

The Mountain Monks of Japan

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Meet the Yamabushi, a group of alpine ascetics who are opting out of the rat race and reconnecting with nature.

By Jonathan DeHart
September 13, 2016



Standing under a torrent of ice-cold water spilling over a rocky cliff in the mountains outside Tokyo, a man in his early 40s clasps his hands together. Clad in nothing more than a white loin cloth, he chants a mantra for more than half a minute, frigid water cascading over him. His peers, dressed in white robes, stand nearby and watch on. They cheer when he completes the ceremony and mentally prepare themselves for their own turn under the falling water.

Meet the *Yamabushi* (“one who prostrates upon mountains”), devotees of a mystical tradition with a unique place in Japanese spirituality. They are pursuing enlightenment through communion with the natural world and the mountainous landscape.



Shugendo

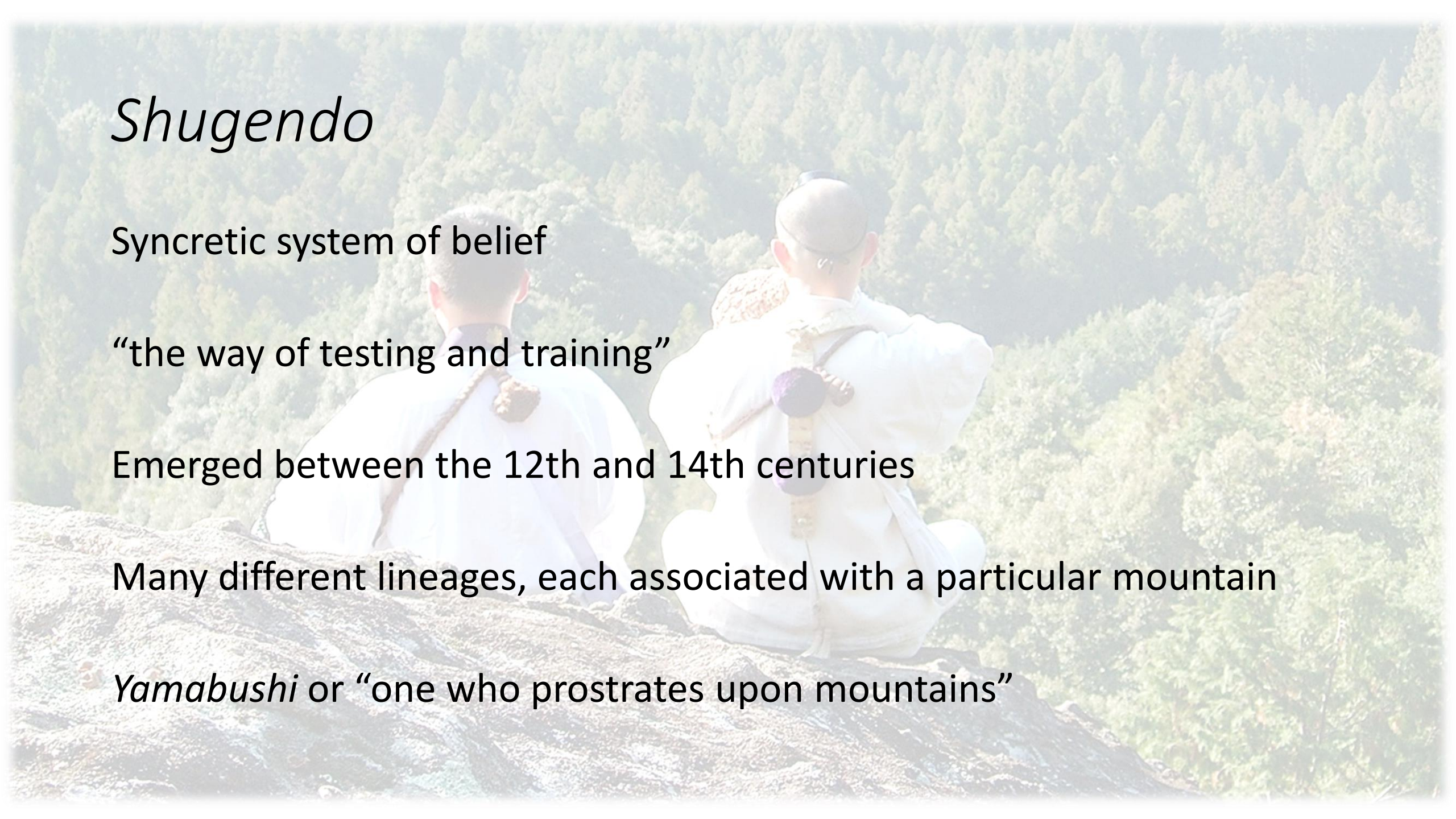
Syncretic system of belief

“the way of testing and training”

Emerged between the 12th and 14th centuries

Many different lineages, each associated with a particular mountain

• *Yamabushi* or “one who prostrates upon mountains”



Mountain pilgrimage

1. Experimental awakening

“Experimental because you are not just reading about *Shugendo* in books or sitting in a temple. You are out in nature, in the mountains and experiencing yourself and your environment with all senses.”

