

## Off the beaten path:

# A BUDDHIST FIRE

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The deep gong of the temple bell wakes us at 6 AM. On this late November morning, it's still dark outside and cold. It's tempting to drift back to sleep on my cozy futon but I'm not missing the chance to witness a Japanese Buddhist fire ritual.

We crawl out from under piles of blankets, pull on clothes, lace up our hiking boots and step outside where dawn is beginning to break, forming silhouettes of the mountains on the eastern horizon. We proceed quietly to the wooden temple that's draped in colourful prayer flags. Inside, a couple of white-robed monks are preparing to perform what's properly called the Goma ritual, a form of prayer that originated in India.

The Kunisaki Peninsula on Kyushu – Japan's southern-most island – has excelled at absorbing and blending religious practices over the centuries, so perhaps it's no surprise that this particular ritual comes from the Hindu faith. Even the Buddhism practiced in this remote region differs from Buddhism elsewhere in Japan. Here, it melded with the animistic Shinto faith, creating an offshoot known as Shugendō Buddhism. It's common to find Buddhist temples next to Shinto shrines.

Our journey began in Fukuoka, the largest city on Kyushu and closer to Seoul than it is to Tokyo, which explains how Buddhism arrived here from Korea. From Fukuoka we hopped onboard the Sonic Express train to Usa, the gateway to the Kunisaki Peninsula.

For the next ten days we'll follow in the footsteps of a monk named Nimmon, who

is popularly believed to have introduced Buddhism to the peninsula in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Cut off from the rest of Kyushu by a range of mountains, the peninsula was perfect for Nimmon's ascetic Buddhist practice. He and his followers climbed its volcanic ridges and descended into its hidden valleys in prayerful contemplation. They established sacred places deep inside caves and carved thousands of Buddhist images in stone.

Once every ten years, Buddhist monks still gather in April for a four-day pilgrimage on the Kunisaki Peninsula where they walk the ancient trails, purify themselves under cold waterfalls and visit temples along the way.

Ours is not a pilgrimage, but more of an adventure. By our sixth day, we've visited numerous temples and shrines, but seen none quite as spectacularly situated as Monjusen-ji. Perched high up on a cliff overlooking the Seto Inland Sea, Monjusen-ji is on a list of the 'best 100 scenes' in the country. And in late November, with Japanese maple trees at their fiery peak, the temple grounds are stunning.

First, we pass two fearsome figures carved in stone. *Ni-o* look like muscular men with shaved heads and menacing facial expressions. They're placed at the entrance to monasteries and temples throughout



# RITUAL IN JAPAN

*Metal bowls used  
during the Goma ritual*







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Exploring further, we find rows of Buddha's disciples – known as *rakan* – human-sized figures carved in stone and now covered in moss, sitting on the sloping forest floor. They look like the contented Buddha himself; smiling, their eyes closed and legs crossed.

We spend the night in the same building where the abbot – the head monk – and his family live. After a simple vegetarian dinner seated on the floor, the abbot apologizes for the lack of comforts. The drafty building can't be upgraded due to its historical significance, he explains.

*Another monk,  
barely visible  
in the darkened  
room, lightly beats  
on a drum.*

Throughout our hiking holiday, we've been staying at traditional Japanese inns with more comforts than at home, including thermal spring baths and toilets with heated seats and built-in bidets. Soaking in the various hot springs has been one of the highlights of each day. A temple lodging can't compete, of course, and we don't expect it to.

However we do have high expectations for the fire ritual. The next morning, we're shivering outside the temple, waiting for the monks to invite us in. The temple doors are open and we can see white-robed figures moving around inside. One monk is trying to light candles but can't get his lighter to work. He fusses for a few moments, then finds another way. They seem surprisingly unprepared considering they perform the Goma ritual every month – on the 25<sup>th</sup> day – as well as by special arrangement.

Finally, we're ushered inside and take our seats around a circular pit that represents the mouth of the Buddha. Then we wait some more while Buncho – the abbot's son and the monk who will perform today's Goma ritual – slowly and methodically stacks rectangular blocks of wood that will fuel the fire. From where I'm sitting I can see outside and notice that it's now fully daylight.

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Peninsula**  
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Japan to keep out evil spirits. Beyond the *Ni-o*, a grand staircase with something like 230 stone steps – I lose count – leads up the steep mountainside.

We emerge breathless at the top in a clearing that provides views of tree-filled valleys below and the sea in the hazy distance. Above us, the top half of the mountain is ablaze with crimson red and orange foliage. A large, phallic-shaped rock juts skyward.

Set against the mountain is the simple wood temple. The original one was founded in 648 A.D. Visitors come here not only to see the Goma ritual and revel in the landscape, but also to drink from a spring that seeps out of a cave at the back of the temple. The 'water of knowledge' is especially popular with students at exam time.





*Monjusen-ji temple's  
91<sup>st</sup> resident abbott*



*Buncho performs the Goma ritual*

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Are they deliberately testing our patience, I wonder? Or trying to build suspense? Perhaps time is simply not of the essence here. Whatever, with my Western need – and desire – for punctuality, I just want the show to get on the road.

At last it does. Buncho lights a fire in the pit, rubs his prayer beads and begins to chant softly. Another monk, barely visible in the darkened room, lightly beats on a drum. Buncho carefully places the first few wood blocks into the fire, one on top of the other at right angles, leaving lots of space for oxygen to feed the fire.

Soon, sparks are flying towards the ceiling. The drumming and chanting grow louder and faster in a rising crescendo that matches the leaping flames. In almost no time the fire is so intense I can feel its heat even though I'm at least a metre away.

Buncho, on the other hand, is sitting very close to it, his face aglow in the flames, but he's not perspiring. The previous night his father explained that a monk doesn't eat any oil or salt for 60 days before performing the Goma ritual, and fasts for four days immediately beforehand so that he can sit comfortably close to the fire and not sweat.

We sit transfixed by the hot flames, the pounding drum and the primal chanting. Buncho continues to place block upon block of wood into the roaring fire, along with grains of rice. How long before his tower topples over like those in the kids' game of Jenga?

I can't judge – I'm now blissfully unaware of the time, enveloped in a realm of fire and sound – but eventually the tower collapses in a blazing heap. The Buddha has been fed. Our wishes and prayers have been heard. Or at least, our expectations around the Goma ritual have been powerfully met.

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*The original temple at Monjus-  
en-ji was founded in 648 AD*



*Stone disciples of Buddha are  
called Rakan in Japanese*