



**Witness** an online magazine

# The Shape of Silence

Kōyasan-Buddhism in Japan

Photographs & Text  
by  
Richard Falco

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## Koyasan - Buddhism in Japan

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Buddhism has played a foundational role in shaping Japan's cultural, artistic, and intellectual history since its formal introduction in the 6th century. Arriving via the Korean Peninsula from the Asian continent, it was initially supported by elite clans and the imperial court. Because of this, it quickly became intertwined with governance and statecraft, helping to legitimize political authority while also introducing new systems of ethics, ritual, and cosmology.

Over time, different schools such as Shingon Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Pure Land Buddhism adapted Buddhist teachings to Japanese society, influencing everything from court ceremony and education to language, literature, and visual culture. Temples became centers not only of worship but of learning, art production, and social organization, embedding Buddhism deeply into the fabric of daily life.

Buddhism also profoundly shaped Japanese ideas about nature, impermanence, and death, blending with indigenous Shinto beliefs into a uniquely syncretic worldview. Concepts such as impermanence (*mujō*) informed aesthetics, visible in tea ceremony, poetry, and garden design, while practices surrounding ancestors and memorial rites established a continuous relationship between the living and the dead.

Even today, Buddhist rituals remain central to funerals and remembrance, with temples and sites like Kōyasan serving as active spiritual landscapes rather than historical relics. In this way, Buddhism continues to function in Japan not only as a religion but as a cultural infrastructure shaping how time, memory, and meaning are experienced.





Dawn in the temple—  
silence resting in deep peace,  
light without a sound.

-Japanese Hiaku



報恩謝徳

Kōyasan (Mount Kōya) is one of Japan's most important Buddhist pilgrimage sites—an isolated mountaintop temple complex in Wakayama Prefecture, about two hours south of Osaka. It is located high plateau about 800 meters above sea level. For more than 1,200 years, it has been one of Japan's most important religious sites—headquarters of Shingon Buddhism, a tradition of esoteric ritual and meditation. It is not a single temple but a functioning town of sacred architecture, hidden cemeteries, and working monasteries surrounded by ridgelines and cedar forest.

Kōyasan feels different from most tourist sites in Japan because it is still alive as a religious community. Monks walk the streets in robes. Temple bells ring daily. Ritual is not staged for outsiders. It continues whether anyone is watching or not.

The story of Kōyasan begins with one man: Kūkai, known posthumously as Kōbō Daishi, “the Great Teacher Who Spread the Dharma.” Born in 774, Kūkai lived during the early Heian period, a time when Japan was looking toward China for cultural and intellectual influence. In 804, he traveled to Tang Dynasty China, then the center of Buddhist scholarship in East Asia. There he encountered esoteric Buddhism, a complex system built around mantras, mudras (hand gestures), and mandalas (sacred diagrams). Unlike more devotional forms of Buddhism, esoteric practice promised something immediate: the possibility of enlightenment in this lifetime through disciplined ritual and meditation.

Kūkai returned to Japan in 806 carrying texts, ritual objects, and an ambitious vision. In 816, he was granted land on a remote mountain basin. Instead of building a single monastery, he founded a religious settlement shaped like a mandala—a spiritual city designed to embody the Buddhist cosmos. Over centuries, Kōyasan grew into a network of more than 100 temples, many still active today.

At Danjō Garan, one of the mountain's main sacred complexes, Kōyasan's spiritual geometry becomes visible. Buildings are arranged with deliberate symbolic intent, reflecting the mandala structure central to Shingon teaching.



Ancient temple courtyards—  
shadows stretch across worn stone,  
peace sits without effort.  
- Japanese Kiaku



Danjō Garan





Stone garden at dawn—  
silence shaped by quiet peace,  
nothing asks to change.  
- Japanese Hiaku



Banryūtei rock garden





Raked sand around stone—  
silence held within deep peace,  
all things return inward.  
- Japanese Kiaku




The most striking structure is the Konpon Daitō, a towering vermilion pagoda that rises above the surrounding halls. Its color is startling against the muted greens and browns of cedar forest. Inside, the pagoda holds a three-dimensional mandala representation of the enlightened universe, a physical teaching tool built to shape the mind through space.

