

Find Your Favorite Manifestation of Kannon

All about the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan

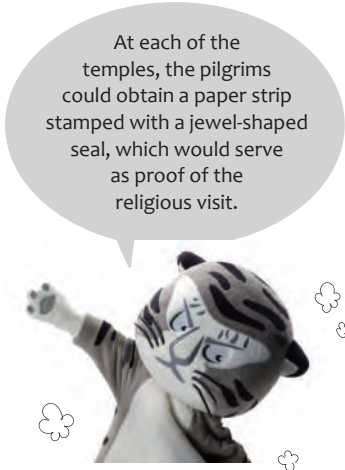
What are the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan?

The Oldest Pilgrimage Route in Japan!

The Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan (Saikoku Sanjūsansho) refer to thirty-three temples venerating Kannon (Avalokiteshvara), the bodhisattva of compassion, whose mission it is to save all sentient beings. It is considered the oldest pilgrimage route in the country and is nearly 1,000 km long. The temples are dispersed across seven prefectures in Western Japan (Wakayama, Osaka, Hyogo, Kyoto, Nara, Shiga, and Gifu); a third are located in Kyoto.

The Legend of the Pilgrimage Route's Origins

The origins of this pilgrimage route have been explained by the following legend. The eighth-century Buddhist priest Tokudō (n.d.), founder of Hase-dera Temple in Nara, once temporarily died and went to Buddhist hell. There, he encountered Enma, the King of Hell. Enma instructed the priest to spread the word that devotees might acquire merit by undertaking a pilgrimage to thirty-three sacred sites of Kannon. The King of Hell gave Tokudō thirty-three jewel-shaped seals that would serve as symbolic passes to attain rebirth in the Pure Land paradise. After coming back to life, the priest distributed the seals to the thirty-three temples that became the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan. Though the pilgrimage route went into decline for a time, it was later revived by Cloistered Emperor Kazan (968–1008) during the Heian period.



Kannon—A Master of Transformation!

Widespread Kannon Worship

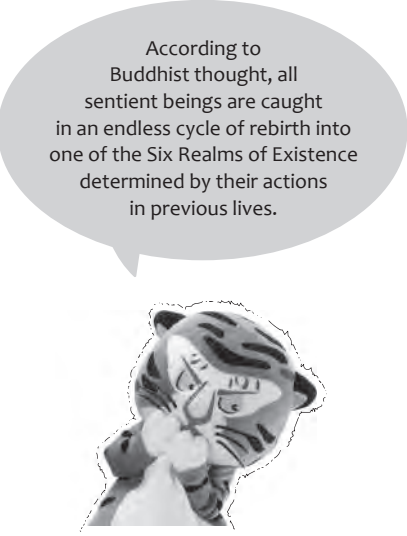
According to the “Universal Gate” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokekyō*), also known as the *Kannon Sutra*, one can overcome any types of trials or tribulations if one faithfully believes in Kannon. The number thirty-three is in itself a reference to Kannon, who can appear in any of thirty-three different manifestations to save sentient beings.

Various Manifestations of Kannon

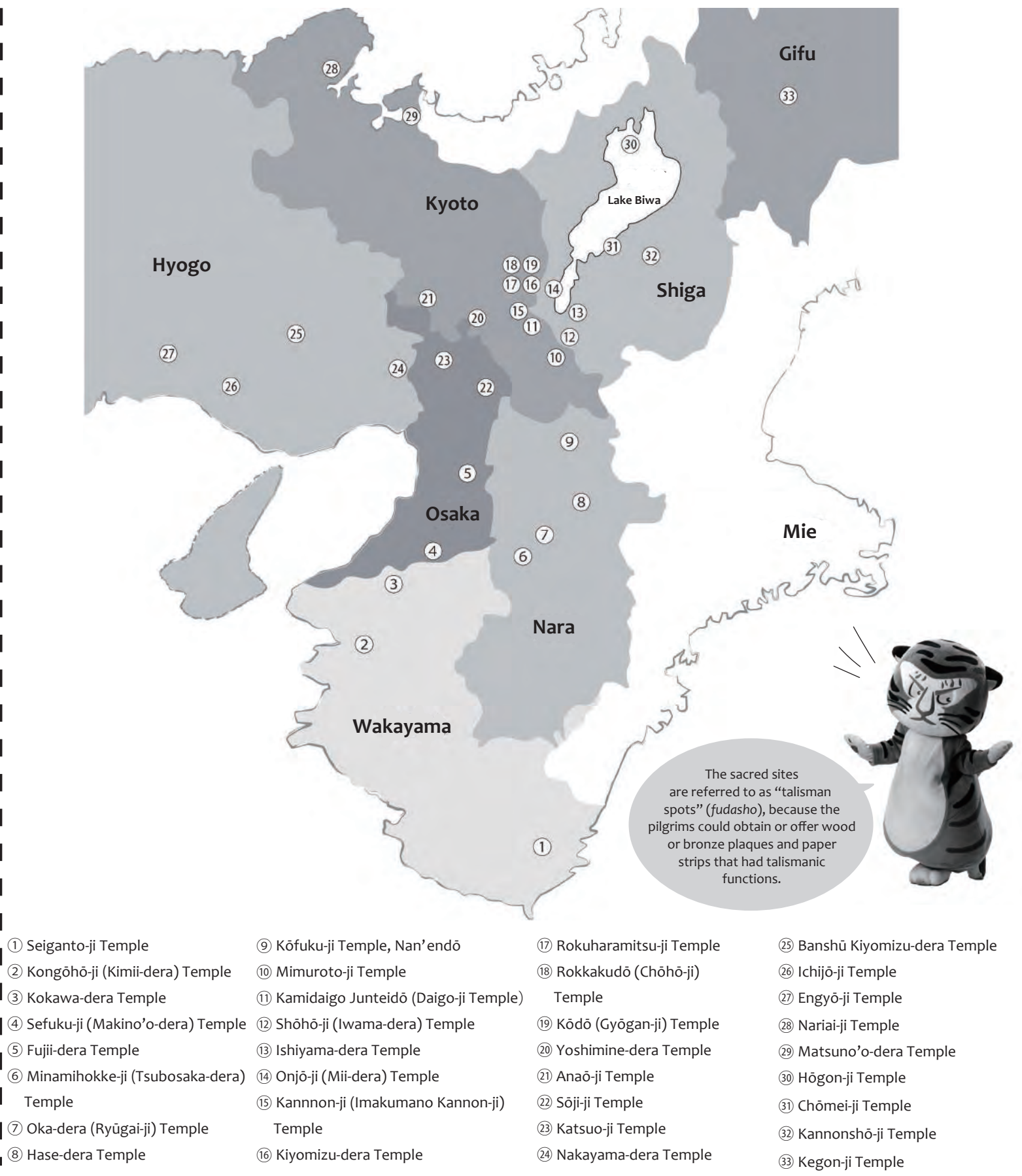
Kannon's principal, most basic form is Noble (Shō) Kannon, with one head and two arms, resembling a human figure. Any alternate manifestation of Kannon with multiple heads, eyes, and arms is referred to as a Transformation (Henge) Kannon. It is thought that the variant forms of Kannon were created to emphasize the deity's powers.

