

# Hoshi Matsuri offers unchanging truth in a world of change

A core element of Buddhist teachings is the notion of transitoriness: the fact that nothing is permanent. Everything in the world around us is fleeting and evanescent.

So on February 11, when the bright, sunny early-morning sky over Kyoto turned gray and cloudy later in the day, those attending the Agon Shu Buddhist Association's 36th

clasp their hands together in prayer as each bus or taxi passes by.

The *yamabushis'* cries of "*o-kaerinasai* (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 the Fire Rites ritual will be held.

The festival proper starts with a procession of *yamabushi*-costumed Agon Shu members in front of a richly decorated altar piled high with various offerings to Buddha, to the accompaniment of fireworks, the blowing of conch shells in traditional *yamabushi* style, and stirring symphonic music especially composed for the

Hoshi Matsuri by the late Japanese composer Toshio Mayuzumi.

## Liberation of afflicted spirits

Dominating the space are two huge massive *goma-dan* pyres (11 meters in diameter and seven meters high) made of thick timbers onto which 32 million *gomagi* prayer sticks were thrown throughout the day. Inscribed on the *gomagi* prayer sticks are believers' personal prayers and desires. One pyre, the "Shinkai-dan," is for the prayers, requests and desires of the living, while the other pyre—the "Bukkai-dan"—is for the liberation of the afflicted spirits of the departed.

In the midst of all this sits the Rev. Seiyu Kiriya, the founder and president of Agon Shu, on the special "Shishi-za" or "Lion Seat," a reference to the fact that wherever the Buddha sat to give his teaching was called the Lion Seat. From here Rev. Kiriya prays 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 have been offered.

The centerpiece of the altar is a relic of the historical Buddha. On April 7, 1986, Agon Shu was presented with some ashes of the Buddha, which were discovered in Bodhi Gaya, India, by then Sri Lanka President Junius Richard Jayewardene. The Buddha's ashes, often called living Buddha, have long been the most important object of devotion in Buddhism, and many old sutras (Buddhist scriptures) tell of magnificent benefits brought through worshipping, making offerings to, and sustaining the ashes.

With the ashes being its main object of devotion, Agon Shu has performed sacred fire ceremonies both in Japan and abroad to pray for world peace.

Reflecting Agon Shu's close connections with Sri Lanka's Buddhist community, a troupe of male and female dancers and drummers from the South Asian country were on hand to add some extra color and ex-

citement to this year's Hoshi Matsuri. They performed several types of dances as offerings to the Buddha. One of these was the "Naga Raksha," performed by male dancers wearing huge, garishly colored wooden masks. This is a stage adaptation of a ritualistic dance from the southern part of Sri Lanka intended to bridge the gap between the human world and that of gods and demons.

Another was the "Mayura Vannama," in which brightly clad female dancers perform an intricate pattern of rhythms set by the accompanying drummers. The opening section of the performance sees the dancers imitate the movements of the peacock, while in the latter half of the dance the performers move in an almost frenzied way as a spirit of ecstatic devotion takes hold.

"This was our first performance at a Hoshi Matsuri," commented one of the male dancers after the performance. "We have received a very good response from the Japanese people."

## Aid and comfort

The Fire Rites Festival, and Agon Shu itself, has its roots in Buddhism. Practitioners of Agon Shu practice the Buddha's Jobutsu-ho (or "Dharma of Attaining Buddhahood") in the style of esoteric Buddhism. However, because esoteric Buddhism has become ritualized in Japan, the practices have lost their power. To rectify this situation, Agon Shu incorporates elements of the Shugendo (esoteric mountain Buddhism), which to some extent retains the original character of esoteric Buddhism. This explains why many Agon Shu members can be seen dressed as *yamabushi* at the festival. Since 1993 the Fire Rites Festival has been conducted as a syncretic blend of Buddhist and Shinto ritual. The festival's main purpose is to help the living make progress on the path to self-realization in accordance with Buddhist teachings, and to provide spiritual assistance and comfort to the souls of the departed.

In doctrinal terms, Agon Shu is based on the Agama Su-

tras (Agon-gyo)—the most ancient Buddhist teachings. These writings contain the precepts known as the "seven systems and thirty-seven curricula," which believers must understand and practice in order to become true Buddhists.

Rev. Kiriya founded Agon Shu in 1978 after he had spent several years in a fruitless search for the ultimate truth of religion. It had dawned on him that he needed to get back to the source of Buddhism, and he realized that the Agama Sutras were what he was looking for.