Nearby stands Kongōbu-ji, the administrative center of Shingon Buddhism and one of Kōyasan's most visited temples. Its interiors are defined by dark wood corridors, sliding doors, and painted screens. Outside is the Banryūtei rock garden, Japan's largest dry landscape garden, composed of raked white gravel and more than 700 stones arranged to evoke dragons emerging from clouds. The garden is not meant to be read like a picture. It is meant to be contemplated, an exercise in stillness and attention.

But the mountain's most powerful site is not its grand halls or pagodas. It is its cemetery.





Cemetery steps fade—  
green fingers hold the gray rock,  
time sits without words.  
- Japanese Kiaku

Okunoin Cemetary



A short walk from the town center leads to Okunoin, Japan's largest cemetery and one of its most haunting sacred landscapes. The entrance begins at Ichinohashi Bridge, where stone paving disappears into a dense cedar forest. The atmosphere shifts almost immediately. Light dims. The air cools. The smell of moss and damp earth rises from the ground. Sound becomes muted, absorbed by the trees.

Okunoin stretches nearly two kilometers, lined with more than 200,000 grave markers and memorial stones. Many are ancient, their inscriptions worn smooth by centuries of rain. Moss grows thick over everything—stone lanterns, statues, tomb bases—turning the cemetery into something that feels less like architecture and more like geology. It is not a place of neat rows and manicured lawns. It is a forest that has slowly absorbed the dead.

The graves belong to all levels of Japanese society: feudal lords, Buddhist priests, poets, merchants, soldiers, and ordinary families. There are memorials erected by corporations, a uniquely modern Japanese tradition, where companies



At Okunoin, many gravestones and small stone figures—especially Jizō statues—are draped with red bibs, knit caps, or colored cloth as a form of devotional offering.



Okunoin Cemetary

Quiet stone under moss—  
silence dissolving to peace,  
world turns to green hush.  
- Japanese Hiaku



place monuments to honor employees or commemorate prosperity. The mix of ancient and contemporary feels natural here. Death in Okunoin is not frozen in the past tense. It is continuous.

Okunoin captures something central to Japanese spiritual life: the closeness of the living and the dead. In Japan, ancestors are not distant figures. They remain present through memorial rituals, household altars, seasonal festivals such as Obon, and visits to graves. Kōyasan is an extreme expression of that worldview—an entire mountain shaped by remembrance.

Yet Kōyasan is not only a landscape of death. It is equally a place of living ritual, where architecture and geography are shaped by Buddhist cosmology.

Visitors come to Kōyasan for two overlapping reasons: spiritual purpose and cultural immersion. For Japanese pilgrims, it is a sacred destination tied to Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi), who is believed not to have died but to remain in eternal meditation at Okunoin. Many come to pray for deceased relatives, seek protection, or make merit through ritual. For international travelers, Kōyasan represents a rare chance to experience Buddhism not as a museum subject, but as a living tradition—monks, chanting, incense, and daily practice continuing as it has for centuries.

Once there, visitors follow a rhythm shaped by the mountain itself. Many begin at Danjō Garan, walking through temple halls and pagodas laid out according to Shingon cosmology. They visit Kongōbu-ji, explore its painted interiors, and sit quietly at the Banryūtei rock garden, where contemplation is part of the experience. Others spend hours walking the forest paths to Okunoin Cemetery, passing thousands of moss-covered gravestones and lanterns before reaching the mausoleum area where prayers are offered to Kōbō Daishi. The walk becomes a kind of moving meditation—slow, silent, and deeply atmospheric.

For travelers, one of Kōyasan's most intimate experiences is not in its famous halls but in its lodging houses. More than fifty temples offer shukubō, traditional temple accommodations once reserved for pilgrims. Guests sleep in tatami rooms, eat monastic vegetarian cuisine, and wake before dawn to attend prayers.





Koyasan receives roughly 1.4 million visitors per year.  
This includes both domestic and international tourists.

Before the shrine doors—  
the bow folds into silence,  
peace answers without sound.  
-Japanese Hiaku



Visitors pray and give thanks to many of the Buddhist monuments located throughout the complex.



