

# AGON SHU HOSHI MATSURI 2014

## Agon Shu unites Buddhist traditions in Fire Rites Festival



Rev. Seiyu Kiriyama, founder of Agon Shu, performs a blessing while wearing the costume of a Bhutanese Buddhist priest.

The Japanese have always had a practical, down-to-earth attitude toward religion. The doctrinal disputes and sectarian rivalries concerning spiritual matters that are found in many cultures are largely absent from the Japanese religious landscape. People don't think of themselves as exclusively Buddhist or Shintoist in the way, say, Christians, Muslims or Jews demarcate their creeds according to strictly defined tenets.

This attitude of non-doctrinaire eclecticism is an important reason many people join the Agon Shu Buddhist Association. Take Paul Mitchell, for example. The British native drew lots of attention with his *yamabushi* mountain priest costume at Agon Shu's annual Fire Rites Festival, which was held in Kyoto on Feb. 11, for the 41st time.

"I've been a member of Agon Shu for about 20 years," says Mitchell. "Before I came to Japan, I didn't know too much about Buddhism. After living here for two or three years, I began to be interested in Buddhism. Then I was introduced to Agon Shu. Agon is a

more eclectic religion, as opposed to some other types of Buddhism, which are focused on their own region."

### Pure source

So just what is Agon Shu, and what's special about the type of Buddhism it teaches? Agon Shu was founded in 1978 by the Rev. Seiyu Kiriyama. For many years he had been trying to find a satisfying answer in his quest for spiritual truth. Kiriyama found it in the Agama Sutras, the purest source

of Buddhist doctrine. Agon Shu has since grown into a community of 400,000 members in Japan and thousands more overseas. Agon Shu advocates the spiritual path taught by the Buddha in the belief that this is the only sure way to achieve personal liberation from karma and peace and harmony in the world. For Agon Shu believers, the Lord Buddha is the ultimate object of worship and is the first element of their faith. Next comes the dharma, which comprises the Buddha's teachings and training methods. The third element is the community of believers and its leaders, called the sangha. Agon Shu is a sangha led by Kiriyama.

Agon Shu prides itself on being unique among Japanese Buddhist groups by its emphasis on returning to the original Buddhist teachings. But as Mitchell notes, the organization also stresses an eclectic, ecumenical style of spirituality that draws on the best elements of the three main schools of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhism was transmitted from India to Sri Lanka, and then to Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. It is based on the Agama Sutras, the only scriptures directly taught by the historical Buddha.

Mahayana Buddhism spread from India to China, the Korean Peninsula and finally Japan. And Tibetan Buddhism was transmitted from India to Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia and Bhutan. Tibetan Buddhism is mainly based on the Tantric Buddhism of late-stage Mahayana Buddhism. But Tibetan Buddhism also has elements close to those of early Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism thus has a strong spiritual power not seen in Theravada or Mahayana Buddhism.

### "Perfect Buddhism"

Kiriyama has mastered all three branches of Buddhism. Agon Shu is thus the world's only Buddhist group that has integrated the three branches of the faith into one complete whole, with the historical Buddha's way of becoming Buddha, which had been lost, as its core. Agon Shu calls this integrated Buddhism "perfect Buddhism." That was a major theme of this year's Fire Rites Festival, which was attended by 430,000 people.

The festival is the most important event of the year for Agon Shu and is the world's biggest fire rites festival. Besides drawing spiritual strength from the three major branches of Buddhism, the festival also blends rituals from Japan's indigenous Shinto faith with Buddhist rites.

"I'm a Nichiren Buddhist," said Jahni Ferguson, a student visiting Japan along with other members of the Boys and Girls Club of Boston in the United States. "I think the Buddhism they do is actually better, because it includes Shinto rituals."

This year's Fire Rites Festival started at 8:30 a.m. instead

of 7:30 a.m. as in previous years. The schedule was changed to give as many visitors as possible the chance to view the ceremony. The beginning of the festival was marked with brightly colored fireworks bursting spectacularly against the morning sky. That was followed by a procession of Agon Shu members dressed as *yamabushi* mountain priests entering the sanctuary of the amphitheater at Agon Shu's headquarters in Kyoto's eastern hills to the sound of majestic music especially created for the Hoshi Matsuri by the late composer Toshiro Mayuzumi. The *yamabushi* assembled in front of a beautifully richly decorated main altar piled high with various offerings to Buddha, including a relic of the historical Buddha.

### Prayers offered

Attendants then carried Kiriyama into the sanctuary of the amphitheater on a palanquin. He took his place on the "Shishi-za" or "Lion Seat," which refers to the seat on which the historical Buddha sat to give his teaching. From here Kiriyama offered prayers to the Lord Buddha on behalf of all the people taking part in the Fire Rites Festival, and on behalf of all the living and the departed for whom prayers were offered.

A series of Shinto rites was followed by a question-and-answer exchange between the



Flames leap from the *goma-dan* pyres in front of the splendidly decorated altar during Agon Shu's annual Fire Rites Festival in Kyoto on Feb. 11.

