe coughing. Nanban ibushi and its smoke symbolize the hells, the first of the realms of rebirth. This is followed by offerings of wood and water to the respective sendatsu. Kogi-osame, the offering of wood, is made to the Kogi no sendatsu, whose duties involve wood.

Shugenja: Kogi no sendatsu ni annai o mosu, annai, annai o mosu (I ask your guidance)

This is a ritualization of the firewood that is cut during the Autumn Peak, both for ritual and everyday purposes. Each shugenja offers one piece of wood in a symbolic gesture.

Kogi no sendatsu: Uketamau, uketa, uketamau.

Aka-osame is similarly the offering of water to the Aka no sendatsu, in charge of water-related matters.

Shugenja: Aka no sendatsu ni annai o mosu, annai, annai o mosu.

It too derives from the necessity to draw water for drinking and ritual purposes during the Autumn Peak. The two small pails represent male and female, and in transferring water from one to the other, reference is made to sexual intercourse.

Aka no sendatsu: Uketamau, uketa, uketamau.

The services and rituals last until daybreak on August 26. On that day a pilgrimage is made to the sacred site called Chudai. "Chudai" refers to the centre of the lotus flower. Before they depart, shugenja gather in the area behind the Jizodo, near the gate of Kotakuji, where an iron statue of Jizo is enshrined, and pay reverence to the Jizodo as representing the inside of the womb. The back wall of the Jizodo is regarded as what the foetus sees when it looks up through the womb to its mother's spine.

(Sanjo Shakujo) Having had a pure heart from the past,

I venerate the Three Treasures.

Showing forth a pure heart,

I venerate the Three Treasures..

The shugenja receive instructions from the sendatsu before leaving for Chudai.

We shall now be going to a sacred place called Chudai. Let all of you go there, no one remaining. (Uketamau) However should there be those who are old, children or ill for whom it would be difficult to go, you should say so now.

Otachi! (Let us leave)

Nojo Taishi, the founder, is said to have practised here. Though the shugenja are observing a three-day fast, they make this pilgrimage out of regard for the founder. It is said too that the pilgrimage to Chudai is made to have the spirit of the mountains attach itself to the life now dwelling in the womb. The former Fudo Hall here has now been converted into a shrine called Otaki Jinja

(Heart Sutra) Therefore know that the perfection of wisdom is the great mantra,

The vivid mantra, the best mantra, the unsurpassable mantra.

It completely clears all pain. This is the truth, not a lie.

So set forth the mantra of the perfection of wisdom,

Set forth this mantra and say:

Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone far beyond,

Enlightenment is accomplished!. Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom.

There was once a statue of Fudo Myoo almost two metres high enshrined here. The shugenja, who have yet to attain the realm of enlightenment, see Fudo, an avatar of Dainichi Nyorai, as a frightening figure. (On the way back to Kotakuji, shugenja pick flowers to offer the Buddha. The kogi sendatsu stands by the inscribed stone and accepts them. (Uketamau) His voice breaks with emotion.

Scattering flowers, we seek to delight you.

We entreat the buddhas of the ten directions

To enter this place of practice.

Scattering flowers, we seek to delight you.

The first service of the night of August 26 begins around 10pm. The order of the liturgy is very similar to that of the previous night, in that it is again centred on the Hokke Senbo. This time however the shugenja recite the verse of homage to Amida (Namo Abitafu) before chanting the Amida Sutra. Following this, the hymn to Amida is sung.

The Buddha Amida has a body of pure gold;

There is no other being who can compare.

The white curl between his eyebrows is like five Mt Sumerus.

His dark blue eyes shine like the four great oceans.

May I be reborn in his paradise of Sukhavati

Having called upon his name with all my effort.

Through Amida's great vow he will return to this Saha world

And lead to Sukhavati all who have made connection with him.

Then the verse in praise of true enlightenment is recited.

Originally all were enlightened.

I honour the truth that lies within my mind.

The wonderful virtue of the Buddha

Is contained originally in my own mind.

