Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei

Sōō (831-918), the recognized founder of kaihogyo, was a Tendai monk who spent years in ascetic practice on Mount Hiei, located outside modern day Kyoto. Sōō had a strong affinity for the Fudō. According to his biography, the deity appeared to Sōō in waterfall surrounded by raging fire. Sōō jumped into the waterfall to embrace and instead emerged with a log from a katsura tree. It is believed that he crafted the log into the three images of Fudo, one for each of the temples he founded.

Fudo continues to serve as the dharmic center of the kaihogyo. Monks participating in the kaihogyo are consider a living form of Fudo. The unusually shaped hat, or higasa, is considered to be Fudo Myoo himself and is treated with the highest respect. The monk carries with him a rope and daggar much like the deity, though they receive emphasis because of their other purpose: tools for the monk to end his life if he fails at any point to complete the kaihogyo.

While many focus on the 24,000 miles walked or one thousand walks, it is important to remember the kaihogyo is a pilgrimage around Enryaku-ji. The concept of pilgrimages was likely borrowed from India and China. Buddhist texts of the eighth century stated that, “Mountain pilgrimages on sacred peaks is the best of practices.” As early as 871, academic research has found that Tendai monks pursued mountain pilgrimages in search of mystic powers and enlightenment. Pilgrimages on Mount Hiei formalized in the following years among its Three Pagodas and many associated temples. Rules for the kaihogyo further solidified with a standardization of dress and routes. By 1387, the length of the course and the number of days are detailed in religious texts. These practices resemble the kaihogyo as it is practiced today.

While the gyoja walks the course, he moves in time with his continually chanting of:

“Mo-namu Samanda Bazara (da) Senda Makaroshada Sowataya (um) Tarata Kanman”

This is a mantra to Fudo that translated reads:

“Homage to the all-pervading Vajras! O Violent One of great wrath! Destroy! hûm trat hâm màm”.

The intensity of the 1000 days of kaihogyo is inseparable from the what Fudo represents. Nothing must deter the gyoja from the task. They must cut through the delusions of what is possible. The lay confraternity that supports the Mt. Hiei kaihogyo take their name from the Japanese word sokusho or “ending/stopping obstacles.” The practitioner is expected to devote seven years of their life to the practice and end their life should they not complete the requirements.

Death is more than a threat to the gyoja and he is reminded every day of the kaihogyo. Rather than traditional black robes, the kaihogyo monks wear white, the color representing death in Japanese culture. A coin is placed in the higasa to be used the monk should die and need ferry passage across the mythological-sanzu river, separating life from death. As Ajari Tanno Kakudo describes:

“I dress in the clothes of the dead, I put on my my sandals in the house. The Japanese never wear shoes indoors. So, putting them on inside means you’ve no intention of returning. At a funeral, the corpse has its shoes put on inside the house. This means that every day I leave on a pilgrimage of no return.”

On the 700th day of the kaihogyo, the gyoja starts the doiri, a nine day fasting retreat where no food, no water, no rest or sleep are allowed. While in the temple, the monk sits behind a folding screen which is arranged upside down, a tradition used during funerals. The monk again invokes Fudo throughout chanting the same mantra from his walks 100,000 times.

Hakozaki Bunno wrote this haiku to his student Sakai Yusai after he narrowly survived an attack from a wild boar during his kaihogyo:

“The mountain itself is a mandala. Practice self-reflection intenly amid the undistilled stones, trees, streams and vegetation, losing yourself in the great body of the Supreme Buddha.”

—attributed to Sōō, 831 (the “kaihogyo patriarch”)
Kaihogyo Practice of Mount Hiei

At the Tendai temple of Enryaku-ji, outside of Kyoto, monks engage in a practice of daily pilgrimage. Over seven years and 1000 days, the gyōga travel 24,000 miles in the search for enlightenment.

**Year One**
- March 18
- 18.6 miles circuit for 100 days

All monks hoping to serve as abbots at Enryaku-ji must complete hyaku-nichi, 100 days on the prescribed course. Each year, five or six monks complete the endeavor and earn the title 'shingyo'. Few monks continue onto the kaihogyo, or 'practice of circling the mountains'.

**Year Two**
- July 5
- 18.6 miles circuit for 100 days

Monks must petition senior leaders to continue onto the 1000 day kaihogyo. If their petition is accepted, they have one week to prepare.

**Year Three**
- April
- 18.6 miles circuit for 200 days

Monks start at 2am and walk for five to six hours, visiting over 250 stops including Buddhas, ponds, bodhisattvas, trees, and patriarchs of Tendai.

**Year Four**
- October
- 18.6 miles circuit for 100 days

After completing 700 days of the kaihogyo, a monk goes through the doiri, an extreme nine day retreat with no food, no water, no rest or sleep. The monk will recite a mantra to Fudo 100,000 times.

**Year Five**
- 37.3 miles circuit for 100 days

Upon completing 1000 days of the kaihogyo, the monk takes the title of Daigyomon Ajari or 'Saintly Master of the Highest Priest.'

**Year Six**
- 52.2 miles circuit for 100 days

Sources (highlights denote best starting points):
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In Their Own Words...

“If you are not afraid of death, you can achieve anything. Put your life on the line and great enlightenment will be yours.” - Hakozaki Bunno

“It is only when a person is completely determined to achieve something that he can be being to realize his inner power.” - Usunmi Shunsho

“You learn how to see your real self. You learn to understand what is important and what isn’t.” - Genshin Fujinami

“To others it seems to be about pain and suffering, But I get really great joy and satisfaction. Every day I return feeling alive and well.” - Tanno Kakudo

“The message I wish to convey is, please, live each day as if it is your entire life. If you start something today, finish it today; tomorrow is another world. Life live positively.” - Sakai Yusai

“The hope is in each of us. It’s no longer in the government, or world powers, but in each individual — we, you and I, are the hope.” - Uehara Gyosho

“Everybody thinks they’re living on their own without help from others. This is not possible. I really think that others have done something for me, and I have a feeling of gratefulness to other people.” - Endo Mitsunaga