

In the footsteps of Kobo Daishi: Rijumati's travels, part VII

Beginnings in Bando



It was well past midday by the time I finally arrived at little Bando station, north of Tokushima. A Monday morning of hectic preparatory chores had gone off well, I was ready to start the 1200km pilgrimage of the Shikoku island's 88 temples, a long time dream and ambition.

I had almost no idea what I was doing, all that I had managed to glean from the tourist information was that one starts at temple 1, Ryozenji and most of the things one needs can be acquired there.

In the unforgiving midday sun Bando reminded me of a deserted hacienda, I half expected to see sombreroed bandits riding lazily down the street, and to hear the echo of a haunting spaghetti western melody, a momentary cultural hallucination.

Without any map I groped my way to Ryozenji where a few pilgrims, known on Shikoku as henro, were making their offerings. I entered the Hondo, the main shrine hall, and lit some incense for the Buddha, still rather unsure what to do next.

In the shop there was a busy little Japanese nun behind the counter. She didn't even look up as I came in, but when I approached and explained in mangled Japanese what I intended, clearly looking rather new to the game of the Shikoku pilgrimage, she gave me her full attention. Immediately I was given a gift of a sleeveless white cotton henro shirt, "present from Ryozenji" she said smiling. Soon I had an English language map book, a book for collecting the temple stamps, a small container of incense, a classic straw henro hat, the henro shirt and she even offered to give me a walking stick. Though at a rough calculation these items should cost about 10,000 yen - she only charged me 3000 for which I was very grateful, the henro's path can be unpredictably expensive. I immediately felt like I'd joined the henro family, recognised by one of the pilgrim mothers. This was the first of many such kindnesses I experienced on the Shikoku "hachi ju-hachi" or Shikoku 88.

The tradition of osettai, giving to henro, is an ancient one. The people of Shikoku have been receiving and supporting henro for over 1000 years, and sometimes their generosity is breath-taking. Often when one is most in need, as I was at Ryozenji, the giving just naturally occurs. This is the magic of the Shikoku 88.

The henro shirt and hat are the distinctive garb of the pilgrim. Wearing them one is immediately recognised both by other henro, with whom one always feels a bond, and by ordinary people who may want to help or even just to greet you. The hat is also very good protection against the sun and the rain, "bigger is better" said my nun friend.

By the time I set off from Ryozenji for temple number 2, walking in the heat along the busy highway 12, I was feeling elated. The dream was beginning, I was really on the Way, and every step felt like meaningful progress.

Why Pilgrimage?



Why have the people of Japan been donning the shirt, hat and stick and undertaking the hardships of the Shikoku pilgrimage for so many centuries? In our modern age of immediate convenience travel it is especially hard to understand why a 1200km circular journey, traditionally made on foot, should be so popular.

The Shikoku 88 is absolutely not a *pleasant ramble*. Undertaken by foot it is hard-graft walking, often along busy highways, sometimes without even the protection of a pavement. Naturally the route, wherever possible, takes in the glorious beauty of Shikoku island: its mountains and forests, cliffs and rivers, the sky and the sea. But it is definitely a mixed bag.

So the question "why?" remains. The official reason is that through undertaking the pilgrimage one enlists the aid and support of one of the greatest of all Buddhist saints, Kukai or Kobo Daishi as he is honorifically known in Japan. Kukai was born on Shikoku in the 8th century, was enlightened at Shikoku's southern cape, Muroto, and is attributed with founding most of the sacred 88 temples on the pilgrimage. Many of the temples tell special stories about Kukai's visit: here he conquered a dragon, here he carved a Buddha, here he created a stream that always runs pure.

Yet in a sense there is no universal answer to this question. The answer must be sought in the heart of every would-be or actual henro. For those to whom such an undertaking seems like a fruitless waste of time, no answer will ever suffice, for those who long to undertake it no reasoning is really necessary. My own desire to undertake the Shikoku 88, or at least part of it, stretches back over eight years, to the time I first heard about it from a friend who had lived in Japan. A young Japanese man of 23 whom I accompanied for a while told me that he had seen a programme about the Shikoku *hachi ju-hachi* on television and decided on the spot that he wanted to do it. Perhaps as you read this account at least the reasons in the heart of one foreign henro will become clearer.

This first afternoon, walking the highways and byways of Itano district, my feelings of elation grew and grew. The heat was intense, within half an hour I was utterly drenched in sweat, as I was to be for much of the walk. But my elation wasn't dampened in the least.

At each temple there is a standard formula that the henro follows, and for want of a better suggestion I decided to broadly follow the norm. Arriving one finds the water basin, often elaborately decorated with a dragon-headed water fountain, washes the hands and drinks. Happily the standards of Japanese water control are such that the temple fountain is invariably safe to drink from. Next one rings the temple bell to announce or celebrate one's arrival. Then one goes to the Hondo, makes offerings and chants to the presiding Buddha figure. Each temple has a different figure and I fell into a routine of chanting the mantra or invocation of that particular Buddha, though traditionally Japanese henro chant the same sequence of scriptures for each Buddha. Last one visits the Daishi hall, a temple building dedicated to Kobo Daishi and make offerings and recitations there also. This pleasing little ritual is easily completed in 30 minutes.



