

REVIEW

John Stevens, *The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei*. Boston: Shambala, 1988. viii+158 pp., \$12.95.

John Stevens' *The Marathon Monks of Mt. Hiei* is the first book in English on the *kaihōgyō*, an arduous ascetic practice carried out on Mount Hiei, the site of the Tendai sect's headquarter temple of Enryaku-ji. The *kaihōgyō* is the practice of walking a prescribed 30 kilometer (18.8 mile) pilgrimage route around the peaks of this mountain, offering prayers at 255 sacred sites along the way. This pilgrimage can be undertaken either for one hundred consecutive days or for one thousand days spread out over seven years. Many Tendai monks undertake the hundred day practice, but few go on to complete the thousand day practice (just forty-six monks have completed it since 1885). However, it is the latter full version that is usually associated with the word "*kaihōgyō*."

Although the *kaihōgyō* had been quietly pursued by dedicated monks for centuries, it has recently become the focus of intense interest on the part of the Japanese public. The media, both print and television, has given it extensive coverage. As Stevens remarks, when Sakai Yusai completed his second thousand day practice, "films of the sixty-one-year-old marvel zooming along the mountain paths were shown on every television news program in Japan" (p. 129). Publishers vied with one another to churn out books cashing in on the sudden interest in this venerable Tendai practice. Indeed, Japan has been in the middle of a veritable "*kaihōgyō* boom" since the mid-1980's.

Stevens' work is the latest (and, as stated above, the first English) entry into the long list of books concerning this unique form of Tendai mountain asceticism. Let me reproduce the table of contents as a way of indicating the scope of the book.

PART ONE. The World of Tendai Buddhism

Chapter One. The Treasure of a Nation: Saichō, Founder of Japanese Tendai

Chapter Two. The Magic Mountain: The History of Hiei

Chapter Three. Study and Practice: The Way of Tendai Buddhism

Chapter Four. Mount Hiei Today

PART TWO. The Marathon Monks

Chapter Five. Mountain Pilgrimage: Sō-ō and the History of the Hiei Marathon

Chapter Six. The Path of the Spiritual Athlete

Chapter Seven. Running Buddhas: The Men Themselves

Epilogue

The author has clearly spent much time on Mount Hiei observing and inter-

viewing the *kaihōgyō* practitioners. In the process, he has gained a thorough understanding of how this practice is carried out on the mountain today. The result of his "fieldwork" is presented in chapters six and seven, which form the fore of the volume. These chapters are the best parts of the book. Chapter six, "The Path of the Spiritual Athlete," is an excellent exposition of the mechanics of the *kaihōgyō* practice. The final chapter, "Running Buddhas: The Men Themselves," describes in fascinating detail some of the major contemporary *kaihōgyō* practitioners and their experiences. The brief but inspiring biographical sketches of Hakozaki Bunnō, Hagami Sōchō, Utsumi Shunshō, and Sakai Yusai — all noted *kaihōgyō* monks of the modern era — found in this last chapter are without question the high points of this book.

In contrast to the painstaking research and attention to detail which characterize the final two chapters, chapters one through five, which treat the historical and philosophical background of the *kaihōgyō* practice, are sketchy and superficial. Stevens rushes through these five chapters in sixty short pages, far too brief to do justice to the topics covered. Moreover, he occasionally displays a disturbing lack of historical perspective. In dealing with Chih-i, the Chinese founder of Tendai (Chinese: T'ien-t'ai) Buddhism, he relates a legend (without identifying its source) that Chih-i was originally a follower of Ch'an (Zen). However, Ch'an did not become an independent movement within Chinese Buddhism until well over a century after Chih-i's death. This legend is clearly apocryphal, and should have no place in a dispassionate account of Chih-i's life. Another incongruity is found in the section recounting Saichō's obscure work on sutra-copying, "Admonitions for Sutra Copyists," while Saichō's efforts to build a Mahāyāna ordination platform on Mt. Hiei, generally considered his most important achievement, merits barely half a page of discussion.

Several mistakes mar this earlier portion of the book. The brief definitions (given on page 12) of each of the Four Doctrines of Conversion, the fundamental categories of Tendai hermeneutics, are sheer nonsense. Another glaring error appears on page 23, where the monk Tokuitsu, with whom Saichō engaged in a doctrinal battle over the question of whether all beings can attain Buddhahood, is wrongly identified as an adherent of the Kegon sect. Tokuitsu, in fact, belonged to the Hossō sect. This is important because, like the Tendai sect, the Kegon sect held to the doctrine of the One Vehicle, which declares that all beings without exception become Buddhas. As Groner has stated (1984, pp. 102-103), Saichō made extensive use of arguments found in Kegon works to defend his position of universal Buddhahood against Tokuitsu's Hossō position that not all beings have the innate capacity to become Buddhas.

Finally, the text contains several errors in Japanese and Chinese proper names. K'uo-ch'ing Temple is mistakenly given as K'uo-ch'ing Temple on page 19. On page 50, Onō-ji should be Onjōji, and Kōji-rin should be Koji-rin. On page 136, note 5, Junjirō Takakusa should be Junjirō Takakusu. Incidentally, the 1956 edition of Takakusu's *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy*, which is cited in note 5, page 136, was not published by the University of Hawaii Press, but by

(believe it or not) the Office Appliance Co. of Honolulu!

Despite the lack of scholarly expertise which Stevens demonstrates in the historical and philosophical sections of *The Marathon Monks*, the fact still remains that the chapters on the *kaihōgyō* practice and its modern-day practitioners are well written and richly informative. On the strength of these latter chapters, this book is to be recommended to those interested in Tendai Buddhism as well as Buddhist practice in general and mountain religion in particular.

REFERENCE

GRONER, Paul

1984 *Saichō: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School*. Berkeley, California: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series 7.

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