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TADASHI NAMBA  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY

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*The Marathon Monks  
of Mount Hiei*

# THE PATH OF THE SPIRITUAL ATHLETE

A *gyōja* (Skt. *ācārin*) is a spiritual athlete who practices (*gyō*) with a mind set on the Path of Buddha. In Tendai Buddhism there is an appropriate practice for everyone: "Those who cannot be saved through insight meditation should take up the esoteric teachings; those who cannot be saved by the esoteric teachings should undergo some sort of religious practice." Of all the disciplines practiced on Hiei, the mountain marathon—*kaibōgyō*—has had the greatest appeal over the centuries, for it encompasses the entire spectrum of Tendai Buddhism—meditation, esotericism, precepts, devotion, nature worship, and work for the salvation of sentient beings.

In principle, all Tendai priests and nuns must do *kaibōgyō* at least one day during their training at Gyō-in. Men who wish to become abbots of one of the subtemples on Hiei frequently opt for a 100-day term of *kaibōgyō*. The requirements for the 100-day term are: to be a Tendai ordinand in good standing, sponsorship by a senior Tendai cleric, and permission of the Council of Elder Gyōja.

If permission is granted, there is one week of preparatory training (*maegyō*) before the term begins. The candidate is given a secret handbook (*tebumi*) to copy which gives directions for the course, describes the stations to visit, lists the proper prayers and chants, and contains other essential information. Because this handwritten manual is often damaged by rain and constant handling, the *gyōja* makes two copies.

Also during this week, all the marathon monks of that particular term clear

the route of debris, especially glass, sharp rocks, sticks, and branches, and piles of leaves in which vipers like to hide. While the new *gyōja* are rather lax about such clearing of the path, the senior marathon monks—who know what it is like to have their feet slashed or punctured by pointed objects or to step on a poisonous snake—cover every inch of ground thoroughly.

On day one, the *gyōja* suits up in the unique Hiei uniform and visits Sō-ō's tomb to ask for spiritual guidance. The pure-white outfit—made of white cotton only, for animal hair, skin, and silk are prohibited—consists of a short kimono undershirt, *nobakama* pants, hand and leg covers, a long outer robe, and priest's surplice. Around the waist goes the “cord of death” (*shide no himo*), with a sheathed knife (*goma no ken*) tucked inside; these two accessories remind the *gyōja* of his duty to take his life—by either hanging or self-disembowelment—if he fails to complete any part of the practice.<sup>1</sup> This is the reason the *gyōja* is dressed in white—the color of death—rather than basic Buddhist black. A small bag to hold the handbook, a sutra book, two candles, and matches is hung over the right shoulder; on occasion a flower bag to hold *shikimi* branches or food (offered at spots along the way) is draped over the left shoulder.<sup>2</sup> The *gyōja* carries his rosary in his left hand.

Inside the *bigasa*, the distinctive woven “trademark” hat of the Hiei *gyōja*, a small coin is placed; if the monk dies on pilgrimage he will need the money to pay the boatman on the Oriental equivalent of the river Styx. Except for rain, the Great Kyoto Marathon (*kirimawari*), and the Katsuragawa Retreat, the *bigasa* must be carried, not worn, by all *gyōja* with fewer than 300 days of training; it is always held in the left hand, and if put down it must be placed on the *hisen*, a special type of fan. The *bigasa* is covered with the oiled paper when it rains. Since Buddhist monks and other religious pilgrims customarily wear large round straw hats, the reason for the peculiar elongated shape of the Hiei *gyōja* hat is uncertain, especially because it appears to afford less protection against sun, rain, and wind. On the other hand, one marathon monk believes that the length of the hat keeps branches away from the *gyōja*'s face and provides a clear view, two important considerations for those who walk along pitch-black mountain paths. The shape of the hat is also said to represent a lotus leaf breaking the surface of the water, signifying the emergence of Buddhist enlightenment in the midst of the world of illusion.

Eighty pairs of straw sandals are allotted for the 100-day term in Mudō-ji. For the longer Imuro Valley Course, *gyōja* are allowed the use of one pair per day. During the Great Marathon, the monk can use as many straw sandals as necessary, usually

## THE MARATHON MONKS

going through five pairs a day. This style of straw sandal is, like the hat, lotus-shaped and is thought to have originated in India. Most *gyōja* have their sandals made by a pious old grandma who lives in Sakamoto—her sandals are treasured as being both comfortable and good luck. In sunny, dry weather, one pair can last three or even four days, but in heavy rains the sandals disintegrate in a few hours. Thus the *gyōja* carries one or two spares.

The old-fashioned straw raincoat and the paper lantern, the other two permitted articles, are on occasion replaced in stormy weather by their modern counterparts—a vinyl raincoat and an electric flashlight. Rain—and in early spring, snow—is the bane of the marathon monks. It destroys their sandals, extinguishes their lanterns, slows their pace, washes away their paths, and soaks them to the bone. In years when the rainy season is especially bad, a marathon monk's robe never dries out completely.

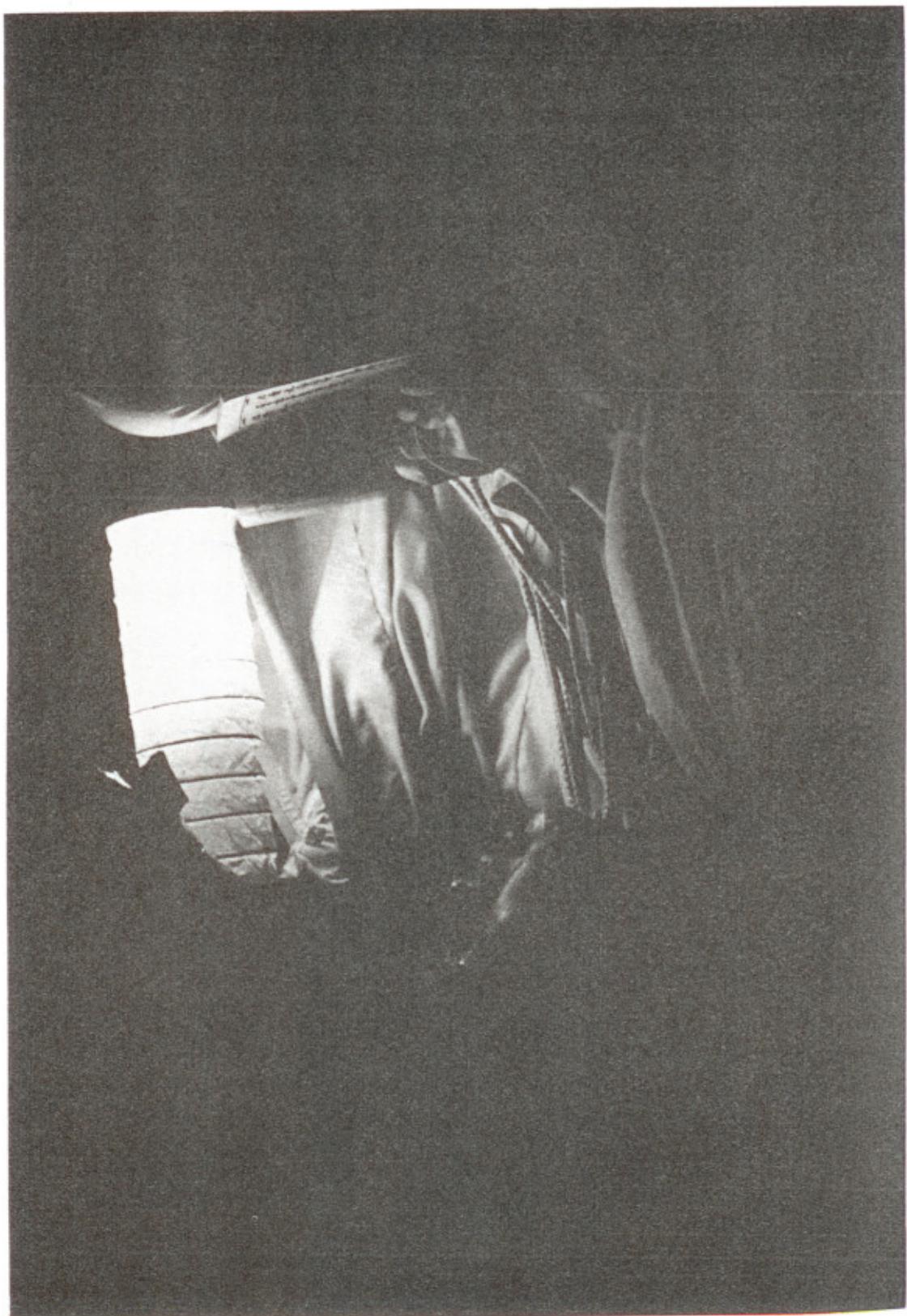
The basic rules of *kaibōgyō* are as follows:

- During the run the robe and hat may not be removed.
- No deviation from the appointed course.
- No stopping for rest or refreshment.
- All required services, prayers, and chants must be correctly performed.
- No smoking or drinking.

On the first day of the term, which begins at the end of March or the beginning of April, the new *gyōja* is accompanied by his master, who takes him through the entire course, giving his disciple various instructions and pointers. Thereafter the marathon monk is on his own. Since the *gyōja* is supposed to train alone, when there is more than one candidate (as has been the case every year recently), both the initial day of the run and daily starting times are staggered.

The day begins at midnight. After conducting (or attending) an hour-long service in the Buddha Hall, the *gyōja* munches on one or two rice balls or drinks a bowl of miso soup and then dresses. At Mudō-ji, the 30-kilometer (18.8-mile) journey commences at around 1:30 A.M. From Mudō-ji the marathon monk proceeds to Kompon Chū-dō and from there through the rest of the Eastern Precinct, then on to the Western Precinct, Yokawa, down to Sakamoto and back to Mudō-ji, stopping at 255 stations of worship and negotiating thousands of stairs and several

Marathon monks carry a handbook describing the course and the rituals that they must perform at each station of worship. The most important directions, however, are secret, given orally by a master to his disciple. ▶





very steep slopes along the way. At Imuro Valley, the course is longer, 40-kilometers (25 miles), with a few more stations of worship, and runs from Sakamoto up to the Eastern Precinct, Western Precinct, Yokawa and then back down to Imuro.

The stations include stops at temples and shrines housing just about every Vedic, Buddhist, Taoist, and Shintō deity that exists in the pantheons of those creeds; at the tombs of the Tendai patriarchs and great saints; before outdoor stone Buddha images; at sacred peaks, hills, stones, forests, bamboo groves, cedar and pine trees, waterfalls, ponds, springs; even a stop at one or two places to placate the gremlins or hungry ghosts residing there. At each station the *gyōja* forms the appropriate *mudrā* (ritual hand gesture) and chants the necessary *mantra*; the stops range from a brief ten seconds to several minutes. During the entire course the monk sits down only once—on a stone bench beneath the sacred giant cedar at the Gyokutaisugi, to chant a two-minute prayer for the protection of the imperial family while facing the direction of Kyoto palace.

Depending on the weather and the pace, the *gyōja* returns to the starting point between 7:30 and 9:30 A.M. The course can be conquered in six hours or even five and a half, but that is likely to draw criticism from senior monks, who disapprove of youngsters racing through the pilgrimage, hastily rattling off the chants and prayers. Most *gyōja* take between six and a half and seven and a half hours to complete the circuit.

