

The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei: The Kaihōgyō



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The Amazing Story of Yusai Sakai The Ultimate Marathon Monk



Much of the following material is taken from John Stevens' book *The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei*, wikipedia, and other internet sites.

The Kaihōgyō is a set of the ascetic spiritual trainings for which the Buddhist Marathon Monks of Mt. Hiei are known. These monks are from the Tendai school of Buddhism, a denomination brought to Japan by the monk Saicho in 806 from China.

The story of the marathon monk practice, or sadhana (daily spiritual practice), began when a young seeker named So-o arrived at the mountain monastery at the age of 15. So-o's daily practices involved encircling Mt. Hiei, and offering daily prayers along the way. So-o practiced a type of Buddhism where he recognized all of nature as manifestations of Buddha.

As the story goes, one day along his walk he was enraptured with the image of Buddha near a waterfall. Seeking to merge with the One, he dove into the falls but along the way he hit a log in the water. So-o pulled the log out of the water and carved the image of Fudo Myoo, which is still a venerated spot on today's course. After his leap into the falls, So-o continued to build a number of monasteries on Mt. Hiei, which became the residence and inspiration for numerous Marathon Monks over the years.



The Marathon Monks' quest is to serve Buddha through many duties but they are best known for their great spiritual effort and perseverance in ascetic practices. In particular a form of asceticism whereby the monks meditate on Fudo Myoo, chant his mantra and circumambulate a sacred mountain for many days in a row.

Part of Tendai Buddhism's teaching is that enlightenment can be attained in the current life. It is through the process of selfless service and devotion that this can be achieved, and the kaihōgyō is seen as the ultimate expression of this desire. By the end of the practice the monks have achieved a form of identification with the emanation of Buddha known as Fudo Myoo.

There are many serving priests at the temple on Mt. Hiei, but very few of them have completed the 1,000-day kaihōgyō. Abbots of Mt. Hiei temple must complete 100-days of kaihōgyō. 1,000 day practice is an uncommon and specialized area of both ascetic and esoteric disciplines.

The selection process for the kaihōgyō is after the first 100 days of practice, the monk will petition the senior monks to complete the remaining 900 days. In the first 100 days, withdrawal from the challenge is possible, but from day 101 onwards the monk is no longer allowed to withdraw; historically he must either complete the course or take his own life.

Altogether there have been forty-six 1,000 day marathons since 1885. Two monks completed two full terms, one died (on purpose) on the 2,500th day of practice, and one, Okuno Genjun, did three full terms but without actually running each day during the third term.

The majority of the marathon monks were in their vigorous thirties, while the oldest, Sakai, completed day 2,000 when he was sixty-one years old. The number of monks who died or committed suicide on route is not known, but the path is lined with unmarked graves of gyoja who have been killed in action. No one has expired in recent memory during the 1,000 day marathon, but at least three monks perished in the nineteenth century.



In past times, in order to qualify as a runner, a trainee first had to master seated meditation. Much emphasis was placed on breath control and visualization techniques – for example, imagining one’s body to be as light as a feather. After acquiring good breath control, a novice was instructed to practice in the evening by fixing his gaze intently on a single star as he ran and coordinating his pace with a secret mantra given to him by his teacher. The runner must keep his eyes fixed on the star (or some other equally distant object) and never allow himself to be distracted. Once runners attained the proper level of moving meditation, they could fly like the wind, virtually gliding along in the air in a state of deepest contemplation.

The marathon monks of Mount Hiei achieve similar results with their training methods, but **the secret of their success lies in their spiritual rather than their physical strength. This spiritual strength – derived from the desire to realize Buddhahood, for the sake of oneself and the sake of others, in this very mind and body – is the key to the question “What makes the marathon monks run?”**

There are many aspects to the kaihōgyō, but the main portion of walking meditation can be broken down into the following sections:

The Runs

The ultimate achievement is the completion of the 1,000-day challenge, which would rank among the most demanding physical and mental challenges in the world. Only 46 men have completed the 1,000-day challenge since 1885. Of these, three people have completed the circuit twice, most recently Yūsai Sakai, (1926–2013)), who first went from 1973 to 1980 and then, after a half year pause, went again, finishing his second round in 1987 at age 60.

The kaihōgyō takes seven years to complete, as the monks must undergo other Buddhist training in meditation and calligraphy, and perform general duties within the temple.

They are required to spend 12 years total on Mt. Hiei and includes vows of lifelong celibacy and sobriety in the spirit of renunciation.

The walks are divided into 100-day sections as follows:

1st year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs, beginning at 1:30 a.m., each day after an hour of prayer.

2nd year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs.

3rd year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs.

4th year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs - performed twice for a total of 200 days.

5th year: 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs - performed twice for a total of 200 days.

6th year: 100 consecutive days of 37.5 mile runs

7th year: 100 consecutive days of 52 mile runs and 100 consecutive days of 25 mile runs.



Before beginning kaihōgyō, the monks have 1 week of training in which they are shown the course by a senior monk, and given a book that contains maps of the course and a description of the mantras to say at sacred locations.

