

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

Nighttime on a Lonely Mountaintop
The Brotherhood of the Sangha
(Temple #19- Temple #21)
Day 7/8

I didn't leave Jizoji until noon. While Shoei-san and Hattori's wife washed my Henro coat and yesterday's soaked T-shirt and socks, I had a good breakfast watching the news on TV with Hattori and his family. Passing each other plates of rice, nori seaweed, pickles, and miso soup, we talked of the road ahead of me, and Fujii-san, who had walked the Pilgrimage the Spring before, wrote tips in my guidebook. He commented on everything from temples where I might be invited to stay, as well as priests who wouldn't welcome even a monk from Koyasan Pilgrimage center like himself. He even checked off the temples with the best self-serve coffee. I enjoyed being part of the household scene, stumbling over kids' toys, looking at rare Kakejiku hanging scrolls, and sitting on the veranda looking out at the courtyard as I went through my overloaded backpack.

I repacked my bag and left some clothes and my camera and binoculars at the temple. I kept a complete change of clothes and several pairs of stockings, as well as my thin foam sleeping pad, poncho, sweater and hat, windbreaker, my guidebooks and pocket English-Japanese dictionary. Hattori-san gave me a T-shirt from his temple. It had a cute drawing of a priest and a little boy, with "Terakoya Komatsushima" written above them. Shoei-san brought my Henro Jacket, neatly pressed, and I put it on with my purple Pilgrim Surplice and prayerbeads around my neck, round bamboo hat and walking stick completing the picture as we stood together on the steps of the Honzon Sanctuary.

We crowded into the white Volkswagen Beetle to drive to Temple #18, where I had ended my walk the day before. On the way, we listened to a tape of Bluegrass music. I was surprised to learn that in his younger days before becoming a monk, Fujii-san was once "one of the three best Dobro players" in Japan. I had no idea how Country and Bluegrass, as well as the Grateful Dead, was so popular with the Japanese of my generation.

At the foot of Temple #18, we posed under a Pilgrimage signboard and took parting photos. I pointed off into the distance smiling in anticipation of the adventures on the long road ahead. It was really nice to have my new friends "see me off" with cheers and wishes for a safe journey.



With my load lightened, I marched off to the next temple, a five kilometer walk along rice fields. Reaching Temple #19, Tatsue-ji, I realized that I had left my Temple Stamp Hanging Scroll at the house, and called to ask for it. Hattori-san arrived in minutes, before I had finished my Hondo prayers. He joined me for the prayers in front of the Daishi-do. Chanting together, I felt at one with the great Buddhist Sangha Brotherhood, stretching across the centuries and around the planet. Any differences between us were of no importance in the shared words generating the mind of enlightenment. “Gone, gone, gone to the other shore of Bodhimind...may my efforts lead all beings to a state of Compassionate Buddhahood....”

We parted once again, and I headed down the road into a hot, muggy afternoon. My shoes hadn't completely dried, and although the foot powder and moleskin helped, I got a couple of very sore blisters. The way to Temple #20 was a six kilometer walk up to 1600 feet. The Henro Michi trail was half that, but it led straight up the mountain. I didn't want to go that way, thinking of the muddy results of the heavy rains earlier, so I struggled up the endlessly zigzagging paved road. Making several stops to rest, it was more difficult each break to get up the energy to continue. I sweated through my shirt and thin cotton Henro Jacket. After reaching Temple #20, Kakurinji Temple of the Crane Forest, there was barely time to light my candle and incense before the evening darkness obscured the outlines of the temple buildings.

The Jushoku Head Priest was impatient to close up for the day. He began slamming shut the sliding doors around the main sanctuary as I finished my prayers. I didn't have a chance to look around the temple. I approached the reception window to get my temple stamps and asked for a room at the lodgings. They were closed for the season! There was nothing else on the mountaintop besides the temple grounds! I begged him to allow me to sleep under any veranda roof. Although he spoke politely, he informed me that the only place I could stay was in an old Jinja Shrine about 4 kilometers down the mountain trail behind the lodgings. “It's only a half hour walk”, he claimed as he locked up the office and put out the candles I had lit for my prayers, disappearing into the darkness.