Shugendo believes that not just the minds of human beings but even those of beings suffering in the hells are originally endowed with the wonderful virtue of the Buddha. Nanban ibushi, the pungent smoke ritual, again follows. (Toko yurugi: "You may leave the hall.")

One of the most demanding practices for shugenja is that of making multiple full prostrations while reciting over and over again the names of the deities of particular places within the Three Mountains.

Namu Tensho Kotai Jingu (I place my trust in the great deity Amaterasu)

Namu Sango Daihi henjo nyorai (I place my trust in the Buddha Daihi Henjo of Sangozawa)

Namu Arasawa Taisho Fudo Myoo (I place my trust in Taisho Fudo Myoo of Arasawa)

Namu Nihon taisho no jingi (I place my trust in all the deities of Japan, great and small)

Services each lasting around two and a half hours are held twice every night. Shugenja get very little sleep.

On August 27 a service called Tana kuyo is held to make offerings to the ancestral spirits. In part it commemorates a shugenja called Akaibo, whose statue is set up at this time, who committed suicide a long time ago because the authorities would not respect the sanctity of Akinomine practice and entered the precincts to arrest a participant accused of a crime. It can also be considered a service held by shugenja for themselves, walking as they are in the realm of the hungry spirits. The five buddhas associated with the hungry spirits are called down. Offerings are made too to lost spirits so that their offences may disappear, that they may be released from their suffering, and that they might quickly be guided to paradise.

I place my trust in the buddhas of the ten directions.

Offerings are made as well to ease the hunger of the suffering spirits. The shugenja becomes a hungry spirit, and receives food offerings. In Haguro Shugendo, the three day fast that runs over the whole First Lodging is the practice of the realm of the hungry spirits. (Recitation of Heart Sutra) The realm of the beasts is practiced throughout the Autumn Peak in that it is forbidden to use water for washing.

Entry into the mountain VI

Chigaigaki

The ten realms practice is divided into three parts, called lodgings. Originally shugenja literally moved between three different lodgings, but now the division is symbolic and the entire practice

takes place at Kotakuji. Metaphorically, the first lodging represents the past, the second the present and the third the future. Shugenja move between these temporal realms, to be reborn. On the evening of August 27, a ritual takes place marking the move between the first and second lodging. This is called *chigaigaki*.

Aka no sendatsu: Omakae, omukae, omukae.

Kogi no sendatsu: Uketamau, uketa, uketamau.

First lighted torches called *taimatsu*, held by the *kogi* and *aka no sendatsu* (representing fire [wood] and water), are swung in wide arcs and then touched together three times. This symbolizes illuminating the darkness of spiritual ignorance and also the purification by fire of the delusions clinging to the spirit of the foetus. Three bundles of straw with camellia twigs stuck into them are arranged across the path in a zig-zag fashion. This arrangement is called *chigaigaki*, and it forms the gateway between the two lodgings. The bundles of straw are sacred wood also symbolize the spirit of the mountain. The shugenja pass through this boundary marker and proceed to the second lodging. When he reaches the second bundle of straw, the daisendatsu passes the *oi* that he has carried until now to the Doshi. The first lodging is the past world, the realm of the buddhas, whereas the second lodging is the present world, the realm of living beings. Therefore the daisendatsu, who represents the Buddha Dainichi, passes the *oi* and the *ayaigasa* to the Doshi, who now represents Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha who appeared in this world. The shugenja hold the first service of the night at the Jizodo and pray that their spirit might be reborn in the realm of living beings. They sing the Hymn to Shakyamuni.

Because all causes and conditions were fulfilled,

Shakyamuni attained supreme enlightenment.

Because of the fruit of buddhahood,

The past and future no longer exist.

All living beings are drowning in the sea of birth and death...

The Buddha was born in a state of non-birth at Kapilavastu, in order to bring all living beings release;

He entered nirvana in the state of non-death at Kushinagara, in order to teach by example that all living things must die...

Eighty thousand times he was reborn in the Saha world...

May we be reborn in paradise...

If we but confess and repent

Sitting correctly we can contemplate the reality of existence.