*yamabushi*-costumed Agon Shu members called *mondo* that tests their knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and practice. This was the second year female *yamabushi* took part in the *mondo* exchanges. In addition, a group called *Yamabushi YAN* comprising male and female disciples aged between 15 and 28 joined the *mondo* exchanges.

The highlight of the Fire Rites Festival came when two huge *goma-dan* pyres in front of the altar were ignited. This year 31 million *gomagi* prayer sticks were thrown onto the pyres throughout the day. Believers write their personal prayers and desires on the *gomagi*. One pyre is called the *Shinkai-dan* and is for the prayers, requests and desires of the living. The other pyre is called *Bukkai-dan* and is for the liberation of the afflicted spirits of the departed.

Kiriyama performed a blessing on the torches used by attendants to ignite the *goma-dan* pyres. He also prayed to the Buddha for his compassion and to protect those present. The attendants took the flaming torches and held them close to the pyres. Two columns of smoke spiraled into the morning sky, followed by the eye-catching sight of orange flames leaping out of the pyres and the loud, crackling sound of burning wood.

### Secret power

During the Buddhist service

in the morning, Kiriyama wore a traditional *yamabushi* costume. In the afternoon, he wore the costume of a high-ranking Bhutanese Buddhist priest. Kiriyama also wore *magatama* beads for the first time this year. *Magatama* are accessories worn by the Shinto gods in ancient times. Kiriyama, who has acquired the powers of both Shinto and Buddhism, began to wear *magatama* because he wants to spiritually boost all visitors by using both his Buddhist power, which was strengthened by the secret power of Bhutanese Buddhism (which is part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition) and the power of Shinto.

Among the foreign visitors at this year's Fire Rites Festival were Jaime Arequipeno and Norberto Gordillo from Peru. "This event is very, very interesting," said Arequipeno. "It's my first time here." Commented Gordillo: "It's another way of knowing the culture of Japan, and I'm very happy to be here."

This year the festival was broadcast for the first time via the Internet, including on Agon Shu's YouTube channel and a special Chinese-subtitled live webcast for the benefit of the Agon Shu faithful in Taiwan.

At a midday press conference, the head of Agon Shu's public relations department described the highlights of Agon Shu's activities in the past year. One was the Dai Gomaku peace memorial ceremony at Maishima Arena in Osaka on July 7. Kiriyama prayed for safety from earthquakes and tsunami. He also prayed for war and disaster victims not only in Osaka and the rest of Japan, but also the Middle East and East Asia, and for economic recovery and world peace.

### Building ties with Israel

On the international front, Agon Shu held a ceremony in Jerusalem on Aug. 28 during which ashes of the historical Buddha were placed in a *dagoba* stone pillar in the Japanese garden at the Jerusalem Botanical Garden. Agon Shu built the garden and the *dago-*



The richly decorated main altar piled high with various offerings to Buddha, including a relic of the historical Buddha.

ba as a monument for lasting world peace. The monument was formally dedicated at a ceremony on Aug. 29. And on Sept. 15, Kiriyama held a special peace prayer fire-offering service for the Middle East at the dagoba in the Jerusalem Peace and Friendship Park at Agon Shu's main temple in Kyoto. The ceremony was attended by various Israeli dignitaries, who presented Agon Shu with a 1,500-year-old olive tree, a symbol of peace, to wish for lasting friendship between Israel and Agon Shu.

And on Nov. 10, Kiriyama held a ceremony in which he prayed for world peace at Agon Shu's new Taiwan head temple in Taipei. The ceremony was broadcast live via the Internet to Agon Shu temples in Japan. Agon Shu received a congratulatory message from former Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui.

### Busy year ahead

2014 is shaping up to be another busy year for Agon Shu. An event called "Yamabushi Shugyo Run" will be held on the grounds of Agon Shu's main temple on April 20th. The aim of the event is to develop the spirit of participants and strengthen connections among friends and colleagues. On hand at the Feb. 11 press conference to talk about the "Yamabushi Shugyo Run" was Taro Shirato, who will serve as director of the event. Shirato is from

Kyoto and is the first professional Japanese triathlon athlete to have competed in the Triathlon World Cup. He is also a *sports navigator*. He was joined by Hisanori Takama, president of event-planning and graphic design company Cried Corp., and Kozo Fujiwara from JTB Sports Station, which operates websites for various sports events.

Agon Shu will also hold a Dai Saito Gomaku ceremony in Fukushima this fall to pray for the victims of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The date for the ceremony has not yet been decided. Since the disaster, Agon Shu has held memorial services to pray for the dead and wish for speedy recovery from the disaster in Miyagi, Fukushima and Iwate prefectures. Agon Shu members have also donated funds and part of the revenue from a February 2012 musical performance at the Minami-za theater in Kyoto to support the reconstruction in disaster-stricken areas.

But now that Agon Shu has found a suitable site in Fukushima, a full-scale Dai Saito Gomaku ceremony can be held to pray for the souls of victims and recovery of the area.

Agon Shu also plans to hold a big event to eliminate bad karma surrounding Japan. Details have yet to be decided and will be announced at a later date.