Kukai, Kobo Daishi, is the founder of Shingon Buddhism, the Japanese equivalent of the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet or Mongolia. In these latter cultures all other Buddhist traditions were eventually subsumed into the Tantric schools, whereas in Japan the Shingon school remains one of the 3 or 4 dominant traditions, which maintain a high degree of independence. As a form of Tantric Buddhism Kukai's writings and the Shingon temples contain a high degree of symbolism and esoteric teaching. Wood-carved Buddha images (*hotoke*), mandalas, ritual

implements, bells and drums are ubiquitous.

Peering through the small window of the Daishi hall often I saw an elegant wood carving of Kukai in his classic seated position holding a vajra, the symbolic diamond-thunderbolt, to his heart and a rosary of 108 beads. Through a kind of non-rational trial and error I discovered that a particular invocation, the mantra associated with the archetypal figure of Vajrasattva, seemed to strike a deep resonance, so it became my custom to always chant this after making an offering to Kukai at the Daishi hall.

The last task is to find the temple stamp office and have one's henro book stamped with the official mark. I always delighted in watching as the red stamps and elegant black strokes of traditional calligraphy were inscribed by the temple stamp officer. Some fast, some slow, some rough, some smooth - it was like receiving a personal gift, though the 300 yen charge at each temple means that the stamps alone for all 88 temples will cost over €170, hardly a small consideration. In addition the stamp officer gives out a small print of the temple's main Buddha, a lovely record of one's visit.



At temple number 2, Gokurakuji, I was still a henro greenhorn, and naively didn't realise that one had to pay for the temple stamp. I imagined that it was a gift from the temple to the henro for the hardships that are to be undertaken. With 150,000 people a year making the pilgrimage, the henro stamp money and temple offerings must be big business. So two rather sweet Japanese ladies had to protest loudly as I headed out of the Gokurakuji stamp office debt unpaid, a rather embarrassing start to my temple ministrations!

For a walking henro, though the 88 temples set the form of the pilgrimage, and are the crucial goals and resting places they are not the essential part of the pilgrimage. The long hours, often solitary hours, of asphalt or forest track, belting sun or pouring rain, steady progress or grinding effort constitute the pilgrimage's essence. It is here that the gold and dross of the mind are separated, it is here that joy and despair meet face to face, it is here that inner and outer obstacles are confronted, it is here that the heart chooses between the selfish and the selfless.

Whether the experience is the same for the car or bus henro - who these days are in the majority - I cannot testify.

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### **The Route**

An obvious and intriguing question that arises as one undertakes the pilgrimage is why does it follow this particular route, which is neither the shortest nor necessarily quickest way to visit each temple? Why did Kobo Daishi choose this particular form?

Thinking about this as I walked for 7 days it seemed to me that there are four interacting reasons that shape the Shikoku pilgrimage, each with their own sphere of validity.

Firstly there are the historical reasons. Although the origins of the pilgrimage arise from the life of Kukai in the 8th century, it is clear from written documents that the present form of the pilgrimage only stabilised after the 17th century with the writing of the first "guidebooks." In the preceding centuries it probably had a rather different and elastic form. Even today it is said that it isn't important in what order one visits the temples, though most people follow the numerical sequence since this is how all the maps, way markers and signposts are arranged. As always with history, there are certain "accidents" that lead to particular traditions being established and these are now built into the sequence of the temples. For instance why is Ryozenji temple number 1, since it is neither the most impressive of the temples nor situated the closest to any of the major towns or cities on Shikoku? The probable answer is that Ryozenji is marginally closest to the Naruto strait and before modern transport networks henro coming from Koyasan, where they would have sought Kobo Daishi's blessing before starting the pilgrimage, would have often made the crossing to Shikoku at Naruto.

Then there are the geographical reasons. Broadly speaking the sequence is arranged to suit the topography of Shikoku which varies from coastal plains to inaccessible forest ravines, from precipitous cliffs to gentle sandy bays. The traditional way of undertaking the pilgrimage is on foot, so this has had a distinct shaping on the form. For instance to travel to temples 11, 12 and 13 by road requires a long detour since Shosanji (12) is high in the mountains, whilst Fujidera (11) and Dainichiji (13) are relatively nearby on the plain. But traversed on foot one can follow a reasonably straight but very demanding footpath that climbs through the forest to Shosanji and then continue back down to Dainichiji. So history and geography interact to shape the route, and the bus or car henro will find less logic in it than the walking henro.

Next there is the spiritual training of the journey. Here one has to leave the realm of objective reasons and enter the mind of the individual henro. As one walks it becomes apparent that there is very powerful inner logic to the sequence that is both testing and encouraging. The first nine temples are all situated on a meandering east-west curve that proceeds along the coastal plain north of Tokushima. In two days walking it is easy to visit all nine without much strain. It is immensely encouraging, whilst knowing that one has about 1200km to walk and 88 temples to visit, to find that in the first 30km one has already achieved nearly 10% of one's goal. The Shikoku 88 gives the new henro a confidence boost right at the start where it is most needed.