Following an hour-long service in the main hall, the monk goes to his quarters to bathe and then to prepare the midday meal. After a simple, high-calorie lunch of noodles, potatoes, tofu, miso soup, and rice or bread, there is an hour's rest and time to attend to chores. At 3:00 P.M. there is another temple service. The second and last meal is taken around 6:00. By 8:00 or 9:00 P.M. the *gyōja* should be sleeping.

This routine is repeated daily without fail, one hundred times, with the exception of *kirimawari*, the 54-kilometer (33-mile) run through Kyoto. It occurs between the 65th and 75th days of the term, depending on the *gyōja*'s starting date. In *kirimawari*, a senior marathon monk accompanies the new *gyōja* as they visit the holy sites of Kyoto and call on parishioners in the city. The new *gyōja* are thereby introduced to "practicing for the sake of others in the world." The freshmen receive more refreshment than usual during *kirimawari*, but they lose a day of sleep—

◀ Rain is the bane of runners everywhere. The marathon monk dons an old-fashioned raincoat in bad weather, though it does not offer much protection in a downpour.

*kirimawari* takes nearly twenty-four hours to complete, and almost as soon as they return to Hiei they must be out on the road again.

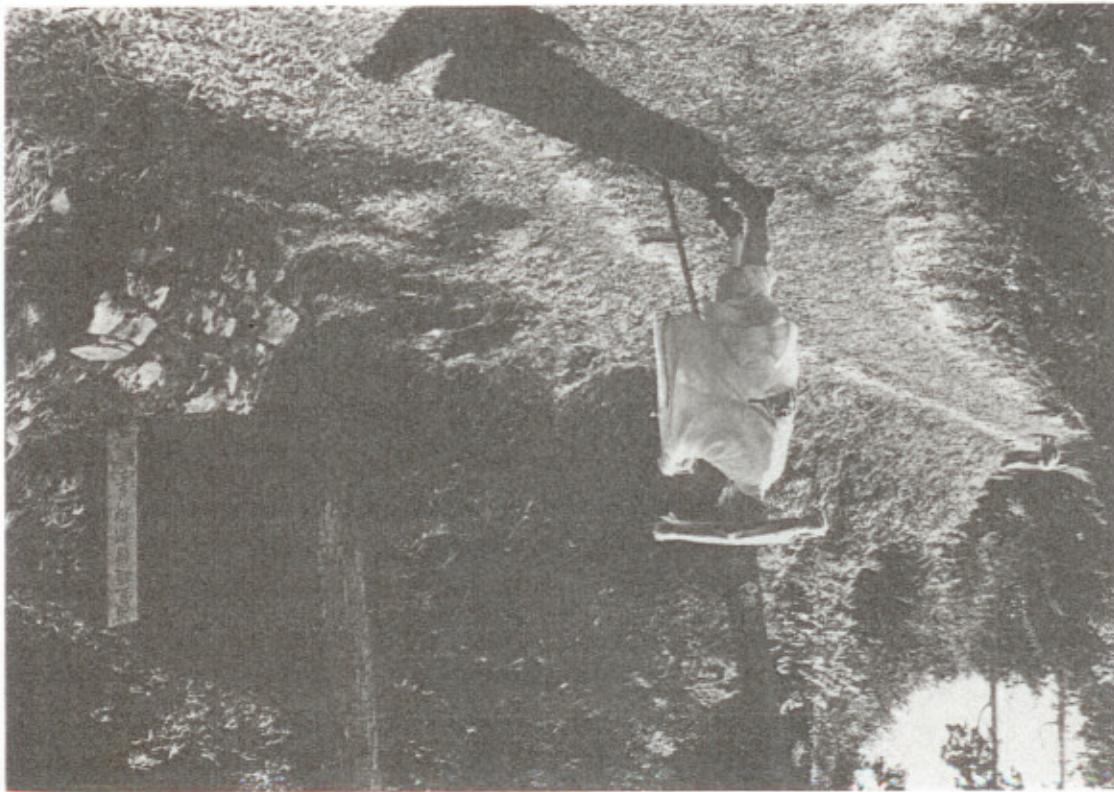
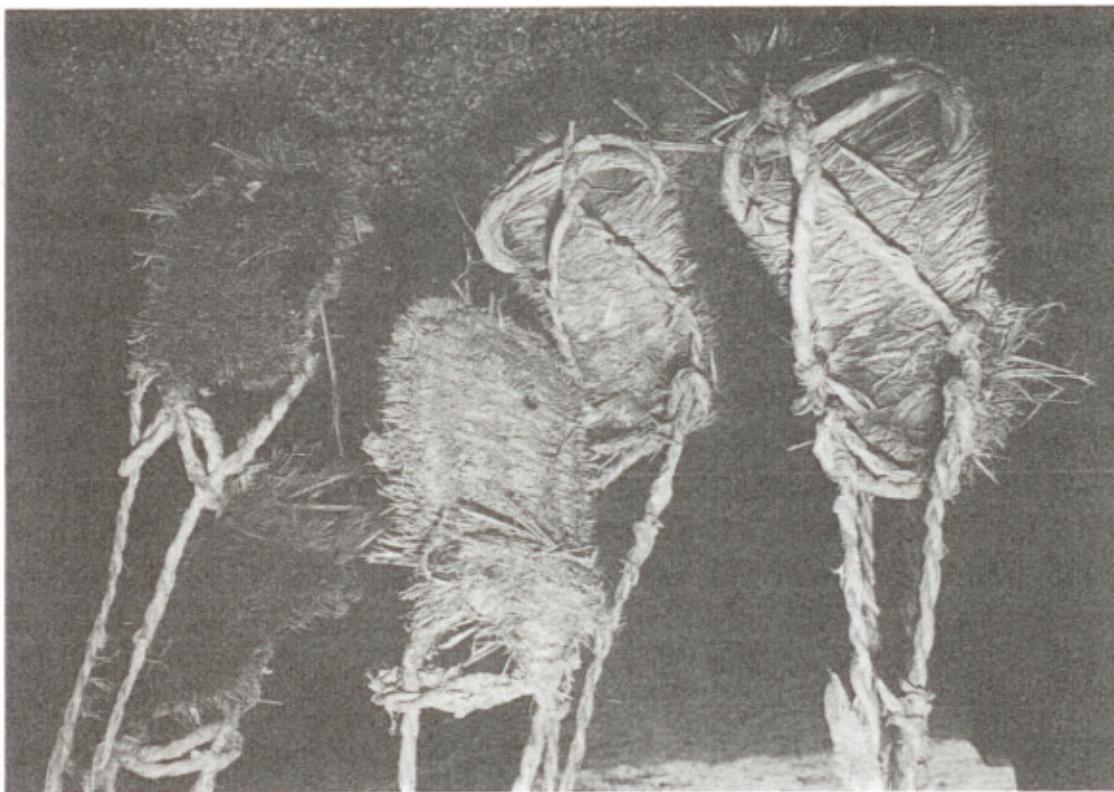
The freshman marathon monks have a very rough time. It takes two or three weeks to memorize the exact location of each station and the appropriate chants and *mudrās*. Before then, *gyōja* unfamiliar with the route sometimes get lost in the heavy fog that frequently blankets Hiei and go miles out of their way. Despite the cleaning of the pathways during the pre-training period, there are still plenty of sharp edges or points to cut tender feet to the quick. By the third day the legs and Achilles tendons begin to throb, and after a week they are painfully swollen. Cuts and sores become infected, and monks who were raised in the southern part of Japan often develop frostbite. Most monks run a slight fever the first few weeks, suffer from diarrhea and hemorrhoids, and experience terrible pains in their backs and hips. By the 30th day, however, the worst of the discomfort is over, and around the 70th day the *gyōja* has acquired the marathon monk stride: eyes focused about 100 feet ahead while moving along in a steady rhythm, keeping the head level, the shoulders relaxed, the back straight, and the nose and navel aligned. The monk also runs in time with the Fudō Myō-ō *mantra* he continually chants.

Following successful completion of a 100-day term and participation in the Katsuragawa Summer Retreat, a *gyōja* may petition the Hiei Headquarters to be allowed to undertake the 1,000-day challenge (*sennichi kaibōgyō*). This involves being free of family ties, willingness to observe a twelve-year retreat, and careful screening by the Council of Elder Gyōja. If accepted, the marathon monk follows the program as outlined in the table.

The first three hundred days are the basic training, the "boot camp" of the marathon monks. From the fourth year, the monks are allowed to wear *tabi*, Japanese-style socks, which considerably lessen the wear and tear on their feet. In the fourth and fifth year, though, the pace quickens to 200 consecutive days of running from the end of March to mid-October. Upon completion of the 500th day, the monk earns the title "White-Belted Ascetic" (Byakutai Gyōja) and may use a walking stick for the rest of the runs. He is also qualified to perform *kaji*, "merit

*Top*. During the entire run, the marathon monk sits down only once. There is a special stone bench beneath the mammoth sacred cedar at Gyokutai-sugi. The monk sits facing the imperial palace—and by extension all the people in the nation—to offer a prayer for peace and well-being. ▶  
*Bottom*. During the Great Marathon, the monks stop to worship at all the major temples and shrines of Kyoto. ▶





"transference" prayer services. Upon completion of the 700th day, the *gyōja* faces the greatest trial of all: *dōiri*, nine days without food, water, sleep, or rest.

A few weeks prior to *dōiri*, the monk sends out this invitation to the other Tendai priests: "I cannot express my joy at being allowed to attempt *dōiri*. This foolish monk vows to commit himself wholeheartedly to the nine-day fast, purify-

## SENNICHI KAIHŌGYŌ

## THE 1,000-DAY MOUNTAIN MARATHON OF HIEI

FIRST YEAR	100 days		<i>Shingyōja</i> (freshman).
SECOND YEAR	100 days	30 (40) km each day one-day <i>kirimawari</i> , 54 km	No <i>tabi</i> ; hat carried
THIRD YEAR	100 days		No <i>tabi</i> ; hat carried
FOURTH YEAR	100 days		<i>Tabi</i> permitted; hat worn from 301st day.
	100 days	30 (40) km, <i>kirimawari</i>	Upon completion, <i>Byakutai Gyōja</i>
FIFTH YEAR	100 days		Wooden staff permitted
	100 days		from 501st day; on
SIXTH YEAR	100 days	60 km each day	700th day <i>dōiri</i> , 9 days
SEVENTH YEAR	100 days	84 km each day	without food, water,
	100 days	30 (40) km, <i>kirimawari</i>	sleep, or rest. Upon
	1,000 days		completion, <i>Tōgyōman Ajari</i> .
		38,632 (46,572) km	<i>Sekizan Kugyō</i> (Sekisan Marathon)
			<i>Kyōto Ōmawari</i> (Great Marathon)
			Upon completion ( <i>mangyō</i> ), <i>Daigyōman Ajari</i>

Note: The numbers in parentheses are for the Imuro Valley course; all distances are approximate. From the second year, all monks participate in the Katsuragawa Summer Retreat, July 16–20. A secret rite known as the *Ichigassui* is usually performed once during the 100-day term.

