

Publications

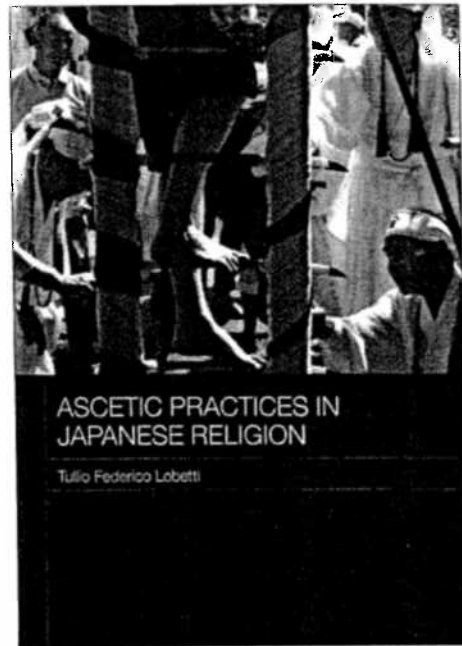
Tullio Federico Lobetti, *Ascetic Practices in Japanese Religion*, Routledge, Japan Anthropology Workshop Series, London 2014

Reviewed by Massimo Raveri

The use of the body in pain as a means of spiritual empowerment manifests itself with astonishing richness throughout Japanese religious history. This richness is due to the many different traditions that have modelled ascetic practices: the idea that the more you willingly suffer and endure hardship, the greater the spiritual power you will obtain is embodied in the yoga tradition and becomes somehow bound to the Daoist techniques for immortality and the shamanistic practice of altered states of consciousness in order to communicate with spirits. Translated into Buddhist discourse, it created the concept of *sokushin jōbutsu*, the possibility of becoming a Buddha in the present body: a fundamental doctrine, on a higher philosophical level, of the Shingon and Tendai esoteric teachings. These traditions constructed what may be defined as a new form of ‘reconcilable duality’, between two different dimensions of the body: the material and the sacred, the ‘vessel of many sicknesses’ and the ‘body of merit and wisdom’. The body was therefore considered capable of potentially becoming the perfect expression of the Dharmakāya.

The notion of *sokushin jōbutsu* underlies, more or less explicitly, a great part of the ascetic practices still alive in Japan, particularly in the Shugendō tradition. For centuries, sacred mountains and their inner recesses have been identified with the dual *maṇḍala*: the *taizōkai* and the *kongōkai*. The master instructs his disciple to perceive the physical elements of the mountain as revelations of a sacred dimension, guiding him along esoteric paths of meditation, to pass a test of enduring inhuman privation, including hunger, cold, and lack of sleep, in search for the ultimate secrets of the mind. ‘The mountain will teach you through the body’ said one practitioner to Lobetti. But also the sacredness of the mountain is renewed each time by the ascetic’s meditation on the three esoteric mysteries (*sanmitsu*) of the body, the sound and the mind of Dainichi, the luminous perfection of absolute emptiness.

Concepts, visions and rituals, transmitted by generations of masters, have been surrounded for centuries by a certain reverent silence, if not by downright secrecy. Until the publications of fundamental studies such as Gorai Shigeru’s *Sangaku shūkyōshi kenkyū sōsho* (1975/1989), Wakamori Tarō’s *Shugendōshi kenkyū* (1972), and Miyake Hitoshi’s *Shugendō girei no kenkyū* (1971) and *Shugendō shisō no kenkyū* (1985), relevant materials were often scarce because the ascetics were mystics who despised words as empty sounds. In general we have monographic works centred on a particular practice of a school, analysed in a historical or theological perspective. Tullio Lobetti chose to study this subject from an



anthropological perspective. But rather than focusing his research on a single practice or on a single Buddhist sect, he decided to attempt a systematic analysis of a number of case studies.

Lobetti laboured on the project for four years, a significant part of which was spent in Japan, in participant observation on the field, mainly in the three sacred mountains of Dewa— under the guidance of Suzuki Masataka (Keio University) and Lucia Dolce (SOAS). Collecting the data must surely have been a very difficult endeavour. In the case of group practices— the author says — surveying the actions of the other practitioners was not always possible, since one’s view was impeded by some of the practice requirements. Taking pictures was even more difficult, because often the context forbids photography. Enquiries about the meaning or circumstances of practice needed to be conducted carefully, as in all cases the leaders were very busy and not prone to dedicate time to answering questions. In some cases, a rigid hierarchical scale was implemented inside the group of ascetics, which made the participants’ upper echelons unavailable to neophytes. But the difficulty and complexity of the subject are also due to the problem of defining the nature and the cultural boundaries of the term ‘asceticism’ itself, which is inherently vague, and to the ambiguity in postulating some form of asceticism as a ‘universal’ category that could meaningfully be used to comprehend the various phenomena of bodily practices present in the Japanese religious context. The author is clearly conscious that these are key issues, the crucial questions at the core of his research.