After this they invoke Shakyamuni, asking that he might guide their spirits, dwelling in the realm of living beings.

I place my trust in the buddhas of the ten directions.

The Doshi then announces the move to the second lodging and the rite of *ho no mi* is then performed.

The First Lodging has now been completed. Congratulations. (Uketamau) Let everyone without exception proceed to the Second Lodging. (Uketamau)

Entry into the mountain VII

Second Lodging (Ni no shuku)

During the Second Lodging the altar area of the hall is hung with cut paper decorations. This symbolizes the setting up of the Buddha's land. The spirits, which have now moved to the realm of human beings, can now comprehend their surroundings inside the womb. The three fans placed in a circular pattern on the ceiling represent the placenta, while the red cloth strips hanging from it are the arteries, the white cloth strips the veins, and the hemp rope the bones. This connects the shugenja to the cosmos. Today, for the first time, the statue of the Founder, Nojo Taishi, is revealed. In the Second Lodging, shugenja are considered to be on the same footing as Nojo Taishi. From this day too first-time participants are called by their "In" rather than their "Bo" titles. At the beginning of the second service that night, in the early hours of August 28, the daisendatsu invokes, not the founder as previously, but a manifestation of Dainichi unique to Haguro Shugendo, Sango Daihi Henjo Nyorai.

Namu kimyo chorai sango daihi henjo nyorai.

This is because he now belongs to the human realm, as did the founder, and like him seeks enlightenment. The service continues as before with the *kouchigi* rite and the *Hokke senbo*.

With all my heart I place my trust in the bodhisattva mahasattva Fugen (Universal Virtue)

For the sake of all living beings, I rid myself of the three obstructions (greed, anger, wilful ignorance) , and with all my heart I confess and make repentance.

What is new is the performance of *toko sanjo*. It is a ritual to stabilize the foetus in the womb.

I confess and repent with all my heart, along with all living beings of the Dharma realm, that for generations beyond count the sense organ which is my eyes has given rise to greedy attachment to things with form. Because of the illusions caused by this attachment and craving I have felt lust for the female form. For generations this has produced confusion and attachment to material form.

At those places in the recitation where previously the wooden doors were battered, we hear the sound of the long sticks hitting the wooden table and instead of *nanban ibushi*, we hear the crackling of camellia leaves held over the hot coals in the braziers. The sounds have softened because now the spirit of the foetus is considered to have become stable and purified. They are said to regulate the breathing of the foetus, and to negate malevolent obstructions, craving and suffering. At the end of this service is held the ceremony called *nenko sanpai*, offering incense to the Tobu Daisendatsu with full prostrations.

Shugenja! (Uketamau) There will now be held a ritual called Incense Offering and Prostrations.

(Uketamau) You should take incense and offer it to the Daisendatsu with three prostrations.

(Uketamau)

He is thought of as the Buddha Dainichi, the fundamental universal existence, and shugenja hope that through him they might become one with the Buddha.

Namu kimyo shorai tobu daisendatsu Fudojin Hodo daiajari (I place my trust in the Tobu Daisendatsu, the Great Ajari Fudojin Hodo)

Since the Second Lodging is that of the human realm, the practice associated with that realm, confession and repentance, is practised. Only human beings are thought able to do this. The Doshi announces that all will recite the verse of repentance.

Shugenja! (Uketamau) There will now be held a ritual called Repentance. (Uketamau) This means repenting here all the evil you have committed from beginningless time, and so extinguish it. (Uketamau)

The shugenja recite together:

All the evil committed by me

Is caused by beginningless greed, hatred and delusion.

All the evil is committed by my body, speech and mind.

I now repent everything wholeheartedly.

The next morning the first formal meal of the practice is eaten. (Sanjo, Sanjo, Daisanjo; uketama, uketa, uketamau) It is a simple meal consisting of rice, pickled vegetable and miso soup with no added ingredients. Such a soup is called "mirror soup." When the shugenja see their faces reflected in it, they see wretched hungry spirits. *Tengu sumo* is performed on August 28. The practice of sumo represents the realm of the violent beings called *ashura*. This is preceded by a light-hearted appeal for donations.

