

Letting the light of peace and reconciliation shine— Fire Rites Festival kindles hopes for peace

A sea of clouds and mist, known as *unkai* in Japanese, swathes the hills surrounding the ancient Japanese capital of Kyoto in the early morning. The atmosphere is calm and subdued; sounds are muffled in the misty air, and it feels like the land itself is half-asleep.

Slowly but surely a glow appears on the eastern hori-

light of truth and understanding can illuminate our hearts and bring peace and reconciliation—a message that had added significance at this year's Hoshi Matsuri. That's because a delegation of religious and political leaders from Israel were special guests at the 2008 event, and joined the assembled Agon Shu faithful to pay for peace

in the strife-torn Middle East as well as the entire world.

"We, as individual persons, cry out from the heart of Jerusalem, the holy city of peace, 'Our brothers, don't be afraid! Let's grow love, peace and friendship between us so we can be brothers in

happiness and freedom, mutual respect and genuine peace.'" said David Baruch Lau, chief rabbi of the Israeli city of Modien, on behalf of Yisrael Meir Lau, his father and Tel Aviv's chief rabbi, in a moving speech at the beginning of the festival.

Swords into plowshares

Lau said he hoped the prophet Isaiah's famous words—"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up swords against nation, neither shall they learn war any more"—will soon come true throughout the world.

Galeb Majadle, the Israeli minister of science, culture and sport, emphasized that world peace and friendship can be achieved between peo-

ple of different nations and backgrounds. He speaks from personal experience: Majadle is an Arab Muslim citizen of Israel.

"Here, a Jewish rabbi and a cabinet minister of Muslim Israel are speaking about world peace," Majadle said in a speech at the beginning of the ceremony. "This is a good example proving that people with different religions can live together in one nation, in the spirit of seeking dialogue, friendship, justice, equality and coexistence," he said, noting the common origin of the Arabic and Hebrew words for peace—"salaam" and "shalom," respectively.

Jerusalem deputy mayor Yigal Amedi then spoke as he prepared to unveil a statue of a lion that he had brought from Israel to give to Agon Shu.

"The lion is a symbol of Jerusalem and a symbol of our history. It is intended to further strengthen relations between Israel and Japan," said Amedi. "I hope that I will see you here again and that the hundreds of thousands of people here today will visit Israel."

Among those watching the unveiling of the lion statue was Rev. Seiyu Kiriyaama, the founder of Agon Shu, who—appropriately—was seated on the special "Shishi-za" or "Lion Seat," a reference to the fact wherever the Buddha sat to give his teaching was called the Lion Seat.

Rev. Kiriyaama visited Israel in January and plans to go to the Middle Eastern nation again in June to hold a memorial service there.

So what is the Hoshi Matsuri, exactly? It is a ceremony combining elements of Buddhist and Shinto ritual, whose highlight is the lighting of two massive *goma-dan* pyres into which millions of *gomagi* prayer sticks are

thrown throughout the day. Inscribed on the *gomagi* are believers' invocations and prayers for the repose of departed souls. One pyre is called the "Shinkai-dan" and is for the prayers, requests and desires of the living, while the other pyre is called "Bukkai-dan" and is for the liberation of the afflicted spirits of the departed.

This year's event was the 35th annual festival and some 485,000 people attended. No less than 30 million *gomagi* were thrown into the *goma-dan* pyres during the day.

Unique event

For the Agon Shu faithful, the Fire Rites Festival is the high point of the year—a unique, special event that renews their commitment to the Buddha's timeless message of salvation.

The festival began with a procession of Agon Shu members dressed as *yamabushi* (mountain priests) parading in front of an elaborately decorated altar piled high with

various offerings to the Buddha. From the Lion Seat, Rev. Kiriyaama prayed to the Lord Buddha on behalf of those taking part in the Fire Rites Festival and all the living and the departed for whom prayers have been offered.

After a series of Shinto rites, Rev. Kiriyaama blessed the torches that are used to light the *goma-dan* and invoked the benevolent protection and compassion of the Buddha. The *goma* were lit, and two columns of thick whitish-gray smoke started to form, and soon tongues of orange flame began to leap into the azure-blue winter sky.

As the two *goma-dan* blazed away through the day to the sound of devotees chanting sutras and the steady beat of *taiko* drums. Volunteers received *gomagi* from those attending the event and then bundled and boxed them before carrying the sticks to the bonfires and throwing them into the

flames. It is an awe-inspiring sight.

