

Seven Weeks on the Henro Michi
Steps along the Shikoku Island 88 Temple Pilgrimage
Marc Pearl

At Temple #2
A Lucky Encounter

“Marc-san desu ka? Fujii-san called to tell us that you would be arriving...we had expected you last week.” I was warmly welcomed at the Shukubo Temple Lodging of Gokurakuji, the Temple of Pure Land Heaven, the second stop on the Pilgrimage. A young woman showed me inside, where I took off my brand new hiking boots and stepped up to the tatami covered hallway. Yes, I had planned on an earlier start, but I had lounged around my Osaka apartment a few more days “getting up my energy” and buying a few more things to add to my overloaded pack. Today had seemed like the proper time to wake up at dawn and rush to the early ferryboat to Shikoku island.

“An American woman came here too!” my hostess excitedly told me. “Right, I know about her”, I replied as I lugged my gear up the stairs. “I read about her in the Koyasan newspaper. She did half the walk last spring, accompanied by a priest and his dog...” I was shown to a small room sparingly furnished with a low writing table, some flowers in a vase, and a painting on the wall. The door of the next room slid open with a rush of energy. Standing before me was a tall strongly built foreigner, whom I recognized immediately as the same Sara Oechsli from the newspaper photos! She had returned to Japan, and that very afternoon had finished walking the second half of the Pilgrimage. She was spending her last night at the temple where I, through the good fortune of that chance meeting with Fujii-san at Koyasan, was to begin my stay on the island. It was an auspicious start!

What questions to ask her first? I was overwhelmed with all the stories and information Sara could give me. She pulled out maps and addresses, and we were looking over her notes together, when someone invited us to have dinner with the Jushoku (Abbot/Temple Head Priest) downstairs in the family dining room. At a large table and chairs set Western style was sitting Aki Shoken. He smiled kindly as he sat there taking in my rising excitement. We were all surprised and pleased at our meeting. Daishi-sama was already looking out for me! We talked a long time, in both English and Japanese. Over coffee and cake, Aki-san told how he had traveled many times to Burma, helping out the Buddhist temples there. His family was very nice, and not put out by the two lively Gaijin (foreigners) at their table.

Aki’s wife gave me a Henro jacket as my first Settai Offering. It was short white cotton “Happi-coat” style, with a mandala design on the back. She showed me how to wear it, left side over right. On the way to the baths, I passed by an area displaying many different styles of these jackets, as well as all the other Henro Pilgrim gear: Boxes of incense, candles of all sizes, strings of rosary beads, walking sticks, handbags, guidebooks and maps, hanging scrolls, prayer books, as well as postcards, teas, toys, and other tourist items. I wanted to buy it all!

After a good soak, I went back to my room. There was a futon with a thick down comforter laid out for me, and on the table alongside, a thermos of hot water and a teapot, with rice crackers for a late night snack. I went to sleep immediately, ready to awaken at 5:30am for my first day of walking.

It was still dark as I got dressed and went out to the Hondo main sanctuary where Aki-san and his son were lighting candles to start the service. There were also three men there, two pilgrims and their taxi driver/guide, who were also beginning their circuit of Shikoku. After the prayers, the priest gave a good short talk about the Hannya Shingyo, the Heart Sutra, and the Henro Pilgrimage. I managed to understand a good part.

Afterwards, I wandered around the temple precincts in the dark, visiting the sacred “Long Life” cedar tree, so-called because Daishi-sama planted it over 1200 years ago. It is known for its powers of granting easy childbirth. In another area, after twenty one days of reciting the Amida Sutra, Kobo Daishi carved a statue of Amida Buddha. Its halo emitted a light so bright that it scared away the fish in the bay miles beyond. The frustrated fishermen built up a small hill in front of the main sanctuary to block this radiance. This was the first of many of the Daishi Legends I was to encounter along the Pilgrim Road.

NAMU DAISHI HENJO KONGO!