Author John Stevens, in his book, *The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei*, describes the long distance walking style which dates back over a thousand years: "Eyes focused about 100 feet ahead while moving in a steady rhythm, keeping the head level, the shoulders relaxed, the back straight, and the nose aligned with the navel."



The basic rules are as follows:

During the walk the robe and hat may not be removed.

No deviation from the appointed course.

No stopping for rest or refreshment.

All required services, prayers, and chants must be correctly performed.

No smoking or drinking.

The attire of the monk is very simple. The monks wear white cloth pants and robe, a straw hat, and straw sandals. Along with the book and the clothes, the monk carries a knife and rope which is to be used for disembowelment if the course cannot be completed.

By demanding the ultimate consequence if the sadhana is not completed, each run becomes a confrontation with death. There is no sleeping in or missing a day, because to do so means death.

Stevens writes, "Around the waist goes the 'cord of death', with a sheathed knife tucked inside; these two accessories remind the gyoja of his duty to take his life – by either hanging or self-disembowelment – if he fails to complete any part of the practice. This is the reason the gyoja is dressed in white – the color of death – rather than basic Buddhist black. A small bag to hold the handbook, a sutra book, two candles, and matches is hung over the right shoulder. The gyoja carries his rosary in his left hand."

The monks wake every day at 12:00 A.M., and after an hour of prayer, they begin their daily pilgrimage at 1:30 a.m.

Throughout the night they run and pray, stopping at different stations along the way to recite prayers and perform ritual chants. Upon completion of each day's marathon, the monks perform chores such as cleaning the temple and they continue to pray throughout the day, until retiring at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. The ritual begins again a few hours later. If at any time the monk finds himself physically or mentally unable to complete the 100-day ritual, he is duty-bound to commit suicide by hanging himself with the belt from his robe or through ritual disembowelment.



Stevens reports: Marathon monks must get by on a minimum of sleep; consequently, they become expert cat-nappers, catching a few winks while waiting for traffic lights to change or at other lulls in their daily schedules. The monks learn to sleep sitting or even standing up, and most in fact prefer not to lie down to nap because that confuses their sense of time. Unsure of the correct hour, monks sometimes leap up from a mid-day nap, jump into their outfits, and race out of the temple. While on the road, they develop the faculty to rest different sections of the body as they move along – “Now I am resting my shoulders, now I am resting my hips, now I am resting my knees,” and so on.

Other essential factors are proper rhythm, breath control, and intense concentration. The monks harmonize their pace with the “beat” of the Fudo Myoo mantra, which they chant continually, and cover meters and meters on each deep abdominal breath. An experienced marathon monk flows along naturally, maintaining the same speed for climbing up or coming down. The monks cannot allow themselves to be distracted by any obstacle, whether external or internal...”

Stevens reported that daily caloric intake for the monks is approximately 1,000-1,200 calories, which is based on a vegetarian fare of rice, miso soup, and green tea. The amount of calories seems very low, but nonetheless the monks seem to be the picture of health.

The marathon monks are devotees of Fudo Myoo, the Unshakable King of Light. Fudo has a fearful face, terribly troubled by the world's inequities, its stupor, and its implacable hatred of the Dharma.

Encompassed by a fiery nimbus, Fudo burns up evil passions while illuminating the darkest corners of existence. His lasso can be used to bind devils or to pull those in distress out of the mud. Fudo's sword hacks off the heads of those who pollute the world but at the same time slices through all obstacles to reveal the deepest wisdom. As an incarnation of the cosmic Buddha Dainichi, Fudo is the active element of salvation, capable of channeling his awesome power to others.



Fudo Myoo at Mount Koya, Japan

The marathon monks strive to become one with Fudo, to actually perceive that dynamic image as a living force and to tap that awesome energy. When questioned about this experience the marathon monks remain mum, but senior gyoja know when their disciples have had the vision, the greatest of all rewards: "You have seen him, haven't you? Now you have the look of a real marathon monk!"

Doiri

After the 700th day of running, the Gyoja faces the ultimate test, the greatest trial of all: doiri, nine days without food, water, sleep, or rest.

A few weeks prior to doiri, the monk sends out this invitation to the other Tendai priests: “I cannot express my joy at being allowed to attempt doiri. This foolish monk vows to commit himself wholeheartedly to the nine-day fast, purifying the body and mind, hoping to become one with the Great Holy One Fudo Myoo. Please join me for a farewell dinner.”

The symbolic “last meal,” is attended by all the senior priests on the mountain – a goodbye party to a gyoja who might not survive. This point is underscored by having the screens in the room reversed, just as they would be for a funeral.

The doiri – the actual period without food, water, rest, or sleep is seven and a half days (182 hours) – designed to bring the gyoja face-to-face with death. Hiei legend has it that the original period of doiri was ten days; when almost all of the monks died it was shortened just a bit.

By the fifty day, they are dehydrated and are allowed to rinse their mouths with water but must spit out every last drop that enters their mouth. They usually go outside and take in the fresh mountain air where they are able to absorb moisture from the rain and dew through their skin.

All the gyoja agree that the greatest ordeal of doiri is not starvation or thirst but keeping the head erect and not being able to rest...Maintaining the correct posture at all times is the ultimate challenge. Two monks stay with the gyoja during the doiri to insure correct posture and wakefulness.