At the shrine entrance—  
offerings of quiet breath,  
the heart learns to be still.  
-Japanese Hiaku



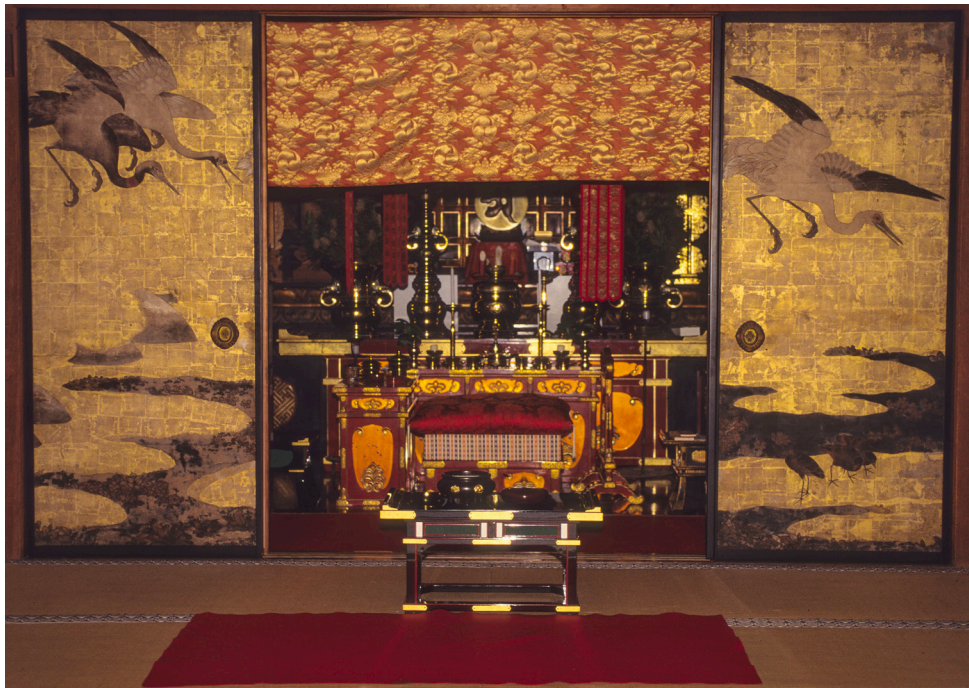
Decor is subtle and often spiritual in tone. Many rooms include a tokonoma alcove, where a seasonal flower arrangement, a hanging scroll, or a small piece of calligraphy is displayed. Common areas may open onto small temple gardens or courtyards, emphasizing stillness and connection to nature. Throughout the building, the overall feeling is less like a hotel and more like a living religious space—simple, orderly, and designed to support meditation, silence, and the rhythm of temple life.

Dinner is *shōjin ryōri*, Buddhist vegetarian cuisine built around tofu, seasonal vegetables, mountain roots, miso soups, sesame sauces, and rice. The flavors are subtle and layered. The food is not designed for indulgence but for awareness.

At dawn, a bell rings. Guests sit in a dim prayer hall as monks chant sutras in resonant tones. The sound rises and falls like waves, vibrating in the chest. Incense smoke coils upward into candlelit darkness. Even visitors who do not

Shukubō (temple lodgings) on Mount Kōya are typically decorated in a restrained, traditional Japanese style meant to encourage calm and reflection. Guest rooms usually have tatami mat floors, sliding shōji screens, and fusuma doors, with simple wooden trim and natural materials that create a quiet, minimalist atmosphere. Instead of Western beds, guests sleep on futons that are rolled out at night and stored away during the day, keeping the room open and uncluttered.





Throughout the interiors, the space is quietly elegant and refined. The hanging scrolls, calligraphy, sculptures, artwork, and flower displays create a mediative silence that surrounds and soothes the spirit.

understand the words often describe the experience as deeply affecting—not because of belief, but because of rhythm and atmosphere. The chanting feels like time made audible.

The monks' morning ritual at Kōyasan is not a performance for visitors—it is the daily spiritual engine of temple life, repeated with discipline and precision, often before sunrise. In the cold mountain air, the day begins with the sound of a bell or wooden clapper echoing through the corridors, signaling that it is time to gather.

Guests staying in shukubō are usually invited to sit quietly in the main prayer hall. The space is dim and formal: tatami floors, polished wood, hanging lanterns, and a central altar glowing with candlelight. Incense is lit early, and the scent fills the room with a sharp, resinous sweetness. Monks enter in robes, moving with practiced calm. There is little speaking. The atmosphere is structured around silence and routine.