Consequently, in the first chapter Lobetti deconstructs the origins and the historical development of the Western understanding of concepts of ‘asceticism’, acknowledging the variety of its meanings. It emerges how the contemporary Western conceptions of mystic practices have been heavily informed by the perception of the human body that originated in the modern period. The

practice of pain seems to connect all the ascetic experiences. In our tradition, concepts such as ‘self-denial’, ‘the contempt of the body’, and the ‘mortification of the flesh’ appear to be perfectly coherent with our common-sense characteristics of asceticism. But Lobetti’s research clearly demonstrates how Japanese ascetics consider their bodies as a precious device for empowerment and in no circumstance does a sense of contempt and disregard ever arise: his participant observation testifies that the ascetic practices are not moral repressive actions, done in repentance for the sins: the pain is chosen not for its destructive power, but quite the contrary, it is chosen for its power to transform the practitioner and awaken in him unknown energies.

Lobetti critically reconsiders whether the term ‘asceticism’ may be proficiently employed as an ‘umbrella-term’ to translate phenomena that, in the Japanese context, are indicated by a variety of different terms: *kugyō* (painful practice), *aragyō* (dreadful practice) and more often *shugyō* (practice). The term *gyō* is utilized to convey the meaning that the religious path must be experienced in a very personal way, through some extraordinary practices codified by tradition, in contrast with ordinary bodily practices. The difference from normality is, in this case, the quantity of effort and austerities used to discipline and purify the body, in order to reshape the mind and open it to a new perspective of self-knowledge and liberation.

Chapters two, three, and four constitute the central body of the book. They are devoted to establishing a systematization of a number of ascetic phenomena in respect to their mode of practice, with the purpose of defining, among the many variables, some fundamental constants in the dynamic relationship between the categories of the human body, pain, and power.

The body can be seen as the cultural locus where the ascetic tradition is preserved and through which it is transmitted. Asceticism can be conceived as an ‘embodied tradition’ which is free to circulate among different religious movements, where it can be re-interpreted following the doctrinal agendas of each specific religious discourse. It is a process, through which unexpressed bodily sensations and feelings are associated with clearly expressed theoretical meanings. For example, the ‘sense of loss’ that ascetics so often experience, is associated with the acquisition of a greater purity of mind and the idea of ‘annihilating oneself’. Reproducing the performance of ascetic acts by means of one’s own body generates the *text* in which the body of the performer is part of the text itself.

Lobetti then develops his analysis exploring the role of the ascetic discourse inside the social and religious context, and the way ascetics build their identity. In many studies, ascetic practices are considered expressions of a ‘folk religion’ (*minzoku shākūyō*), with a diminutive meaning. But in comparison with the ‘orthodoxy’ of the great temples, these ‘popular’ practices are more free and creative in articulating new theological perspectives, different visions, unusual symbolic correlations, thus creat-

ing a body of ‘ascetic lore’ that still today represents a relevant part of the life of established religious traditions. I fully agree with the author in underlining that these practices are not marginal at all.

Lobetti’s fieldwork witnesses the performance of religious practices that can be labelled as ‘ascetic’ in a progressive scale of physical commitment and doctrinal complexity. In some occasions they could be ascetic feats performed as the core of communal rituals, in order to enrich and deepen the religious experience with layers of meaning and symbols. People closely connected with the organization of the *matsuri* or the *daikagura*, generally perform the *mizugori*, the purifying water ablution. During the *harumatsuri* and *akimatsuri* the rites of *hiwatari* (fire crossing) and *hawatari* (climbing of the ladder of swords), constitute main events. On other occasions ascetic practices can take place outside the institutional religious body. It is the case of the *samugyō*, which is practiced in the mountains, in winter. It consists of standing naked under a sacred waterfall, with eyes closed, the mind concentrated on reciting a *mantra*, and the hands tightened in a *mudra*, in order to achieve a body-mind dimension of clarity and purity.

The *akinomine*, the annual mountain-entry practice at Mount Haguro, or the *okugake shugyō*, the pilgrimage from Yoshino to Kumano, represent still another typology. The presence of religious professionals is crucial for the undertaking. The practice leaders, or *sendatsu*, are in fact the temple heads. All of them are fully ordained monks, and they are responsible for the performance of the rituals. Unlike the previous cases, there is a remarkably solid and articulated doctrinal structure underlying the whole practice, and this, coupled with the active presence of the monks, enhances the sense of a rigid orthodoxy. The underlying purpose of the whole procedure is to ‘experience the Ten Realms’ of existence (*jukkai shugyō*). In this practice, the *shugenja* are led from the realm of hell to that of the hungry ghosts, animals, demons, human beings, and gods by a series of ascetic exercises, specific to each realm, that push the participants to the edge of their physical endurance. They are asked to fast and drastically reduce food intake, to climb steep cliffs, to pass through very dangerous passages in the mountain, to pass little bridges suspended in the deep void of the valley, to plunge themselves into cold streams. Having discovered in themselves the supernatural outflow of energy that arises upon passing the limit, they are then allowed to have access to the four higher Realms of the Enlightenment. During the interviews with the author, many ascetics agreed that the practice is really effective if it can bring one near the brink of complete exhaustion, a point of no return from which it appears to be impossible either to come back to normal life or to advance to any successive stage but death.