The monks undergoing doiri spend their days reciting chants that they repeat 100,000 times.

Most gyoja report that they pass out for a second or two when they emerge from the temple out onto the veranda (at the completion of the doiri), in what is evidently a sudden transition from death back to life – for the gyoja, according to physiologists, who have studied them at the conclusion of the rite, manifest many of the symptoms of a dead person at the end of the doiri.

They have come so close to death that they develop a sensitivity to life. They can hear ashes fall from incense sticks, and smell and identify foods from miles away.

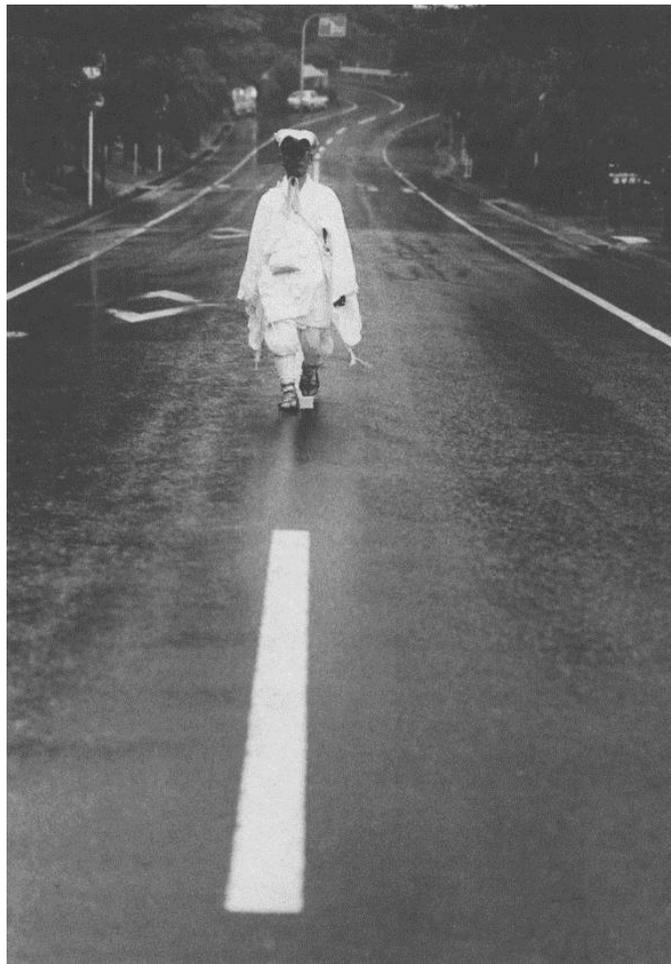
As doiri nears conclusion, the gyoja experiences a feeling of transparency. Nothing is retained; everything – good, bad, neutral – has come out of them, and existence is revealed in crystal clarity.

One relative of a gyoja remarked, “I always dismissed Buddhism as superstitious nonsense until I saw my brother after doiri. He was really a living Buddha.”

The seventh and final year again has two 100 day runs. The first – perhaps the supreme athletic challenge of all times – consists of a daily 52.5 mile run through the environs of Kyoto. This is the equivalent of two Olympic marathons, and is performed 100 days in a row.

During the aptly named Great Marathon, the monk sets out from Hiei at 12:30 A.M., covers the 52 miles over the next sixteen to eighteen hours, and then arrives, sometimes between four and six in the afternoon, at a temple in the center of Kyoto to rest for a few hours.

The following day, beginning at 1:00 A.M., the monk reverses the course. He completes this routine for one hundred consecutive days.



4 A.M.

The final 100 day term is the same distance and course as the first 100 day term completed long ago. This reunion with the mountain and the forest is easily completed. During this final term, Stevens describes the gyoja as having a special connection with all that inhabit the Mountain.

In the last 300 days of the marathon, the focus shifts. The monk emerges from his hibernation, possessed of a certain measure of wisdom and compassion, to roam in a big city among all sorts of human beings, spreading light and happiness. A balance is struck between practice for one's own sake and practice for the benefit of all.



At the end, the marathon monk has become one with the mountain, flying along a path that is free of obstruction. The joy of practice has been discovered and all things are made new each day. The stars and sky, the stones, the plants, and the trees, have become the monk's trusted companions; he can predict the week's weather by the shape of the clouds, the direction of the wind, and the smell of the air; he knows the exact times each species of bird and insect begin to sing; and he takes special delight in that magic moment of the day when the moon sets and the sun rises, poised in the center of creation.

Awakened to the Supreme, one marathon monk described his attitude thus: "Gratitude for the teaching of the enlightened ones, gratitude for the wonders of nature, gratitude for the charity of human beings, gratitude for the opportunity to practice – gratitude, not asceticism, is the principle of the 1,000 day Kaihōgyō."

Indeed, on the last day of the 1,000 day run, the monks have a saying: "The real practice begins from now."

What can you learn from the Marathon Monks?