Toko e, toko e (Hurry to the hall)

During the first service that night the *toko sanjo* rite is repeated during the *Hokke senbo*. The Kannon sutra (a chapter of the Lotus Sutra) is also recited as it has been in every service. It says that all suffering will be eliminated through hearing the name of the bodhisattva Kannon (Avalokiteshvara, Cry Regarder), seeing his form and meditating upon him.

The World-Honoured One

With all the mystic signs

Answered Infinite Thought in verse.

"Listen to the deeds of the Cry Regarder

Who well responds to every quarter;

His vast vow is as deep as the sea

Inconceivable in its eons.

Serving many thousands of kotis of buddhas,
He has vowed a great pure vow.
Let me briefly tell you.
Whoever hears his name and sees him,
And bears him unremittingly in mind,
Will be able to end the sorrows of existence.

During this sutra too the sound of the long sticks tapping on the wooden table is heard (*toko sanjo*).

If, scorched by the fire-flame
Of the poisonous breath
Of boas, vipers and scorpions,
He thinks of the Cry Regarder's power,
They will flee in every direction.

After the service the Tobu Daisendatsu teaches, and formally transmits to, the first-time participants the mantras and mudras of the Kuji spell and the protection rite called Goshinpo.

(Kuji) Rin pyo to sha kai chin retsu zai zen (Come down, soldiers and fighters, and line up before me)

The Goshinpo is used before and after every service and ritual to purify the body and mind. The Kuji is a secret rite to overcome all enemies of the body and mind and to eliminate all evil caused by the defilements.

Entry into the mountain VIII

Saito Goma fire rite

The second service that night, that takes place before dawn on August 29, is held in conjunction with the most secret of all the Autumn Peak rituals, the *saito goma*. The unborn spirits, which have come as far as the world of the present of the Second Lodging, must, in order to proceed to the world of the future of the Third Lodging, purify by burning the karma which surround the foetus. This they do themselves. The kogi and aka sendatsu touch flaming torches (*taimatsu*) together. The altar is constructed of a lattice of logs, whose number is the same as the number of bones (96) in the human body. The wood is set ablaze by the torches, after a ritual similar to that performed at the *chigaigaki*.

Saito ni hi ga tatta (The saito altar is now alight!)

Osaito ni hi ga tatta (The great saito altar is now alight!)

A symbol representing water is drawn at each end of the logs. This water washes away the impurities of action, speech and mind of the shugenja. The camellia branches on the top of the altar represent the spirits of the mountain.

Again the *Hokke senbo* is chanted.

With all my heart I place my trust in the original teacher, the Buddha Shakyamuni...

I confess and repent with all my heart, along with all living beings of the Dharma realm, that for generations beyond count the sense organ which is my eyes has given rise to greedy attachment to things with form. Because of the illusions caused by this attachment and craving I have felt lust for the female form. For generations this has produced confusion and attachment to material form.

The Kogi no sendatsu stamps down on evil spirits using the magical *henbai* step and calls down the kami and buddhas from the sky using the long pole like a ladder that he holds.

This material form has damaged my eyes and I have been like a slave seeking favour manipulated by it as I wander through the three realms. This corruption has made me blind, so I see nothing at all. The sense organ that is my eyes is not good and has harmed me greatly.

The three bundles of wood (*kogi*) with black bark represent the three principal defilements, greed, anger and wilful ignorance. The white paper they are wrapped in symbolizes the originally pure spirits of the shugenja.

The tongue as a sense organ has committed many evil deeds. The greed for fine flavours has harmed living beings. I have broken the precepts, and opened doors of idleness. My tongue has produced countless evil deeds.

The Daisendatsu cuts the cord around each of the two bundles of wood with his sword, and throws the twigs one by one into the fire. The cloud of the defilements is purified by the sword and burned away by the flames. The ritual of *saito goma* is also held to pray for the peace of the world. The Daisendatsu fans the flames to burn away the defilements. The Kogi no sendatsu throws the third bundle of wood into the well of flame. The *goma* altar represents a bottomless well able to absorb and purify all the defilements caused by the six sense organs. The Daisendatsu draws his sword again as shugenja recite the chapter "A Happy Life" from the Lotus Sutra.