◀ *Top*. The marathon monks pay their respects to the various Tendai patriarchs buried at different places all over the mountain. Here one of Sakai Yūsai's marathon dogs runs ahead of him on the path.

◀ *Bottom*. Although primitive in appearance, simple straw sandals such as these have served as "running shoes" for generation after generation of marathon monk.

ing body and mind, hoping to become one with the Great Holy One Fudō Myō-ō. Please join me for a farewell dinner." The *saijiki-gi*, the symbolic "last meal," is attended by all the senior priests on the mountain—a goodbye party to a *gyōja* who might not survive. This point is underscored by having the screens in the room reversed, just as they would be for a funeral.

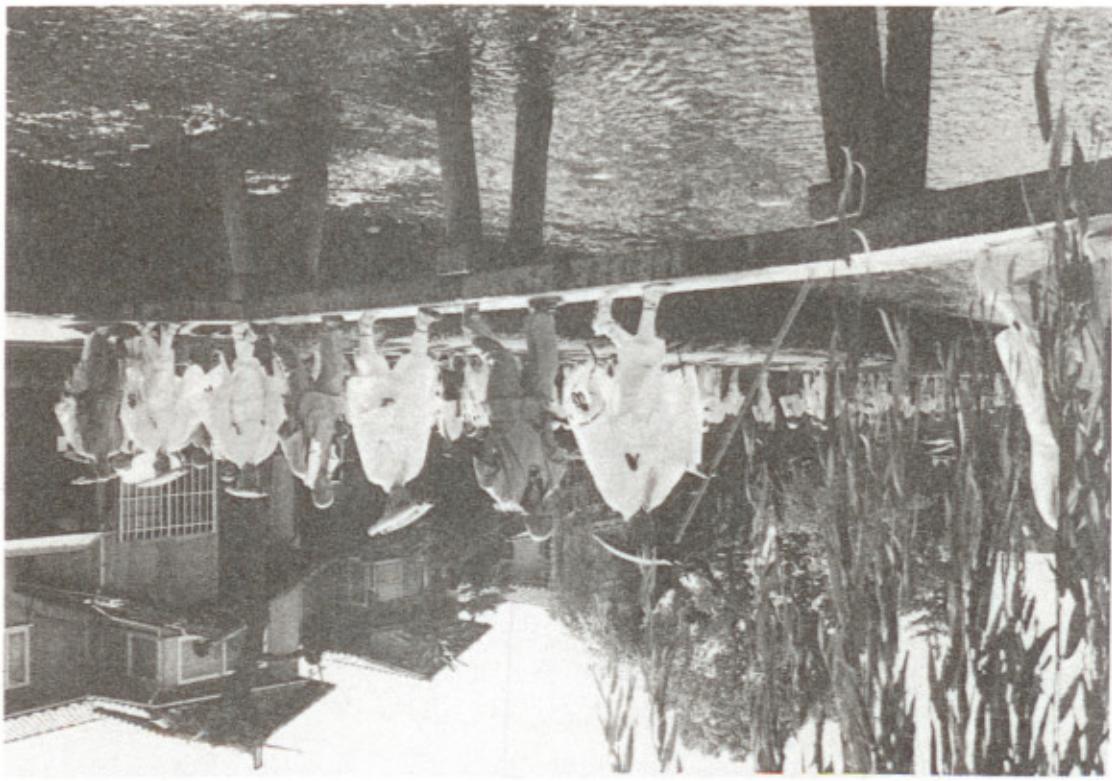
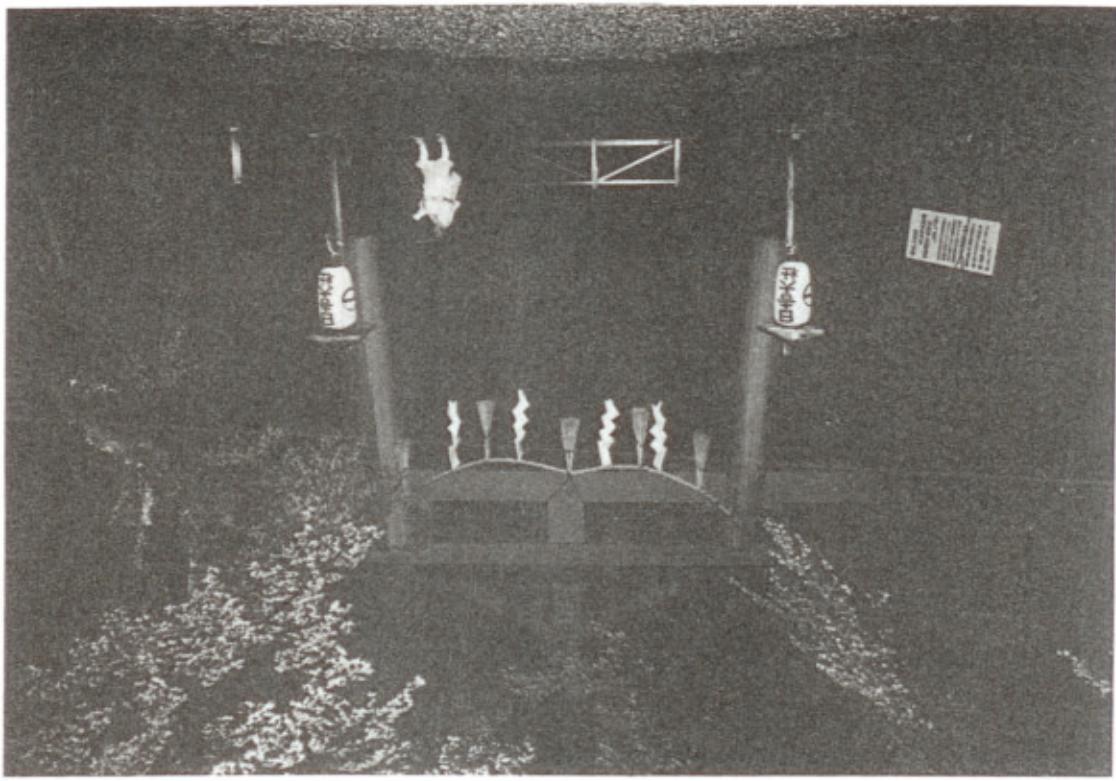
Following the meal, a bell is struck at 1:00 P.M., and the senior marathon monks and other high-ranking Tendai prelates accompany the *gyōja* into Myō-ō-dō. The *gyōja* begins by making 330 full prostrations; after this, the guests depart, the doors are sealed, and the *gyōja* is left to his nine-day prayer fast.

At 3:00 A.M., 10:00 A.M., and 5:00 P.M. the *gyōja* chants the *Lotus Sūtra* before the altar. (During the course of the fast, the entire text is recited). At 2:00 A.M. he performs the *shusui* (water-taking) ritual. Chanting the *Heart Sūtra*, he walks to the Aka Well, about 200 meters from the temple, and scoops up a bucketful of water, carries it back to the main hall, and offers it to the image of Fudō Myō-ō. The remaining hours are spent sitting in the lotus position silently reciting the Fudō Myō-ō mantra—"namaku samanda bazaranan sendan makaroshana sowataya untarata kanman"<sup>3</sup>—100,000 times in all. It takes about 45 minutes to recite the mantra 1,000 times. Working in twenty-four-hour shifts, two monks, holding incense and candles, are always in attendance to make sure the *gyōja* remains awake and erect, touching his shoulders whenever he appears to be dozing off.

For several weeks prior to *dōiri*, the *gyōja* tapers down on his intake of food and water to prepare for the fast, usually limiting himself to one simple meal of noodles, potatoes and soup during this time. (He would usually not eat anything at the farewell dinner.) The first day is no problem, but there is some nausea the second and third day. By the fourth day the pangs of hunger usually cease. By day five, however, the *gyōja* is so dehydrated that the saliva in his mouth is dried up and he begins to taste blood. To prevent the sides of the mouth from adhering permanently, the *gyōja* is allowed, from the fifth day, to rinse his mouth with water, but every drop must be spat back into the cup. Unbelievably, the amount of liquid returned is often greater than the original amount. The drops that remain on the *gyōja*'s tongue

*Top.* During the Great Marathon and the Kyoto One-Day Run (*kirimawari*), the monks head up a colorful parade through the streets of Kyoto. Here Utsumi Shunsō leads the charge across Gyōja Bridge, one of Kyoto's landmarks. ▶

*Bottom.* The stations of worship encompass not only Buddhist holy sites. The Grand Shrine of Hie, seat of the important Shintō deity who guards Hiei, is a major stop on the run. ▶





are compared to the sweetest nectar. Defecation usually disappears from the third or fourth day, but very weak urination generally continues right to the end. Also from day five, the *gyōja* is given an arm rest when he recites the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The 2:00 A.M. water-taking ritual helps revive the *gyōja*. As he steps out of the hall made stuffy by incense smoke and poor circulation, the pure, bracing mountain air helps clear his head. *Gyōja* claim further that they absorb moisture from the rain and dew through their skin during this walk outdoors. The round trip to the well takes fifteen minutes the first day, but near the end it requires an hour, as the *gyōja* seems to move in a state of suspended animation.

The *dōiri*—the actual period without food, water, rest, or sleep is seven and a half days (182 hours)—is designed to bring the *gyōja* face-to-face with death. Hiei legend has it that the original period of *dōiri* was ten days; when almost all of the monks died it was shortened just a bit. It was further discovered that the humid months of summer were too dangerous—the deaths of the two *dōiri* monks mentioned in the modern chronicles both occurred in August—they rotted internally.

All the *gyōja* agree that the greatest ordeal of *dōiri* is not starvation or thirst but keeping the head erect and not being able to rest. It is interesting to note that the hardest part of making a Buddha image is the carving of the head. If the head is not perfectly balanced between the shoulders and on top of the body, sooner or later, it will fall off due to improper stress. Maintaining the correct posture at all times is the ultimate challenge.

During *dōiri*, the *gyōja* develop extraordinary sensitivity. They can hear ashes fall from the incense sticks and other normally inaudible sounds from all over the mountain. Not surprisingly, they can smell and identify food being prepared miles away, and they see beams of sun and moonlight that seep into the dark interior of the temple. At 3:00 A.M. on the ninth and concluding day, the *gyōja* makes his final trip to the Aka Well. A large crowd of upward of three hundred Tendai priests and lay believers gathers to attend the grand finale. The trip to the well, which only required twenty minutes the first few days of *dōiri*, now takes the weakened *gyōja* an hour to complete. He returns to the hall, sits before the altar, and bows his head as an official document from the Enryaku-ji Headquarters is read, proclaiming the end of the fast. The *gyōja* is then given *Hō-no-yū*, a special medicinal drink, to revive him. The final barrier is three circumambulations around the hall. When that is

◀ During their runs the marathon monks must stop at over 250 stations of worship. Here Utsumi chants a brief service before the Kompon Chū-dō.

done, the *gyōja* emerges from the "living death" as a radiant *Tōgyōman Ajari*, "Saintly Master of the Severe Practice."

Most *gyōja* report that they pass out for a second or two when they emerge from the temple out onto the veranda, in what is evidently a sudden transition from death back to life—for the *gyōja*, according to physiologists, who have examined them at the conclusion of the rite, manifest many of the symptoms of a "dead" person at the end of the *dōiri*. As *dōiri* nears conclusion, the *gyōja* experience a feeling of transparency. Nothing is retained; everything—good, bad, neutral—has come out of them, and existence is revealed in crystal clarity.