Mountain pilgrimage

2. Mountains as a place for discovery

Rituals to mediate the boundary between society and nature (Kalland, 1997)

Mountain as a place 'in between'

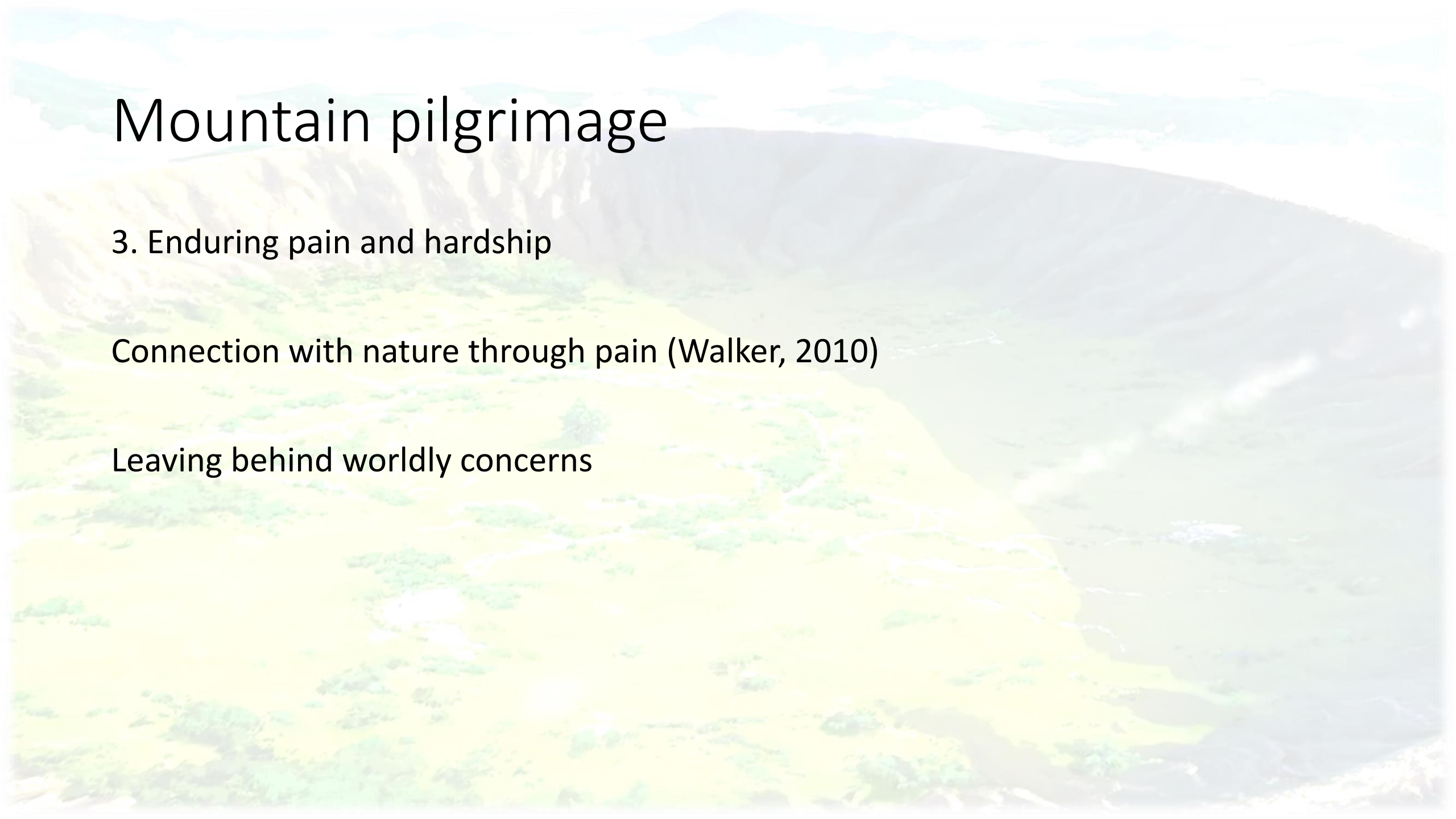
A place where discovery and enlightenment occurs

Mountain pilgrimage

3. Enduring pain and hardship

Connection with nature through pain (Walker, 2010)