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At Temple #2 Final Instructions- Starting Out

After breakfast, I went with Sara to Temple #1, Ryozanji, Sacred Mountain Temple. In front of the sanctuary, we reviewed the brief Pilgrim's prayer service. Sara, now finishing her Henro Pilgrimage now had a Deshi student to teach! The ritual is simple. One lights a candle and places it in the glass enclosed candle rack set up before the building, then lights three sticks of incense, placing them in the ashmound in the large stone urn next to the candles. Passing through the purifying smoke, a few steps lead to the veranda of the sanctuary. The prayers are usually recited in front of the screened doorway, as the interior is often darkened, with slight glimmers reflecting off the gilded altar decorations. By the opening are three boxes. One is for depositing hand copied Buddhist Sutra prayers, an exercise long believed to grant "merit", good Karma. Another box is for receiving the Pilgrims "O-Fuda", which is a type of calling card on which the Pilgrim writes his name, address, date, and the reason for which he is making these prayers on the Pilgrimage. Indeed, another name for these temples is O-Fuda-sho, O-Fuda Place. On mine I wrote for "Health for my family, a happy successful future with my wife, and the strength to complete the entire Henro Michi hike" (a walk of 850 miles ahead of me!) and put the slip of paper in the box. In the third box, one tosses a few coins, the more money, the more sincere and better received is the request, it is said!

These preliminaries quickly done, the Pilgrim opens his "Kyohon", a prayer book made of a long strip of paper folded accordion style between two slim cardboard covers, about 7 ½ by 3 inches. All the sects use this basic format. On the cover is written in Japanese "Order of Prayers to be read before the Buddha". The prayers are commonly called "O-Tsutome", "Diligent Work". The opening prayers are nearly the same in all the sects. First is a poem:

"Unsurpassed, profound and Wonderful Law
Difficult to encounter in hundreds of thousands of eras
Now we can see, hear, receive and benefit from it,
We vow to attain the true understanding of the Buddha!"

Next is Repentance:

"I have, since the ancient past, committed evil deeds
All caused by beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance
These acts of body, speech, and thought
I now completely confess and repent."

We then take refuge in the Buddha, his teachings, and the community of his followers, and vow to observe his ten precepts: Not to kill, steal, commit adultery, lie, exaggerate, slander, equivocate (speak two ways of the same thing), covet, get angry, or hold wrong views (harmful to others and the teachings).

The prayers that follow these opening words vary from sect to sect, and on different Pilgrimages and holidays. The Western Japan 33 Kannon Temple Pilgrimage includes the Kannon chapter from the Lotus Sutra for example. In the Shingon Sect founded by Kobo Daishi, many mantras of Sanskrit words are recited. These are modified to resemble Japanese pronunciation:

“On Boji shitta Bodahadayami”

(“Om, I generate the mind/heart of Enlightenment”)

“On Sammaya Satoban”

(“Om, You are the One Samadhi Enlightenment”)

The focus of these prayers is the short Heart of the Perfect Wisdom Sutra, in Japanese the Bussetsu Maka Hannya Haramita Shingyo, commonly called the Hannya Shingyo. It is a compact description of the Buddhist philosophy of mind, and is considered by many to have great magical powers as well. It gives us a description of Kannon-sama who, while in a state of deep meditation, perceived that our sensations and psychological states are all relative and in a constant flux that cannot be separated from all other life, that they are “empty” of independent existence. Thus the famous phrase “Form is no other than Emptiness, Emptiness no other than Form”. The sutra ends with the recital of a Sanskrit mantra phrase “Gyate, gyate, hara gyate, hara so gyate, Boji Sowaka” meaning “Gone, gone, gone to the other side (of wisdom beyond petty discrimination) to the state of Endless Bodhi Heart, so be it!”