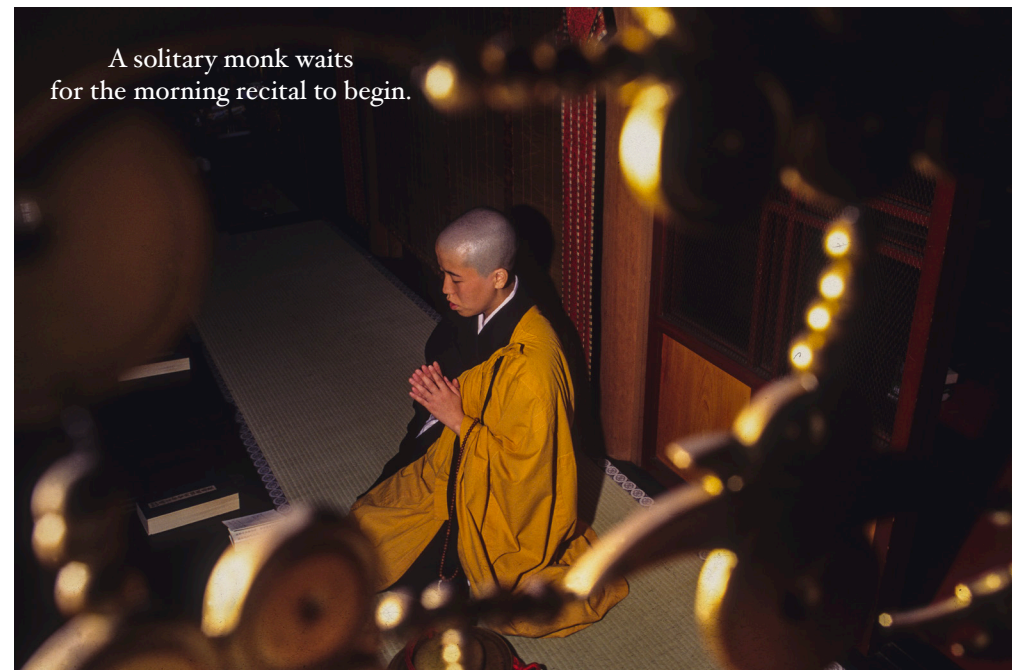
The core of the ritual is sutra chanting, often in deep, resonant tones that rise and fall like a tide. In Shingon Buddhism, chanting is not simply devotional—it is believed to have spiritual power. The sound itself is considered transformative, aligning the mind and body with Buddhist truth. The chants may include Sanskrit-derived mantras rendered in Japanese phonetics, along with sections of classical Buddhist scripture. To outsiders the words are unintelligible, but the rhythm is unmistakable: steady, hypnotic, and physical, vibrating in the chest.

Alongside chanting, monks perform offerings—rice, water, tea, and incense placed before the altar. Some rituals include the ringing of hand bells (kane) and the use of ritual implements associated with esoteric practice. Depending on the temple, visitors may also witness goma fire ceremonies (more dramatic, though not always part of the everyday morning service). In a goma rite, wooden prayer sticks are burned in a controlled sacred fire, symbolizing the destruction of ignorance and worldly attachment. The flames are treated as an active spiritual force, carrying prayers upward through smoke.

