

# Historical and Religious Aspects of the Shikoku Pilgrimage in Japan

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## Introduction

*What is a Pilgrimage-* Traditionally, a pilgrimage is a long journey undertaken in order to pay homage to a sacred place and to find oneself spiritually.

In Japan, the Shikoku Pilgrimage is a popular and important religious pilgrimage. The Shikoku Pilgrimage includes 88 Buddhist temples spread over 1,150 km on Shikoku's entire island.

The pilgrims, known as Ohenro, travel around Shikoku island to make amends for sins, pray for health and success, seek enlightenment, and experience the mysteries of the least developed island in Japan.

The Shikoku pilgrimage or, also known as Ohenro, can take 50 to 60 days by foot, 12 to 15 days by bus, 10 to 12 days by hired or private transport, and around four days by aircraft. It is common today for devotees to take the pilgrimage in sections, completing a cycle over several visits. Some devotees even carry out the pilgrimage hundreds of times. It is common for pilgrims to become so attached to the sites and routes that they spend their entire lives "wandering", ending their pilgrimage with death.

This article aims to examine Shikoku Pilgrimage's historical and religious aspects.

## Literature review

### 1) Sacred Mountains of Japan, with a Particular Look at the Shikoku Pilgrimage: Frank L. Chance

According to the research, the Shikoku pilgrimage is influenced by folklore and mysticism. As pilgrims complete the route and return to their point of departure, they are at the end and start of the pilgrimage at the same time. Faith in Kobo Daishi, depicted as a perpetual wanderer on Shikoku, enabled famous historical pilgrims to walk multiple times.

Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims travel along these temple routes each year, seeking peace of mind, health, and wellbeing for themselves and others. The research examines the history, development and significance of the temples on the pilgrimage route. The researcher also explores the geographical variations and significances of temples and mountains along the way.

### 2) Pilgrimage Through Time: The Theoretical Implications of Continuing Journeys on the Shikoku Henro- 2020- John Shultz

The research explores the ritual practice of circular pilgrimages. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims travel along these temple routes each year, seeking peace of mind, health, and wellbeing for themselves and others. The research also explores the personal and cultural reasons for doing pilgrimage. It also explores the motivations of doing continuous circular pilgrimage. It also shows that, the methods of performing the pilgrimage have a dependency on the specific period of time. The research explores the ritual practice of circular pilgrimages.

According to author, there are many reasons why believers undertake these journeys. A person's desire to accumulate spiritual merit and good karma are obvious motives, but there are other powerful reasons as well. A pilgrim may be grieving the loss of a loved one, seeking personal development or physical strength, or even trying to avoid a troubling situation at home.

It demonstrates that the pilgrims are from diverse background doing pilgrimage for different reasons only significant shared quality among them is the tremendous overall amount of time spent pilgrimaging.

## Historical Significance and Evolution of Shikoku Pilgrimage

### Map of Shikoku



Shikoku Pilgrimage dates back over 1,200 years. Its origins can be traced to Kukai, the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan. Kukai, posthumously known as Kobo Daishi trained as a monk on Shikoku. A reverence of Kukai is an essential part of the pilgrimage.

In terms of spiritual and religious influence, Kobo Daishi (774-835), was one of the nation's most influential figures. As well as being a monk, he was also a poet, calligrapher, and the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism.

Kobo Daishi returned to Japan after studying Buddhism in China. Throughout the region, he built temples. He was involved in Mount Koya's development. Mount Koya is a sacred mountain containing a large temple complex. In his final years, Kobo Daishi is said to have returned to the Shikoku area. A number of temples in the region were built as a result of his teachings and passion for the Shingon school of Buddhism. The Shikoku Pilgrimage first appears in documents and reports around the 12th century, but the exact route is unknown. The pilgrimage evolved over time in the 16th and 17th centuries into its current form.

Temple stamps have been a tradition since the Edo Period, when travel was highly regulated and restrictive. There were officials who guarded several major roads who often questioned travellers' legitimacy. It was necessary for pilgrims to follow the main paths and show proof of temple visits in order to obtain a travel permit.

In the course of time, temples issued 'signatures' that provided pilgrims with some level of freedom of movement and allowed them to proceed to the next temple. The book of temple stamps that pilgrims in Japan use today evolved from these proofs of passages.

