

Shingon Priests and Self-Mummification

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The practice of self-mummification seems somewhat macabre to today's civilized population. However, for some sects of Buddhist priests, it was a form of further enlightenment. Many of these priests voluntarily went through a ten-year gruesome process of self-mummifying, believing that extreme physical pain and denial created an opening to a higher spiritual level, the ultimate attainment of "passing into the state of nirvana."¹

The practice of self-mummification in Japan has its roots in the esoteric school of Shingon Buddhism called the Shingon-Shu, established in the Heian Period (794-1185). The founder of this new Buddhist movement was a monk named Kobo Daishi, also recognized as Kukai. Kukai's teachings reflect an influence derived from Tantric Buddhism, which comes from the Great Vehicle Sect, called the Mahayana School. Between the years 804 and 806, Kukai studied in the rural province of T'ang in China, where he worked on mastering esoteric practices.

After having studied in China, Kukai returned to Japan bringing with him the three theological building blocks that were the basis of the Shingon School. The first was the idea of the all-powerful syllable, the meaning of which can be found in the etiological root of the word "Shingon." Shingon is taken from the Chinese word "Chin-yen" (true word). Chin-yen is a transliterated form of the Sanskrit word for "mantra"² (sacred noise making up the universe, such as the syllable "om"). The next theological seed was the most important iconographical symbol in esoteric Buddhism, the two Mandalas denoting the impermanence of life and the inevitability of birth and rebirth in the ever-moving wheel of Samsara. The third and most influential to esoteric Buddhism's development in the Japan came back with Kukai in the translated form of two Tantric Buddhist scriptures known as the Machavairocana sutra, describing the relationship between man and the cosmic Buddha, and the Sarvatathagatatattvasamgraha sutra. These texts were especially helpful in giving Shingon the claws to dig into and plant the seeds of esoteric Buddhism's fertility in Japanese religious history.

Kukai transliterated these texts into the vernacular from Sanskrit. His transliterations played a pivotal role in the formation of the Shingon School. Long after Buddhists in the native country of India discarded the two sutras and the Chinese no longer practiced their rituals, the Japanese kept the practices alive.³ These secret teachings spread to a variety of places. "Esoteric Buddhist history was practiced from India to Central Asia, Ceylon, China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal, Indonesia, Southeast Asia, and Tibet."⁴ By the seventh or eighth century, secret Buddhist rituals, like self-mummification, reached an apex and developed in regions of Japan.

The Shingon priests' beliefs in the path to salvation can be described by explaining the mindset behind the strange, ritualistic, practice of self-mummification. The psychological mindset of the to-be mummified person is important in allowing empathy with the priest. "Personal life and death does not matter, but being kind to your fellow beings and guiding them toward self-realization of their greater connection to the Buddha does. So, truly devout Buddhist priests are not afraid of death."⁵

The importance of such psychoanalysis can be observed in Richard Payne's discussion of Shingon's four ritual stages of self-transformation of the mind called Shindo Kegyo. In his discussion, he uses

¹ Klimov, Sergey, "Mummy is Coming Back." <http://www.gazetangn.narod.ru/archive/ngn0324/mummy.html> (30 November 2004).

² Suzuki, Daisetz. *Japanese Spirituality*, 173.

³ *Encyclopedia of World Religion*, Volume 13, s.v. "Shingon Buddhism."

⁴ Shingon Buddhist International Institute, "History Koyosan/Shingon-Shu," 21 April 2004 <http://www.shingon.org/history.html> (21 November 2004).

⁵ Haslam, Garth. "Buddhist Mummies of Japan." 24 August 1998 <http://www.sonic.net/~anomaly/japan/dbuddha.htm> (29 November 2004).

psychology as a tool for analyzing this four-pronged ritual transformation. ⁶ “Clearly, ritual must be more than a mechanical technique (such as simple breathing exercises might be).”⁷ The practitioners of such rituals report related feelings of connection to generations of previous worshipers.⁸

Another important aspect of Shindo-Keygo, and in particular self-mummification, is the belief in Tantric Buddhism that one has the “possibility of realizing enlightenment in this very lifetime.”⁹ Hence, self-mummification must have developed as a vehicle to fill the void created by the debacle of how to achieve earthly salvation, a principal very different from most Buddhist doctrine. The last phase of a Shingon priest’s ritualistic development is called Kendoku (attaining realization), which usually takes place in the latter years of the priest’s life when he becomes more likely to participate in self-mummification activities.¹⁰