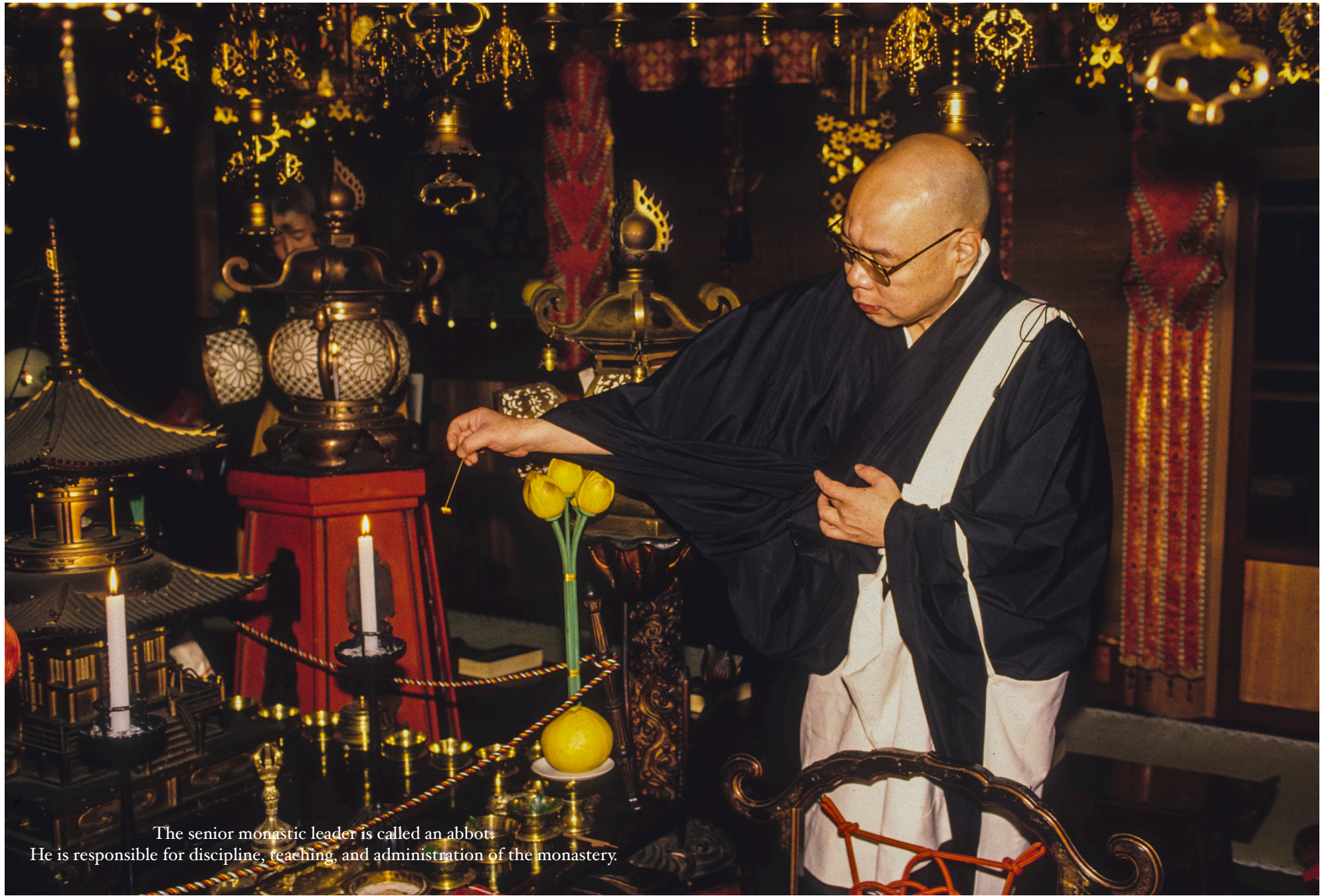
The entire service can last from 20 minutes to over an hour. Guests are expected to remain still, seated on the floor, often with hands folded or resting in their lap. Some temples allow visitors to write prayer requests in advance—names of deceased relatives, hopes for health, protection, or success—which are included in the morning prayers.

What makes the ritual memorable is its sensory intensity. The chanting is low and thunderous, the incense thick, the candles flickering against gold altars and lacquered wood. Outside, the mountain remains dark and quiet. The effect is less like attending a religious service and more like stepping into a different relationship with time—one measured not by clocks, but by breath, repetition, and sound.

