

# **Seven Weeks on the Henro Michi Steps along the Shikoku Island 88 Temple Pilgrimage**

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## **First Steps Koyasan to Shikoku Island**

One must start the Pilgrimage by going to the sacred mountain temple complex of Koyasan. In the year 816, Kobo Daishi asked the Emperor permission to build on this remote plateau a center for the practice of his Esoteric meditations and rituals. What was until very recently an arduous climb can now be traveled by a thirty minute train ride direct from Osaka, followed by an incline cable car to the beginning of a long line of temples with facilities for overnight stays. On top of Koyasan one finds a Buddhist university, many shops selling religious articles, as well as historic pagodas, bell towers, halls filled with the images of the Shingon sect pantheon of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Wisdom Kings and devas, and the largest cemetery in Japan. All this has been designed with the purpose of aiding the pilgrim in his progress towards Buddhahood in this very lifetime.

At the end of a walk lined with enormous trees, surrounded by all sizes of funereal markers and stupas, one reaches the Oku-no-in, the resting place of the Saint. Indeed, his followers believe he is seated in deep meditation behind the closed doors of his tomb, awaiting the arrival of the future Buddha Maitreya. The Pilgrim starts his travels by announcing his intentions and prays for the Saint's help on the path.

That evening, I stayed in a temple with two floors of various sized tatami rooms. After a hot soak in the furo bath, I was invited upstairs to join a get together of Burmese students. I learned that there are a number of Japanese temples associated with Burma. Many priests had lived through the unpleasant experience of being soldiers at the Burmese Front during World War II, and felt the need to be part of the spiritual support of all involved there. Their story was partly related in a fine book and film "Harp of Burma". The party was animated and friendly, with videos of the Burmese New Year festivities where the girls tossed pails of water over young men riding on carts. I noticed the homesick expressions on the students, all of whom shared the uncertain future of returning to a country in turmoil.

At the party, I met a young Japanese monk who had completed the Pilgrimage the year before. Fujii-san lived at the Oku-no-in as one of the caretakers of that temple. He spent some time living in a temple in Bangkok Thailand. Many of the more spiritually inclined, more idealistic monks of Japan (where a priest can marry, eat meat, drink sake) want to experience the pure simple life of the Theravada monks of South East Asia where they are celibate and have few possessions. He was married to a Thai woman named Shoei who made an incredibly hot and sour soup that the students adored. He gave me the name of a priest at Temple #2 in Shikoku, who is also associated with Burma, and promised to call there to arrange a place for me to spend the night upon starting the walk.



**Koyasan Pilgrims**

Ten days later I sat on the ferryboat approaching Shikoku Island. Although it is one of the four main islands of Japan, it is little traveled by the foreign tourist. Indeed, even the Japanese don't place it very high on the list of places to visit, unless they long for the spiritual solace of the 88 temple pilgrimage. Recently Shikoku was connected by a series of bridges to the main island of Honshu, and the number of cars passing through increases each year.

At the railing of the ferryboat, I stared through my small binoculars for a glimpse of unknown mountains, and as their blue shapes separated from the haze of sea and clouds, I envisioned hidden ravines with paths winding through forests of moss covered tree trunks and the remnants of over a thousand years of Buddhist and Shinto communion with nature. It would be a place where I could feel at ease among the strangeness of a foreign country. I love walking in mountains, any mountains. They have been a fundamental part of me since I left the flat prairielands of suburban Chicago to study at the University of Colorado.

At the base of the foothills of Boulder, I found trails leading into silent, cooler spaces. Following them at random, I would end up overlooking the campus and rejoice in the sensation of being above it all. Other ways would take me deeper into the hills, where I'd become lost, only to stumble upon a road where I could eventually catch a car ride back, or even further into new territory. Soon I was spending all my time hitch hiking across Colorado in search of the ever more remote spot. It was a time of VW Beetles and painted minivans with friendly long haired worshippers of nature, whom you could count on to stop for you (after a couple of hours of counting the rednecks zooming by in shiny pickups). A friend from a small town in Western Colorado took me to a camping gear store, and helped me buy hiking boots, a down sleeping bag, a little gas cookset, and a backpack to put it in. Thus outfitted, we would cross country ski until finding suitable snow drifts, and dug caves into them to spend the night. At 30 below zero on a campout, I knew that I could always be at home in the Mountains.