Left in confused disappointment and growing anger, I walked out of the courtyard to the lonely parking lot. The only light came from a telephone booth nearby. Leaning against a wooden railing next to it, I tried to think up my next move. I pulled out my journal and pen, to capture the feelings of the moment. “So much for the Brotherhood of the Sangha!” I bitterly considered as I wrote:

“Alone in the evening silence of a mountaintop temple. Clouds of moths and bugs of all sizes are competing for the small circle of light around me. It doesn't feel very cold yet, and the moon is almost full, but it may well rain. The days are getting shorter, the nights getting longer! I hadn't thought of that when I decided to start my trip in Autumn. I've got twelve hours to blow until dawn! Where to sleep if it rains? I don't even want to consider that! Sleep standing up in the phone booth? Wish I had a pack of cigarettes! Might even chase away the bugs!”

I got my telephone card and called Hattori-san. His wife answered, and told me the prediction was for a dry night, and wished me luck. Hattori-san had thought that the Jushoku there would have given me a place to stay, but he didn't know him very well. Some of the Head

Priests were inconsiderate, more interested in the money aspects of the Pilgrim business. Hopefully that was changing with a newer, more spiritual generation of priests, he said.

I called Osaka next, and left a sad message on the answering machine at home. Not too sad actually—more ticked off at the temple priests! I sat around the booth for what seemed forever, and resolved to check out the trail to the old Shrine.

The moon was bright and clear as I found the start of a stone stairway downhill behind the temple, so I followed it, pocket flashlight in hand. Slowly descending through the forest, I saw a bright neon green spot next to the path. I squatted down close to the ground to discover a tiny worm type creature. The whole way since Temple #19 had been very quiet and beautiful, I reflected. Great mountains, lots of little crabs scurrying across the path, ferret like animals running through the bushes, ancient moss covered statues of Jizo-sama, and old stone markers with carvings of hands pointing the way to the next temple. The old markers weren't much use, though, because when they fell they would be reset in any direction. My thoughts became more peaceful as I concentrated on the winding path downhill.

I reached the Jinja O-Do around 10:30. It was an old rustic structure in a small clearing, remnants of farming equipment and carts scattered around the area. At first I thought to sleep in a canvas covered wooden wagon, but decided to check out the building. The sliding door was unlocked, so I peeked inside. From the small entry genkan, I could see the wooden floor was raised two feet from the ground. Under it were old bales of rice straw. The floor was covered with thin mats, and I took off my shoes, stretched out my foam pad, and quickly fell asleep.

In the early dawn, I set out through the wooded path, passing sheds, and then small cultivated fields, as the path became a dirt road eventually meeting up with a highway, which I quickly crossed. The Henro path followed a river in the quieter forest below the paved road. Rounding a bend, I was surprised to meet up with a figure in white pilgrim's clothes, walking towards me. He looked poor, and was loaded down with an old fashioned knapsack, and grinning broadly, revealed a mouthful of bad teeth. We stopped, facing each other.

With only the two of us in the remote stillness of our shared spiritual path, I felt an instant bond with the man before me. I took out a bag of mikan tangerines and offered him some. He reached inside a pouch hanging from his shoulder and pulled out a handful of strange looking sweets. They were brownish balls covered with coarse sugar, and very hard and chewy, with a furusato (homemade) taste of dried fruit. As I rolled a piece around in my mouth, my fellow Pilgrim explained that he was from Hiroshima, and starting out from the ferry terminal near Matsuyama City Temple #51 Ishiteji, clear over the other side of the island, was walking the Pilgrimage in reverse order. This is called "Gyaku-uchi", said to be a more difficult, thus more meritorious undertaking. We talked very briefly about the path ahead of us, then parted, wishing each other a safe and successful conclusion to our endeavors. As my new friend vanished into the morning mist, I wished I had asked him more about his experiences, why he was doing the Henro walk.

Two of us on the Path Together. Dogyo Ninin, “Same Path, Two Persons”, is the basic call to faith of the Shikoku Henro Pilgrim. It is written on our hats, walking sticks, purple neck ribbons, and white jackets. It means that wherever we walk, the Sainted Kobo Daishi walks with us, making the trip safer and smoother, hearing our prayers and helping us reach our goal of self awareness and compassion, keeping us on the Bodhisattva Trail.

Two white robed people meeting for a brief moment on an unknown path, far from homes and family, sharing sweets and words of encouragement. Two people from different lands, languages, and races, both waving sweaty, heart felt farewells. An encounter with the Daishi-sama within each of us on a road traveled by others of like mind over a thousand years. The Brotherhood of the Sangha.

NAMU DAISHI HENJO KONGO!