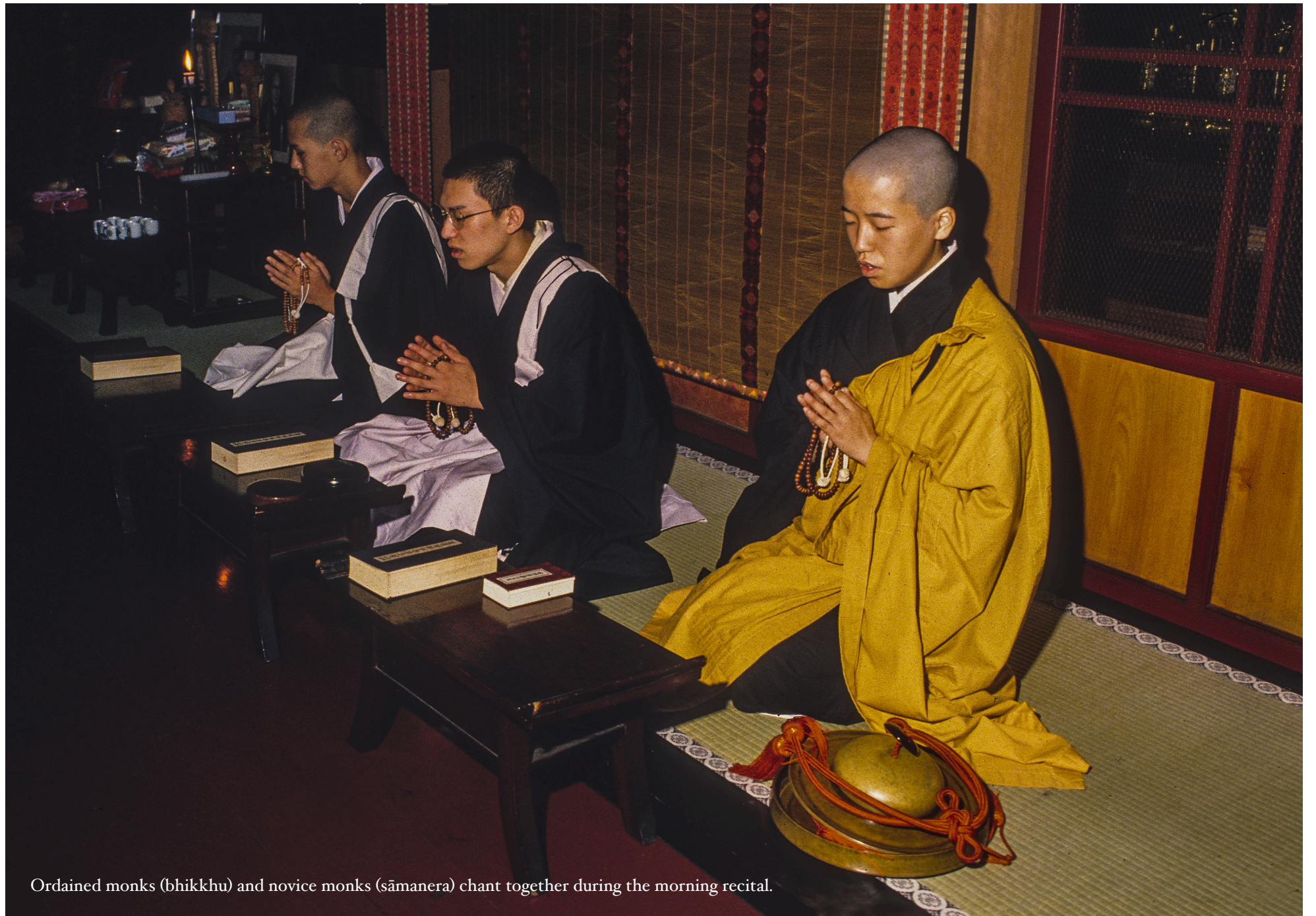
When it is time to leave, the descent feels abrupt. The cable car drops through the cedar forest, and the air warms with each meter lost. At the bottom, the train waits, ready to return travelers to Osaka and the fast pulse of modern Japan. But Kōyasan lingers in the mind: lantern flames flickering



A solitary monk waits for the morning recital to begin.



