

AGON SHU HOSHI MATSURI 2015

Getting back to the source with Agon Shu

Getting back to the source, or rediscovering one's roots, is a common theme in the history of human civilization, both for organizations such as religious movements and for individual people.

For example, many Christians over the course of the centuries have tried to get back to the original teachings and practices of Jesus Christ. Buddhism, a religion with an even longer history than Christianity, offers many similar examples.

In the case of Japanese Buddhism, many people have come to believe that the form of the religion that prevails in Japan is very far removed from the teachings of the original Buddha. He preached his message of universal salvation some 2,500 years ago in a small kingdom in a region that stretched from present-day Nepal to India. But he would likely be mystified by many aspects of the religion that bears his name in 21-century Japan.

Like the vast majority of Japanese Buddhists, the Rev. Seiyu Kiriya, the Founder and President of Agon Shu, was originally an adherent of what is known as Mahayana (greater vehicle) Buddhism. It became a separate strand of the religion several hundred years after the death of the historical Buddha, and emphasize-



One of the highlights of Agon Shu's annual celebration is the performance of *bugaku* ancient court dances.

es trying to help all beings achieve enlightenment. But the more Kiriya studied Buddhism, the more he began to realize that the Mahayana school (which prevails in China, Korea and Japan) had acquired many doctrines and practices that have little to do with the Buddha's original message.

Agama Sutras

So Kiriya went back to the source. In terms of Buddhist scriptures, that means the Agama Sutras. These writings contain the precepts known as the seven systems and thirty-seven curricula, which believers must understand and practice in order to achieve true liberation. In recent decades, advances in linguistic studies have enabled scholars to analyze Buddhist sutras (scriptures) in the Sanskrit and Pali languages, as well as the Buddha's local Magadhi dialect. Their studies clearly demonstrate that the Agama Sutras are the true teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, while the Mahayana Sutras were created and falsely attributed to him several hundred years after his death.

Kiriya realized that these incorrect views needed to be corrected and that it was time for Japanese Buddhists to find out about Buddha's original teachings. So in 1978 he founded the Agon Shu Buddhist Association.

Agon Shu has since grown into a community of more than 300,000 members in Japan and thousands more overseas. The Agon Shu faithful believe the seven systems and thirty-seven curricula taught by the Buddha are the only sure way to achieve personal liberation and

peace and harmony in the world. The Lord Buddha is the primary object of worship and main element of faith for the Agon Shu faithful. The Buddha's teachings and methods of training comprise the dharma, the next step. The third element is the sangha, the community of believers and their leaders.

And just as Agon Shu represents a move back to the roots of Buddhism, its believers come back to Kyoto every Feb. 11 to reconnect with the organization and its teachings, as well as fellow members of the faithful. As they make their way up to Kitakazan in eastern Kyoto, the site of Agon Shu's main temple, they are greeted by colorfully dressed Agon Shu *yamabushi* mountain priests along the route to the site. The *yamabushis'* cries of "*okaerinasai*" (welcome back) echo through the wooded hillside as they direct the crowds along a path through the forest to an amphitheater on the mountainside where Agon Shu holds its annual Fire Rites Festival. It's a very special spiritual homecoming.

Homecoming

One man making that homecoming was 67-year-old Toshihide Sakai. A resident of Kyoto Prefecture, Sakai has been a member of Agon Shu for more than 30 years.

"I am very proud of Agon Shu, because it is promoting peace in the world," he said. "I hope that people around the world will obtain more information about Agon Shu and help promote world peace."

The Fire Rites Festival is the largest of its kind in the world. Over the years the annual event has established itself not only as one of the most important religious events in Japan, but also as a major tourist attraction in the Kyoto region.

It's also called Hoshi Matsuri, or Star Festival. That refers to the "star of destiny"

that determines both the suffering and happiness we experience in life. It's also a reference to how esoteric Buddhism offers insights into the cycle of people's luck by analyzing the "star of destiny" through *Mikkyo Senseijutsu*.

Besides outlining a person's destiny, this is also a way to improve their luck. Agon Shu members believe this secret method of esoteric Buddhist prayer, known as *Jokashofuku*, can eliminate evil and improve people's fortune.

Spiritual aid

The festival's main purpose is to provide spiritual aid and comfort to the souls of the departed, and to help the living make progress on the path to self-realization in accordance with Buddhist teachings.

Matsuri (festival) is an appropriate way of describing this event. Although it has a very serious purpose, there's a festive atmosphere all day long. For example, people wear *happi* coats, which are worn during festivals, chanting loudly and merrily as they invite members of the faithful and visitors to the festival to receive a blessing from a man dressed as the Daikoku-ten, the god of luck.

