

Seven Weeks on the Henro Michi
Steps along the Shikoku Island 88 Temple Pilgrimage
Marc Pearl

The Settai Offering
(Temples #7- #11)

The Settai Offering is a fundamental aspect of the Henro Pilgrim experience. Offerings and services of all kinds are given to the Pilgrim as he makes his way along the island paths. Meals, snacks and cups of tea, items necessary to the Henro such as incense sticks and candles and coins, as well as places to spend the night, are donated by the kind people of Shikoku. Although the Henro is a stranger traveling but briefly through the neighborhood, he is greeted as a friend, and invited to sit on the veranda or inside the front genkan entrance, leaving the hot sun and dusty road for some moments to relax and share a few words.

During my second day of walking, between Temples #7 and #8, I got caught in a gentle sunshower, so I stood under the eaves of a house alongside the road. From the open doorway of the genkan, a grandmother motioned me inside. We sat quietly and drank green tea and nibbled some crackers while we watched the rain and talked about the Pilgrimage. In Spring and Summer there are a lot of chartered buses whizzing by her door, she told me. In the fall, it was calmer. She doesn't see very many walking pilgrims nowadays, not like the old days after the war when, for a lack of jobs or anything else to do, many people would do the Pilgrimage, before they had cars or those fancy taxis and buses. As I looked out at the fields across the road, she pointed out rice, napa cabbages, grapes, kaki persimmons, and tobacco plants. Once it was popular to grow one's own favorite tobacco.

As the drizzle let up, I gave her a Fuda Pilgrim's slip with my name and date, and "Chicago USA" for my address, and thanked her for the tea. She called out for a grandchild to bring her purse, and pulled out a Y100 coin as my first money settai. I told her I would pray for her at the next temple, and I bounced back to the road quite pleased by the new connection with this special place. I resolved to save all future money settai to send to the children and young monks at the Drepung Monastery of Tibetan refugees in India, thus sharing the kindness of the wealthier Japanese with their fellow Buddhists across Asia.

At Temple #8, the priest gave me a map of Shikoku as Settai. From there I walked five kilometers, reaching Temple #9 at noon. The priest's wife at the reception hut gave me back the Y500 I had paid for the temple stamps in my book and hanging scroll, and pointed out a small canopy with a table and bench in a corner of the courtyard. Use the money to try the famous Temple sweets, she suggested. The Meibutsu Yamaimo Kusa Mochi was made of sweet rice balls with bits of sweet potato leaves mixed inside, not bad with enough tea to wash it down.

The skies had gotten cloudy after I walked the 5 ½ km to the long stairway up the hill to Temple #10, so I stopped at a store at the foot of the hill and bought a Pilgrim's straw hat. This essential part of the Henro gear provides shade from the hot glaring sunlight, as well as some protection from the rain with the addition of a rugged plastic covering that clung to the hat with

an elastic ribbon. I discovered another useful aspect a day later, on an overgrown path through a forest. The wide brim of the hat kept the spiderwebs and their large leggy owners from entangling in my hair and beard! The hat, called Sugegasa, has written on it with large calligraphy the mystic Sanskrit sound YU, representing Miroku, the future Buddha, as well as the Pilgrim statement of faith in Kobo Daishi, “Do Gyo Ni-nin” (“two on the path together”). A poem fills out each section of the hat, in four lines from top to brim:

“In confusion the three worlds (Past, Present, and Future) are limiting, in Enlightenment the ten directions are Empty. Originally there was no East or West, where can there be South or North?”

The friendly shopladies told me to leave my pack and gave me an umbrella. Good thing, too, for it was a long walk up those stairs in the rain! There was a great view of the valley from the temple veranda, but I was huffing and puffing and amazed that a busload of old people managed to climb up with me.

Back at the shop, the ladies gave me tea and cookies while I bought a small change purse to store my coins for the temple offering boxes. The bag had a nice drawing of Kobo Daishi dressed in his mountain hiking robes. Incredible the varieties of Pilgrim souvenirs at the store: postcards and books, amulets of every shape and material from paper to wood to plastic.

The sun came out for the remainder of the afternoon’s walk, 10 km to Temple #11, Fujiidera, Wisteria Well Temple. It was starting to get colder as I finished my prayers after 5:00. The priest’s wife at the Nokyosho Reception Hut was pleased to see a foreigner interested in the Henro Pilgrimage. She said that the old people know about it and do all the rituals, but the young just run up and take a look around. She gave me back my stamp money too.

There were no places to spend the night near the quiet temple. The kind woman called the closest Ryokan in the town below. It was closed on Sunday. The next one was filled. A few minutes later, one called back, said they would arrange something for me, and drive over to pick me up. As we waited together, I mentioned that as I had two months of walking ahead of me, I’d have to budget myself carefully for all my meals and rooms. When I got my things together for the ride back into town, I found an envelope with the temple name, and inside it was a Y5000 note! Use it for your lodgings, dinner and the taxi ride back the next morning, and continue your Pilgrimage, I was warmly advised.