Contemplating all consequences of action

As though they were not,

As if they were space

Without solidity,

Neither produced nor coming forth,

Motionless and unreceding,

Ever remaining a unity.

This is named the sphere of intimacy.

Each of the three bundles contains 36 twigs, making 108 altogether. This is the number of defilements people are said to have.

Namo Abitafu, Abitafu, Abitafu (I place my trust in the Buddha Amida)

The long sticks called *sanjo* are a conduit for sacred water from heaven to purify the defilements. The *Amida Sutra* tells us that in paradise the three lower realms of rebirth (the hells, hungry spirits

and animals) do not exist. The deity to whom the saito goma of Hagurosan is offered is Amida become one with Dainichi (Daihi Hensho Nyorai).

(Amida Sutra) If there is a good man or a good woman who keeps the name of Amida Buddha in mind, that person, when about to die, will see Amida Buddha accompanied by his holy host appear before him; and immediately after his death, he with his mind undisturbed can be born into the Sukhavati land of Amida Buddha.

(Hymn to Amida) May the merits of this veneration of Amida Buddha
Adorn all living beings in the Dharma realm.

May they all be reborn in Sukhavati upon death.

May they all meet Amida and attain enlightenment.

May I be reborn in Sukhavati

Because I have practised the samadhi of the recitation of Amida's name.

(Verse of Original Enlightenment) Originally all were enlightened.

I honour the truth that lies within my mind.

The wonderful virtue of the Buddha

Is contained originally in my own mind.

The shugenja pass under each of the four gates of the sacred boundary of the saito goma altar. In turn they are called the Gate of Arousing the Aspiration to Enlightenment, the Gate of Religious Practice, the Gate of Enlightenment and the Gate of Nirvana. Now the shugenja can move towards the future world, which the Third Lodging symbolizes.

Shugenja! (Uketamau) The Second Lodging has now been completed. Congratulations.

(Uketamau) Let everyone without exception proceed to the Third Lodging. (Uketamau)

After the *ho no mi* rite has been performed, the cry of *toko yurugi*, *daitoko yurugi*, *toko yurugi* (leave the hall) signals the departure. The final stage of the realms of rebirth is that of heavenly beings. This is symbolized by the ritual of Ennen, also called Narugo. Formerly a ritual dance, it now consists of two Noh chants, Takasago and Chikai nami. A cry of "yaho" is given after each rendition. Celebratory sake flows as shugenja complete the practices associated with the realms of suffering and rebirth. The Third Lodging is said to be a practice associated with the future world. Now shugenja enter the realm of enlightenment, which has four stages: the shravaka, who has listened directly to the words of the Buddha, the pratyeka-buddha, who has gained enlightenment by his own efforts, the bodhisattva, who extends to others the joys of enlightenment, and the Buddha, who has realized the Truth and works to bring others to the same realization.

Entry into the mountain IX

The Realm of Enlightenment

The most sacred site for Haguro Shugendo is Sankozawa, the last place where the founder pursued

his religious training, which is considered to be the Pure Land of Daihi Henjo Nyorai, a Buddha which combines Dainichi and Amida. It symbolizes the supreme realm of enlightenment that those who have escaped the wheel of rebirth in the six realms aim for. On August 29, in heavy rain, shugenja recite the Heart Sutra. Sankozawa is a very difficult place to reach, and involves 48 crossings of a river and a steep climb. When the flow of water is too strong, shugenja have to venerate Sankozawa from a distance. They become one with Daihi Henjo Nyorai.

Namu sanko daihi henjo nyorai (I place my trust in Sanko Daihi Henjo Nyorai)

On the night of August 29, a service is held to venerate the founder, Shoken Daibosatsu. His name is written on a scroll and is hung across the altar.

I place my trust in the kami and the buddhas, one within the original nature of Dainichi, the source of all life,

The wondrous and sacred Three Mountains,

And all the spirits of the dead and the kami dwelling in the mountains.

