

Kukai – Kobo Daishi

The Buddhist priest Kukai (774–835) is considered the founder of the Shikoku Pilgrimage and is a figure pilgrims will encounter repeatedly as they make their way around the 88-temple circuit. Born into the aristocratic Saeki family in Sanuki Province (present-day Kagawa Prefecture), on the site of what is now Zentsuji Temple (temple number 75 on the pilgrimage), Kukai developed a deep interest in Buddhism. He studied in China for two years, focusing on esoteric teachings. On his return to Japan he founded the Shingon school of Buddhism. Kukai went on to accomplish many other great deeds during his lifetime, including establishing a monastery on Mt. Koya, a site in present-day Wakayama Prefecture that now hosts a vast complex of temples and monasteries and is one of the holiest sites in Shingon Buddhism. His achievements earned him the posthumous title of Kobo Daishi, or “Grand Master of Buddhist Teaching.”

For Buddhist devotees, the main purpose of the Shikoku Pilgrimage is to follow in the footsteps of Kobo Daishi in order to honor the Grand Master and earn his blessings. Each of the 88 temples has a Daishi hall, which is dedicated to Kobo Daishi, as well as a main hall, in which the temple’s principal deity is enshrined. Pilgrims generally light a candle, offer incense, and pray at both halls when visiting a temple. Most of the 88 temples also have their own legends that tell of miracles worked by Kobo Daishi. For example, in a story told at Hotsumisakiji Temple (number 24) in Kochi Prefecture, Kobo Daishi is refused a potato by a local farmer, and so makes the region’s potatoes inedible. Another tale involves the main hall at Yashimaji Temple (number 84) in Kagawa, which the Grand Master is said to have built in one night.