

Malá, Zuzana

Retreat

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APPENDIX 3: RETREAT

I reached the village of Tōge by local bus on August 1st. I met two other women participants on the bus. We realized we were going to the same retreat after we got off the bus at the same bus stop. We walked down the main street looking for our lodge together. We entered the lodge with greetings and found some other participants inside a large tatami room, where we signed a list of participants. Parts of *yamabushi* garments were piled separately on the floor of the room. Each of us took one piece of the clothing from the piles and found herself a place inside the room. We sat ourselves next to each other. There was still time to go to eat before we started with *shugyō*.

Around noon there were 16 women and 10 men participants. Among the women was one participant who had some experience with *shugyō*. This was her third time in Dewa Sanzan, but the first time in this lodge. She introduced herself as a *yamabushi* even on her name card, which also contained information about her profession as a voice actress. This woman assisted all of those who did not know how to put on the *yamabushi* attire. Especially difficult was the head cover folded in a specific style.

One of the participants was accompanied by her fifteen year old daughter. The mother was raised in a Catholic Japanese family but currently lives in Morocco. It was not her first time on the retreat, she had taken part in *shugyō* 25 years before. The young daughter – the youngest member of our *shugyō* group – was assigned the role of *Utachi*. She would call ‘Utachi’ loudly each time we were setting out, while we replied ‘Uketamau’ (I accept). We received three types of prayer texts which we carried with us all the time (Figures 47, 48).

The *shugyō* started at 1pm with chanting of the prayers inside the lodge. Then we walked out and lined up in two rows, beginning with the women and ending with the men. Our first destination was the Haguro Shrine. The path to the Haguro Shrine leads through the shrine precincts located at the foot of the



Fig. 44: Praying in front of the sacred cedar tree. Photograph by author.



Fig. 45: A sacred spot at the top of Mount Gassan. Photograph by author.

mountain stairs. The stairs consist of 2466 stone steps which we ascended at a brisk pace. On our way to the shrine we were chanting the prayers as an expression of a reverence for the sacred spots such as a five-storied pagoda, small shrines and a cedar tree more than a thousand years old known as 'the Old man cedar' (Figure 31). Our guide made a few stops to let us catch our breath and to drink some water. We were lucky to have cloudy weather. The ascent on a hot sunny day would be more exhausting. At the peak of Mount Haguro we entered the Hachiko Hall and paid homage to Hachiko – the founder of the Dewa Sanzan tradition (Figure 28). For 500 yen we were allowed to see a special exhibition of an image of the founder. (The money was collected to support the region of Fukushima after the big earthquake in 2011.) We descended the stairs and walked back to the lodge around 5pm. We rested for around an hour and a half and then we practiced *zazen* with meditation for around 10 minutes.

After the short meditation we had our evening meal – one scoop of miso (soya bean paste) soup, a scoop of rice and two slices of pickled cucumbers. *Sendatsu* showed us how to eat the meal. We were supposed to eat it as fast as possible, within around 2 to 5 minutes, in silence. Each participant received a set consisting of two small bowls, a small plate and a cloth. After we finished the food, we poured water into our bowl and rinsed it. We poured the same liquid into the next bowl and at the end we drank that liquid. Then we wrapped our set into the cloth.

After 7pm we gathered in front of the lodge and set out for an evening walk around the village area for around an hour and a half. After that, we walked to a suburb of the village where we took a bow facing Mount Gassan.

Then we returned and chanted prayers in front of two altars inside the lodge, repeating the texts around 10 times. After the chants finished, the women and men separately entered a small house located outside the building where we were sleeping. We walked into a small room on the second floor and sat on the tatami floor. Our guide was sitting on the floor behind our backs. He lit rice hulls mixed with red peppers¹ inside a brazier which induced coughing and teary reactions among the participants who were trying to chant the prayers but had problems with breathing properly. After a few minutes we were allowed to leave the room and walked back to the lodge. The *shugyō* of the first day was over around 11pm.

The following morning, we woke up to the sound of a conch shell (*horagai*) blown by our guide at 4am. We got up, sat for *zazen* meditation for around 10 minutes, ate breakfast quickly and got inside a bus. The bus took us to the entrance gate of Mount Gassan. We set out for our journey towards the peak of

1 The specific content of the mixture was described by Earhart (1970).



Fig. 46: Praying at Mount Gassan. Photograph by author.