Again the Verse of Repentance is recited.

All the evil committed by me

Is caused by beginningless greed, hatred and delusion.

All the evil is committed by my body, speech and mind.

I now repent everything wholeheartedly.

Now shugenja can recite the Oharae (Verses of Purification) and Shukugon (Celebratory verse), both associated with kami-buddha combinatory ideas.

(Oharae) Because of the purification of the six sense organs

The kami of the five organs of the body are in good order.

Because the kami of the five organs of the body are in good order,

We are one with the kami of heaven and earth.

Because we are one with the kami of heaven and earth,

We are one with all the spirits.

(Sanzan shukugon) From the time heaven and earth separated and our land came into being,

Amaterasu has ruled the land.

The seal of Amida and Dainichi appeared on the ocean's floor.

This was a great event in the coming of Buddhism to Japan:

The original body and its traces are one, not two.

.....

The shadow of Gassan penetrates to the depths of Arasawa;

It burnishes the jewel of the Buddha-nature within.

The radiance of Dainichi brightens the peak of Hagurosan

Revealing the virtues of the Buddha's marks.

The stream of Arasawa fills the pond of the eight merits,
The wind of the high mountains is the music of nature.

Entry into the mountain X

Mountain pilgrimage

The world of enlightenment is realized through being able to understand the sound of the wind in the mountains, the song of the birds and the cries of insects as the voices of the kami and the buddhas. On August 30 shugenja visit sacred sites around Gassan. This is the last pilgrimage they will make among the peaks of the Three Mountains. At Higashi Fudaraku they pray before a towering pinnacle of rock, and crawl through a narrow rock cave to venerate Kannon. This is called *tainai kuguri*, or passing through the womb. Then they climb down to Ohama pond. “The water of springtime flowing down the valleys, the wind of autumn dropping down from the peaks, proclaim to us that all living beings have, without exception, the seed of buddhahood.” For the shugenja, the sounds of nature are in themselves the teachings of the Buddha. The summit of Gassan, from which Mt Chokai can be seen in the distance, is the paradise of Amida.

Namu Gassan Daigongen. (I place my trust on the great avatar Gassan.)

The shrine of Gassan used to contain the statues of the thirteen buddhas. The thirteen buddhas are associated with stages of purification after death and so are important in the veneration of the ancestral spirits believed to gather at Gassan. In the niche behind the small sanctuary there used to be a statue of Sanbo Kojin, a fierce-looking and potentially malignant deity who acts as a protector of the Three Treasures of Buddhism – the Buddha, the Teachings (Dharma) and the Community (Sangha). The third of the Dewa mountains is Yudonosan. Hagurosan represents the present, Gassan the past, and Yudonosan the future. Together they comprise a mandala of the cosmos.

In the early hours of August 31, a sutra recitation service is held to make prayer requests.

Shugenja! (Uketamau) Tomorrow is the 210th day. (This is a time when climatic conditions can be very changeable.) Therefore we pray that the winds and rain might be normal and that the harvest crops will be rich. We will recite the Heart Sutra one thousand times. (Uketamau)

Let each of you recite the sutra and make supplication. (Uketamau)

For each, the Heart Sutra is recited one thousand times (in abbreviated form). A verse which repents the actions of the six sense organs is chanted using a melodic form particular to Dewa Sanzan.

I ask that all our great sins caused by the six sense organs be purified;

I beg it of the eight vajra lads of the protective cord (*oshime*).

In the early afternoon of August 31, the shugenja leave the mountain to return to the everyday world. They will descend as reborn bodhisattvas, filled with compassion, having achieved enlightenment in this very body and become united with Dainichi. The kouchigi rite is performed for the last time over the shugenja standing in front of Kotakuji. The mountain symbol on their token is turned

downwards, symbolizing their return. They leave chanting the Kannon Sutra, which is their declaration of their determination as bodhisattvas to bring all beings to enlightenment.

Taiga joju, oyama wa hanjo (My great vow has been fulfilled; the mountain is prosperous)

At the entrance to Akoya, a sacred site in the valley behind the Main Shrine, they recite the Verse of Repentance for the last time.

