

The *Choishi* Stone Markers

The stone pillars that mark the trail are called *choishi*. *Cho* is an ancient measurement of length equivalent to 109 meters, while *ishi* means stone. Unsurprisingly, the stone pillars are placed about 109 meters apart.

Each pillar is about 3 meters tall and is sculpted in the shape of a *gorinto* (five-elements pagoda). Each section of a *gorinto* has a specific meaning, representing the five elements that make up the world and the five colors of the Shingon sect of Buddhism. From top to bottom, these elements are space, wind, fire, water, and earth. Each one is inscribed with the Sanskrit name of a buddha or bodhisattva, the name of the sculptor, and the year it was created.

These sacred pillars replaced the original wooden markers that the priest Kukai (known posthumously as Kobo Daishi; 774–835), the founder of Koyasan, is said to have placed along the route during his ascent. Most of the 180 *choishi* between Jisonin Temple and the Konpon Daito pagoda date back to the Kamakura period (1185–1333), when the quality of stone carving was high. An additional 36 pillars mark the section of the trail between Konpon Daito and Okunoin Cemetery, the traditional destination for pilgrims making the climb.