The Six and Seven Manifestations of Kannon

The veneration of six manifestations of Kannon dates back to around the tenth century. It is said that one Kannon resides in each of the Buddhist Six Realms of Existence (Reincarnation), and that it comes to rescue those who get lost. Shingon Buddhism worships the following six manifestations: Noble Kannon, Eleven-Headed Kannon, Thousand-Armed Kannon, Horse-Headed Kannon, Wish-Fulfilling Kannon, and Pure Kannon. In Tendai Buddhism, Unfailing Rope Kannon is considered an alternate form of Pure Kannon. At each of the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites, one of these seven forms of Kannon is venerated as a main icon.



Map of the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan





Noble (Shō) Kannon

- Has one head and two arms
- Has an almost human figure and is the principal, most basic form of Kannon
- Usually has a small sculpture representing Amida Buddha in its headdress
- Sometimes holds a lotus bud in its left hand, which it may try to open with the fingertips of its right hand



Eleven-Headed (Jūichimen) Kannon

- Has eleven small heads on top of its own head
- Usually has the head of Amida Buddha on top surrounded by ten bodhisattva heads with different facial expressions: kind, angry, fanged, open-mouthed laughing, etc.
- Is almost always represented with only two arms
- Holds a water bottle (or a lotus) in its left hand and often has its right hand lowered

☆The many faces watch over different directions.

Thousand-Armed (Senju) Kannon

- Has one thousand arms with an eye on the palm of each hand
- In sculpture, is often represented symbolically with only forty-two arms, though some examples actually have around one thousand arms
- Has eleven small heads on top of its own head

☆The many arms symbolize the many ways Kannon saves sentient beings.



Wish-Fulfilling (Nyoirin) Kannon

- Often has one head and two or six arms
- Holds a wish-fulfilling jewel and a Dharma wheel
- Holds its left leg with the knee bent and lying down, and its right leg with the knee bent and raised, its right foot resting on the left foot

☆Wish-fulfilling jewel: A jewel that grants all kind of wishes

☆Dharma wheel: A turning wheel that symbolizes the spreading of the teachings of the Buddha



Seven Manifestations of Kannon

Kannon (Avalokiteshvara), like other bodhisattvas, is in the middle of “training” to achieve enlightenment. It is not yet a Buddha. Accordingly, its appearance is modeled after the Indian prince who later became the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. Kannon is thus depicted clad in the lavish attire of ancient Indian aristocrats, with necklaces, bracelets, and a crown.

Horse-Headed (Batō) Kannon

- Has a horse on top of its head
- Has an angry expression with fangs and red skin, both of which are unusual for Kannon
- Often has three faces and a total of eight arms
- Has a third eye on its forehead
- Has middle hands forming the horse-mouth mudra

☆It is thought to devour evil, almost like a starving horse.

☆Among the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan, only Matsuno’o-dera Temple has this deity as its main icon.



Unfailing Rope (Fukūkenjaku) Kannon

- Often has one head and eight arms
- Holds a rope
- Wears a deerskin robe
- Has a third eye on its forehead

☆Unfailing rope: Kannon is unfailingly able to encircle sentient beings in this rope to lead them to salvation.

☆Among the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan, only the Nan’endō of Kōfuku-ji Temple has this deity as its main icon.



Pure (Juntei) Kannon

- Often has one head and eighteen arms
- Has a third eye on its forehead

☆Pure Kannon is venerated as a “Buddha Mother” who has given birth to countless buddhas.

☆Among the Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan, only Kamidaigo Junteidō (Daigo-ji Temple) has this deity as its main icon.