Kirihataji (10) is both demanding and encouraging. It constitutes the first real climb, rising perhaps 100m above the plain, and a small taste of what is to come later. One begins to really feel the weight of one's

backpack and the impact of one's shoes, by now the first blisters or sores can be felt. By the time one leaves Kirihataji one knows one's body a little better, where are the weak points that are going to need some attention for the days ahead. This is the first real test of the stamina that one will need to develop to complete the journey. So passing Kirihataji feels like a significant achievement.

In the August humid heat the climb to Kirihataji had the walking henro drenched in sweat. One young man just abandoned his ridiculously heavy backpack at the base of the several hundred steps, trusting (quite reasonably) that it would be still there when he returned.

The teaching of Kirihataji was dramatically brought home to me since as I descended from the temple I was feeling a sharp steady pain from the skin of my thighs. It took me a while to find somewhere suitable to drop my trousers (not something, I hasten to add, that I often do in public). Eventually I found a smelly but deserted toilet facility. I was shocked to find that the sweat and two days of friction from my lightweight trousers had combined to leave the skin utterly red, raw and oozing fluid. It looked like a skin wound ripe for infection in the summer heat and sweat.

I managed to create a makeshift antiseptic bandage from the materials in my first aid kit, but it was clear that I was going to have to expend some time and energy to prevent the sores from getting much worse. Here was the first physical challenge, the pilgrimage was beginning to bite.

There are many other lessons that the sequence of the pilgrimage teaches, perhaps the most frequent is the challenging of assumptions and shattering of complacency, more of that later.

The last factors that play a role in shaping the form of the pilgrimage are the mystic or secret reasons. Here, by their very nature, little can be said. But in the individual experiences and realisations that the henro has there often seems to be a deeper significance and pattern. There is a powerful interplay between the external and inner terrain. Just when one feels that one has reached a psychological, existential or spiritual dead-end, a new pathway opens up that one never could have imagined was possible. It is as if Kobo Daishi is at one's side and suddenly points to a door that one hadn't even noticed but which was there all along. These are intensely personal and inspiring moments, the gateways to new creativity and freedom often triggered by a seemingly insignificant event along the way. A tiny consideration from another can turn into the blessing of the Universe; a momentary smile at one's frustration can turn into a gateway to unlimited freedom; a small gift imparted can turn into the boundless love for all that lives.

### **The henro haircut**

As I got back into my stride leaving Kirihataji, the pain of the sores gave way to feelings of numbness. I had a long but easy walk to complete in the remainder of the afternoon, wanting to arrive at Fujidera (11) temple before it closed so that the following day I could make the climb to Shosanji (12), reputedly the toughest climb of the whole Shikoku 88 pilgrimage, with a fresh pair of legs.

Wandering through the village lanes that cross the plain to the southern mountains I suddenly saw the spiralling red, white and blue of a barber's sign. There is something very reassuring about the cultural familiarity of this sign which one finds all over Japan. It was over two months since I had last been shorn, on that occasion by a rather elegant barber in New Delhi, so I was feeling rather top heavy, especially for the summer heat. On a complete whim I opened the door and entered the cool air-conditioned shop, thinking I would be out again in 20 minutes.

Inside three middle-aged Japanese were chatting easily but at the appearance of a heavily sweating gaijin dressed as a henro the conversation stopped abruptly. They stared in amazement at me standing in the doorway. Suddenly one of the men got up, made some parting remarks and left. The other two, I guessed husband and wife, attended carefully as I attempted to mime receiving a haircut, and repeated "haircut" in English several times. I guess that given the context it wasn't too hard to work out what I wanted! This being Japan it is always apposite to inquire the price before undertaking any service. At my "ikura des ka?" the woman pointed to a long indecipherable pricelist on the wall. I just chose the cheapest option at 3200 yen (roughly 16GBP) hoping that this would be a simple haircut, rather than a wash and dry. She nodded and after disrobing from my backpack, henro shirt and hat I was installed in a sumptuously soft barber's chair. What followed in the next hour must rate as one of the hairdressing highlights of my entire life.

The man proceeded to give me a slow and methodical cut, going over my head several times with different types of scissors. Each time that I thought he had finished he would change to another implement, last of



all giving me a blood chilling shave with a cut throat razor - I always have gruesome Sweeny Todd fantasies when the barber gets out a cut throat!

Since every hair on my head had now been ministered to I rose from the chair to leave, but his wife urgently indicated that I should sit down again. She then proceeded to recline the chair until I was more or less horizontal. "What now?" I wondered, deciding that it was best just to relax and completely give myself up to their treatment. And what a treatment it was! In the next 30 minutes she practised her art upon my scalp, starting with a head massage, then a sort of refreshing face mask made of sterile cloth with nose, mouth and eye apertures followed by cool pads for the eyes. The finale was a "scalp shower" using a pressurized container of fluid that gave an ice-cold sensation all over the scalp as she rubbed it in.

At last I was allowed to arise, certain by now that I had been the recipient of some osettai, giving to henro, since I am sure that their cheapest haircut wouldn't usually include such a service. I thanked them both profusely, bowing and intoning "arigato gozaimas" as I paid and re-donned my henro gear. My scalp was still tingling freshly as I walked off down the asphalt road cheerfully, wondering what they had made of this unusual meeting.