Shugenja! There will now be the rite called Repentance. This means repenting here all the evil you have committed from beginningless time, and so extinguish it.

Now they climb the ten steps of the Main Shrine (Dewa Sanzan Jinja). These represent the ten realms that the shugenja have just practised, and therefore this time the shugenja climb them to the very top, unlike at the beginning of the Autumn Peak, when they recited the service from below. This action confirms that they have reached the tenth stage. The ten realms exist within the mind of the shugenja. If he did not have the mind of a hungry spirit he would not be able to understand the hungry spirit. If he did not have the mind of a beast, he would not be able to understand beasts. If he did not have the mind of someone in hell, he would not be able to rescue those beings suffering in the hells.

Shugenja! (Uketamau) As I have said before, this place is the sacred peak where the strictest secrecy is maintained. You may under no circumstance speak of it to outsiders after you return to the ordinary world. It is strictly forbidden to speak of it to parents, children, brothers, wives or friends. (Uketamau) Should you do so, immediately you will fall under the curse of the founder. Therefore make your pledge of silence by striking this gong. (Uketamau)

After the shugenja have struck the gong to vow their silence, they give a great yell, the cry of a baby at birth, and hurtle at full speed down the stone steps. In Japanese, the words for “mountain path” and “birth canal” are homophones. So to descend the path is to be born from the womb. Shugenja arrive one by one at the Zuishinmon gate, happiness and relief mingling on their faces.

Congratulations! Thanks!

A welcoming fire, called *ba saito*, is kindled in front of the Koganedo. This is said to be the first bath a baby is given after birth. Shugenja leap over it, like kami descending to this world through the flames. A final service of thanksgiving to celebrate the safe completion of the Autumn Peak is held in the Koganedo in front of the 33 statues of Kannon. Shugendo practice shows us that it is possible to find the Buddha within our own hearts and minds.

(Kannon Sutra) Regarder of the World's Cries, pure and holy,

In pain, distress, death, calamity,

Able to be a sure reliance,

Perfect in all merit,

With compassionate eyes beholding all,

Boundless ocean of blessings!

Prostrate, let us revere him.

The Autumn Peak is over. Shugenja each receive certificates from the Tobu Daisendatsu attesting their participation. Traditionally the Autumn Peak was the principal means by which shugenja advanced in rank. A celebratory meal follows.

“When I came down the mountain and everybody said I had done well, I was so happy that I almost cried.” (old man)

“Yes, it really is bodhisattva practice, I think. I feel very grateful. It’s not easy, though!” (a chiropractor)

“Well, my body survived! That too was due to the protection of the kami and the buddhas. Also the guidance and help everyone gave me. I am just so full of thanks. Thank you. Thank you.” (an old man)

“I really feel that my business will do well through the power of the Buddha.” (manager of an inn)

“He’s from Shimokita in Aomori. He’s just like Jizo, you know, at Osorezan, he’s from near Osorezan, after all. Don’t you think he’s cute?” (Doshi and Aka Sendatsu)

“Now I’ve finished I think I understand a bit more. Have I been reborn? I might have been. But it’s enough to work hard, do things properly, after I go home tomorrow. Uketamau!” (A stone mason)

After breakfast on September 1, shugenja return to their homes, having traversed the ten realms within the womb of the mountain over the preceding nine days, and attaining rebirth through a realization of the ten realms.

Kotakuji lies deserted, until the next Autumn Peak.

What you must understand is that human beings and animals, trees and grasses, all that exists in the universe, are endowed without exception with the buddha nature.

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With grateful thanks to Hagurosan Kotakuji Shozennin;

With thanks for materials: Dewa Sanzan Jinja, Hayama Daien'in, Zenpoji

Made with the assistance of the Japan Arts Council

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Visual Folklore Inc. Japan

Translated by Gaynor Sekimori. The assistance of Shimazu Kokai, and the advice of Peter Johnson regarding the translation of the Hokke senbo, are gratefully acknowledged.