From Internet Sites

So how can we use the example of the Marathon Monks in our own personal practice? When I describe the Marathon Monk practice to others, often they can't believe or understand why anyone would go through all of that hardship, or why they just don't quit. While there is the threat of Seppuku (suicide), this is really a reminder that it is the monk's duty to honor and stay true to the practice. This epitomizes the spirit of Bushido, the ancient Samurai code of Japan. The Marathon Monks have made a covenant between themselves and Buddha that they will continue the practice to the end. The practice of Bushido may be lacking in modern society, but we can use the Marathon Monks as an inspiration to honor ourselves and nature by getting out the door every morning for our daily run.

Along with the will to remain on their chosen path, the monks learn to love the practice. It is my interpretation that this is the final stage of kaihōgyō. Stevens describes it best when he says that the monk, "takes special delight in the magic moment of the day when the moon sets and the sun rises, poised in the center of creation." The Monk becomes one with Mt. Hiei, connected with all she has to offer, and each run is started and completed in the spirit of love. (<http://bushidorunner.blogspot.com/2011/01/spiritual-athletes-lessons-from.html>)

The Mind Rules the Body

Sports Psychologists are fast coming to the conclusions long known by those following Eastern traditions - that is, that the mind rules the body. In any aspect of training, it is always the mind that quits first and the body that follows - hence, the marathon monks' training for their 7 year long ultra-endurance feats are almost entirely about training the mind to ignore distractions of any shape or form, from physical pain, mental anguish, loneliness, boredom etc.

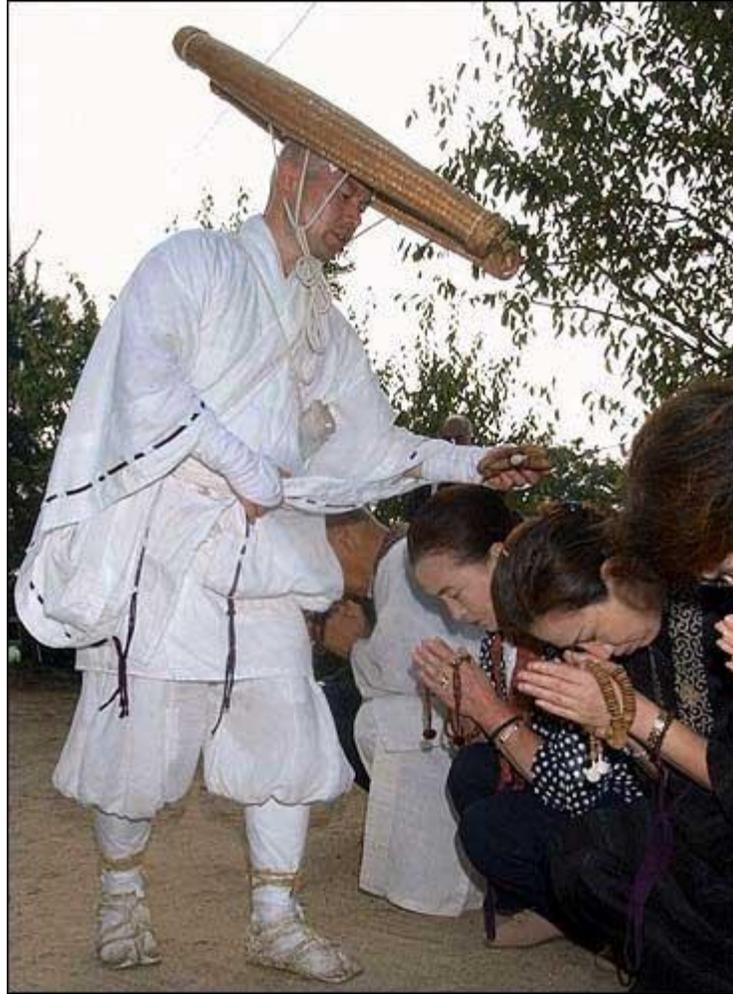
Here is something you can do to train your mind to maintain a calm, even and neutral state, which will allow your body to move uninhibited and keep you free from doubt, anxiety and all other mental symptoms.

Meditation Training

The brain undergoes subtle changes during meditation. Research shows that meditation can actually train the mind and reshape the brain. Tests using the most sophisticated imaging techniques suggest that meditation can actually reset the brain, changing the point at which a traffic jam, for instance, sets the blood boiling. What the scientists discovered through these studies is that with enough practice, the neurons in the brain will re-shape themselves, and many parts of the brain responsible for taking in information, actually slow down or go off-line altogether during meditation, enabling the practitioner to have a more positive experience of themselves and detach from negative feelings and situations.

Meditation also results in a pronounced change in brain-wave patterns, shifting from the alpha waves of aroused, conscious thought to the theta waves that dominate the brain during periods of deep relaxation. Contentment and a real sense of inner peace are the natural result.

(<http://www.brianmac.co.uk/articles/scni41a2.htm>)



Marathon monk sandals

An Interview with Yusai Sakai The Ultimate Marathon Monk

In the lush foothills of Mt Hiei, overlooking the city of Kyoto, they call the monk Yusai Sakai “superman” because of the way he once ran – further and harder than anyone in Japan, probably the world, perhaps even the history of the world. Sakai ran to within a breath of death, not just to visit mortality’s brink but to camp there a while. His austerities were so tortuous, it hurts even to recount them.