As usual I had no idea where I would stay that evening, making it all the more urgent to arrive at Fujidera in good time to find some accommodation. Since I was still getting used to the pilgrimage and what distances were viable each day I had consciously decided just to "go with the flow" each evening and see what turned up. As it happens something good always appeared.

I arrived at Fujidera just before they closed the temple and after completing the rituals asked the temple stamp officer if there was accommodation available. He directed me to a place on the map, another 3-4km back the way I had come, my heart sank, I had already walked 30km that day, and the skin on my thighs was sorely aching. As I was sitting by the temple gate wondering what to do a bright young Japanese henro was putting on his rucksack, his name was Hiramichi. I asked him if he was staying somewhere nearby, and in near perfect English he told me that he had booked into a ryokan (Japanese style inn) just down the road, so we agreed that I would come with him to see if they had a free room.

At the ryokan I was given a pleasant Japanese style room and joined two men Yasu and Mr. M, for dinner; Hiramichi was self-catering to save money. Yasu had lived in Canada and his English was faultless so we talked long into the evening about the pilgrimage, Kobo Daishi, Buddhism in Japan, travelling and our lives. It was a wonderful meeting of minds. I felt very fortunate that the pilgrimage had led me here; Kobo Daishi was at my side as ever.

At the rear of Fujidera temple is a small footpath which immediately starts with a steep staircase cut out of the hillside and held in place with gnarled roots and rotting faggots. The 13km walk to Shosanji works its way up through the forest, occasionally affording stunning views of the plain, and rising 800m or more. I set out early and walked alone, filled with delight at this ancient track through the forest. It is certain that pilgrims have been following this very route for over 1000 years. The Shikoku forest mixes mighty cedars with slender pines, shimmering poplars with serrated maples. Wherever there is a break in the canopy flowers and bushes grow profusely on the forest floor. Everywhere the rhythm of the *semi* - the Japanese name for a large species of cicada - whirrs and clicks, at times almost deafening.



The track to Shosanji takes about 5 hours at a steady pace, climbing and falling, alternating between deep green tunnels and sunlit broad tracks. At one point it follows a narrow ridge, no more than a metre wide, through a tunnel of trees falling away steeply left and right. It is incredibly magical, conjuring in my mind images of shamans, samurai and dragons. Shosanji is also one of the great tests of the Shikoku 88. After a steep climb for about 3 hours, one has to spend the next hour descending rapidly in order to cross a mountain river, before the final gruelling ascent for the last hour. It is a test of stamina, strength and patience.

However the exertions of Shosanji are amply rewarded. Perched on a high cliff and approached by a snaking pavement adorned with lovely Buddha images, Shosanji is indeed picturesque, a mythical setting for a

temple. The sanmon, or temple gate, stands at the head of a steep stone staircase, grand and imposing, and in the temple compound, which clings to the mountain on several levels, grow some of the largest cedars one can see in Japan, towering high into the canopy above.

On arrival I rang the great temple bell, swinging the large log that was suspended horizontally for the purpose and delighted as the resonance echoed across the valley. Hiramichi was already there resting, he had started the climb an hour before me. "I'm dead!" he said, and indeed he looked rather exhausted, though at 23 his young body would get fit quickly in the days ahead. There was a kind of party atmosphere as one by one the walking henro arrived, each feeling the great achievement of reaching Shosanji. I was relieved that my bandages had mostly remained attached during the climb, affording some protection to the raw skin beneath.

After resting for an hour or more we set out for another ryokan a few kilometres on, where once again I would join Hiramichi and try for a room. August is definitely the off-season for the pilgrimage, considered too hot by most people, but the one big advantage of walking in August is that accommodation is almost always available. The spontaneous henro, seeking somewhere unreserved each night wouldn't have a chance in Spring or Autumn, the peak seasons, when there will be 1000s of people each day passing through some of the temples. At these times even booking a few weeks ahead might be too late. At the ryokan I soaked in a wonderful hot onsen bath, one of the great delights of ryokan accommodation. Later Hiramichi and I were joined by Yasu, Mr. M and another elderly gentleman. We had a pleasant evening together, chatting as we relaxed in our fresh cotton kimonos before turning in early in preparation for the 20km descent from the mountains the following day.

### **Just when you thought...**

The next day, my fourth, was to be a day of shattered assumptions, one of the powerful spiritual lessons of the Shikoku 88. Firstly instead of the clear skies and blistering heat it was welcomingly overcast as Hiramichi and I set out. Soon the cloud cover had become impenetrable mountain fog, which turned into drizzle, and finally became torrential rains.

Despite donning our wet-weather gear the rain was so heavy that at times we were obliged to take shelter. I don't mind being wet to the skin when walking, but like to avoid soaking the entire contents of my backpack, especially the dry change of clothes. After days of being baked by the sun, the rainstorm was exhilarating, though it slowed us down considerably. From time to time we were gifted with a tantalizing glimpse of the mountains and valleys through the mists; jagged, forested and awesome.