Mount Gassan. We walked in silence which was interrupted only by the sound of a bell tied to the waist of our guide and the tapping of our pilgrim sticks. We chanted the prayers at sacred spots and in front of the shrine on the summit of Mount Gassan. Just below the summit, we stopped to pray for the victims of the big earthquake. Ten thousand copies of sutras are buried at this place of worship for the victims. During a short break at the peak of the mountain we entered a shelter. There we each ate two rice balls. After the break for food, we began to walk towards Mount Yudono passing through valleys and via a demanding steep descending path which featured a ladder leading to a river. When we reached the river, we drank from a fresh cold stream. We continued walking via a pathway of river boulders which resembled a dried river basin until we reached the sacred site of Yudono. There are no shrines or temples – the natural shape of a sacred rock is worshipped at this place. The sacred rock is believed to be the body of kami *shintai* 神体. Everybody has to enter this site barefoot and to pass a ritual known as *oharai*. We released white paper cutouts in the shape of simple human figures into the water current.² Then we revered the *kami* with our chants and walked on the sacred boulder, washed by a trickling stream of hot water. We drank from the shrine *sake* and we departed the Yudono site.

From Yudono we kept walking to yet another sacred spot. We left the main road descending to a river. Women participants took off their lower garments and continued dressed in the upper part of their attire (with a small backpack where we kept spare upper garments and spare underwear) through the mountain river. The stream was extremely cold. Following our guide, we arrived at a waterfall where we practiced the *taki gyō* (standing and praying under the waterfall). Before entering the waterfall, we repeated a set of movements which recall rowing a boat while directing our arms to the left and to the right. This was followed by acting as if we were pressing an imagined ‘sphere’ in between our palms at the level of our waists. Each of us then entered a waterfall pond and exposed our bodies to the stream of falling water while praying. Women and men participants split into two groups entering two separate streams of the waterfall. After the waterfall ablution we changed into our spare upper attire and underclothes. We walked back through the river and returned to the road. Then we carried on walking down the main road for not more than 20 minutes to a big *torii* gate (marking the shrine area) where we took a group picture.

Around 4pm we got into a bus which was waiting for us at a parking lot nearby. The bus took us back to the lodge where we rested and dried our white top garments. Then we practiced *zazen* meditation and ate a quick meal. After it became dark, we gathered in front of the lodge and started walking in the

² The white paper cutouts represented our unwell bodily condition, which should be cured through the *oharai*.