The Fire Rites Festival and Agon Shu itself are basically Buddhist in inspiration. But since 1993 the festival has been conducted as a syncretic blend of Buddhist and Shinto rituals. That's why many Agon Shu members dress up as *yamabushi*, who historically adhered to the unique Japanese blend of Buddhism and Shinto known as *shugendo*.

This year's festival, which was attended by 430,000 people, began at 9:30 a.m., later than last year, owing to the fact that the Feb. 11 (a public holiday) fell in the middle of the week, which made it more difficult for many people to make an early start. The weather was mainly sunny



Right: The sight of bright tongues of flame bursting out of the *goma-dan* pyres always impresses those attending Agon Shu's annual Fire Rites Festival. Left: The Rev. Seiyu Kiriya, the Founder and President of the Agon Shu Buddhist Association, presides over the day's events.



throughout the day, helping to dispel the winter chill.

The festivities began with a procession of some 600 *yamabushi*-costumed Agon Shu members who entered the amphitheater and formed neat ranks in front of a richly decorated altar on which were placed various offerings to Buddha. In the midst of the procession there was a palanquin on which Kiriya sat, resplendent in multicolored robes.

Buddhism of Bhutan

The dominant visual motif of the altar was from the Buddhism of Bhutan. In 2010, Kiriya traveled to the Himalayan nation to take part in the Abhisheka ritual of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. While Mahayana, or Northern Buddhism, which emphasizes mercy, was introduced to Japan centuries ago, its Late Vajrayana variant wasn't represented in the Japanese Buddhist tradition until Agon Shu integrated it into its practice. The Fire Rites Festival also featured a special Bhutanese Buddhist pavilion where the faithful can learn more about this interesting branch of the Buddhist tradition.

After the *yamabushi* had taken their positions in front of the altar, brightly colored fireworks exploded against the azure morning sky.

The sound of the conch shells

gave way to symphonic music especially composed for the festival by the late Japanese composer Toshiro Mayuzumi. The dramatic music heightened the sense of anticipation felt by those in the audience.

Dominating the space were two huge massive *goma-dan* pyres made of thick timbers onto which of *gomagi* prayer sticks were thrown throughout the day. Believers write their personal prayers and desires on the *gomagi*. One pyre, the Shinkai-dan, was for the prayers, requests and desires of the living, while the other pyre — the Bukkai-dan — was for the liberation of the afflicted spirits of the departed.

Kiriya presided over the ceremony from his special *Shishi-za* or Lion Seat. That's a reference to the fact wherever the Buddha sat to give his teaching was called the Lion Seat. Kiriya offered prayers to Buddha on behalf of those attending the Fire Rites Festival, as well as for the living and the dead.

Next on the program was a series of Shinto rites, followed by a lively and entertaining question-and-answer exchange between the *yamabushi*-costumed Agon Shu members called *mondo*. It gave them an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of *shugendo* doctrine and practice.

Tongues of flame

Kiriya then blessed the

torches that are used to light the *goma-dan* pyres and invoked Buddha's protection and compassion. The bonfires were lit, and two thick columns of whitish-gray smoke rose into the sky. Soon huge orange tongues of flame leapt out of the pyres, and their heat dispelled the early morning cold. This year 31 million prayer sticks were thrown onto the pyres during the course of the day.

In recent years, Agon Shu has greatly increased its international profile. The organization has held fire rites ceremonies in locations as diverse as Poland, Israel, Siberia, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. And each year sees more and more people from other countries attending the festival in Kyoto.

Tommy Hoffmann, a student from Colorado in the U.S., was one of the visitors from overseas at this year's event. He explained that he is an exchange student taking a class in religion during his 4-month stay in Japan and that his teacher suggested he go to the Fire Rites Festival and write a report about it.

"It's really interesting," Hoffmann said of the event. "Everyone here is really friendly. I got called out a couple of times and shown the right way to go, just because I was a foreigner and didn't know where I was

going."

Praying for peace

One visitor who had a very special reason to pray for peace was Natalia Kozlova. A professional singer, she is originally from Donetsk in strife-torn Ukraine and has lived in Japan for the past 10 years. "I sing Russian and Japanese folk songs," Kozlova said. "Japanese don't know much about Russian music. I sing easy-to-understand Russian music."

"I am an Agon Shu member," said Kozlova. "I am an Orthodox Christian, but I go to many churches. I get inspiration from the Fire Rites Festival. I feel the energy."

Sam Homer, an Englishman who lives in Scotland, was in the middle of a two-week tour of Japan when he found out about the festival at the hostel where he was staying. "I decided before I went to Osaka that I'd come up and check it out," he said. "It's impressive — we don't have anything like this at home."

Next on the agenda for Agon Shu is a ceremony in Okinawa in the autumn to mark the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Okinawa, which saw thousands of civilians die in one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. By holding events like the Fire Rites Festival and constantly praying for peace and the Buddha's guidance, Agon Shu hopes such tragedies will never be repeated.