I had assumed that Hiramichi and I, having developed a warm friendship, would walk together that day. So when he needed to stop to adjust his pack (which was considerably heavier than mine - young men often over-estimate what they really need to carry) I always waited for him. Several times he suggested that I go on without him, but I didn't take this seriously assuming that it was just Japanese politeness. So I was very surprised that when I needed to stop Hiramichi didn't wait for me, but just kept on going. "Oh, we're not walking together after all!" I recalled one henro saying to me "everyone goes at his own pace" and I reflected on the high premium the Japanese give to private space, an attitude diametrically opposite to the Indian attitude to private space for instance. Nevertheless for me it was rather strange that Hiramichi and I kept passing each other on the road, no longer as walking companions but more like strangers.

The long road down from the mountains to Dainichiji soon drops from the forested heights and becomes an asphalt hike on highway 301(?). Hour after hour one trudges the asphalt, as the road becomes busier the nearer one gets to Tokushima. Dainichiji is tucked into a bend on the highway, in fact one has to take life in hand to dodge the cars as one enters the temple gate directly from the carriageway. To finally arrive at this small and unpretentious temple seems something of an anti-climax after being in the mountains and so many hours walking.

Here, having run out of surgical tape whilst dressing my wounds in the morning, I was unsurprised to find that the bandages had come loose and were no longer giving me any protection. In vain I had sought for a chemist along the road, but in true mendicant fashion I was able to beg some tape from another henro, one of the young men with an impossibly overloaded backpack had plenty to spare. I was very grateful. Hiramichi and I, arriving here nearly at the same time, sat together and ate a snack lunch. He had been the recipient of a large offering of food from an old lady on the way. I had seen her giving him the bag and have to confess I felt a little jealous. He generously shared his gains, leaving me rather ashamed of those jealous feelings.

As I set off again from Dainichiji it was early afternoon. The next four temples are all within a few kilometres of each other so I was thinking to myself, "after the last two days serious hiking this will be a doddle, I can knock these on the head really quickly." But there was a surprise in store.

As one begins to meander through the suburbs of northern Tokushima travelling from temples 13 to 17 the path is naturally far less strenuous than the mountain passes of Shosanji, but the navigation starts to become very difficult. Suddenly there is a profusion of small lanes (many of which were too small scale to appear on my map) and an almost complete disappearance of way markers.

I struggled with the directions, confused and rather lost. Several times, though I didn't actually take the wrong road, I was forced to retrace my steps to ensure that I hadn't missed the way at a key juncture. On one occasion the pathway to Jorakuji (14) involved walking down an unmarked road that looked like the private driveway into a schoolyard. It was uncanny just how confusing the route became, and as the journey took considerably longer than I had anticipated I couldn't help feeling that it was almost designed to be like that. Recollecting the thoughts I'd had of quickly getting through the next temples I felt that Kobo Daishi was saying to me "you've got too goal orientated, that isn't the point of this pilgrimage." The Shikoku 88 was once again teaching me a lesson about making assumptions and getting complacent. Will I ever learn? I had to laugh at myself!

Finally the way-finding became easier as I approached Idoji (17) and I was even blessed with finding a drugstore in which to stock up on bandages and surgical tape.

The temple stamp officer at Idoji was a friendly man and he gave me a map of how to find a nearby place where henro can stay for free, a "zenkon-yado." The tradition of osettai perhaps finds its apotheosis in the example of the zenkon-yado. Here a local family offer to lodge any henro for the night without expecting payment. It is seen as a way of making merit. Usually as well as somewhere to shelter, one will find clothes washing and basic cooking facilities. And really they don't expect any payment; it is an extraordinary act of generosity.

As I was waiting for Hiramichi to arrive, to see what he was intending to do for the evening, a large party of bus henro arrived at Idoji. I watched them making their offerings at the Hondo and Daishi hall and was impressed with the energy and sincerity they seemed to pour into the ritual. I pondered how extraordinarily different an experience of the Shikoku 88 they must have from the walking henro. Instead of the long solitary hours on the asphalt they sit in a large air-conditioned bus chatting and socialising together. It seems rather like a "spiritual" package tour. For them the temples must be the main events of the pilgrimage, whereas for the walking henro they are at times almost incidental. I was in no doubt that I would much rather be a walking henro.

While I was musing over this one of the middle-aged women came up to me and in good English asked me where I was from, how long I had been in Japan, and what I thought of Shikoku. She seemed delighted to discover that I was an English henro and follower of Kobo Daishi. As she parted she gave me a small envelope which I guessed contained a card or image of the Buddha. Imagine my amazement later on when I opened it and found it contained 1000 yen, yet another unexpected osettai!

Hiramichi was a long time coming, I had almost given up on him. In the meantime I had re-met Kozai, with whom I had shared a ryokan 4 days previously. One of the joys of walking the Shikoku 88 is that one tends to meet the same henro again and again, since fast or slow we are all constrained by the limits of what can be comfortably walked in a day. Kozai was delighted to discover that I was thinking of going to the local zenkon-yado, where he had already dropped his backpack, and offered to take me there.