The next years in between studying psychology, anthropology, and the philosophy of religions, I reveled in the freedom of the open, thinner air of alpine forests. Heading further afield, I discovered ruins of old Native cities among rocky cliffs in southwest Colorado. I began an intensive search for these sites. It is much easier to scramble up steep gravelly slopes than climb back down, and from my perch among broken pottery shards and dried corncobs, I would often have to repeat over and over my mantra "If you got all the way up here, you can get down the same way", never really asking myself what had driven me into the situation in the first place, the "What am I doing here? Why am I doing this?" type of questions.

I sometimes asked them the year I lived in Kyoto, but I was too busy climbing the hills surrounding the ancient capital, once again finding myself searching out paths and ruins of an older way of life. On my very first day in Japan, while strolling along the popular Philosopher's Walk at the eastern foothills, I spotted a trace of a path up into the brush, bounded across the stream and started uphill. Soon I discovered a world of trails, and after a time picking various branches and letting chance guide me, I met an American walking along the trail. He was a long time resident of Kyoto. He was shocked to see me among the trees, especially to hear that I'd only been in town a few hours! He showed me his favorite way down the mountain to a little-known temple. I learned that all the temples on the eastern mountains are connected by these

mountain trails. From then on, I spent a great deal of time searching out the varied pathways, surprising myself when I'd walk out of the trees through the back gate of Kiyomizudera or Nanzenji temples. I never had to pay an entrance fee again!

I discovered a great book by Oliver Statler, "Japanese Pilgrimage". It described a circular walk around the entire island of Shikoku. This sounded like the perfect way for me to get out of the intense stressful life of the Japanese city, to discover the more traditional, slower Nippon. I could improve my language skills, see more unusual places, and do what I loved best, hiking up hills finding ancient architecture.

On my second trip back to Japan, I was prepared with the necessary gear (Too much of it! So Heavy!), maps, guidebooks, and enthusiasm for two months of solid walking. I had a notion of the course ahead of me, thanks to a well detailed description in English by a California Buddhist priest, Taisen Miyata. In his book, he tells how the island circuit is divided into four parts, one for each prefecture. They are called Dojo (just as in the martial arts training hall), and go through a progression:

Awakening Faith → Religious Discipline → Enlightenment → Nirvana  
Each part has its Gate and Nansho (difficult place). I heard a bit more about the walk from the monks on Koyasan.

As the ferry approached the harbor, I opened up a small notebook to start a journal:

Kobe to Tokushima City: 3 ½ hours...

"It furthers one to cross the great waters", says the I Ching. I am about to step onto Shikoku Island.

Will I complete the Pilgrimage?

Among my concerns now are: Heavy pack, lack of practice in speaking Nihongo. Hopefully the weather will be good, the people helpful, the costs of staying overnight reasonable.

Shingon Buddhism is so complex, almost like magic. I don't want to be a magician. I want to become a simple hermit wanderer Dharma Bum on an old pilgrim road.

What will be my Onegai/wish for fulfillment? Pure life, spiritual grace, understanding of Japan and Asia (including its language), a successful life after the pilgrimage earning my living well...Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo! Dogyo Ni-nin! Two of us on the path together...Help me Daishi-sama, communicate will with the people of Shikoku, and achieve whatever is in my Destiny and Higher Self! Open me to inner guidance, ability to listen to others, and to respond in peace and love!

Reaching the island, I took a short train to the starting place of the Henro Michi, The Pilgrim Road. In the dim evening light I walked the short ways to Temple #2, Gokurakuji, preparing my little speech of introduction ("I'm Koyasan no Fujii no tomodachi..." etc). I walked through the Niomon demon gates to the reception area. As I readied myself to knock at the doors, they slid open, with the pleasant surprise of "Marc-san desu ka? Fujii-san called us....."