Guidebooks were published as temple visits became more popular in Japan. In 1687, Shinnen wrote a guidebook for pilgrims called *Shikoku Henro Michishirube*, which listed the 88 temples chronologically. The guidebook further strengthened the legitimacy of the pilgrimage and formally established the temples and routes.

During the latter half of the 17th century, Shikoku's infrastructure boomed to accommodate pilgrims from all over Japan. To guide pilgrims along the route, paved roads, rest stops, and signs were erected. In the 18th century, Daishido (a separate temple hall dedicated to Kūkai) were built in every temple alongside the main halls.

From earliest times to the present, pilgrimages have been complex processes that have evolved through time. It further complicates the Shikoku pilgrimage because there are no absolute beginnings or endings, so one can start and finish in any order, or divide and combine the 88 in any order.

## Spiritual and Religious Significance

In Shikoku, pilgrimage is called *henro*, instead of *junrei*, which is the standard Japanese word for pilgrimage. This word originates from the Japanese word *hendo*, meaning "remote region," since Shikoku is far from Japan's main population centers. Despite this, many Japanese have travelled to Shikoku over the years seeking life-changing experiences.

Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims travel along these temple routes each year, seeking peace of mind, health, and wellbeing for themselves and others.

### Shikoku Temple



There are four sections in the Pilgrimage, one for each of the island's prefectures. Each section represents a different stage in the journey of a religious individual.

1. Tokushima Prefecture section (temples 1–23) represents “Awakening”.
2. Kōchi (temples 24–39) represents “Ascetic training”.
3. Ehime (temples 40–65) represents “Enlightenment”.
4. Kagawa section (temples 66–88) represents “Nirvana”.

When pilgrims travel to Shikoku, they put aside their family, social standing, possessions, and worldly ties to focus on their self-discovery and growth journeys. Although pilgrims typically travel alone, the priest Kukai is said to always accompany them, in spirit. And this spiritual presence is expressed in the words *dogyo ninin*. The term *dogyo ninin* refers to two people traveling together. *Dogyo ninin* is written on the sedge hats travellers wear.

It is not mandatory for pilgrims to wear a prescribed garment, but they usually wear white robes and sedge hats as a means of protection against rain and the sun. *Henro*-related items are now available at a reasonable price, making it easier for travellers to embrace the spirit of the journey. It is usually customary to wear white robes. The colour white represents equality for all pilgrims before the Buddha.

## Shikoku Clothing

### Hakui (White jacket)



White represents purity and innocence. Additionally, it symbolizes the equality of all before Buddha. One of the most important pieces of clothing is probably a white jacket. During the summer, you can also wear a sleeveless version. In addition to their main jacket, some pilgrims carry a second jacket on which they collect red stamps from each temple. Because there is a belief that in the past some pilgrims would collapse from physical exertion and die during the pilgrimage. The white robes could serve as burial clothes for the deceased.

### **Sugegasa (Sedge hat)**

The conical sedge hat is perhaps the most recognizable pilgrim clothing item. It protects you from the sun, wind and rain. The sedge hat bears the Sanskrit character of “bonji”, which represents Kukai . While wearing the Hat The character should face the front.

### **Kongozue (staff)**

Wooden staffs are a vital part of a pilgrim’s kit. As an embodiment of Kukai himself, it guides you throughout your journey.

### **Wagesa (Stole)**

Wagesa symbolizes the full Buddhist robe. It is a thin stole worn around the neck. It shows devotion. It can be any colour.

### **Zudabukuro(Bag)**

The white shoulder bag is useful for carrying a range of items like temple stamp booklet (nokyocho), sutra book, candles, incense and name slips (osamefuda).



A major part of the henro is the offering of food and shelter to pilgrims. These selfless gestures are believed to be a form of thanksgiving to Kukai. Getting free offerings by walking around the pilgrimage is considered a violation of the henro spirit.

All the temples located along the route have a particular association. Some of the examples are as follows:

- Konomineji (Temple 27) is known for its healing water. In addition, the temple was associated with the visit of Mitsubishi founder Iwasaki Yatar's mother to pray for his success.
- Unpenji(Temple 66) is popular for its eggplant-shaped seats; it is said that any prayers made on them are granted.
- Zentsji(Temple 75) is known for its June ceremony celebrating the arrival of the dish sanuki udon from China, which is now a Shikoku favourite.

