

## Prayer is the solution to the world's problems

Every day the news is full of stories about war, greed, crime and other human follies. Politicians and other people in positions of authority and influence claim they have the solutions to such problems, but they don't seem successful in handling such problems.

Rev. Seiyu Kiriya, the founder and president of the Agon Shu Buddhist Association, offers a different perspective. "As a man of religion, I think world peace must be realized not by political, diplomatic or economic means, but by prayer," he said 32 years ago.

Kiriya and the members of Agon Shu have remained true to that vision ever since. Their belief is readily apparent at the Fire Rites Festival held every Feb. 11 at Agon Shu's headquarters in the mountains just east of Kyoto. The festival is the most important event of the year for Agon Shu and is the world's biggest fire rites festival. The festival blends rituals from Japan's indigenous Shinto faith, Shugendo syncretic religion in Japan and Buddhist rites.

Attendants dressed in yamabushi, or mountain priest, costumes lined the path to the main kekkai sacred enclosure and greeted Agon Shu members and

visitors who came to the site for this year's festival. There they saw two goma-dan pyres, 11 meters wide and seven meters high. One pyre was the shinkai-dan for the prayers, requests and desires of the living. The other pyre was the bukkai-dan and was for the liberation of the afflicted spirits of the departed.

The festival began at 9:30 in the bright winter sunshine with a procession of Agon Shu faithful into the kekkai to the sound of majestic music composed for the festival by the late Toshiro Mayuzumi. They assembled in front of a richly decorated altar piled high with various offerings to Buddha. Behind the altar was a great thongdrol mandala painting brought from the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan.

### Divine nature

As the echo of the last booming chord of Mayuzumi's music subsided, silence descended. The solemn chanting of a Shinto priest then focused the spiritual energy that everyone present could feel. Then the calm and ethereal sounds of gagaku ancient court music coursed through the still mountain air, reinforcing the theme of "spirituality" that Kiriya has finally realized in his religious work



Rev. Seiyu Kiriya AGON SHU

after a decadeslong spiritual struggle.

One key theme in Agon Shu's recent activities has been the more visible role played by its female members. For example, six female archers performed a purification ritual with huge traditional Japanese bows in front of the goma-dan. There was also a question-and-answer exchange between the yamabushi, known as the mondo, which tests their knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and practice. Female yamabushi participated in the mondo.

Kiriya was then carried into the kekkai. He took his place on the hoza, which refers to the seat on which daidoshi Buddhist event leaders sit. From there Kiriya offered prayers on behalf of all the people taking part in the festival, as well as on behalf of the happiness of all the living and the comfort of the departed spirits in the world.

After the prayers, the two goma-dan pyres were ignited. The crowd watched in awe as huge

columns of flames and smoke rose majestically into the clear morning sky. This year, 31 million gomagi prayer sticks, on which believers write their personal prayers and desires, were thrown onto the pyres over the course of the day. The number of participants amounted to 450,000.

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### Pure source of doctrine

Kiriya founded Agon Shu in 1978. He found the method of becoming a Buddha he'd been seeking in the Agama Sutras, the purest source of Buddhist doctrine. Agon Shu is now a community of 400,000 members in Japan and thousands more overseas. For Agon Shu believers, the



Setting fire to goma-dan pyres is part of the Fire Rites Festival, which was held at Agon Shu's headquarters in the mountains just east of Kyoto on Feb. 11. AGON SHU

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 Kiriya. The organization

year's festival.

"It's absolutely fantastic," said Frank Abbott, a Briton who has lived in Japan for 35 years. "It's the first time I've been here. I've always wanted to come."

"It's really interesting. It's the first time we've seen ceremonies like this in Japan," says Bek Khan, a German who lives in Hong Kong. He was in Japan to visit his brother, who is studying in Japan.

In his New Year's message, Kiriya reflected on key Agon Shu events from last year, including the dedication of the Bhutan Hall at Agon Shu's Kyoto headquarters in June and a special ceremony in Okinawa in November marking the 70th anniversary of the battle between Japanese and Allied forces.

### Spiritual power

"This is the year of reisei kaiken, when you will strengthen your reisei (spiritual power) and work hard to realize genuine world peace," Kiriya said in his message. He also noted that Agon



Some 450,000 people attended the event. AGON SHU

Shu will soon start training in shomyo Buddhist chanting to improve that spiritual power.

"This year's Fire Rites Festival will be held with the sacred fire, and we will start a major campaign to spread the power of the sacred fire," said Kiriya. "We must burn the evil karma of the world and individuals and carry out activities to strengthen people's spiritual power by lighting

the fire of prayer throughout the world."

Kiriya believes that the astrology of esoteric Buddhism shows that 2016 will be a year of change — especially natural disasters. "We must be careful," he said. "The political instability and economic stagnation in the world are expected to continue. I think, however, Japan alone will do well and boost its presence."



An archer performs a purification ritual. AGON SHU