At last Hiramichi arrived, he seemed rather frustrated and in a hurry, I guessed that he'd got lost and it had taken an hour or two to find his way. I asked him where he was going to stay and he had in mind another zenkon-yado in Tokushima, but it was nearly 7km away. That was too far after already walking nearly 30km that day. I suggested that he come with Kozai and I to the local one, but he said "I don't want to go back" in a grit your teeth sort of mood. Finally he turned to me and said rather forcefully "I have to go and pray now!" That was the last we saw of each other. I slightly regret that I didn't persist with persuading him to come with Kozai and I. His wilful state of mind seemed to be a rather painful one. I guess the Shikoku 88 was teaching him a lesson too. He was learning it the hard way, just as I would have done when I was 23.

## The garage garret

As Kozai and I walked back along Tokushima highway 192, I scanned the profusion of kanji signs looking for one that roughly matched the label for the zenkon-yado on my map. Passing a garage forecourt to my great surprise Kozai directed me in, I never would have found it unaided. Up some wooden stairs we found a single room where the walls were plastered with henro name tags and Buddha images. Here we met the young man who had given me the surgical tape earlier on. Two more henro were to appear during the evening, making us 5 comrades shackled up for the night above a greasy garage on the main highway into northern Tokushima. I was glad that I had some earplugs!

When I arrived our host was sleeping in a small office, in which it turned out he lived with his whole family. By Japanese standards they seemed extraordinarily poor. I met him later and offered my thanks for his hospitality. He seemed momentarily surprised to find a gaijin lodging above his garage, but then continued with his car washing unabashed.

There was a wonderful atmosphere of camaraderie in our makeshift dormitory. We took turns to use the washing machine, shared our food, and discussed (as best as I was able) the trials and joys of the Shikoku 88, and what was in store for us in the coming days. One of our number was a cyclist, whom I was to meet again at Cape Muroto. It struck me that the bicycle is also a powerful way to engage with the pilgrimage, though perhaps the demands on one's attention whilst cycling mean that opportunities for deeper reflection get somewhat pushed aside.

In another act of generosity our host offered to take anyone who was interested to see the Awa Odori dances in central Tokushima. The roots of the Awa Odori go back many centuries and every August Tokushima becomes the focus for a festival of street dancing which attracts 100,000s of visitors. Awa Odori is danced in a troop, requiring extraordinary co-ordination. Men and women dance separately, though sometimes the troops oppose or highlight one another. The dances are slow, rhythmic and with elegant yet powerful movements of the hands and arms. A band of drums, flutes and Japanese "guitars" creates a strong, resonant and haunting backdrop of sound. As the troop advances, weaving back and forward, suddenly the troop leader will call out "Aya-owha!" on a particular beat and the troop drops into a static form. Then the beat picks up again and the troop moves on, weaving and advancing. I found the dance utterly captivating and hypnotic, unlike anything I know from the West. The closest I can get to describing it is as a cross between flamenco power and Balkan communality. It would be a wonderful dance to participate in, but obviously needing a lot of practice.

So amidst the piles of clothes strung from ceiling ropes, the noise of Tokushima traffic, and with a sense of roughing it together, the five of us bedded down in our garage garret with our assorted bedding. I was surprised to discover that I was the only one to put up a mosquito net, perhaps Japanese blood tastes less sweet to Japanese mosquitoes than does western blood. I slept deeply and happily.

## Crossing the sound barrier

As I left my friends at the zenkon-yado it was a beautiful morning. Though still early, maybe 6:40am, Tokushima highway 192 was already buzzing with cars and lorries, yet I happily made my way along it.



The relationship to road walking is very different for the pilgrim and the Rambler. Having tried both this is crystal clear to me. The Rambler is looking to get out into nature, away from the smelly, noisy and artificial world of asphalt and internal combustion engines. For a Rambler to spend a large part of his excursion walking a major highway is to defeat the whole purpose, and he will go to great lengths to avoid this and arrange for more beautiful scenery through which to travel. The pilgrim has an altogether different view. The walk is inherently meaningful whatever the conditions because it is dedicated to a higher purpose and to deeper self-realisation. To pick only the cherries from experience, such as lovely forest footpaths, would be to miss the opportunity to face one's aversion and dislike

to certain aspects of the world. One might inhabit more beautiful states of mind for a while, but would be more prone to becoming depressed when the conditions deteriorate. In short the cherry-picking pilgrim is likely to make less progress than one who takes the rough with the smooth.



I knew that I had ahead of me 3 or 4 hours of serious highways, but I was feeling quietly elated at the prospect. The challenge was to find something inspiring even here in the fumes and the heat. With early morning optimism I found it in the blueness of the sky and the open vistas as highway 192 crossed the broad Akuigawa river. However I am not a complete masochist so when the opportunity for a shortcut through the forest arose I took it.

The Tokushima skyline is dominated by the densely forested Mt Bizan, which though only 290m high rises so steeply from the coastal plain and penetrates so deeply into the heart of the city that it is a monumental landmark, the most striking thing one sees when emerging from the main station for the first time. Almost all of the city's thoroughfares skirt around this rocky intrusion, but one very hairpin minor road, route 203, climbs up to the saddle point and winds its way down the other side to meet Tokushima's southern suburbs and highways. There is an arduous but even more direct walkers path that avoids the wiggles and takes you over the saddle, the Jizo-goe path. This was my Way.

