This documentary is an experiential journey into the mystical practices of Japanese mountain asceticism. In Shugendō, practitioners perform ritual actions from shamanism, “Shintō,” Daoism, and Tantric Buddhism. They seek experiential truth of the teachings during arduous climbs in sacred mountains. More poetic than analytical, this film explores how a group of modern Japanese people integrate the myriad ways mountain learning interacts with urban life.

ALTAR OF FIRE
by Robert Gardner and J.F Staal for The Film Study Center at Harvard University
58 min, 1976

This film records a 12-day ritual performed by Mambudiri Brahmins in Kerala, southwest India, in April 1975. This was possibly the last performance of the Agnicayana, a Vedic ritual dating back 3,000 years — probably the oldest surviving human ritual. Long considered extinct and never witnessed by outsiders, the ceremonies require the participation of seventeen priests, offerings of Soma juice and other substances, and several months of preparations and rehearsals.

FEAST DAY OF TAMAR AND LASHARI
by Hugo Zemp
73 min, 1998

The mountain dwelling Pshavi people of the Republic of Georgia perform a syncretic ritual each year, which blends ancient polytheistic beliefs and Orthodox Christian faith, and is deemed “pagan” by Tbilisi’s city dwellers. The ritual of Tamar and Lashari celebrates queen Tamar and her son, Lasha, deified by the Pshavi. For three days, pilgrims meet at two sanctuaries consecrated to these deities and worship them through prayers, songs, and sacrifices.

BÖN: MUSTANG TO MENRI
by Andrea Heckman, Rose Gordon and Tad Fettig
60 min, 2011

This film tells the story of Asonam, a young boy, who made a journey from his home to Menri Monastery in Northern India. There, Asonam made the commitment to become a Geshe, equivalent to a PhD, and after 13 years of education in languages, philosophy, debate, and Bön traditions he achieved his goal. Asonam’s life is interwoven with Tibetan Bön history and culture, illuminating the interconnectedness of education, service, and spirituality.

WALKING PILGRIMS (ARUKIHENRO)
by Tommi Mendel
73 min, 2006

This documentary focuses on today’s Japanese wandering pilgrims as they undertake the 88 Temples’ Pilgrimage that circles the island of Shikoku. Over 1000 years old, the pilgrimage follows the path of the holy monk Kobo Daishi, founder of Shingon Buddhism. This film investigates the motivations of today’s pilgrims with input from priests, academic experts and Shikoku residents, and gives insight into the cultural roots of contemporary Japanese society.

MARATHON MONKS OF MOUNT HIEI
by Christopher J. Hayden
57 min, 2002

Over a seven-year training period, the “Marathon Monks” of Japan’s sacred Mount Hiei figuratively circle the globe on foot. During one incredible 100-day stretch, they cover 53.5 miles daily. This documentary is about one monk, Tanno Kakudo, and the mountain where he trains. Viewers will learn about his death defying fast, vegetarian training diet, handmade straw running shoes, mummifying fire ceremony, and other feats of endurance.

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THE LOVER AND THE BELOVED
by Andy Lawrence
70 min, 2011

This film documents one man’s journey across northern India, and into the heart of Tantra. Offering insight into Tantrik ideas about the life cycle, particularly death, the film contributes to understanding of how we seek knowledge and how we die. This film represents a realistic attempt to understand the practice and illusive theory behind Indian Tantraism, and is intended to challenge widespread Western misinterpretations of this system of thought.

THE DRUMS OF WINTER
by Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling
90 min, 1988

This documentary explores the traditional dance, music, and spiritual world of the Yupik Eskimo people of Emmonak, a remote village on the Bering Sea coast. Dance was once at the heart of Yupik Eskimo spiritual and social life, and served as the bridge between the ancient and the new, the living and the dead, a person’s own power and the greater powers of the unseen world.

ONE PRECEPT: ZEN BUDDHISM IN AMERICA
by Steve Flood and Robin Adams
30 min, 1995

Shot at the Rinzai-Ji temple in Los Angeles, One Precept documents Zen Buddhism in America during the 21st century. Seiju, a Zen priest, discusses Zen’s principles, its growing popularity, and his seventeen years as a disciple of one of its oldest living masters, Kyozan Joshu Sasaki. Images of meditation, chanting, formal meal, and study reveal a disciplined practice that has been emerging as a popular form of religion in Western society.

THE ONE AND THE MANY
by Andy Lawrence
56 min, 2012

Following his journey of discovery in The Lover and the Beloved, Rajive McMullen goes deeper into Tantra presenting his own guru’s story. The Nath Yogis of Northern India desire to find the One among the many, and to return to the source of all things. According to the Naths, only a true guru can guide them through the paradoxes of human life in their search for a center where nothing exists.

THE LEFT EYE OF GOD:
CAODOISM TRAVELS FROM VIETNAM TO CALIFORNIA
by Janet Hoskins and Susan Hoskins
58 min, 2008

Caodaists worship the left eye as an Asian synthesis of Eastern and Western traditions. In this film, they tell their stories of exile, anti-colonial struggle, and building immigrant congregations in California. Footage of rituals, temples, and archival images provides insight into a largely unknown mystical tradition. Religious leaders explain how this faith emerged in colonial Saigon in the 1920s, and was soon adopted by one in four people in Southern Vietnam.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF TAYTACHA
by Peter Getzels and Harriet Gordon
30 min, 1985

This film follows a group of Quechua-speaking artists as they leave their villages high in Peru’s Andes Mountains on a religious pilgrimage to the sacred peaks of Qoyllur-Riti. The villagers walk day and night over mountainous terrain to attend the largest and most important religious ritual in the southern Andes. For the villagers, this festival retraces the escape-route of an Andean god who fled from Catholic priests during the conquest.

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