Yusai Sakai completes his second 1,000-day ascetic alpine rounds in 1988.

The last time he ran was 1988, when, at the age of 61, he completed two marathons per day for 100 days in succession. According to the unsparing strictures of his practice, he would rise at midnight for a simple meal of vegetables, tofu and miso soup, his only daily sustenance.

At no time was he allowed to stop for rest or refreshment, nor to remove the heavy, invariably rain-sodden monastic robes and long furled hat. The only footwear permitted, despite the jagged, slippery terrain, was a crude pair of straw slippers, and at all times, he had to carry a burden of candles, food (for strangers) and books containing directions to the places of worship he had to visit, the prayers he had to recite.

On a good day, Sakai would return relatively intact by 9 p.m. On a bad day, he’d limp in late, gashed and bloody having been attacked by wild boar or bitten by vipers. Either way, by midnight, he’d be running again.

Fellow monks recall seeing the old man labor up and down the hard, wet mountain in his distinctive upright running style, his hat bobbing behind the trees and disappearing into the mist. They recall his stoic expression, a mask for the myriad agonies that tore through his body - the raging thirst, burning muscles and shredded feet, and not least the knowledge that his only alternative to completing the course was death, either by exhaustion or suicide - which is why Sakai also ran with a knife at his side, a rope (known, morbidly, as the “cord of death”) and a white ceremonial handkerchief used to veil the dead in funeral ceremonies. He'd have used them too, had Buddha chosen it.

Sakai's itinerary is graced with shrines to previous monks for whom the end came before the finish. In fact, since 1885, only 46 monks have made it – “it” being perhaps the most demanding feat of endurance ever devised.

It is believed that to complete the 1,000-day challenge makes one a "Saintly Master of the Highest Practice", or "Living Buddha". And of the few that survive today, Sakai, the 9th living Buddha of the modern age is indisputably the greatest.

When he hung up his straw slippers in 1988, he had completed his 2,000th day of training - that is, he finished the Sennichi Kaihogyo *twice*. "The first time I didn't feel satisfied, I could have done a lot of things better," he said. So he did, completing his second 1,000-day challenge as he entered his sixties, without sustaining an injury, and in six, rather than seven years.

Panting up the hill to his temple abode, I felt woefully unworthy of an audience with Sakai. After all, Sakai is a superman, the subject of several books and documentaries and at 77, well into his autumn, he has already transcended agonies I can barely imagine, not least a fear of death.

Sakai has none of the severity or obscurity I'd expected. He neither dispenses wisdom from on high nor shelters behind koan smokescreens about clapping with one hand. Instead, he laughs and listens and tells simple stories about “once when I was going around the mountain.” He has this way of talking about going round and around that is immediately endearing and uncannily appropriate - he says "guru-guru-guru-guru-guru" very quickly and makes stirring shapes with his hands.

For a dear old man with a benign, twinkling smile, he has many spry, youthful qualities. He is open and inquisitive and delights in the smallest of things, such as butterflies and rain. He is also an elegant and effusive storyteller whose Japanese, I'm assured, is remarkably humble for a man of his eminence.

Yet the enduring experience of Sakai's company is his unencumbered devotion to the moment. He is present and therein lies his presence - always utterly attentive and patient and without the slightest air of distraction or haste. To spend time with Sakai is to be flattered by his focus.

His remarkable story is one of wandering, a perilous proximity to death and the tremendous metamorphosis of a hopeless forty-year-old through spiritual labor. It is all the more inspiring because Sakai was by no means "likely to succeed" -- rather he was considered a shiftless dullard who would never amount to anything.

Sakai's relatives and friends remember him as something of a crybaby, a sleepyhead, and a very dull student. He was, by all accounts, unexceptional, although the family recalls that he was never attached to his possessions – if he won at marbles, he would immediately return his winnings to the loser, and he would give away his pencils or toys without hesitation to his brothers and sisters if they asked for them.

Repeatedly unable to graduate from school, he answered the call for Japan's war effort, specifically because the recruitment drive offered automatic graduation to those who completed army training.

Given his fatal bent, Sakai picked the kamikaze pilot program, an indecisive choice at best – what did he plan to do with his graduation certificate as he hurtled to certain death?

In any case, WWII ended before his training so he left empty-handed, and not a little troubled by the toll his country had paid in defeat. "Why have so many fine men perished," he said, "while a no-account like me remains alive?"

He then found filing work at a university library and, seduced by his new setting, resolved to graduate from school once more. This time he was so confident that, before retaking his exams, he boasted far and wide that he'd already passed and would definitely be a university student next term.

When he failed with flying colors he was so ashamed, that rather than admit it, he faked it – he took the train to the university, disembarked one stop early and wandered around Tokyo all day.

"That was the start of my wandering life," said Sakai. "Little did I think then that I was merely rehearsing for my 84km runs, 20 years later!"

He drifted from job to job, a purposeless roam propelled either by necessity or any number of whims. "Sometimes I'd find work for a month, sometimes two years, but I'd wander and work, wander and work."

"That's how it was until I was 40." By which point, his aimless existence had led to the great tragedy of his life, which in turn turned him towards God – his wife committed suicide.

