

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

**A Walk through Tokushima in the Rain**  
**Synchronicity on the Path**  
**(Temples #17-#18)**  
**Day 6**

Woke to heavy rains splattering off the rooftiles of the tiny temple reception hut. The day before, I had reached Temple #17, Idoji Temple of the Well, late in the afternoon, only to find the temple lodgings closed for the season. Although I had chosen the Autumn season for my walk, supposedly the driest time of the year (after the constant Tsuyu rains of Spring and the typhoons of late Summer), I had overlooked two major seasonal factors. With each passing day, I would have earlier sunsets and shorter walking times. Each night would be colder than the last, especially as I left the southern beaches for the northern mountainous second half of the Henro Michi. I would have to find a place to stay each night, as it got too cold and windy to sleep outside (Nojuku). Now I discovered the power of tradition in the creation of the Henro Tourist Season! The chartered buses filled the springtime roads, despite the tsuyu, and those temples lucky enough to have been included on the circuit of the 88 made their fortunes accommodating groups of elderly Pilgrims in their immaculate and complete Henro costumes. Tossing coins into the box in front of the Buddha statues, earnestly praying to clean up their Karma and acquire merit, grandmas and grandfathers then diligently paid a fee for the official Temple stamp and calligraphy to be entered into their Kakejiku hanging scrolls. They bought O-Mamori amulets and talismans, O-Mikuge fortunes, Te-nuki hand towels, posters, candles and incense, telephone cards and all the other Henro gear the creative priest could dream up. Thus the older generations assured themselves a place in Paradise.

When the priest saw the look of dismay on my face, he must have felt a twinge of pity, for he offered me the use of the small hut for the night. Without another word (or the offer of a cup of tea, or a bath, or dinner I grumpily noted) he vanished for the night, locking up the Hondo main sanctuary and the other buildings. I really needed to wash up, and started to wander through the rice fields to the main roads in search of a Sento bathhouse. I put on a few extra kilometers in an attempt to find the sento the neighbors thought was “only a little further along”. I really wanted to soak my sore legs! Finally I gave up, ate a big bowl of udon noodles, and made my way back to the temple grounds. Behind the buildings, I found a modern public lavatory, washed my hair over a sink, went to my little hut, and passed out.

A short time later, I awoke when two cars entered the courtyard. Nearby, under the temple belltower sat a young couple flirting. Lots of gabbing, no sounds of kissing....I lay half dozing, reviewing my day. I thought this young priest would at least be curious as to why I was doing this walk, and since the “hotel” was closed, he had time to chat....As eldest son, these guys inherit the family business, although they don’t always like it. This temple was famous for a well that was dug by Kobo Daishi himself. The legend in the book said that if you could see your face reflected in the water, you would have good luck. If not, you would have an accident

in a short time. After one look inside the dark room housing the well, I was afraid to peek over the edge and look into the well. I also passed on the chance to buy a bottle of the magic well water.

As I continued these musings, sounds of drumming nearby aroused me to get dressed and investigate. At the Jinja shrine next door some kind of practice session was on. Entering, I saw a group of ten year old boys and girls sitting on the floor banging away at small drums. Two men supervised them, while little brothers and sisters played games nearby. The playing children ran to surround me. We talked small talk while they folded origami cranes in exchange for my writing their names in “English” for them. They wanted my name too, and eagerly shook my hand. Returning to my hut, I slept deeply until morning.

I went to the Hondo to recite my prayers under the dripping eaves of the sanctuary veranda. Back at the hut, as I prepared my pack, the priest came by with a plate of Texas Toast. I gave him my book and scroll to stamp as I waited around for a Henro bus or taxi to come by. I didn’t want to carry my pack for 20km in the rain. I was able to give it to a bus driver to leave at the next temple.

I set off in a real downpour! So much for avoiding the “rainy season”. I had on my raincoat, my straw Henro hat had its own plastic cover, and my feet felt dry. I lost track of the Henro Michi signs early on. At that point, one can only follow along busy city streets. I got a soaking from the puddles splashing from passing cars. Reaching Tokushima city, I stopped in a bakery, bought a sweet roll and the grandmother gave me one more, and pointed out the right direction. Happily munching along in the drizzle, I headed down the wrong fork in the road, passed over a river not marked on the map, and kept going until I got to a highway with street signs indicating that I was heading East instead of South. I caused quite a stir as I entered the Prefecture office and tried to get the correct information from the girls at the front desk. I showed them my rain-smearred map, repeating “Temple #18, Onzanji, which way, where’s the road South?” to no avail, as they couldn’t stop nervously giggling to give me any answer. Looking in one of my books, I saw that I could get back on track, but would have to head South on the major Kokudo Highway for six miles instead of walking along the hills.