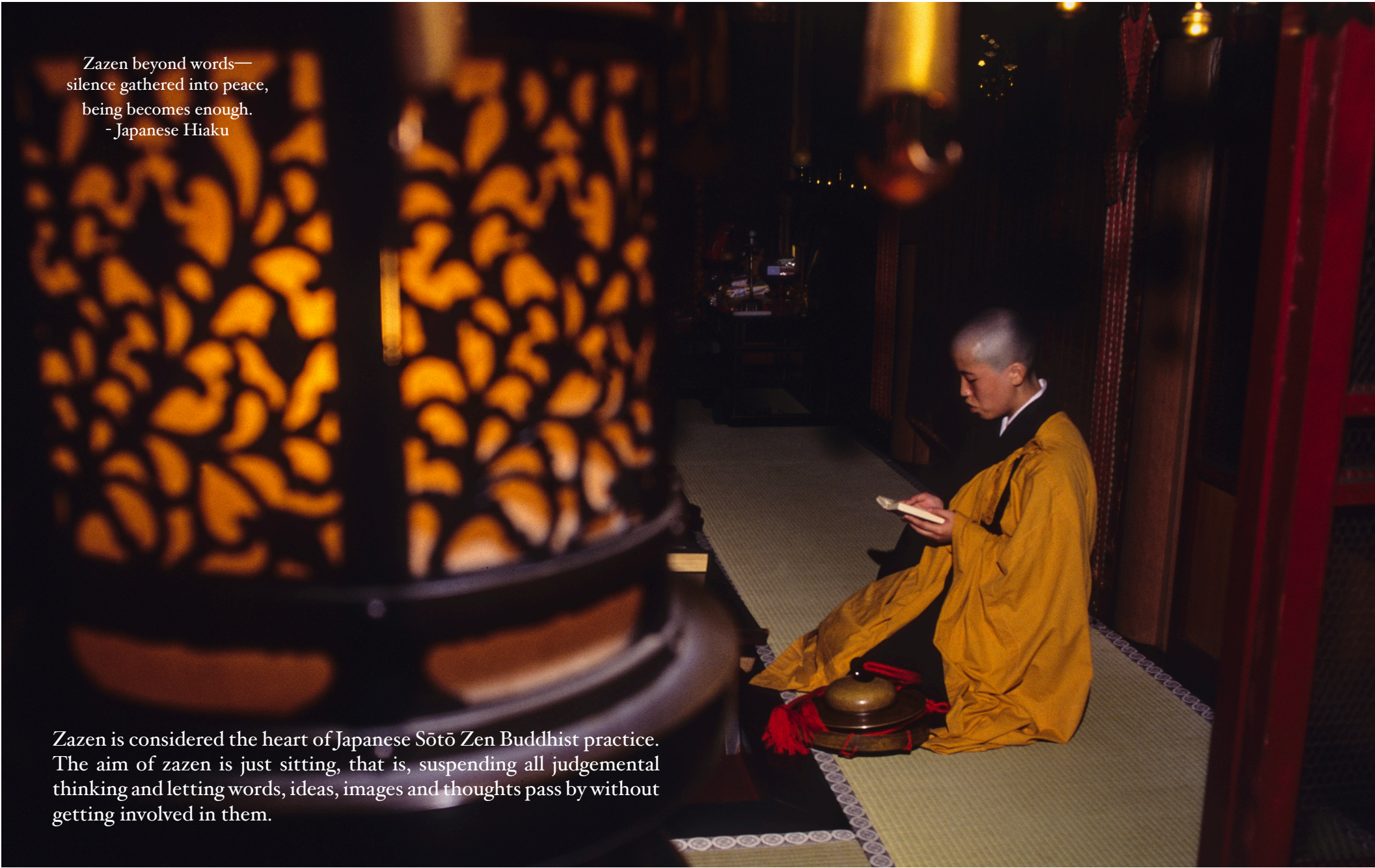
The senior monastic leader is called an abbot.  
He is responsible for discipline, teaching, and administration of the monastery.



Ordained monks (bhikkhu) and novice monks (sāmanera) chant together during the morning recital.



The morning service is led by the monastery's abbot.



Zazen beyond words—  
silence gathered into peace,  
being becomes enough.  
- Japanese Hiaku

Zazen is considered the heart of Japanese Sōtō Zen Buddhist practice. The aim of zazen is just sitting, that is, suspending all judgemental thinking and letting words, ideas, images and thoughts pass by without getting involved in them.



in a dark hall, moss creeping over stone names, the sound of chanting before sunrise, and the forest's quiet insistence that time is longer than any one life.

High on its plateau, surrounded by ridges and cedars, the mountain continues its work—holding its rituals, holding its dead, holding its silence. A place where Japan does not shout its meaning. It whispers.

## Richard Falco

Richard Falco has worked as a photographer, documentary filmmaker, journalist, and educator for the past thirty-five years. He has traveled extensively worldwide, working on assignments in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the United States. His photographs have appeared in major publications. Clients include *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *New York Times*, *Life*, *National Geographic Society*, *People*, *Geo*, *New York Magazine*, *Stern*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, to name a few.

There are seven published books of his work: *To Bear Witness/September 11*, *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community*; *Hunger and Rice in Asia*; *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive in Salem*; *Water, Wild & Light: The Dingle Peninsula*; *India: A Timeless Testimonial*; and *Autumn Madrigals*.

Falco is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care in America*, *Project Music: Not A Single Dissonant Note*, and *Holding Back the Surge*, and the executive producer of the films *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*. He is also the editor & chief of *Witness Magazine*.

He has exhibited in the United States and abroad. Exhibitions include the International Center of Photography, NY; Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC; Nikon Galleries, Tokyo; New York Historical Society, NY; and others.

Falco is a winner of the *International Media Award*, a 15-time award winner for *Excellence in Journalism* from the Society of Professional Journalists, and an *Award for Excellence* from the Society of Publication Designers.

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