"My poor wife," recalled Sakai. "Her mother told her to leave me because I was a good-for-nothing, but for a wife it is very difficult to leave her husband. So she was caught in a dilemma. The only thing she could do was to leave us both, so she removed herself entirely."

Although he now hedges around the loss with euphemism, at the time, her death left him devastated, alone and approaching 40. Viewing the rubble of his life with increasing anguish, he continued his listless drift until his ex-mother in law, of all people, was sufficiently

alarmed by his state of mind to persuade him to visit her favorite temple, Enryakuji, the beating heart of the marathon monks.

He had little to lose, so he went, making the 31 mile journey by foot, of course. He left at 7 p.m. one night and arrived 22 hours later, so ending his tortuous path to the mountain he would call home for the next 35 years.

“I was too old, usually they do not permit anyone over 35,” he said. “But the monks took pity on me and allowed me the honor of performing a prayer ceremony that involved rising from kneeling to standing 108 times.” It had to be performed three times a day, each time after standing beneath a freezing waterfall, for purification. “Every time that I rose, I could feel my faith grow,” he said. It was 1965.

The following is reported by Stevens: Sakai has said that of all the trials he has undergone, the first two years at Choju-in were by far the worst. Hakozaiki was deliberately testing Sakai’s mettle – like all true masters, he wanted his disciple to surpass him – and the old priest gave Sakai no rest.

When Sakai, for instance, began to prepare meals in advance to save a few precious moments, Hakozaiki rejected the food with a curt “This is stale!”

Sometimes when he did prostrations in the temple, Sakai was so tired that he would fall fast asleep as he touched his head to the floor. Sakai was so sure that he would die of exhaustion on the route that he began to carry the equivalent of several hundred dollars in cash on his person rather than the customary symbolic few cents as consolation money for whoever discovered his body and arranged for his funeral.

Sakai survived, and during the fourth 100 day term he achieved a breakthrough – he was no longer troubled by visions of his dead wife and army pals or other distracting and disturbing thoughts, nor was he tormented by physical and spiritual pain. He successfully completed doiri, and seemed to be safely on his way to finishing the full 1,000 day term.

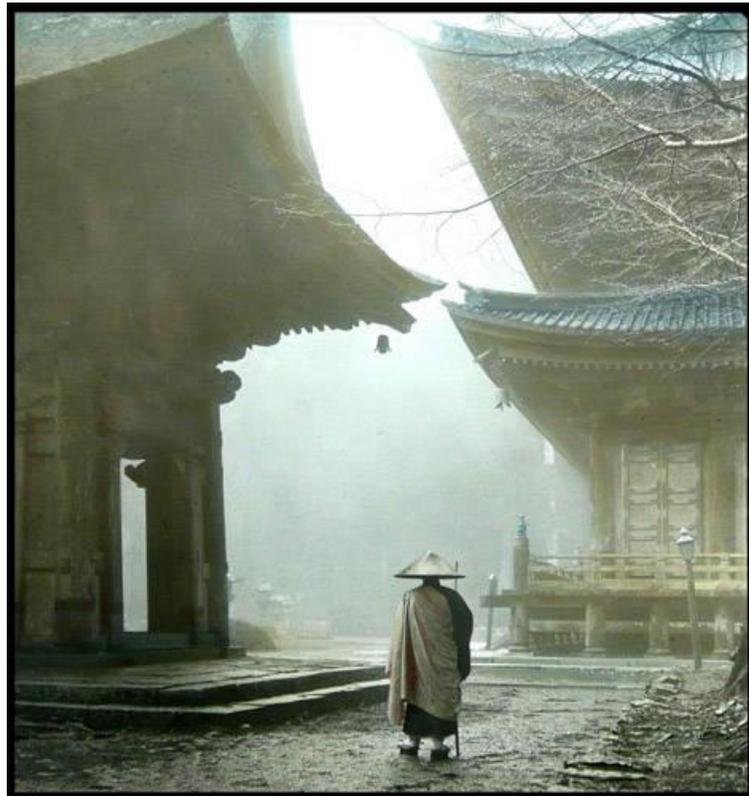
The path of gyoja is never completely smooth, however. About a week before setting out on the Sekisan Marathon, Sakai was doing preliminary training in the mountains when he was attacked by a wild boar. As Sakai leaped out of the way, he was either slashed by the boar’s tusks or lacerated by a sharp branch. Sakai ignored the wound, but it soon festered, and after a few days of the Sekisan Marathon his first two toes had swollen to twice their normal size and turned deep purple.

The toenail on his big toe had fallen off, and the pain was so intense that he shrieked in pain with each step. Unable to continue, Sakai sat down on a rock, pulled out his “suicide knife,” and lanced the wound; blood and pus gushed out, and Sakai fell into a faint.

He pointed the knife at his throat so that if he fell the blade would pierce the skin and he would remain faithful to his vow to kill himself if he failed to complete the course.

Thirty minutes later, the groggy monk recovered slightly from the shock, wiped off the wound, and proceeded to Sekisanin, where a crowd awaited his arrival. Showing up at the temple gates an hour late, Sakai apologized for the delay, explaining sheepishly that he had “overslept.”