Since then, Agon Shu has grown into a community of Buddhist followers with 73 institutes in Japan, 35 ordained priests, and nearly 400,000 followers in Japan and thousands more overseas.

Agon Shu's believers and their spiritual leaders comprise a community known in Buddhism as a *sangha*, one of the three main elements common to all forms of Buddhism. The other two are the Buddha and the dharma, which constitutes the Buddha's teachings.

In its teachings and rituals, Agon Shu, based mainly on the original teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha (Agon Buddhism), also draws on the best elements of Mahayana, Theravada and esoteric (especially Tibetan) Buddhism. It additionally incorporates elements of other spiritual traditions, such as Japan's indigenous Shinto religion and Taoism from China.

## Questions and answers

After a series of Shinto rites, the *yamabushi* then hold a "Questions and Answers" exchange called *mondo* that tests their knowledge of esoteric Buddhist practice, the meaning of the *yamabushi* costumes and other subjects.

Rev. Kiriya then blesses the torches that are used to light the *goma-dan* pyre and invokes the Buddha's benevolent protection and compassion. The bonfires are lit, and two thick columns of whitish-gray smoke start rising, obscuring the blue vault of the sky. The steady crackling of

flames builds in intensity, and soon huge orange tongues of flame are leaping up out of the pyres.

The Hoshi Matsuri is the world's biggest annual fire rites festival. The two bonfires burn steadily through the day as devotees chant sutras to the steady beat of *taiko* drums. Dozens of volunteers receive prayer sticks from those attending the event and then bundle and box them before carrying the sticks to the bonfires and throwing them into the flames. Other volunteers keep a close eye on the flames and periodically douse the pyre with water to keep the fire under control. The Kyoto fire department is also on hand to make sure everything goes smoothly.

Among those present to view this year's ceremony was Khalsa Sada Anand, director of the Nara-based 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization), an organization teaching Kundalini Yoga. Khalsa makes a point of attending the Hoshi Matsuri every year.

Khalsa adopted and follows the Sikh spiritual tradition, and so wears the white turban and white robes, as well as a luxuriant beard, associated with that tradition. Brandishing his wooden staff, he is the very image of an Eastern holy man—although he's originally from Chicago.

He says that what he likes about the Hoshi Matsuri is "the energy, the people, the fire. It's all very yogic—all religions are very similar: they all take you back to your essence or roots."

At a midday press conference, Rev. Kiriya focused on Agon Shu's increasingly visible international profile. Asked why Agon Shu held a Dai Saito Gomaku fire ceremony last September in Jerusalem, Rev. Kiriya ex-



The "Mayura Vannama," or Peacock Dance, was performed by Sri Lankan dancers.

plained that he felt it was necessary to go to the strife-torn region to pray for peace.

"I went there thinking it would be good if I could help contain conflicts in the region, even though my action might have little impact and there was no guarantee that my prayer for world peace could prevent war," he said. "Fortunately, we were warmly welcomed by people in Jerusalem and I think our action had some effect."

Rev. Kiriya then announced that Agon Shu plans to hold a *hoyo* (memorial service) this year on the island of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, which was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in the Pacific War.

"As far as I know, Japanese troops dispatched to Guadalcanal had the most tragic fate among all Japanese troops during World War II," he noted. "The troops on the island ran out of food and ammunition after their supply lines were cut off by the U.S. Navy. Their bodies remain uncollected. That is a tragic story."

"As a Japanese, I must pray for them and bring their afflicted souls back to Japan," Rev. Kiriya added. "So I will go to Guadalcanal and offer a memorial service for them."



Khalsa Sada Anand, director of the 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization)



Thirty-two million *gomagi* prayer sticks were thrown into the two *goma-dan* pyres throughout the day.



Rev. Seiyu Kiriya, founder and president of Agon Shu

annual Fire Rites Festival could well have taken it as a metaphor for Buddha's timeless teaching of impermanence.

But the fickle weather, which included some unwelcome rain toward midday, certainly didn't curb the enthusiasm of the 450,000 people who attended the festival, known in Japanese as Hoshi Matsuri.

"*Matsuri* (festival)" is an apt designation for this joyous—yet also deeply serious—event, which through the years 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.

Spiritual seekers mingle with curious onlookers as they make their way to the mountainside east of the city proper where Agon Shu's main temple is located. Agon Shu members dressed in colorful *yamabushi* (mountain priests) costumes line the route to the site, and respectfully bow and