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# Symbolism in the mountain austerities of Shugendō

*Hitoshi Miyake*

The purpose of the mountain austerities of shugendō is to awake the Buddha-Nature which man is believed to possess by nature, by practising austerities in a sacred mountain. (Sokushin-Sokubutsu= 即身即仏) The rites of mountain austerities are the products of religious device for the achievement of this goal. Generally speaking, predecessors have interpreted these rites by linking them to the process of attainment of the Buddha-Nature and called them Jikkai-Shugyō = 十界修行.

However, through participation in the mountain austerities of Mt Ōmine and Mt Haguro we have recognized a motif of death and rebirth in a series of symbolic actions in the mountain austerities of shugendo; shugenja, a mountain ascetic, is dressed in clothes which symbolize the dead, pushes down Bonten, a sacred staff with cut paper, to symbolize sexual intercourse, and enter into the place for training which symbolizes a mother's womb. Then they practise Jikkai-Shugyō and are given their new name. When all these rites are over, they practise a rite of birth in which they mimic the first cry of a new born babe.

In this way the mountain austerities of shugendō betrays such a mechanism that the significance of Jikkai-Shugyō for the attainment of the Buddha-Nature may be enhanced with these symbols of death and rebirth, an essential motif in our life.