The process of self-mummification is broken down into three 1,000-day periods. Each period is characterized by physical and mental changes caused by phase-specific austerities and excruciating pain. The process is not some mystic secret, but rather a calculated scientific means for ridding the body of material that cannot cross over into nirvana. In the first phase the priest is restricted to a diet of only nuts and grains surrounding the temple complex.¹¹ During this time the practitioner endures extreme hardships, such as meditating under icy cold mountain streams for hours on end. “Japan is a mountainous country.”¹² Therefore, most of the Shingon temple complexes are in the proximity of large sacred mountains.

During the second phase of the process, the fat matter that causes the body to decompose is greatly reduced. Upon entering the second one thousand-day period, the priest’s body fat is near zero. In this stage, the diet is restricted even further to only miniscule amounts of pine bark and roots from pine trees. After this stage, the priest is like a “skin-covered skeleton.”¹³ The dehydration helps in preservation of the body. Towards the end of the second stage, “A special tea is made from the sap of the urushi tree.” This sap is used as a lacquer for furniture. The tea is a poisonous concoction that causes vomiting and sickness that further decrease the moisture in the body, but more importantly, its build up in the system prevents insects from speeding up the decomposition process. This, in turn, helps the self-mummification process by protecting the to-be mummified priest from natural elements.

Upon entering the final stage, the priest is given a bell and then sealed in his tomb where a tube is inserted into a small opening in the top. Every day, he rings the bell. Eventually, when the ringing stops, the tube is removed. ¹⁴ At the end of the last 1000-day period, nearly ten years after starting, the tomb is opened and the results are seen. Out of the thousands who have tried to complete this decade long process, most are decomposed, and thus, have failed in their efforts. Only a select few actually achieve this fascinating but grisly transformation. The priests who triumphed in their endeavor are said to be one with the cosmic Buddha. While the people who tried and failed are praised for their fervor, they are not thought to be Buddha. Therefore, they enter back into the wheel of Samsara.

One of the questions scientists pose is why some bodies decompose while others mummify. “In a place called Yamagata, there is a sacred spring on a mountain called Yudono.” In this area, there have been reported higher levels of mummification success. It was in the same area that Kukai first pioneered this practice in Japan. Many of the priests from this prefecture reported drinking water before entombment.

⁶ Aune, Michael B. and Valerie DeMarinis, Eds. *Religious and Social Ritual*, 20.

⁷ Aune, 20.

⁸ Aune, 20.

⁹ Aune, 73.

¹⁰ Aune, 78.

¹¹ Haslam, Garth.

¹² Earhart, Byron H. “Mount Fuji and Shugendo.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 206.

¹³ Roth, Martin. “Finding My Religion.” *Living Water to Light the Journey*.

<http://www.martinrothonline.com/lw8.htm> (29 November 2004).

¹⁴ Haslam, Garth.

When a chemical analysis was conducted, the results were amazing. The water contained huge amounts of arsenic at near fatal levels. Arsenic, like the urushi tea, stays in the body after death. "It is toxic to bacteria and other microorganisms, so it eliminated the bacteria that started the decomposition process."¹⁵

It is easy to condemn such practices as barbaric or otherworldly. It is very possible to make shallow one-sided comparisons barely scraping the surface of complexity of the ritualistic self-mummification practice. However, to understand the devout priest of the Shingon, it is imperative to consider the determination, faith, and mindset of the priest entering the last stages of life. Facing the inevitability of old age and death or the prospect of salvation here and now, the choice reveals a noble motivation. What more appropriate sign to show true belief than leaving one's temporary abode on this earth in exchange for eternal salvation and the possibility of becoming one with the beloved Buddha? "The way of life of one who 'leaves home' is 'natural' to the people who follow the great path to liberation from birth and death."¹⁶

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¹⁵ Haslam, Garth.

¹⁶ Watt, Paul B. "Sermon on the Precepts and Monastic Life by the Shingon Vinaya Master Jiun," *The Eastern Buddhist* 25,120.