So many different Settai in one day! It was an auspicious start. I was overwhelmed by the generosity of so many different people. How had this tradition of donations and offerings become such an important aspect of the Shikoku Pilgrimage?

The word “Settai” is composed of two Kanji characters:

Setsu “touch, contact, encounter, experience, draw near, receive visitors”

and Tai “to wait, expect, depend on, deal with, treat”.

Combining together, the character dictionary defines Settai as “reception, welcome, serving (food)”. Although the word is commonly used in daily social situations, in Shikoku it refers to the help given to Pilgrims as they travel the hardships of the Henro Michi roads. In this sense,

the definitions “ contact, encounter, experience, deal with” strike me as remarkably similar to the subject matter of a certain movie dealing with Extraterrestrials.

Every Spring there is an invasion of strangers flooding through the small towns and rice fields of the island. The prearranged stops of the chartered buses deposit 40,000 energetic and eager Pilgrim/Tourists with their loaded pocket-books before temples, restaurants, souvenir shops, and hotels, which are staffed by a rural, thus simpler, calmer, less stressed out people. It is as impressive an economic and cultural encounter as when the same Tokyoites land in Micronesia or New Guinea, cameras and videorecorders and matching outfits flashing in the tropical sunlight.

Imagine the confusion created by the bearded Gaijin! Definitely a close encounter of the farther-out kind!

In the 1150 years of the Shikoku Pilgrimage, only the last twenty or so have been commercially developed to this extent. Where other types of Pilgrimage, most notably the Edo Period Pilgrimage to Ise Shrine, have always had large numbers of organized travelers, Shikoku with its extensive 1400 kilometer walk amid remote and less developed areas has been a more solitary and dangerous undertaking. Even the usual term “Junrei” meaning “to go praying in order of one temple to the next” is replaced by “Henro”, “everywhere on the path”. The walking is not only the means to visit temples, it becomes the end itself, that of the experience of Self in the sacredness of Nature. The Shikoku Henro Path is a circle. Originally it had no numbering of temples, and here are many more than 88 sacred places on the route. One can sit atop a mountain, stroll along a sandy beach, pick herbs in a forest, or meditate in a cave, finding the Buddha Nature in every moment. The ten directions are limitless, there is no East or West.

In olden days the religious wanderer was looked upon with both respect and dread. His sacred endeavor was recognized, and the Pilgrim would often be called upon to use his “good spiritual energy”, acquired through religious austerities, to bless crops and pray for the sick. In return, he would be given a warm meal and a place to sleep. This evolved into Settai Offerings of new sandals, uncooked rice, fruits, and (as Statler mentions) the islanders would even give haircuts, shaves, and massages to the passing Henro. Buddhists regard this as a way of accumulating “Merit”, the good Karma necessary to help gain a higher rebirth.

By helping the Henro fulfill his vows, the man tied to his small farm can become part of the Pilgrimage. The Henro in turn will pray for his benefactors. In this, I was reminded of the Corn and Rain Dances of the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest. The Pueblos welcome crowds of people to their dances as the more participants in the scene will provide more energy for their prayers. The Pueblos even provide huge banquet tables of food for their guests. When the visitors are respectful of the proceedings, there is no longer any division between Dancer and Watcher. All are participating in the great prayer.

There is also the belief that the Sainted Kobo Daishi walks along the path with the Henro. “Do Gyo Ni-nin...two on the path together”. Anyone on the road could be Daishi-sama. Treat everyone as if he is the Saint. Thus, every encounter can bring us closer to Enlightenment.

As the Shikoku Pilgrimage grew more popular, however, the types of Pilgrim changed. People came to the island in search of a spiritual cure for awful diseases, or for any number of needs. Ill-prepared Pilgrims would get caught in the fierce weather of rain or snow or typhoons, they might fall while walking along a precipitous mountain path, or simply collapse for lack of food and sleep. Japanese have a deep fear of strangers upsetting their orderly society. The thought of a stranger dying in one's rice field was of the utmost of horrors. The spirit of the corpse, having no relatives to pray for it, would become a Muenbotoke, a wandering ghost*. No one wanted the blood of such a being flowing through his crops.

By giving food and a safe place to sleep, the farmer could prevent disaster, for the stranger would have the energy to continue along the next morning. Here we discover the dark side of the Settai. The Zenkonyado, the Tsuyado, and the Henro Koya sleeping huts were preventative measures. The Pilgrim's Ofuda Slips, presented to the temples and in exchange for Settai, have the Pilgrim's name, birthday, and most importantly his address, thus aiding in identifying the stranger along the lonely road.

Those days are long gone. Along the road, I cherished the memories of old women running after me calling out "Ohenro-san, here's a little help for you", pressing a coin into my hand, or the high school girls who nervously giggling, would ride their bicycles past me only to return minutes later to hand me a bottle of juice or an apple. In the weeks ahead I would be graced by many gifts and surprises as Settai.

NAMU DAISHI HENJO KONGO!

* Mu-en-botoke: although the meaning is that of "Wandering Ghost", the characters actually say "Connection-less/Karma-less Buddha"...a much nicer way of looking at these troubled spirits.