Lobetti sets himself the ambitious goal of penetrating into the minds of these ascetics and discovering what urged them to undergo these practices in the sacred mountains. Sensibly, he does not attempt a psychoanalytical interpretation of these phenomena; instead he tries

to provide answers by relying on the assumptions that the ascetics themselves confessed to him during the informal, friendly conversations that spontaneously arose in the rare moments of rest during the days of the ascetic ordeals. Old men were more 'thankful' to the deity and wanted to preserve an existing relationship with the deity. They were past-oriented. The young were instead more future-oriented: They often mentioned very pragmatic and materialistic desires of good health, prosperity, and success in life. For them the practice was a way to shorten the time to reach their goals, utilizing the spiritual powers generated by the ascetic experience. Women proved to be more homogeneous in their behaviour and understanding. Nearly all the women were practicing for the sake of their family, parents, children, and husbands. They were taking part in an ascetic exercise in order to benefit *others*, rather than themselves. Religious professionals, such as Buddhist monks or Shintō priests, were a more homogeneous category of practitioners and portrayed a narrower range of motivations. Often they undertook ascetic practices in order to legitimize their roles in the community or advance in the hierarchy of their religious orders.

The solitude imposed by the *aragyō* can be better understood as the moment of 'de-socialization' required for the ascetic to legitimize himself and to become a 'holy person'. But the ascetic phenomenon, as Lobetti says, cannot be isolated from the society in which it took root and found such tenacious success. One reacts upon the other, and both create a universe of meanings and reciprocal obligations. The ascetics never withdraw completely from society. In short, they form a different kind of social organization ambiguously positioned at the margins, but their 'distance' is respected, because they carry considerable importance for the religious needs of the rural—and now urban—communities.

The intra-ascetic society seems to be constituted by at least three different groups, the temple heads and clergy, the people regularly attending the ascetic practices in the mountain and, at the lowest level, the newcomers or the occasional practitioners. They are positioned in a vertical relationship, but as the practice goes on and the weariness of the practitioners increases—as the author often remarked during his fieldwork—all the usual social relationships collapse into a much more vague division between temple leaders and practitioners. They become a uniform community overwhelmed by exhaustion, pain and fear. So, it can be concluded that the process of de-socialization takes place not only by virtue of the spatial dislocation of the ascetics in the 'sacred space' of the mountain, but within the intra-ascetic society as well. The centre of the collective experience is in fact the body, the physical dimensions of all practitioners.

But also the process of re-socialization is fundamental: asceticism is meaningful because it is structured and enacted on social terms. There is a sensation of rebirth vivid and sharp on the last day of the Haguro *akinomine* when, after the final service at the Dewasanzan *jinja*, the 'newborn' ascetic gives a loud cry (the cry of birth) and

then rushes outside the shrine precinct. The ascetic re-socializes again, but with a sense of having acquired a powerful spiritual strength and a radically new freedom.

Lobetti insists on the subjective nature of the practitioner's quest. For him, all kinds of ascetic achievements can be considered as variations of the same ideal: the search for the ultimate purity. Having done research in this same field, I fully agree with him. The sacred practices of the body speak about the unexhausted search, present in all religious traditions, to ascend from ordinary matter to something purer and holier. Tullio Lobetti, with sharp insight, chooses the term *corporis ascensus* to define the core of the ascetic experience: the ontological progression from the lowest level, that of an impure person, egocentric and deluded by his illusions, 'distracted', 'opened' and confused by the chaos of his undisciplined senses, to the serene perfection of the ultimate freedom of an ascetic who has achieved immortality. It is a long, difficult, but exalted itinerary of inner transformation, from the innocent and hesitating superficiality of the practitioner who, for the first time, follows his master along the path of the sacred mountain, to the silent glory of the self-mummified hermits of Mount Yudono who, through long and extremely painful practices, have achieved the deepest concentration, the complete detachment from all desires and needs, and an adamant purity of body and mind. Their sacred presence on the altar of the temple, transforms the mountain—here and now—in a luminous Pure Land of the Buddha.

The fact that, in contemporary Japan, ascetic practices and rituals are still so rich and varied, and so actively followed not only by monks and shamans but also by a remarkably heterogeneous range of laypeople, testifies to the strength and originality of its religious traditions. It is a merit of Tullio Lobetti to have given us, through this book, a vivid, authoritative and passionate description of this experience, not easy to live and understand, but certainly provocative and fascinating.

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