Some may condemn this type of severe training as a violation of Śākyamuni's Middle Way, but such death-defying exercises lie at the heart of Buddhist practice. There would be no doctrine of the Middle Way if Śākyamuni had not nearly fasted to death, subjecting himself to the most rigorous austerities to win enlightenment. Asceticism did not get him enlightenment, but it did lead to his transformation into a Buddha. This is why the emergence of a marathon monk from *dōiri* is compared to Śākyamuni Buddha's descent from the Himalayas following his Great Awakening. As one of the *gyōja*'s relatives remarked, "I always dismissed Buddhism as superstitious nonsense until I saw my brother step out of Myō-ō-dō after *dōiri*. He was really a living Buddha."

Around 3:30 A.M. the *gyōja*, twenty to thirty pounds lighter, returns to his room, where he is greeted by his family and other well-wishers, receives a *shiatsu* massage, and sucks on chunks of ice made out of water taken from a miraculous spring on Mount Hira. The *gyōja* will then lie down for a few hours but only sleep about twenty or thirty minutes. It takes two weeks or so before he can take solid food; until then he lives on ice shavings, water, thin soup, *sake* or *amasake* (sweet, lightly fermented rice wine), and pudding. Nor does he sleep much the next several weeks, averaging two or three hours a night.

Following successful completion of the "seven hundred days of moving and the nine days of stillness," the *gyōja* are indeed men transformed. Grateful to be alive, full of energy, fortified by a vision of the Ultimate, constantly moving toward the light, and eager to work for the benefit of all, the monks head into the final stages of the marathon.

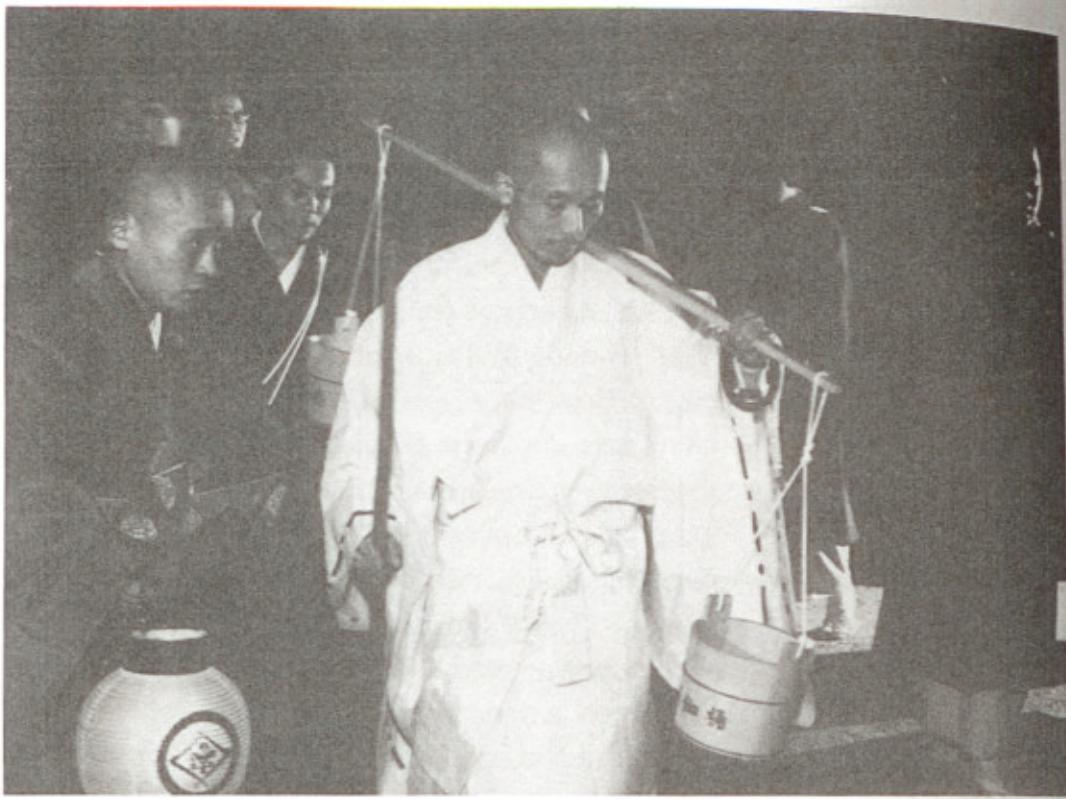
In the sixth year, the route lengthens to include a round trip to Sekisan-in at the base of Hiei (*Sekisan Kugyō*). The Sekisan Marathon along the extremely steep Kirara Slope—the slope used by Hiei warrior-monks of old to swoop down on

Kyoto—increases the course to 60 kilometers (37.5 miles), requiring fourteen to fifteen hours for stopping at all 260 stations of worship.

The seventh and final year again has two 100-day terms. The first—perhaps the supreme athletic challenge of all times—consists of a *daily* 84-kilometer (52.5 mile) run through the environs of Kyoto. The run encompasses the 30-kilometer walk around Hiei, the 10 kilometers of Kirara Slope, and the 44-kilometer circling of Kyoto. This is the equivalent of two Olympic marathons, and it is not run once every four years but performed 100 days in a row. During the aptly named Great Marathon (*Ō-mawari*), the monk sets out from Hiei at 12:30 A.M., covers the 84 kilometers over the next sixteen to eighteen hours, and then arrives, sometime between 4:00 and 6:00 in the afternoon, at a temple in the center of Kyoto to rest for a few hours. The following day, beginning at 1:00 A.M., the monk reverses the course. The course<sup>4</sup> was originally the city limits of Kyoto; the *gyōja* was thus circling the capital as he prayed for the protection of all its inhabitants, wise and foolish, saints and sinners, rich and poor, young and old alike. Nowadays part of the course cuts through the pleasure quarters of the city, past hostess bars, love hotels, strip joints, mah-jongg parlors, and pornographic theaters. The denizens of that world, too, receive the prayers of the marathon monk.

In addition to the three hundred or so stations of worship, the *gyōja* blesses hundreds of people each day (thousands on weekends and holidays). People of all ages sit bowing along the road to be blessed by the touch of the *gyōja*'s rosary on their heads, diseased portions of their bodies, crippled limbs, hospital robes, or even on photographs of their loved ones. The *gyōja* is considered to be a vehicle, if not an incarnation, of the great saint Fudō Myō-ō, with the capability of transferring his merit to others. The Great Marathon is truly the practice of bestowing merit on others; while the monk's previous runs were solitary pursuits deep in the mountains, this marathon is for the benefit of all those struggling to survive in the midst of a big city, a silent turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, preaching by example rather than with empty words. Since the Great Marathon takes place in summer, the colorful procession of Tendai priests, lay believers, photographers and filmmakers, interested observers, joggers, and other assorted hangers-on literally stops traffic in the busy tourist season.

Negotiation of the 84-kilometer course is made somewhat easier by the use of a "pusher" on straightaways. A padded pole is placed at the small of the monk's back while the pusher applies a gentle force. If the pusher (a different person every day)