The formal name for the event is the Combined Shinto-Buddhist Fire Rites Festival. While there are many religious festivals in Japan every year, the Fire Rites Festival is unique in that since 1993 it has been held as a syncretic blend of Buddhist and Shinto ritual. It was on October 24 of that year that Agon Shu celebrated a combined Shinto-Buddhist Fire Rites ceremony in the city of Ise to commemorate the 61st rebuilding of the Ise Shrine, which takes place every 20 years. Since then Agon Shu has held its Hoshi Matsuri as a combined Buddhist-Shinto ceremony.

The main purpose of the festival is to provide spiritual aid and comfort to the souls of the departed and to help the living advance on the path to self-realization in accordance with Buddhist beliefs.

But what is Agon Shu? First, it is important to realize that there is a major difference between Agon Shu and other Buddhist organizations in Japan. Agon Shu is based on the most ancient Buddhist teachings: the Agama Sutras (Agon-kyo), which are the first written records of the original teach-

ings of Buddha and from which Agon Shu derives its name. These scriptures contain the precepts known as the "seven systems and thirty-seven curricula" which believers must understand and practice in order to become true Buddhists. These ancient writings comprise the doctrinal core of Agon Shu.

The doctrines upon which Agon Shu is based are rooted in the past, but the organization itself is relatively new. It was founded in 1978 by Rev. Kiriyaama, who, after many years of searching for the ultimate truth, realized that the Agama Sutras were what he was seeking. Agon Shu is now a community of Buddhist followers with 74 institutions in Japan, 35 ordained priests, nearly 300,000 believers in Japan, and thousands more overseas.

In Buddhist terms, Agon Shu's believers and their spiritual leaders comprise a community called a *sangha*, which is one of the three main elements found in all forms of Buddhism. The other two are the Buddha and the dharma.

In the Agon Shu Buddhist faith, the Lord Buddha is the ultimate object of worship. A relic of the historical Buddha occupies a central place on the altar at the Fire Rites Festival. The dharma comprises the teachings and discipline or training methods of the Buddha.

In its teachings and rituals, Agon Shu draws on the best elements from Mahayana, Theravada and esoteric (especially Tibetan) Buddhism, as well as incorporating elements from other spiritual traditions such as Japan's indigenous Shinto religion and Taoism from China.



Rev. Seiyu Kiriyaama, the founder of Agon Shu Buddhist Association

"Very impressed"

"I'm very impressed with the Hoshi Matsuri," said Angelika Germann, a student of comparative religion from German who is now studying in Kyoto, saying she was struck by the spiritual ardor of the Agon Shu faithful.

One of the highlights of this year's ceremony was a performance of the song "Ikoku no Oka" (A Hill in a Foreign Land) by male vocal quartet the Duke Aces. The song is written from the point of view of a Japanese internee in Siberia longing to see his homeland.

Last summer Rev. Kiriyaama and 400 Agon Shu members went to the Siberian city of Khabarovsk to assuage the souls of the roughly 60,000 Japanese soldiers who died in captivity after being taken prisoner by the army of the former Soviet Union in the closing days of World War II.

"I can't stop tears from falling from my eyes whenever I hear the song," said Rev. Kiriyaama at a press conference on February 11. "To me, singing the song and reciting a sutra are the same thing. Holding a memorial service by sharing their sadness and pain is my way of reposing their souls."

Asked to explain the purpose of the planned Fire Rites Festival in Israel, Rev. Kiriyaama explained: "It is my duty, as a disciple of Buddha, to console the souls of those who died sacrificing their lives for the nation, no matter what country they are from. As a Buddhist, I want to pray for the pure hearts of these people."



Rev. Kiriyaama blessed the torches that are used to light the *goma-dan* pyres.

zon, and the golden orb of the sun soon emerges from the clouds and mist, its rays casting into harsh relief the contours of the *unkai* that fills the valleys between the rolling hills.

As dawn breaks, a steady stream of people make their way along a path leading to an amphitheater overlooking one of the valleys. They are members of the Agon Shu Buddhist Association, which every February 11 holds a spectacular ceremony called the Fire Rites Festival, or Hoshi Matsuri. For them, the way the sun's rays pierce through the morning mist is a beautiful reminder of the way Buddha's teachings cut through the illusory veils of ignorance, hate and desire.

The sunrise is also an apt metaphor for the way the



Tongues of orange flame from the two *goma-dan* pyres leaped into the azure-blue winter sky.