Leaving behind worldly concerns



Shugendo Today

“For most Japanese, *Shugendo* is as strange as it is for foreigners,”

Regular people who integrate *Shugendo* into their family and work life

Mostly middle aged and older men

Young foreigners, mostly academics

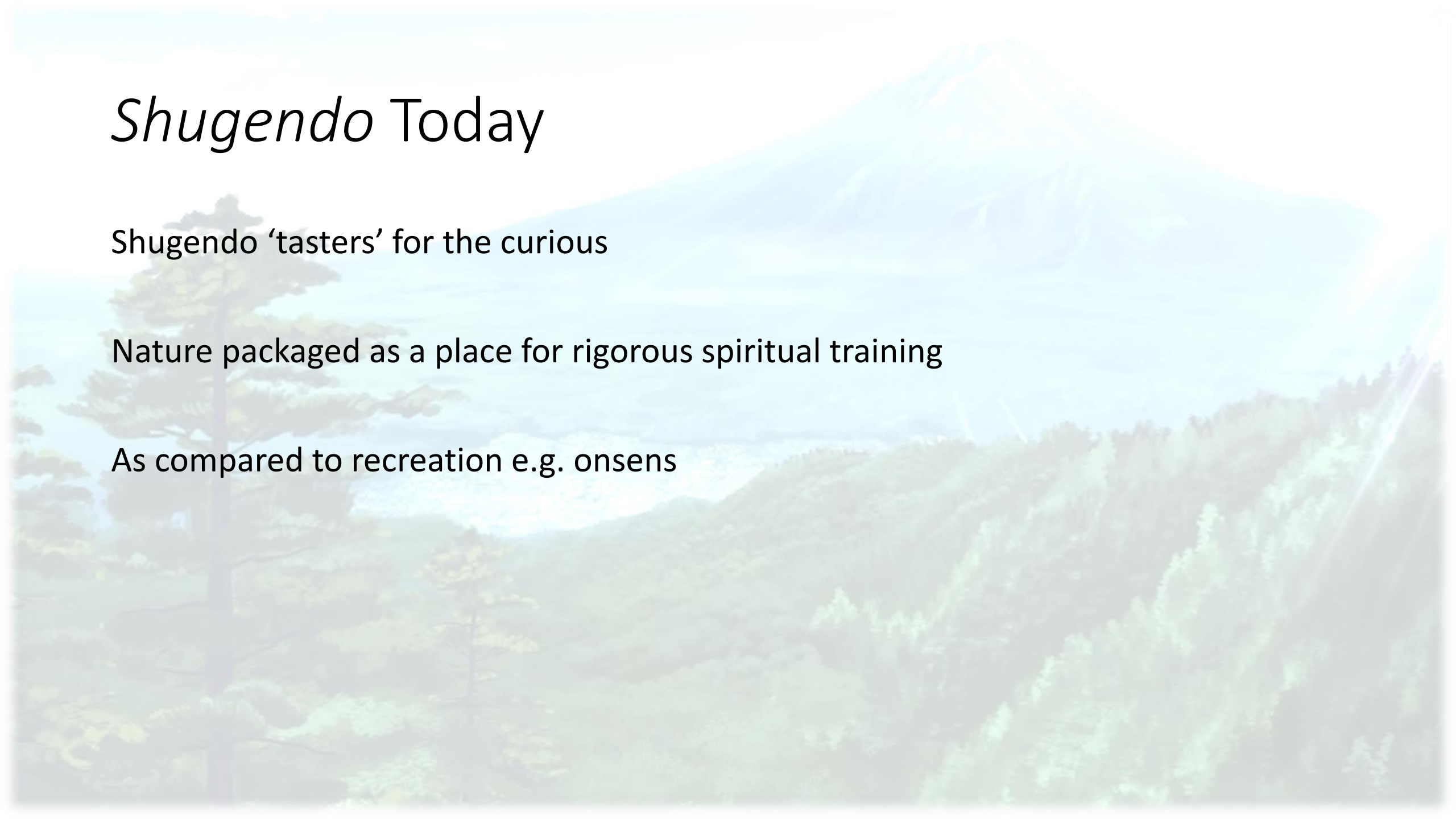
More women

Shugendo Today

Shugendo 'tasters' for the curious

Nature packaged as a place for rigorous spiritual training

As compared to recreation e.g. onsens



References

- Kalland, A., & Asquith, P. J. (1997). Japanese perceptions of nature. *Japanese images of nature: Cultural perspectives*.
- Miyamoto, K. (n.d). "Shugendō" Retrieved from <http://k-amc.kokugakuin.ac.jp/>
- Walker, Brett L. (2010). "Toxic archipelago."