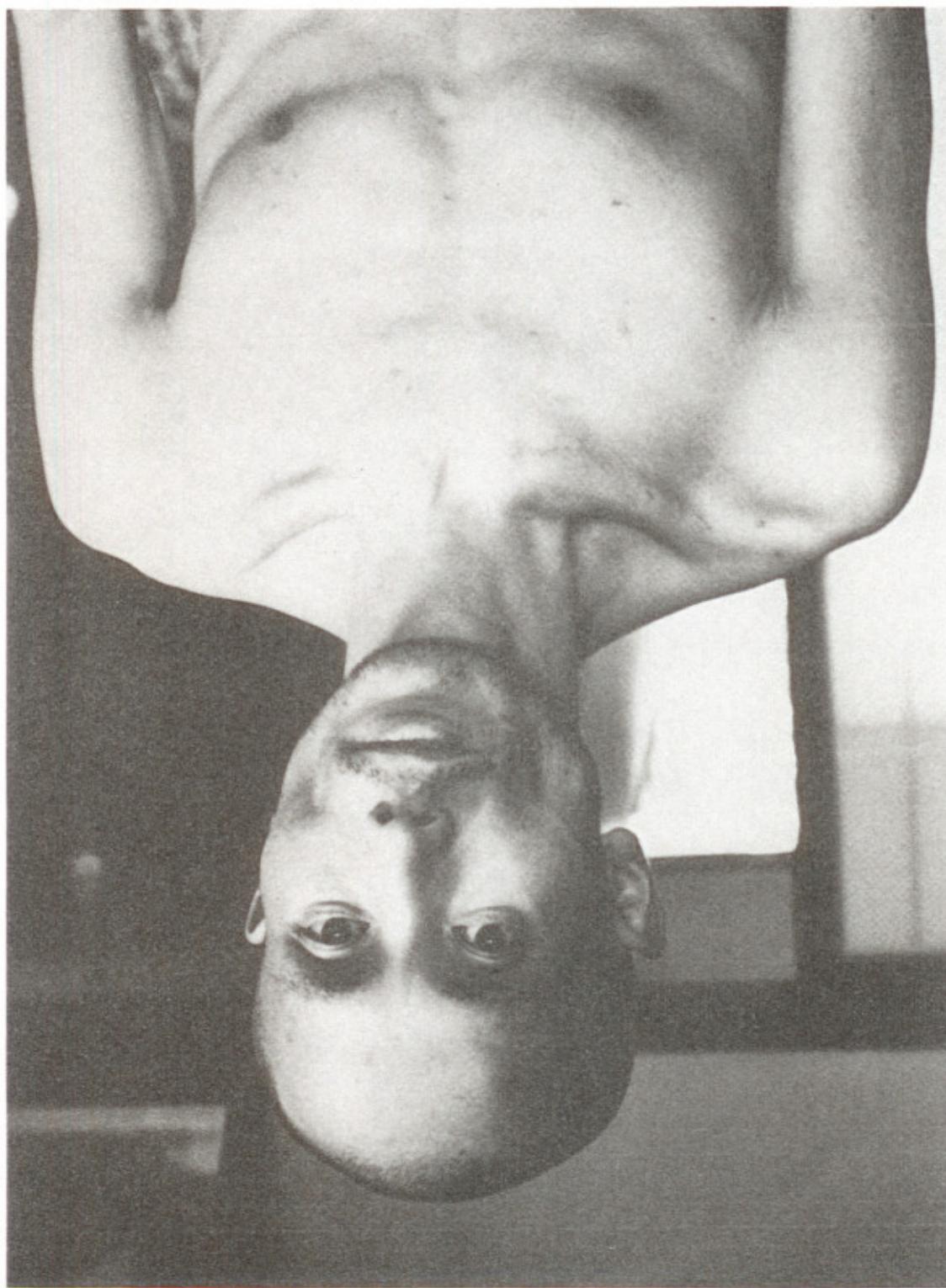


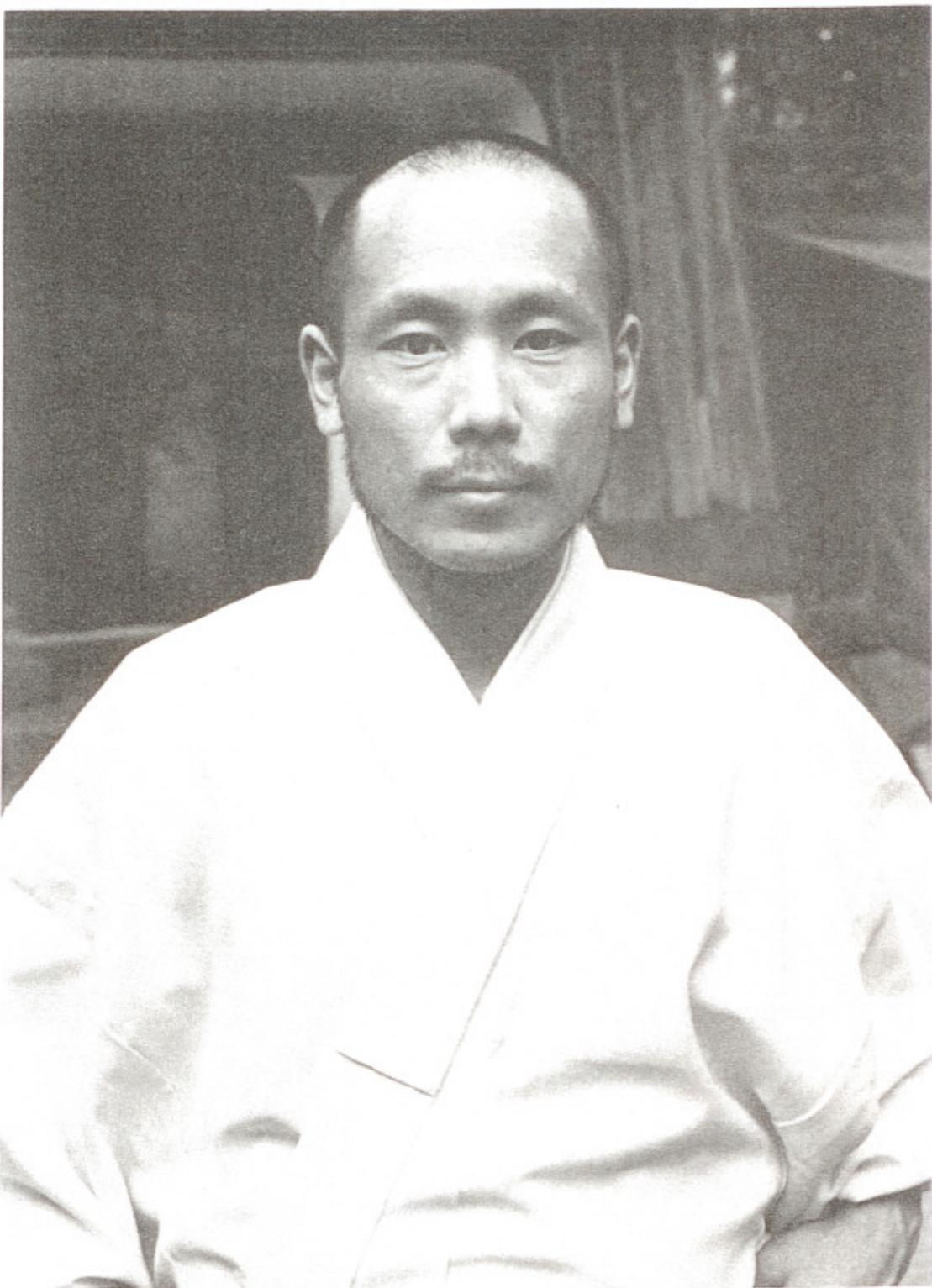
*Top.* Utsumi performing the *shūsui* (water-carrying) rite during *dōiri*.

*Bottom.* Sakai bowing with gratitude for being allowed to undertake the practice of *dōiri* and being able to complete it (*left*), and sipping a medicinal drink at the conclusion of the "living death" (*right*).

Two attendants guide Utsumi back to his quarters after *dōgi*.







*Left.* Skeleton-thin but triumphant, Utsumi has just completed *dōiri*; notice his radiant eyes.  
*Above.* Two weeks later, he is fully restored.

THE MARATHON MONKS



The last great barrier the marathon monk faces on his quest is the 100,000-Prayer Fast. Day and night for eight days, the monk prays before the roaring fire lit before his patron, Fudō Myō-ō. The fire ceremony consumes all evil passions and purifies the consciousness.

has a lot of experience, he can supply as much as half the locomotion needed by the marathon monk on long stretches. If, on the other hand, the pusher is a novice or a young parishioner who cannot keep up with the monk, the extra assistance is nil. (Some marathon monks dispense with the pusher for part or all of the course.) Another attendant carries a small folding chair along, placing it down the instant the monk is held up by traffic lights or crowd control. Perhaps because of the constant encouragement and excitement of being welcomed by crowds of admirers, the *gyōja* come through the Great Marathon in surprisingly good shape despite the almost total lack of sleep. Such sleep as they do get is deep, sound, and refreshing. An old saying goes: "Ten minutes of sleep for a marathon monk is worth five hours of ordinary rest."

During the Great Marathon the monk is supported by dozens of *sokubō-kō* parishioners. This special group of supporters accompanies the monk on his rounds,

directing traffic and carrying equipment, preparing his meals, washing his clothes, and attending to his other needs. Some of the *sokubō-kō*—the position is inherited from generation to generation—have been serving in this way for decades, covering nearly as much ground as the *gyōja* themselves.

The final 100-day term on the regular course is a snap; on day 1,000 the *gyōja*, who has run enough to have circled the globe, is declared to be a Daigyōman Ajari, "Saintly Master of the Highest Practice." Several weeks later the marathon monk visits the Kyoto Imperial Palace to conduct a special thanksgiving service known as *dosoku sandai*. When the emperor maintained his court in Kyoto, everyone had to remove his or her footwear before entering the grounds. A Hiei marathon monk was the sole exemption from this custom—he alone could enter the palace clad in straw sandals. The ceremony evidently originated with the *kaibōgyō* Patriarch Sō-ō's visits to the palace centuries ago to cure the imperial family's ailments.

There are two other practices integral to the 1,000-day marathon. The first is the annual Katsuragawa Retreat (Katsuragawa Geango) held from July 16 to 20. *Gyōja* who have completed at least one 100-day *kaibōgyō* term gather on Hiei on July 16. (Some *gyōja* from outlying districts walk hundreds of miles to get there.) Lining up in order of seniority (according to the number of retreats attended), the *gyōja* set out from Hiei at 4:00 A.M. for Mount Hira, 30 kilometers (18.8 miles) distant. The impressive body of *gyōja*—in certain years they can number as many as fifty—descend en masse from the mountain and pass through Otsu City on their way to Katsuragawa, arriving in the valley about twelve hours later.

During the retreat, the *gyōja* fast and conduct various rites. The highlights of the retreat are, first, the *taikomawashi* festival, in which the new *gyōja*, in imitation of Sō-ō's leap into the waterfall to embrace Fudō Myō-ō, bound off a large rotating drum and into a crowd of excited spectators; and, second, the secret rite at Katsuragawa in which the *gyōja*, firmly anchored by a lifeline, actually throw themselves into the cascading falls.

Since the Katsuragawa Retreat is devoted to the memory of Sō-ō, it takes precedence over all else, and marathon monks doing 200 days a year interrupt their running to attend. Thus the actual number of days on the road is more like 980 than an even 1,000, although recently the monks have been adding on the extra days after formal completion.

The final rite of the initiation for the marathon monks is the 100,000-prayer fast and fire ceremony, the *jumanmai daigoma*. One hundred days before the cere-

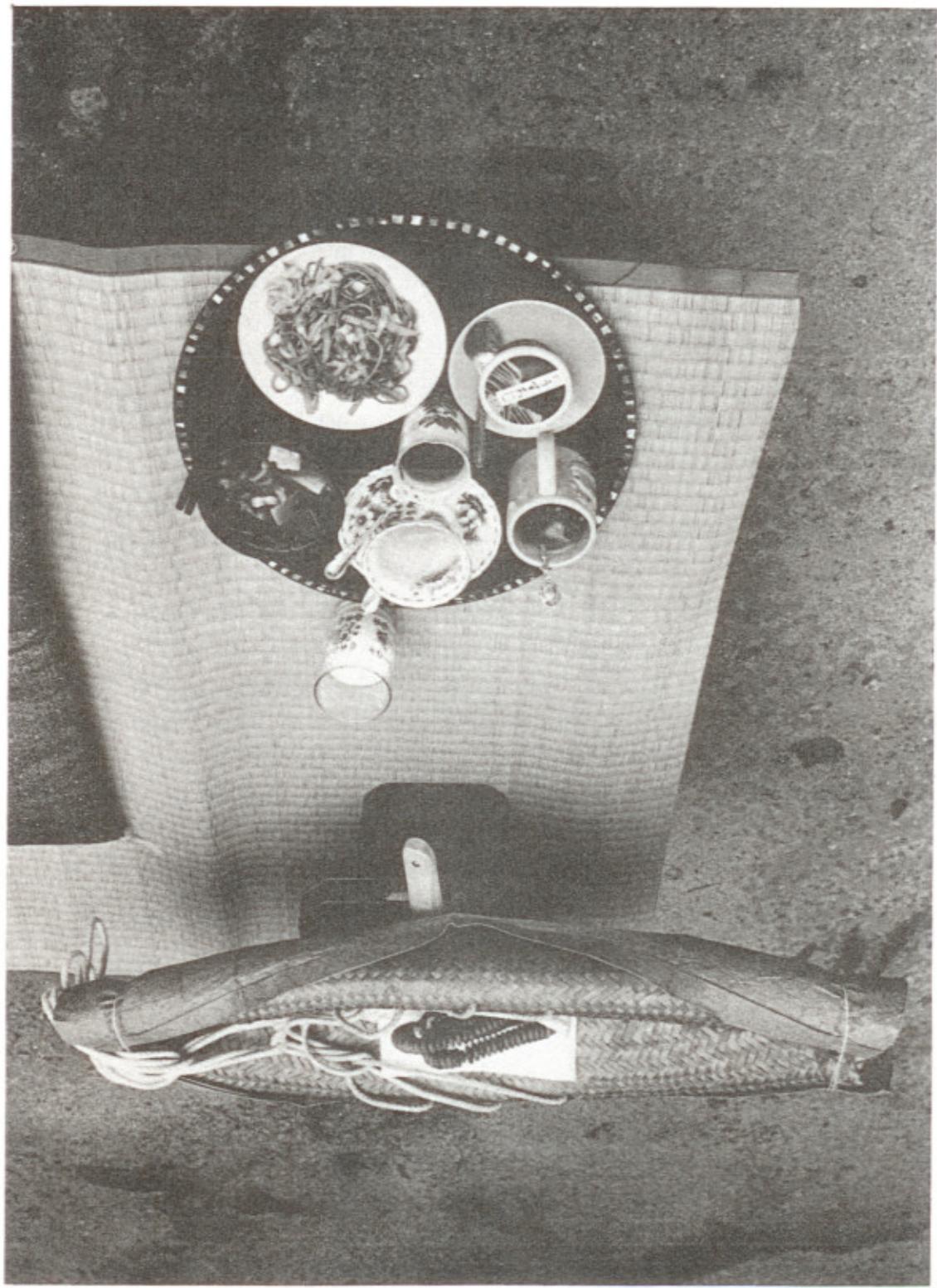
mony, the *gyōja* embarks on a stringent fast. All grains—rice, wheat, soy beans, and the like—plus salt and most leafy vegetables are prohibited. Consequently, the monk is obliged to live on potatoes and other root vegetables, boiled pine needles, nuts, and water. The fast dries the *gyōja* out, almost mummifying him, so that he will not expire of excessive perspiration during the eight-day fire ceremony in which he will sit in front of a roaring fire, casting in prayer stick after prayer stick. On each stick a supplicant has written a petition, which the *gyōja* “relays” to Fudō Myō-ō. Usually the number of prayer sticks exceeds 100,000, going as high in some cases as 150,000. Although this fast is one day shorter than that of *dōiri* and a few hours of sitting-up sleep is permitted, most *gyōja* feel that this is the greater trial—it is in the early stages, “like being roasted alive in hell.”

