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Making Pilgrimages, Meaning and Practice in Shikoku

Reviewed by Ronald S. Green

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Coastal Carolina University
rgreen@coastal.edu

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Review of *Making Pilgrimages, Meaning and Practice in Shikoku*

Ronald S. Green*

Making Pilgrimages, Meaning and Practice in Shikoku. By Ian Reader. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, xv + 250 pages, ISBN 0-8248-2907-7, US \$29.00.

With this work, Ian Reader offers a unique and valuable contribution to the academic study of the *Shikoku hachijūhakkasho*, a pilgrimage to eighty-eight sacred places of Shikoku in honor of the Japanese Buddhist saint Kōbō Daishi (774-835). He does so by incorporating two decades of his own participant observations and in-depth interviews, along with an impressive array of resources, sociological, historical and personal narratives, both past and present. Shikoku is the fourth largest island of the Japanese archipelago. Following the route to all eighty-eight officially designated sites takes the pilgrim around most of the perimeter of Shikoku, a distance of some 1400 kilometers (around 870 miles), typically done clockwise as with circumambulation of Buddhist stupas in India. Some Participants, however, feel the entire pilgrimage need not be accomplished in one trip. Instead, it may be done in an assortment of ways, such as taking a single trip encompassing only the sites of one of the four

* Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Coastal Carolina University.
Email: rgreen@coastal.edu

districts of Shikoku, leaving those of the other districts for future visits. Taking into account these and other factors such as modes of transportation, starting points, time of year, motives and demographics, Reader's text abounds with analyses of a rich variety of experiences.

According to Reader, figuring into the allure of Shikoku is its past identification as an island perceived as far distant from the capital—a place for exiles. This distance from ordinary life is now a part of the pilgrimage experience. In addition, Japanese mythology sees mountains as abodes of the dead. In the Shikoku pilgrimage this extends to the landscape of the entire island. Pilgrims see their clothing as death shrouds and while on the journey some consider themselves dead, a Buddhist idea not particular to Japan. In a related way, some undertake the pilgrimage as a memorial for a deceased relative. Others see it as a way of earning merit for the spirits of ancestors or so the pilgrim might be reborn in a Buddhist Pure Land. Reader tells of individuals who carry cremated remains of loved ones on the pilgrimage. In contrast, according to numerous reports, Kōbō Daishi has saved pilgrims from imminent death by purging them of illnesses deemed medically incurable. As such stories are well circulated, restoration of health has become a main reason for carrying out the pilgrimage.

While all eighty-eight sites are Buddhist temples, Reader points out that scarcely a century ago some of these were Shinto shrines, and a positive feeling toward Buddhist-Shinto syncretism is pervasive among pilgrims. For example, pilgrims and pilgrimage literature describes the feelings participants develop for the surroundings with reference to the Buddhist concept of impermanence as well as with the Shinto idea of the presence of spirits. Likewise, the eighty-eight Buddhist temples are known as *reijō*, places where the spirits gather. This synchronism and a broader ambivalence associated with numerous aspects of the pilgrimage is a motif that runs through Reader's analysis. Starting with the

traditional clothing worn by pilgrims, there is an intentional blurring of social and economic status of pilgrims, making all equal as spiritual adepts—a notion reminiscent of pilgrimages of other religious traditions such as the Islamic Hajj. Although some deviate from it, the traditional attire includes a white robe, knee pants, straw hat, sandals, and a walking staff symbolizing the physical presence of Kōbō Daishi. Like other aspects of the pilgrimage, this identification has many interpretations. The pilgrim undertakes the same actions as Kōbō Daishi, is thought to be with him on the pilgrimage, or is, in some way, the physical embodiment of Kōbō Daishi. Owing to these features and as a reminder of them, on the back of the pilgrim's robe is written the phrase *dōgyō ninin*—two people, one practice. This also points to the feeling of community among pilgrims. As an incarnation of Kōbō Daishi, a pilgrim accepts alms—given as money, food, or lodging—as a way for non-pilgrims to earn merit. Reader also describes a rather negative side to this, the prevalence of stories of karmic retribution befalling those who refuse to lend support to Kōbō Daishi in the form of pilgrims.

Both the sacredness of the sites and of the pilgrims derive in large part from association with Kūkai, whose posthumous honorific title, Kōbō Daishi, means Great Teacher who Brought the Dharma. Kūkai is the founder of the Shingon tradition of Japanese esoteric or tantric Buddhism, which he imported from China in the early ninth century. While most of the eighty-eight sites are affiliated with Shingon, many are not, and large numbers of pilgrims consider themselves more closely tied to other traditions. Throughout Japan, Kūkai is credited with thousands of deeds, many of which may be considered miraculous. Kūkai was born in Shikoku and is thought to have founded the pilgrimage, although Reader presents historical data suggesting its popularity can only be traced to around the fifteenth century. Among the legends most important in terms of the pilgrimage, Kūkai is believed by many to have never died, remaining in the world in a state of long-term *samādhi*. He is said to visit

pilgrims in spiritual or physical need, masquerading or manifesting in various guises.

Reader compares and contrasts ideals and practices of the Shikoku pilgrimage with some of those described in the literature of other pilgrimages, Asian and non-Asian. He begins by considering word *henro* used in this case and translated as “pilgrimage.” A more literal rendering of the two Chinese glyphs used for *henro* might be “linking route” or expansive road (9). The Japanese word again conveys ambivalence in that the *henro* is both expansive and a unitary route. On another level, the *hen* of *henro* alludes to Kōbō Daishi, whose esoteric initiation name was Henjō Kongō, the Expansive Shining Diamond (or *vajra*). Pilgrims likely know the name Henjō Kongō as it appears on various signs along the pilgrimage and in writings about it. It also is a name for the Buddha Mahāvairocana, the Cosmic Buddha and sacred embodiment of the Dharma. In Shingon Buddhism Mahāvairocana is the central Buddha for devotion and meditative visualization of the perfection of wisdom and ultimate truth. Interestingly, Kōbō Daishi has apparently taken on these roles for participants in the Shikoku pilgrimage. This is in keeping with Shingon ideology, since an esoteric master can become a Buddha, as Kūkai is said to have. As with Mahāvairocana, Kōbō Daishi’s salvific powers may be bestowed on a faithful and worshipful pilgrim by his grace or one may attain salvation through ascetic efforts emulating those of the master. In classical Japanese buddhological analysis, the difference between salvation by reliance on the powers of a deity and through one’s ascetic practices is a defining point separating Buddhist traditions. In contrast, both approaches coexist in the Shikoku pilgrimage, another example of the type of ambivalence pointed to by Reader.

I appreciate that the author locates himself in the tradition of the pilgrimage, as a foreigner engaged in an activity that has been deemed as one defining Japanese cultural identity, and as an English language re-

searcher of a Japanese religious pilgrimage. With respect to the latter, he cites a conversation he had with Oliver Statler (1915-2002), author of *Japanese Pilgrimage* (London: Picador, 1984). The researchers agreed both had contracted the “Shikoku sickness” (*Shikoku byō*), a well-acknowledged longing among pilgrims to return to the pilgrimage. Although I have not yet undertaken the Shikoku pilgrimage, there is contagion in Reader’s descriptions and I will certainly make use of his study in the classroom. Besides being a commendable treatment of a significant topic, it provides a potential springboard for discussing such concepts as Buddhist austerities, merit, the Pure Land, alms, popular uses of the *Heart Sutra*, miraculous tales in Japan, and the relationship between spiritual practices and the material prosperity of a nation.