

【Sutra Copying (*Shakyō*)】

Two temples along the Chichibu 34 Kannon Pilgrimage offer the opportunity for visitors to try copying a Buddhist sutra: Saikōji (#16) and Hōshōji (#32). Those who prefer instruction in English or Mandarin should go to Hōshōji. No reservation is required, but there is a requested donation of ¥1,000 per participant.

Hōshōji offers three sutras for copying: the *Heart Sutra*, the *Kannon Sutra*, and the *Life-Extending Ten-Phrase Kannon Sutra* (*Enmei jikku kannongyō*), a shorter form of the *Kannon Sutra* that has only 42 characters. The *Ten-Phrase Kannon Sutra* is ideal for beginners, and completing a copy usually takes between 30 and 60 minutes.

Visitors are led to a tatami room with the desk and materials prepared. The chosen sutra text is overlaid with a translucent sheet of copying paper. To copy the sutra, trace the characters beneath from top-to-bottom, right-to-left. While it is important to proceed slowly and carefully as a sign of reverence, the copyist's sincerity outweighs the quality of the handwriting. Any mistake should be crossed out and the correct character written beside it in the margin.

The final lines of the sutra contain blank spaces to write in the date, the person to receive the merit, and the copyist's name. Traditionally, upon completion, the copyist reads the sutra aloud, repeating after the priest, who pronounces it a few sounds at a time. Visitors can choose to take their copied sutra home or to dedicate it to the temple. If they choose to dedicate it, the sutra will be placed on the altar with other offerings and ritually burned.

History of Shakyō

The practice of copying sutras (*shakyō*) came to Japan in the sixth century with the introduction of Buddhism. By the Nara period (710–794), sutra-copying had become a popular activity among the aristocracy, the new faith's main adherents. In the days before mechanical printing, the propagation of religious texts relied upon the labor-intensive process of hand-copying. Depending on the skill of the copyist and the length of the chosen sutra, it can take months or even years to fully copy a text. In Japan, the most frequently copied sutra is the Heart Sutra (*Hannya shingyō*), but the Kannon Sutra (*Kannongyō*), Diamond Sutra (*Kongōkyō*), Amida Sutra (*Amidakyō*), and Lotus Sutra (*Hokkekyō*) are also common. In the Nara period, Court-sponsored projects to copy the entire corpus of all sutras took place every three and a half years, engaging the efforts of around 10,000 people for a year at a time. Copying sutras helped the religion to spread and was also considered a meritorious act that expressed the piety of the copyist.

In Buddhist doctrine, this “merit” is more than just the sense of having done a good deed; it can affect a person’s fate in the cycle of death and rebirth (Sanskrit: *samsara*). Earning merit in the current life is believed to improve the level at which one is born in the next. Being born human, rather than a beast or insect, gives one a better chance of achieving enlightenment and being freed from the cycle of rebirth. The merit earned by *shakyō* can also be transferred, and as sutra copying became popular, it became common practice to commission the copying of sutras for the benefit of a deceased loved one.

The *shakyō* process is highly contemplative. Approaching the act with sincerity and reverence is more important than understanding the meaning of the text. Copyists make sure their hands and clothing are clean, the copying materials are neatly arranged, and the desk is uncluttered.