Sakai washed off the wound again with temple well water, rested a bit, and then started back on the return trip. He had not gone too far before he fainted again but recovered in about ten minutes. Sakai knew now that he was tapping a higher power, just as he had at the darkest moments of the ceaseless nembutsu practice. Reliance on human strength was out of the question; Sakai felt he must have been propelled along by a superior force.



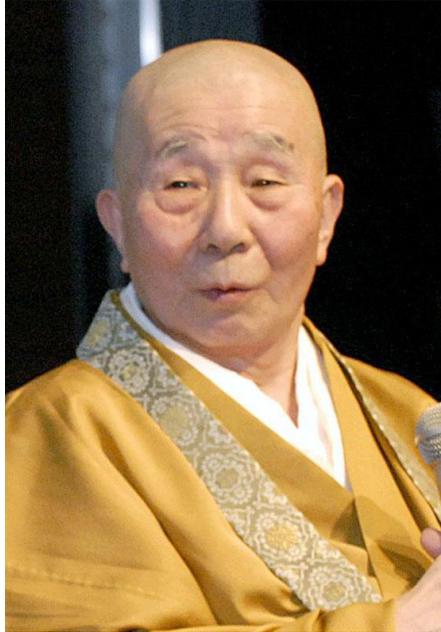
Enryakuji

Enryakuji is the most magnificent cluster of temples on Mt. Hiei. We stayed a night there, in the temple guest house, to witness a monk in the excruciating throes of doiri, the 9-day fast.

Every morning at 2 a.m., the 42 year old Fujinami would emerge from his seclusion and perform the water ceremony – walking 200 yards downhill to the well, and returning with two pails. It sounds simple enough but come day six when he’s withered by dehydration and wrestling powerful hallucinations – remember, he hasn’t eaten, drank or slept - what once took 15 minutes may last an hour or more. According to standard medical primers, Fujinami ought to be already dead.

Doiri is regarded as the most treacherous stage of Sennichi Kaihogyu, more dangerous even than the endless marathons, and since Fujinami is the first monk in 10 years to attempt it, the temple was abuzz with anticipation.

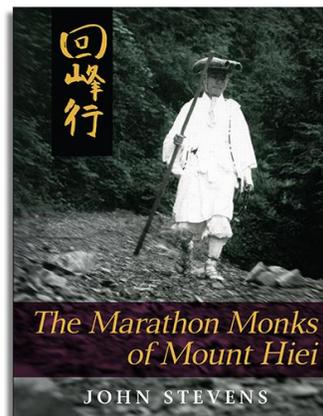
Sitting among the gathering was Sakai, in his golden robes, bashfully receiving the reverence of those around him. "I don't like to wear all this gold," he whispered. "But if I don't these people will be disappointed." Sakai had come to preface the water ceremony with a lecture about his own experiences.



"Your nails die during doiri, and you develop deep furrows in your hands, between your fingers," he explained.

"You also realize how sweet water tastes. When you are permitted to rinse your mouth out, many men become hysterical and delirious, they want to seize the cup, they speak to it." Sakai chuckled. "You get a full glass of water but to make sure you do not drink any, there is a test - when you spit it back the glass is supposed to overflow, because during the fast, your mouth accumulates a lot of residue, mostly blood."

The first time Sakai underwent doiri, he spat out a thick brown fluid, as is typical. The second time, however, his spittle was clear.



Ceaseless Nembutsu

Incredibly, Sakai regards his first doiri as only his second closest brush with death. His nearest miss took place in 1971, barely six years into his monkhood, when he revived the ceaseless nembutsu practice.

This practice is deemed so dangerous that it had been banned since the Meiji era when the last monk who attempted it collapsed, his legs swelling to twice their normal size. His dying words were "please, please do not let anyone do this anymore."

So 100 years later, in walks Sakai. Sakai always had a taste for the ultimate showdown.



The ceaseless nembutsu involves chanting the name of Buddha - Hail to Amida Buddha - incessantly for 90 days at a temple called Jogyo-do, while walking around a blood-red candle-lit hall and stopping for only two hours of sleep per day.

In the beginning, Sakai felt as if he were walking on air gliding around the hall; later it was if he were walking through deep mud. He slept poorly in the two hours of rest-meditation that he was allowed each day, and during the walking he sometimes lost consciousness temporarily and fell asleep against the railing for five minutes or so.

Near the end of the ninety day term Sakai perceived himself moving along a narrow white path over a raging river. Even though he was revolving around a square room, Sakai distinctly sensed himself walking in a straight line as the path opened before him.

The ghosts and goblins that had previously threatened him turned into the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Lotus Sutra, and all was peace and light. Sakai recalls reposing in a timeless state, one with Amida Buddha.

"I saw this golden glow in the distance, and all these dancing specks of light and I remember coming down from what seemed like an immense height and just gliding," said Sakai. "I'm sure that if I'd just followed the feeling, and if I hadn't opened my eyes when I hit the floor, I would have passed over into death."

After 20 minutes, Fujinami returned, buckling under the weight, but otherwise impenetrably focused. As the temple doors closed behind him, and he returned to his punishing deprivation, we tramped back up the mountain, brimming with our own mortality.