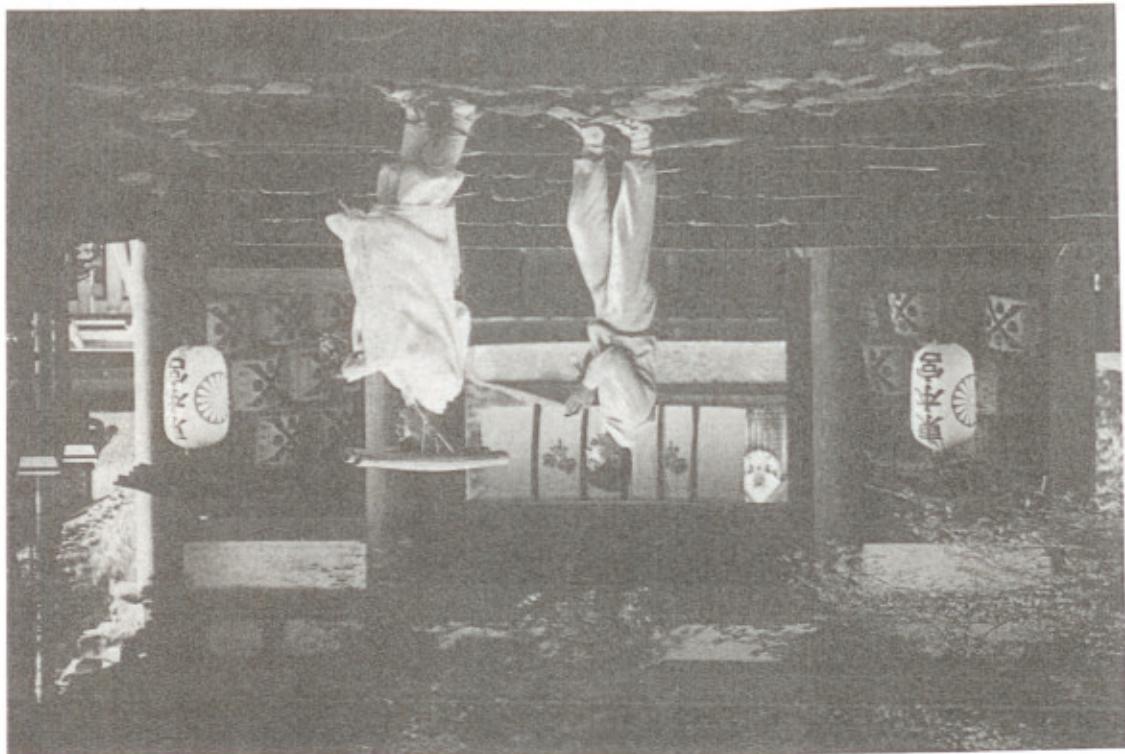
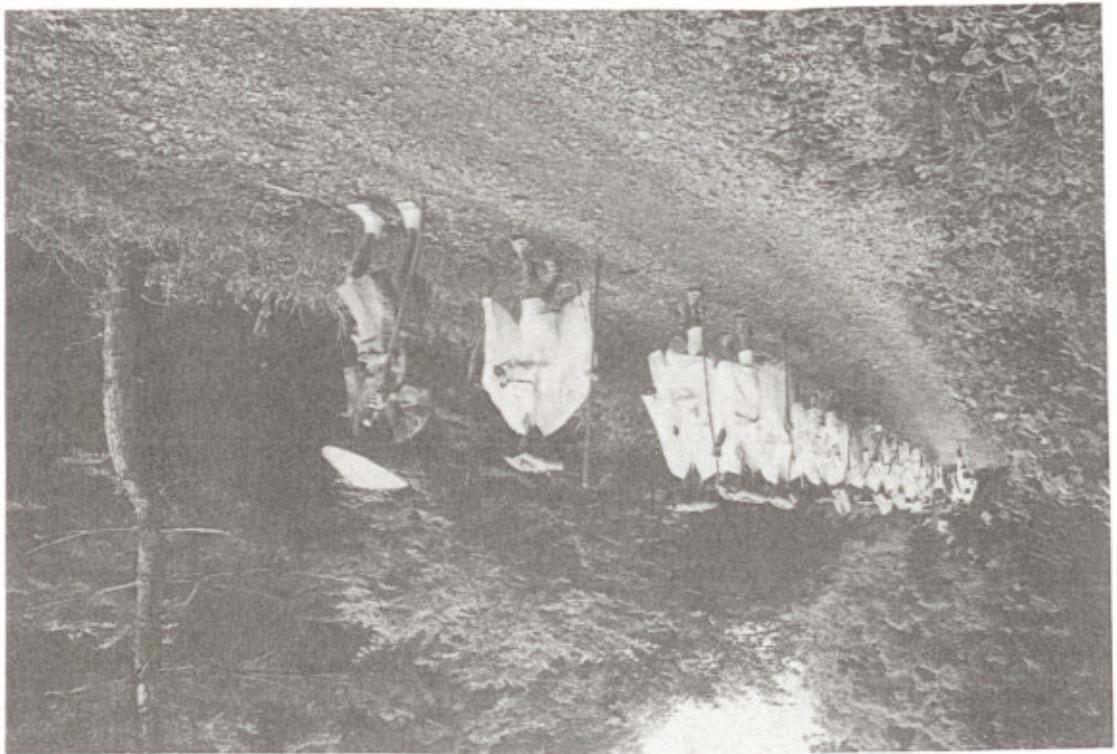
Here again, the *gyōja* eventually becomes one with the fiery presence of Fudō Myō-ō, consuming all evil and purifying the world. The Great 100,000-Prayer Fire Ceremony takes place two or three years after completion of the 1,000-day marathon. It is not obligatory, but most of the modern marathon monks undergo it, partly to raise money for new construction projects—people donate money for each prayer stick that they write. Sakai Yūsai is the most recent monk to have done the ceremony, the sixth since the end of World War II.

Altogether there have been forty-six 1,000-day marathon monks since 1885. Two monks completed two full terms, one died (on purpose) on the 2,500th day of practice, and one, Okuno Genjun, did three full terms but without actually running each day during the third term. The majority of the marathon monks were in their vigorous thirties, while the oldest, Sakai, completed day 2,000 when he was sixty-one years old.<sup>5</sup> The number of monks who died or committed suicide on route is not known, but the path is lined with unmarked graves of *gyōja* who have been killed in action. No one has expired in recent memory during the 1,000-day marathon, but at least three monks perished in the nineteenth century.

How do the monks train for this ultimate marathon? Young novices build their strength by doing lots of manual labor—chopping wood, carrying heavy provisions from temple to temple, doing repair work on stone fences and stairs.

Food for practice: lunch during the Great Marathon. The meal includes fried noodles, miso soup with tofu and vegetables, sweet *yokan* jelly, and four kinds of liquid: potage, kudzu tea, an herbal tonic drink, and half a glass of milk. ▶





## THE PATH OF THE SPIRITUAL ATHLETE

They also spend years acting as attendant to a senior marathon monk, accompanying the master while loaded down with baggage or acting as a pusher, matching the monk step for step.

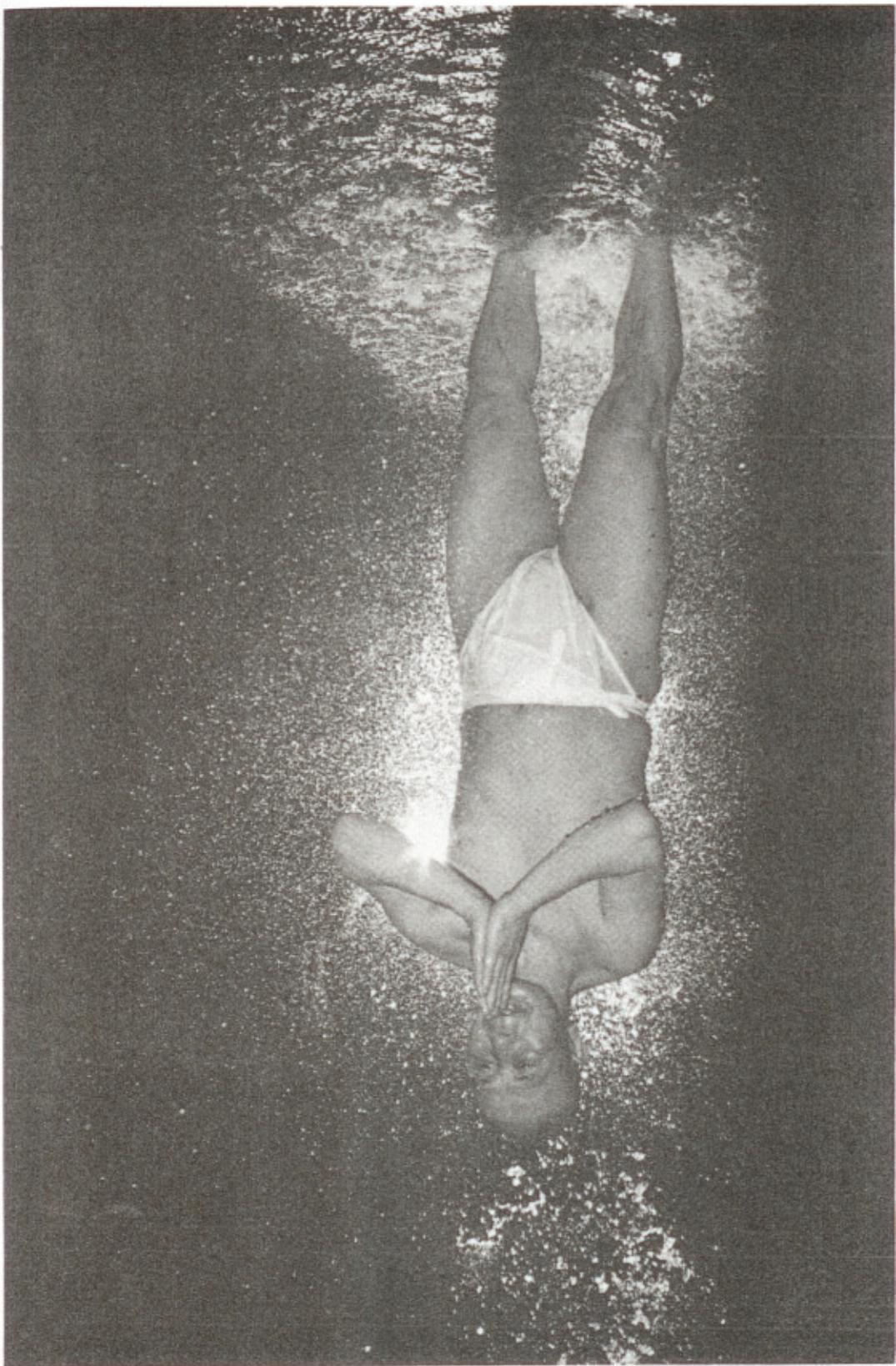
What do they eat? The meals on Hiei are vegetarian—*shojin ryōri*, “food for practice”—and the monks thrive on what most modern athletes would consider a woefully inadequate diet. The following is a typical menu of a marathon monk:

1:30 A.M.	(before starting out): a bowl of miso soup with tofu
7:00 A.M.	(upon completion): miso soup, a bowl of rice gruel with daikon leaves, grated daikon with soy sauce
10:00 A.M.	herbal tea, honey and lemon water
12:00 NOON	(main meal): half a bowl of rice, noodles, boiled vegetables, tofu with sesame seed oil, <i>natto</i> (fermented soybeans), seaweed, pickles, and a glass of milk
2:30 P.M.	potato dumpling
6:00 P.M.	a bowl of rice gruel and soup

The marathon monks will occasionally take fish in the off-season and richer foods such as tempura, *yuba* (dried soybean cream), and sweets. Most favor several kinds of tonic drinks, concocted from herbs, lotus root, ginseng, and other secret ingredients. During the one hundred days prior to Jumanmai Daigoma, the monks subsist on buckwheat flour, nuts, potatoes, cabbage, and pine needles.

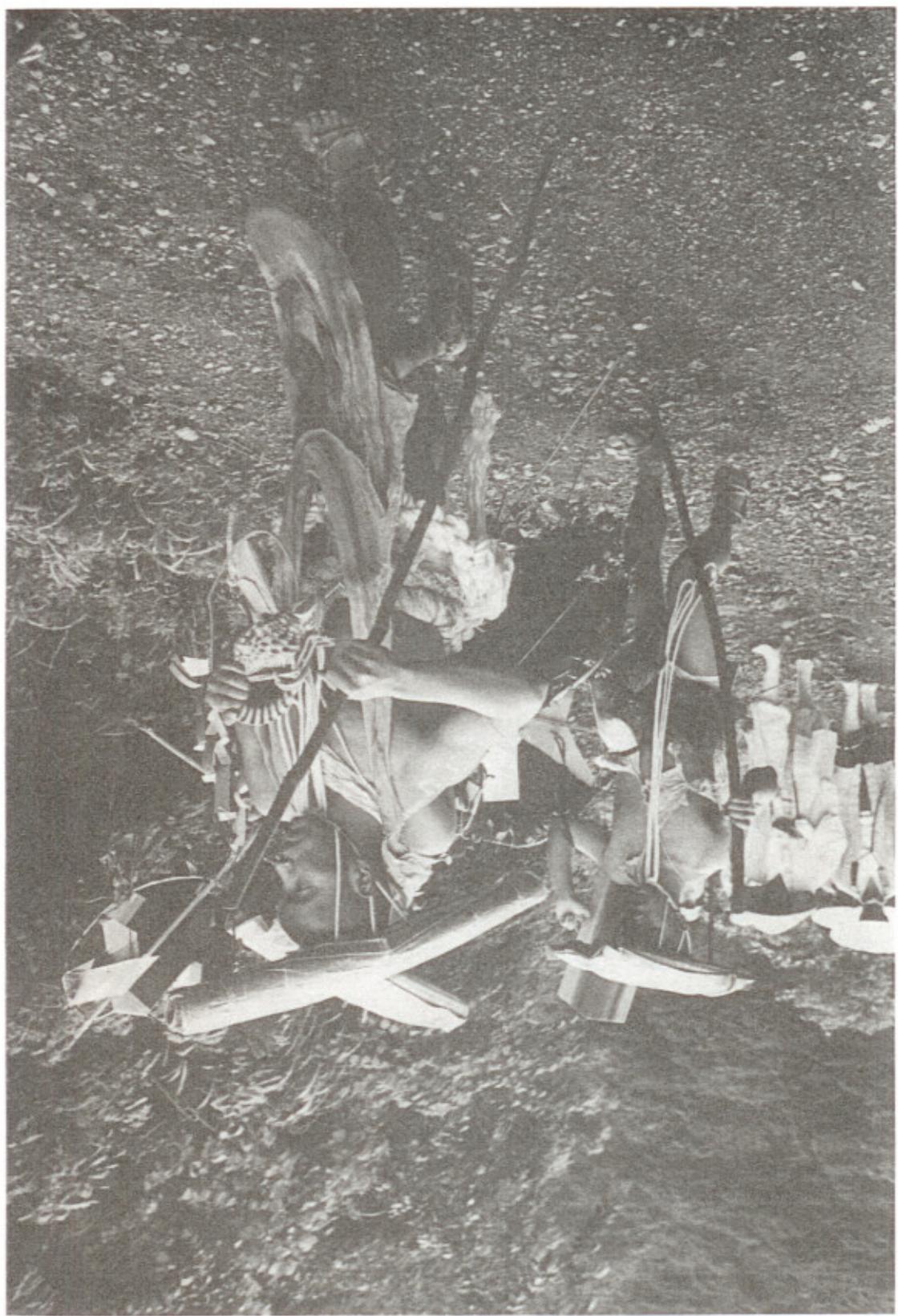
Older *gyōja* eat even less than the typical monk. Sakai, for example, takes two meals a day consisting of one plate of noodles, two boiled potatoes, half a cake of tofu with sesame seed oil, and boiled vegetables. This adds up to about 1,450 calories a day. According to modern dietary science, Sakai must use at least 2,000 calories during his 40-kilometer runs and therefore should be shedding ten to fifteen pounds a month. Far from wasting away, however, Sakai retains his robust physique, as seen in the photograph on page 88.

- ◀ *Top.* Joggers and young athletes enjoy accompanying the marathon monks on their rounds for the sake of their own training; no one, however, keeps up the pace for 100 days in a row.
- ◀ *Bottom.* Every year from July 16 to July 20, marathon monks past and present gather to participate in the Katsuragawa Summer Retreat. Here Sakai heads the procession from Hiei to Katsuragawa Valley.





- ▲ This page. After the monks arrive at Katsuragawa, they conduct various rites (top). The Drum-Turning Ceremony at Katsuragawa (bottom): In emulation of Sō-ō, founder of the Hiei marathon, new monks are required to leap onto a huge rotating drum and fly into the crowd. This re-creates Sō-ō's leap into the waterfall to embrace the image of Fudō Myō-ō.
- ◀ Opposite page. As soon as Sakai arises at midnight he performs *takigyō*, "waterfall training," to purify himself. Such purification is an important element in all Japanese religions, a method to cleanse both the body and the mind of impurities.





Dressed in rags (*left*), the monks also proceed to the actual waterfall (*above*) to reenact Sō-ō's leap.



*Left.* Fudō Myō-ō, the principle that the marathon monks come to embody. Fiercely devoted to the practice of Buddhism, Fudō will let nothing deter him from his appointed task of bringing all beings to salvation. His female counterpart is the beatific Kannon, the Goddess of Compassion. *Right.* Fudō Myō-ō represented by a mystic Siddhārtha seed-syllable (*shūji*) drawn by the marathon monk Kanshūji Shinnin on the 900th day of *kaihōgyo*.

As mentioned above, marathon monks must get by on a minimum of sleep; consequently, they become expert cat-nappers, catching a few winks while waiting for traffic lights to change or at other lulls in their daily schedules. The monks learn to sleep sitting or even standing up, and most in fact prefer not to lie down to nap because that confuses their sense of time. Unsure of the correct hour, monks sometimes leap up from a mid-day nap, jump into their outfits, and race out of the temple. While on the road, they develop the faculty to rest different sections of the body as they move along—"Now I am resting my shoulders, now I am resting my hips, now I am resting my knees," and so on.

Other essential factors are proper rhythm, breath control, and intense concentration. The marathon monks harmonize their pace with the "beat" of the Fudō

Myō-ō *mantra*, which they chant continually, and cover meters and meters on each deep abdominal breath. An experienced marathon monk flows along naturally, maintaining the same speed for climbing up or coming down. The monks cannot allow themselves to be distracted by any obstacle, whether external or internal. They must be quite similar to the famed *lung-gom-pa* runners of old Tibet. Scores of explorers to Tibet and Mongolia recorded encounters with these running monks, who appeared to bound across the immense grassy plains; apparently in a trance, they could travel nonstop for forty-eight hours or more, covering over 200 miles a day. Since accomplished *lung-gom-pa* runners were faster than horses over long distances, they were often employed as a human "pony express" to convey messages across that huge country.

Interestingly, in order to qualify as a *lung-gom-pa* runner, a trainee first had to master seated meditation. Much emphasis was placed on breath control and visualization techniques—for example, imagining one's body to be as light as a feather. After acquiring good breath control, a novice was instructed to practice in the evening by fixing his gaze intently on a single star as he ran and coordinating his pace with a secret *mantra* given to him by his teacher. The runner must keep his eyes fixed on the star (or some other equally distant object) and never allow himself to be distracted. Once *lung-gom-pa* runners attained the proper level of moving meditation, they could fly like the wind, virtually gliding along in the air in a state of deepest contemplation.<sup>6</sup>

The marathon monks of Mount Hiei achieve similar results with their training methods, but the secret of their success lies in their spiritual rather than their physical strength. This spiritual strength—derived from the desire to realize Buddhahood, for the sake of oneself and the sake of others, in this very mind and body—is the key to the question "What makes the marathon monks run?"

Buddhism can never be understood purely through the intellect; it must be experienced: "Learn through the eyes, practice with the feet." The manner in which a suitable practice unfolds is known as *innen* in Japanese. *In* is composed of the inner factors, the stirring up of the Buddha-mind from deep within; *en* are the circumstances in which the drama is played out.

A man is drawn to Hiei and then to the path of a marathon monk. The *gyōja* have said that as soon as they don the robe of a marathon monk, all other concerns vanish; they gravitate toward the mountain paths, compelled by a powerful force that suffuses them with energy. The first 700 days of training are to enable the

marathon monk to establish himself; it is a pilgrimage carried out in the immense silence of the Absolute on a remote, majestic, and mysterious mountain where gods and Buddhas dwell. Leaving behind the cacophony of the restless, relentless world, the monk isolates himself to live every day as if it were his last.

Midway on the marathon route the road narrows to a tiny footpath. To the left the runner looks down on Kyoto, a sea of lights wherein all the attractions, good and bad, that the world has to offer hold forth. To the right is Lake Biwa, sparkling in the moonlight, calm, clear, and empty. The marathon monk hovers briefly between the two spheres of worldly entanglement and Buddhist enlightenment and then presses on, hoping someday to transcend both.