After wandering for one or two kilometres through the northern suburbs at the foot of Mt Bizan, I finally found a highly missable little opening into the forest. As ever there was just a tiny red arrow to indicate the pilgrim's road, but it was indication enough. Climbing steeply I was suddenly in a new world, a finger of a long lost realm that was reaching down into the city, as if offering a reminder of times past. The intense blue of the sky was suddenly dimmed to a dark, cool green; the droning sound of engines was drowned out by the whirring and clicking of the semi-cicadas, and there was periodic resonant sound of striking bamboo. After a while I came across a spring, obviously a hallowed spot from the care with which the stones were laid. Here I drank deeply and refilled my bottle, it was early but already in the humid heat I was drenched with sweat. Further up the path I was amazed to find an intricate network of bamboo aqueducts, waterwheels and hammers that would slowly fill with water and then suddenly tip heavily resounding in a distinctive resonance. As the path climbed steeply along the side of the rocky stream I passed spinning wheel after spinning wheel, hammer after hammer. A wonderful work of nature art, having no purpose other than to delight the walker of a forest track, or perhaps propitiate the local spirits.

Soon the forest got denser and darker, the path more strewn with cobwebs and covered with ferns and shrubs; the Jizo-goe was clearly not a popular route with the henro. However the most striking aspect was the powerful odour of the forest. It seems absurd, but the closest I can get to describing this smell is that of a strong warm red wine. I kept sniffing deeply to check that I wasn't having some kind of olfactory hallucination - but yes, it was definitely red wine! I am totally at a loss as to why the forest smelt like this, the sensation came and went, but it pervaded the whole walk through the Bizan wilds, and ceased as soon as I left the green pathways. Perhaps the local spirits had been indulging in some forbidden merriment.

Dropping down suddenly one rejoins the meandering 203 and is soon back in the big city and walking the banks of a small river. The next two hours are just hard-slog road walking. The henro hat is an absolute blessing, a parasol stuck to one's head, which affords some protection from the direct sunshine.

Another important aide on the pilgrim's path is Pocari Sweat. The marketing department who named this soft-drink were either total idiots or geniuses, I guess they must be the latter since the drink is found in roadside vending machines all over Japan. Throughout my travels Pocari Sweat became my soft drink of choice wherever I could find it. Pocari Sweat boasts the replacement of electrolytes lost through sweating and claims to have exactly the right balance of sugars and salts for your body to absorb quickly. I thought electrolytes were something you only encountered in chemistry practicals, but that didn't diminish my enthusiasm for this rather salty-sweet ice cold drink. Apart from its totally ridiculous name and questionable electrolytic properties I also delighted in Pocari Sweat because it seemed not to be owned by one of the worldwide soft-drinks corporations. My tiny modicum of consumer influence was supporting a local product. I know my choice was utterly irrelevant to the machinery of global economics, but I felt good about it. I guess I'm something of an anarchist at heart! At regular intervals I would find a Pocari Sweat vending machine and dive for the shade whilst I gulped down the cool life-preserving fluid.



Although the Jizo-goe route puts off the inevitable for as long as possible eventually it succumbs and joins the massive highway 55. This great road is the main north-south artery from Tokushima all the way to Cape

Muroto. As it leaves Tokushima it is four lanes wide with a broad tree-lined central reservation and wide, but largely empty belting hot concrete pavements on either side - anyone with any sense only travels highway 55 in an air-conditioned car! I did meet two other henro on the road, they were sheltering from the heat in a little hut which the city council had kindly provided along a particularly concrete jungle stretch of highway.

A bizarre feature of walking this heavily laden artery were the momentary silences that descended when all the synchronised traffic signals changed to allow the minor routes to join. For maybe 30 seconds an eerie silence prevailed, one could even here the call of the odd bird, or the grating of a badly lost cicada. Once a beautiful blue and black butterfly fluttered by, unaware of the deadly onslaught that was about to be unleashed when the lights changed to green. I don't recall ever experiencing this abrupt change of mood on an arterial route, but of course I rarely walk along such roads for any distance if I can help it. Somewhere along the way a haiku fell out of my soul:

August in Shikoku  
Too hot for o'henro  
Only the semi-cicadas  
Buzz around the island

Finally, after several hours of steady effort, one arrives at temple 18, the lovely Onzanji. The strenuous march along highway 55 left behind, one climbs up the hill to enter a world of bamboos and wooden buildings. However the most striking aspect of Onzanji is the route by which one leaves. A little difficult to find is an overgrown path that takes one into a gently dappled bamboo grove, the narrow track is strewn with fallen bamboo leaves, and the light becomes a blue-green as it tumbles through the dense foliage. In the tall elegance of these mighty bamboos there is something immensely uplifting and inspiring. Even more than the wonderful bamboo groves of Kyoto, I was transported to a quintessentially Far Eastern realm, all the more lovely for having stumbled upon it so unexpectedly and after so much hard asphalt. In fact the contrast with highway 55, which is only a few hundred metres away, is astounding. Shielded by the hills the sound of the traffic has all but died away, and enveloped in the bamboos one could be a thousand miles away from modern civilisation. The joy of walking amongst the bamboos of Onzanji is something that will stay with me for a very long time.