A year since my visit, it is stirring to think of these monks running, even as you read this, through the mountains on their mythic, severe journeys. Fujinami went on to complete his daily double marathons through the mountains, and Sakai is probably hiking up some mountain or other, he can scarcely help himself. Since completing kaihogyu he has hiked through China and India, meeting religious leaders, and he now has his sights on South America. For Sakai, training never stops.

"I die every night," he told me, cheerfully, "and every morning I am born anew. This feeling grew within me while I was doing mountain training. When I was running, I was in the world of motion, then I entered doiri, which is nine days of stillness. Similarly, after each day that I circled the mountains, I came back to sleep.

I would look back on the day and assess any mistakes I'd made and this allowed me to be reborn the next day. That's why I see each day as a life. It's just by repeating this day after day, that I completed my 2,000 days of training." http://sanjivb.com/_site/archive/fringe/marathon_monks/index.php)



Yusai Sakai sprinkles water on worshippers in Otsu

Yusai Sakai Death Notice

Buddhist priest who endured ascetic practices over 2,000 days dies at 87
September 24, 2013



Yusai Sakai, a former kamikaze pilot whose misery led him to Japanese Buddhism and a grueling 40,000-kilometer ascetic practice that he twice completed, died of heart failure in Shiga Prefecture on Sept. 23. He was 87.

Sakai had gained a large following through books he wrote on the teachings of Buddhism and the lessons of life. He used plain words to push his belief that actions were more important than wisdom.

But he is perhaps best known for completing Sennichi Kaiho Gyo (1,000-day ascetic alpine rounds), one of the most physically demanding in Japanese Buddhism.

He is one of only three ascetics known to have twice completed the journey since feudal lord Oda Nobunaga attacked and set fire to Enryakuji temple on Mount Hieizan in 1571.

Enryakuji, the head temple of the Tendai sect of Buddhism in Otsu, Shiga Prefecture, is where the Sennichi Kaiho Gyo tradition has been handed down.

The practice involves a pilgrimage across peaks and valleys on Mount Hieizan, which straddles Shiga and Kyoto prefectures, for 1,000 days, spread out over seven years. During the journey—the length of the Earth's circumference—the follower feels the omnipresence of Buddha in natural elements, such as mountains, rivers, grass and wood.

When the ascetic has completed the first 700 days of his alpine rounds, he shuts himself up in a worship hall for nine days and chants a mantra 100,000 times without eating, drinking or sleeping.

“Death spots emerged around the fourth day, and I began to smell like a rotten fish,” Sakai said of the nine-day seclusion practice.

Subsequent duties include a pilgrimage in the city of Kyoto in addition to rounds in the mountains.

On completing the practice, an ascetic is given the title of Dai Ajari (great acharya). Tradition has allowed a Dai Ajari to enter an imperial estate without taking off his footwear.

A native of Osaka, Sakai was a kamikaze pilot based in Kagoshima Prefecture preparing for a suicide mission when World War II ended in 1945. Although his life was spared, he experienced pain and setbacks in the early postwar period.

After struggling in school, Sakai started a number of businesses, but they all failed, including a ramen noodle restaurant in Tokyo that was destroyed in a fire.

His newlywed wife committed suicide.

Those hardships pushed Sakai toward Buddhism, and he joined the Tendai sect after obtaining priesthood in 1965.

Sakai completed his first 1,000-day alpine rounds in 1980, an experience documented in a Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK) program.

He entered the rounds for a second time less than a year later and completed them in 1987 at the age of 60.

The priest later visited temples across Japan and made a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai in China, where the 1,000-day ascetic practice is believed to have originated. He also met Pope John Paul II in the Vatican in 1995.

The NHK program about his first journey was well-received by the public. But Sakai also gained popularity through his words and books.

“You don’t have to just cram to increase your knowledge,” Sakai said. “You can take action once you believe that you know things to such and such an extent. Action gives you wisdom. And wisdom leads you to think, ‘Why not try this way?’ and ‘Oh, I need to study more.’”

Tetsuo Yamaori, an 82-year-old religious scholar, had nothing but praise for the departed ascetic.

“I had an opportunity to follow Sakai all night in a car as he was approaching the end of his first 1,000-day alpine rounds,” Yamaori said. “Rather than striding in the mountains, he was flying through the mountains like a heron.

“I remember his two companion dogs obediently waiting by his side while he stopped to chant a sutra and say a prayer during the practice. His face had an affable and merciful look. That was a spectacular scene.”

Genshin Fujinami, Sakai's disciple and chief mourner, has also completed the 1,000-day alpine rounds.

After an early life of war and pain, followed by exhausting journeys through the mountains, Sakai spent the last days of his life at his Imuro Fudodo Chojuin temple in Otsu.

Regarding his practice, Sakai has said: "Human life is like a candle; if it burns out halfway it does no one any good. I want the flame of my practice to consume my candle completely, letting that light illuminate thousands of places. My practice is to live wholeheartedly, with gratitude and without regret. Practice really has no beginning nor end; when practice and daily life are one, that is true Buddhism." (http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/people/AJ201309240055)



Yusai Sakai: 1926 - 2013

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