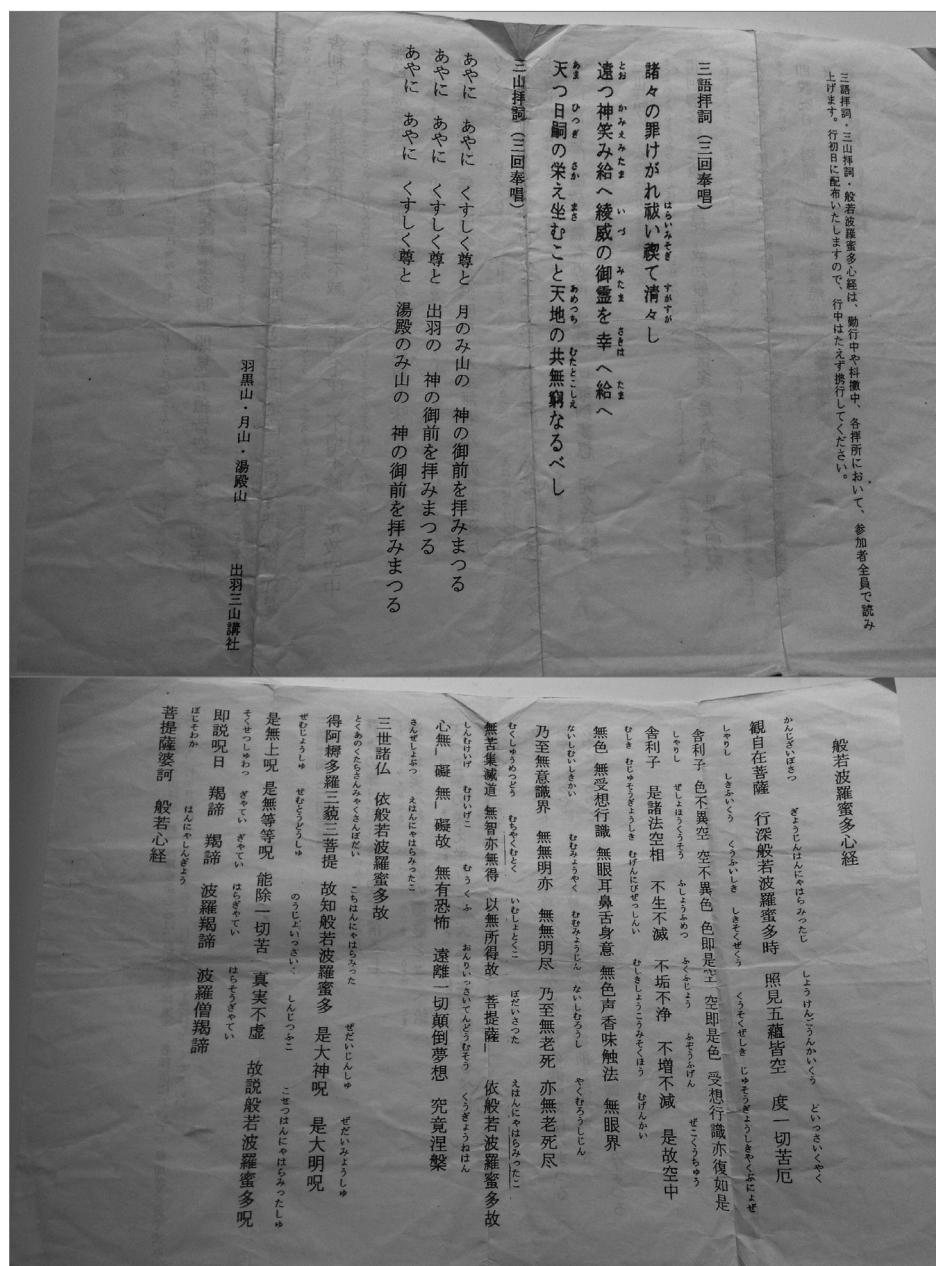


Fig. 47-48: The texts of the prayers and songs used during the retreat. Photograph by author.

darkness, equipped with a few lanterns, to a small shrine located outside the village. From the small shrine we continued to the precincts of the Haguro shrine, at the foot of Mount Haguro, stopping near the cedar tree and the five-storied pagoda to chant prayers. We returned to the lodge around 9pm. After chanting the prayers, we went through the tough experience of smoke one more time. That day we went to sleep after a short speech from our guide at around 11pm.

On the third day, the sound of the conch shell woke us up again at 4am. We set out for a walk to the river, passing through the precincts of the Haguro shrine. We took off our lower garments behind one of the shrines and afterwards we repeatedly practiced the movements resembling the rowing of a boat, followed by the gestures of pressing an imagined sphere in between our palms. Then we entered the river from the left side of a bridge and immersed ourselves in the water. In that position we were chanting our prayers. The river temperature felt very comfortable, compared to the waterfall, as it was not so high in the mountains. After we changed our garments we began to ascend the stairs towards Mount Haguro again. Our pace was a little more relaxed this time with fewer rest breaks. We entered the main shrine at the mountain peak where we received *oharai*. A white automatic curtain separated us from the rest of the shrine interior. We were sitting in the *seiza* position and we had to bow with our heads touching the floor. Then a Shinto priest approached us by touching our backs with golden tins attached to stripes hanging from a stick. We were offered the shrine sake and afterwards we started a quiet descent to the village of Tōge. Upon our arrival at the lodge yard, each participant jumped over a small fire with a loud cry.³ Our *shugyō* was over and we received a certificate of accomplishment and special wooden amulets (*ofuda*) from the Dewa Sanzan Shrine. After a bath at the nearby spa, we had lunch at the lodge. A special dietary meal, prepared by the wife of our guide, known as *shōjin ryōri* was served (Figure 32). We shared sake from a huge plate which was handed around from participant to participant. Meanwhile, each of us spoke briefly about his or her motivation for the participation in *shugyō* and our impressions from the retreat.

³ This cry represents the first cry of a newborn child. In the case of Shugendō it is the cry of a newborn *yamabushi*.