In the last 300 days of the marathon, the focus shifts. The monk emerges from his hibernation, possessed of a certain measure of wisdom and compassion, to roam in a big city among all sorts of human beings, spreading light and happiness. A balance is struck between practice for one's own sake and practice for the benefit of all.

At the end, the marathon monk has become one with the mountain, flying along a path that is free of obstruction. The joy of practice has been discovered and all things are made new each day. The stars and sky, the stones, the plants, and the trees, have become the monk's trusted companions; he can predict the week's weather by the shape of the clouds, the direction of the wind, and the smell of the air; he knows the exact times each species of bird and insect begin to sing; and he takes special delight in that magic moment of the day when the moon sets and the sun rises, poised in the center of creation. Awakened to the Supreme, one marathon monk described his attitude thus: "Gratitude for the teaching of the enlightened ones, gratitude for the wonders of nature, gratitude for the charity of human beings, gratitude for the opportunity to practice—gratitude, not asceticism, is the principle of the 1,000-day *kaibōgyō*." Indeed, on the last day of the 1,000-day run, the monks have a saying: "The real practice begins from now."

The marathon monks are devotees of Fudō Myō-ō (Acala Vidyārāja), the Unshakable King of Light. Fudō has a fearful face, terribly troubled by the world's inequities, its stupor, and its implacable hatred of the Dharma. Encompassed by a fiery nimbus, Fudō burns up evil passions while illuminating the darkest corners of existence. His lasso can be used to bind devils or to pull those in distress out of the mud. Fudō's sword hacks off the heads of those who pollute the world but at the same time slices through all obstacles to reveal the deepest wisdom. As an incarnation of the cosmic Buddha Dainichi (Mahāvairocana), Fudō is the active element of

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salvation, capable of channeling his awesome power to others.<sup>7</sup> The marathon monks strive to become one with Fudō, to actually perceive that dynamic image as a living force and to tap that awesome energy. When questioned about this experience the marathon monks remain mum, but senior *gyōja* know when their disciples have had the vision, the greatest of all rewards: "You have seen him, haven't you? Now you have the look of a real marathon monk!"

## NOTES

7. For a detailed discussion of the four kinds of *samādhi* see Daniel B. Stevenson, "The Four Kinds of Samadhi in Early T'ien-t'ai Buddhism," *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 45–98.
8. Chap. 14, "A Happy Life."
9. See Tsukamoto Zenryū, "Buddhism and Fine Arts in Kyoto (II)," *Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987), pp. 62–75.
10. For a record of his experiences see Nakano Eiken, *Rōzan Juni-nen* (Kyoto: Nihon Bungeisha, 1970), and *Ichigo o ikiru* (Kyoto: Shirakawa Sho-in, 1976). In Take Kakuchō, "Hiei-zan no gyō", Watanabe et al., *Hiei-zan*, pp. 173–179, there is a list of all the twelve-year retreatants of the modern era.

## MOUNT HIEI TODAY

1. Mosher's book, *Kyoto, A Contemplative Guide*, contains an excellent guide, with maps, of Hiei. A similar "contemplative" guide in Japanese is Kajiwara Gaku and Kikuchi Tōta, *Hiei-Zan* (Tokyo: Kōsei Shuppansha, 1986). Enryaku-ji puts out two excellent guides in Japanese—both entitled *Hiei-zan*—which are available at the souvenir stands on the mountain. An interesting modern short story on Hiei is Ri'ichi Yokomitsu's "Mount Hiei," translated by Lane Dunlop in *Translation*, vol. 17 (Fall, 1986), pp. 117–129.
2. A tremendous exhibition on Tendai art toured Japan to great acclaim during 1986. The catalogue, containing over 350 illustrations with summaries in English, is essential reading: *Hiei-zan to Tendai no bijutsu* (Tokyo: Asahi Shimbun-sha, 1986).
3. A nicely illustrated guidebook to Sakamoto is Kawasaki Tōru's *Monzen-machi Sakamoto* (Otsu: Ōmi Bunka-sha, 1980).

## MOUNTAIN PILGRIMAGE

1. Major scholarly studies of *kaibōgyō* in Japanese include Hiramatsu Chōkū, *Hiei-zan kaibōgyō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Miosha, 1982); Ōdera Bunei, "Hiei-zan kaihōgyō no shiteki tenkai," and Misaki Ryōshū, "Hiei-zan no kaihōgyō to sono riron-teki konkyō," both in *Bukkyō ni okeru shūgyō to sono riron-teki konkyō* (Tokyo: Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai, 1980); Murayama Shuichi, "Kaihōshugen-shi," *Hiei-zan I*, pp. 93–120; Mitsunaga Chōdō, "Sennichi kaihōgyō," *Hiei-zan II*, pp. 133–158; and Take Kakushō, "Sennichi kaihōgyō," *Hiei-zan*, pp. 157–169. In English there is an incredibly dull article on *kaibōgyō* in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, Tendai issue, vol. 14, nos. 2 & 3 (June & September 1987), pp. 185–202.
2. This occurs in the *Kongōchō-kyō* (*Taishō Daizō-kyō* (Skt. *Vajrasékhara-sūtra*), vol. 19, no. 957.) There is also a verse in the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* extolling those "who, unsleeping, walk about the forest diligently seeking the Buddha Way" (translation by Katō et al.).

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1. Nowadays the knife is usually carried only by the 1,000-day marathon monks.
2. The offering of *shikimi* branches at all the stations of worship along the route is called *kuge*.
3. In proper Sanskrit transliteration this runs: *namah samanta vajrāṇam canda mahāroṣaṇa spboṭaya hūm traṭ hāmmāmī*. The meaning is something like "Hail to the Diamond Fire Kings,

## NOTES

the fearful Lords who terrorize evildoers; shatter too the darkness which lurks in my heart, O Holy Unshakable King of Light!"

4. The course is as follows: Hiei—Sekisan-in—Shinnyō-dō—Heian Shrine—Gyōja Bridge—Kiyomizu-dera—Gojō Tennin—Shinsen-in—Kitano Temman Shrine—Shimogamo Shrine—Kawai Shrine—Shōjōren-in.
5. An up-to-date list of the *gyōja* appears in Watanabe et al., *Hiei-zan*, pp. 163–166.
6. An account of the *lung-gom-pa* runners appears in Alexandra David-Neel's *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), pp. 199–216.
7. For an excellent illustrated study of this important deity see *Fudō Myō-ō* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1984).

## RUNNING BUDDHAS

1. Much of the information on the early *gyōja* comes from Hagami Shōchō, *Dōshin*, revised edition, (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1971), pp. 239–266.
2. Genjun wrote of his experiences in "Hiei-zan kaihōgyō ni tsuite," *Gyō no bukkyō, Nibon seishin gyōsetsu*, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Sanshō-dō, 1939), pp. 1–25.
3. For a short biography of Hakozaki, see Kobayashi Ryūshō, "Fudō Myō-ō no gotoku ni iku; shinja de ari, gyōja de ari," *Tendai* 4 (1981), pp. 25–31.
4. Among Hagami's many publications the following two books deal primarily with *kaibōgyō: Dōshin* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1971), and *Ganshin* (Tokyo: Hōzōin, 1986). The second volume contains English translations of some of Hagami's talks delivered overseas.
5. Mitsunaga has written a book about his experiences: *Tada no hito to nare* (Tokyo: Yamanote Shobō, 1973). He is also featured together with Utsumi Shunshō in the illustrated book by Shirasu Misako and Gōtō Chikako, *Kaihōgyō* (Tokyo: Shinshin-dō, 1976) and has an article on *kaibōgyō* in Gotō et al., *Hiei-zan Enryakuji Sen-nibyaku-nen* (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1986) pp. 80–91.
6. Utsumi is the centerpiece of the picture book *Hokurei no hito* by Hayashi Takashi and Murakami Mamoru (Tokyo: Kōsei Shuppansha, 1983). He was also the subject of a fascinating documentary film, *Yomigaeru Tōtō* ("Phoenix Mount Hiei") that was submitted to the U.S. Motion Picture Academy Awards in 1980. Unfortunately, it did not win.
7. Not surprisingly, Sakai is the subject of an ever-increasing number of books: Wazaki Nobuya, *Ajari Tanjō* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1979); Nishigawa Isamu, *Gyō* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1981); Shima Kazuharu, *Gyōdō ni iku* (Tokyo: Kōsei Shuppansha, 1983); Kikuchi Tōta and Noki Shosuke, *Nisennichi kaibōgyō* (Tokyo: Kōsei Shuppansha, 1987); Shima Kazuharu, *Sakai Yūsai* (Tokyo: Shinjūsha, 1987); and a photo essay issued by the Imuro-kai, *Hokurei kaibōgyō: nisennichi mangyō kinen shashin-shū* (Osaka: Imuro-kai, 1987). NHK television, the Japanese national network, has produced several programs on Sakai.
8. Hiramatsu Chōkū, *Hiei-zan kaibōgyō-ki* (Tokyo: Miosha, 1981). The book contains many interesting photographs, which, unfortunately, are very poorly reproduced.

warmth. The long years of training and ceaseless introspection have rubbed the rough edges smooth, and Sakai is—as one would expect of a living Buddha—open, wise, and unpretentious. His sanctity is unsanctimonious; constantly smiling—even just before *dōiri*, the “living death”—Sakai unostentatiously makes tea for his guests while chatting away in a lively Ōsaka accent, answers the phone with a hearty “Hello, this is Sakai,” and slips into a threadbare warmup suit when he has a lot of calligraphy to brush. One of Sakai’s favorite calligraphic sayings is the Zen-flavored “Everyday mind is the way.” Sakai never boasts of mystic flights or clairvoyant powers; the only unusual experience he might mention is the breaking of his rosary at the moment of his father’s death in a Tokyo hospital.

One unique quality about Sakai is his sensitivity to all forms of life. As he walked through the mountains day after day, he was struck by the incredible energy of the weeds, how they sprout and grow despite all obstacles. Even though weeding is an important Buddhist practice, Sakai stopped weeding his temple garden, explaining: “Weeds, too, have a right to live.” This marathon monk is also fond of animals. The beasts he encounters on his runs—birds, rabbits, monkeys, deer, snakes, even boars—he feels are his companions. Sakai keeps a bunch of dogs at his temple, including a couple of real old mongrels, and at least one happily wags along with its master on the *kaibōgyō* rounds.

Regarding his practice, Sakai has said: “Human life is like a candle; if it burns out halfway it does no one any good. I want the flame of my practice to consume my candle completely, letting that light illuminate thousands of places. My practice is to live wholeheartedly, with gratitude and without regret. Practice really has no beginning nor end; when practice and daily life are one, that is true Buddhism.”

This effervescent sixty-year-old marathon monk often exclaims brightly to his visitors, “Life is so wonderful!”

Among the fifty or so priests who have completed a 100-day *kaibōgyō* term since 1868, Hiramatsu Chōkū is one of the most interesting. A former military man who served in both Japan’s Imperial Army and the postwar Self-Defense Force, Hiramatsu became a Tendai priest shortly after his retirement from the force at age fifty-four. He enrolled in a Buddhist university and then decided to undergo a 100-day *kaibōgyō*. Since he was in excellent shape and accustomed to hardship as a military officer, the Hiei Council of Gyōja granted him permission despite his advanced age and recent ordination. He is also the only priest (it is thought) to have been married while performing the marathon.