It was still raining steadily. I was working up a good pace without my pack, although disappointed at not being on the quieter road. A VW Beetle pulled over to give me a ride. I prepared a speech... “No, I’m a walking Henro, thank you anyway.....”. A bald man in robes got out, a Bosan Priest, and from the other door emerged Fujii-san, the monk I had met at Koyasan! He was visiting with his friend Hattori from nearby Komatsushima city’s Temple Jizoji.

If I had been walking on the other road, we never would have met each other! They were as surprised as I was, because they thought I had started out a week earlier, and expected that I was across the island by that time. They drew me a map to Jizoji, and we made plans to meet there for dinner. After walking the rest of the way to Temple #18, totally waterlogged, I picked up my pack, said my prayers, and hitched my way to Jizoji. I would get a ride back to #18, and start my next day’s walking where I had stopped. At the temple, I was warmly welcomed, and at last had the long awaited Furo Bath. I especially enjoyed the ultramodern toilet seat, so nicely

heated that I almost regretted leaving it. I was afraid of reading the instructions incorrectly, so I passed up getting the full toilet seat comforts of a warm spray of soapy water followed by a drying blast of air.

Over a great dinner, Fujii-san explained that he had given a speech that evening about C.J. Jung, but no one had understood it. He said that the temple system will change soon, and not be so money oriented. The younger priests are striving for a more spiritual outlook. The three of us were the same age “of the Woodstock generation” as he called it. We are interested in a different view of things, one that includes Buddha and Jung, ancient Japanese oracles and modern California “spirit channelers”, Koto and Shamisen as well as Blues and Dobro guitars. “Tonight is truly a night of Synchronicity, to meet each other in such a way” he added.

In my warm futon bedding, in a room permeated with the smell of sandalwood incense from the altar on the other side of the thin shoji paper screen wall, I contemplated the events of the day in terms of Jung’s “Synchronicity”, the joining together of seemingly random events into a meaningful pattern. I had started this Pilgrimage with little knowledge beyond that of a few guidebooks and some slight background from classes about Buddhism, with a total lack of understanding of the Shingon Sect and its techniques and rituals. I was learning as I walked along, the innocent and ignorant foreigner in search of confirmation of a mysterious faith that “everything will work out in the end”. Perhaps in this age old religious setting, synchronicities take over when those techniques and knowledge are lacking. An article in the Koyasan Shingon newspaper had said to “Recite NAMU DAISHI in times of trouble on the path”, and so I did.

The “reckless” hiker, the purposeful choosing of the tougher lesser known trails, the walking past sundown in dark forests in a faraway country with its strange culture and language, stretches the limits of one’s ability to learn and develop from some deeply rooted, unconscious Karmic seedlings. As I was walking, I searched within myself for the reasons for choosing this Pilgrimage. I could not recollect any moments in my youth that triggered an interest in Japan, or in Buddhism, or for that matter, in hiking. The influences for those three aspects evolved out of experiences in very different periods and places in my life that somehow threaded together to bring me to that incense filled room. I could only surmise that the seeds did exist deep within one’s being, that impel us to resolve unfulfilled past life events. Earlier on the trail, I had passed a small Bodhisattva statue. As I stared at the moss covered stone, thinking of the kindness of the Shikoku people, I had a brief glimmer of my quest. Perhaps I had once, hundreds of years ago, walked the Henro Michi, in an age when few people completed the entire circuit of temples. Was I once a monk who, in frustration, cried out “Kobo Daishi, bring me back to try one more time!” as he lay dying on some dark forest path? Or perhaps, less dramatically, my Past Life Monk had indeed walked the entire Pilgrimage, and yearned to see the sacred sites of Shikoku once again.

In this life, as a 35 year old white middle class male, I now had the resources, time, energy, and determination to fulfill this deep spiritual compulsion. These glimpses of unknown motivations can be accepted only for lack of any more “sensible” reasons.

Synchronicities on the road in the rain, a warm bed among friends of like mind, gave me a sense of belonging in an alien world. I could fall asleep satisfied that the Sainted Kobo Daishi

was indeed looking out for this Gaijin Pilgrim, and hope that through the upcoming weeks, I would grasp some of the missing threads of the evolving pattern of my life.

Thank you Daishi-sama for such good friends and for all your help!

**NAMU DAISHI HENJO KONGO!**