The closing lines include the mantra for the Buddha enshrined in the temple sanctuary, also the Mantra of Bright Light, and the mantra for Kobo Daishi, the founder of the Pilgrimage, “Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo! Hail to the great teacher, spreading the Diamond Light!”. Finally, closing with the prayer:

“May the merit we have gained by these words bring us,

Together with all Beings, further along the path to Buddhahood”

Each temple also has a Founder’s Hall dedicated to Kobo Daishi, where the above ritual is repeated. The entire set of prayers can be completed in fifteen minutes or so, but on the first day I struggled through reading the unfamiliar words, marveling at Sara’s fluidity in chanting. I would become more proficient, too, she told me, because there are 87 more temples ahead!

Although I am not a follower of any organized religion, and knew very little about the details of Buddhist ritual, I decided that since I was making the effort of walking the entire pilgrimage and visiting the temples, I might as well dress the part and wear the Henro outfit, and pray in the manner of the Pilgrimage. Perhaps some deeper understanding would evolve this way. The sight of a bearded Gaijin, a foreigner, was so unusual to the Japanese, that my dressing the part of the Pilgrim would not be many strangers for them! It could even be of benefit among these islanders accustomed to floods of tourists in Pilgrimage chartered buses!

Sara and I entered the temple reception area, the Nokyocho. There for a fee of 200yen, the priest would stamp the official Temple Seal in your Pilgrimage Book. This includes a stamp with a Buddhist symbol, the name and number of the temple, all in red ink. In beautiful flowing brushstrokes, the page is then covered with a Sanskrit letter representing the Honzon (Buddha) of

the main sanctuary, the name of the Honzon, and the temple name. Pilgrims can also ask for the seal to be placed on the back of their white jackets, or on a special hanging scroll. The jacket is worn by the Pilgrim at his funeral, the book placed in his coffin, thus accompanying him on his final journey to the Pure Land. Until that time, he can pray at his Butsudan (home altar) in front of the hanging scroll, truly a wonderful sight with its 88 temple stamps.

I bought one of these books, a smaller size to fit into my pack, so I could begin my collection of Nokyo seals. Sara bought me a little bell to tie to my pack. This bell is to awaken the Pilgrim to a mindful state of awareness, but we suspected that it serves more as a signal to the locals that a stranger is approaching! I decided to buy the rest of my gear at Temple #2, since they were so helpful and kind. In addition to the Henro jacket, Aki-san had given me a hanging scroll to take along. The scroll is a sheet of silk with a paper backing on which the spaces for 88 seals is marked. In the middle of the scroll is a painting of Kobo Daishi. After the scroll is complete with seals it can be taken to a shop where the paper backing is replaced by an elaborate border and tassels, making a first rate work of art.

We walked to a small coffee shop, where Sara gave me more tips and names of places to stay. On the return to Temple #2, we stopped at a store to make copies of detailed maps she had gotten from a man in Matsuyama City who had placed guide plaques along the entire hiking trail. Back at Gokurakuji, I got the rest of my Henro gear:

- Incense and small candles in a plastic case with space for matches

- Book shoulderbag, to carry prayer, stamp, and guide books

- Sugegasa Straw Hat

- Wagesa(prayer ribbon to wear around neck)

- O-Fuda slips

- Kongo-Tsue the Pilgrims Walking Stick, inscribed with the Heart Sutra

In addition, Aki-san gave me some Telephone cards with the temple's picture. These are used when making long distance calls, each card worth a number of call units. He also gave me his calling card (Meishi), with a short message written on the back. It said "Marc-san is my friend from America, please extend to him any courtesies and help he might need on his Pilgrimage". We sat down and over a last cup of tea, he gave me more details on the ritual and prayers, then he stamped my book and scroll, and wished me a safe journey. I stopped at the well by the main gate and filled my canteen, and with a wave and a bow to the gate's protector demons at 1:30 in the afternoon, I was finally on my way, walking stick clacking down the driveway.

NAMU DAISHI HENJO KONGO!





Henro Outfit includes:

Book bag, to carry prayer, stamp, and guide books

Sugegasa Hat

O Izuru White jacket

Wagesa Surplice (ribbon around neck)

Nenju Rosary Beads

Kongo-Tsue the Pilgrims Walking Stick, inscribed with the Heart Sutra

Little Bell