The route to Tatsueji, temple 19, and the last point of my unaided walk, takes about 1 hour. Eventually one emerges from the bamboos and snakes by the back roads into the town of Tatsue.

Tatsueji is a special temple amongst the Shikoku 88, what is known as a barrier temple, of which there are only two or three. This means that it is impossible to pass this temple unless one has a pure motivation. One story goes that a woman who had killed her husband so as to take up with a new lover came to Tatsueji, but when she tried to pray her hair got entangled in the rope of the temple bell. She broke down and confessed her evil deed and spent the rest of her days as a nun.

Naturally as a "modern pilgrim" I take these stories as symbolic, but nevertheless approaching Tatsueji I started to feel the apprehension of someone about to be tested. I had already decided not to walk to the next temple but rather to head south by train and start walking for the cape, so how could I know if the barrier had been passed or not? I started to feel very concerned about crossing the Tatsueji barrier.

Tatsueji, unlike Onzanji, is in the centre of town. The gate opens right onto a main road, without even room for a pavement. The temple is a wealthy one, large and with recently renovated grounds, perhaps its barrier status provokes extra generosity from the visiting pilgrims. As I entered, washed my hands at the dragon fountain, I felt very stirred by the solemnity of this testing moment, and the crossing that was being marked after my five days on foot. I rang the temple bell and listened reverently as the sound peeled out, calling forth the barrier spirits.

I approached the Hondo, dedicated to Jizo, and started to chant his mantra or invocation. As I was chanting, I remembered that I had very uncharacteristically left my rucksack unattended by the temple gate. This being a busy temple in the town, and the gate opening straight onto the main road it seemed to me very possible that the rucksack would walk. I felt a pang of anxiety, but in the same moment it dawned on me that this was the barrier test. If the rucksack was stolen I would have to go to the police, get certificates for the insurance, buy new equipment, in short my pilgrimage couldn't continue. My heart started to beat rapidly wondering if the rucksack would still be there. I had to force myself not to hurry, but

to complete the devotions in the proper manner. The adrenalin was high as a walked back to the gate, turned the corner - the rucksack was still there, propped up against a bench. I suppose the chances of it being stolen from a temple in Japan are actually very slight, but that didn't diminish the inner feeling of being tested. It is strange how these symbols work on the mind.

### **The Road to Muroto-misaki**

After Tatsueji, breaking the walking discipline of the Shikoku 88 path felt rather sad, as if leaving a significant retreat before its end. But given the time I had available this was the point at which to find a ride further south. Muroto-misaki (Cape Muroto) is a pivotal place in the hagiography of Kobo Daishi, said to be where he gained Enlightenment. It is also a wild land of cliff and forest, sky and sea, which I had wanted to visit for a long time. I knew I had to go there and to arrive on foot.

I was careful to chose Tatsueji as the last temple of my unbroken walk partly because it has such an important symbolic status and partly because it is one of the easiest places from which to pick up the trail again on another occasion. Having made a complete loop of Tokushima it is the point at which one strikes out for the long 150km walk to the cape leaving behind the big city roads and taking in several temples along the way.

So with some sadness I disrobed, feeling that it would somehow be false to still appear as a henro on a train, and went looking for Tatsue JR station. Tatsue is a tiny provincial stop, perhaps the smallest possible station one can have. One short platform with tracks on either side, no one selling tickets and no English signage. Helpfully there is a timetable from which I was able to decipher that there was a train towards Kaifu in the south at 13:37. However I had an unusual problem: this being a single track railway there was also a train going to Tokushima at exactly the same time, the two trains passing each other at Tatsue station. The platforms had no numbers so I had no idea which of the 13:37 trains to board. Closer to the time a Japanese man appeared and so I prevailed upon him to help me in my predicament. He was, naturally, unfailingly polite and wanting to help, but somehow in the communication I was still left confused as to which way to go - was he pointing to the direction that the train to Tokushima was going to or the direction it was arriving from? Eventually like a good boy scout I resorted to my compass, realising from the map that the railway line must be approximately aligned north-south and that the train I wanted must come from the north. Not a moment too soon, for shortly the two trains rolled up, I hopped on one, my acquaintance hopped on the other. My first and probably last experience of finding the correct train by compass! I couldn't help feeling that Kobo Daishi was teasing me ever so slightly.

Suddenly being back in the world of commuters, shoppers and school children twitching their mobile phones felt decidedly odd. I noticed that one elderly man seemed to be in a very confused state. He kept getting up and changing his seat, putting the sunblind down and then up and looking about with rapid darting eyes. At the all-change stop he got onto a train going in the direction from which we had just come. Sometimes human beings inhabit very strange states of mind.

Yet the journey was a pleasant one. After 5 days walking in the searing heat it felt like a forgotten luxury to be on local air-conditioned train. As the city fell away the glimpses of the Pacific deep blue became more frequent, occasionally punctuated by a lovely pine covered island in front of a sandy beach, how very enticing to a sweat-drenched walker!

After two train changes I finally arrived at Kannoura, the very last station on the Asa-Kaigan railway and about two days walk from Muroto-misaki. I had in mind to stay in Kannoura, since according to my map there was a minshuku (guesthouse) here, and start the pilgrimage again tomorrow.

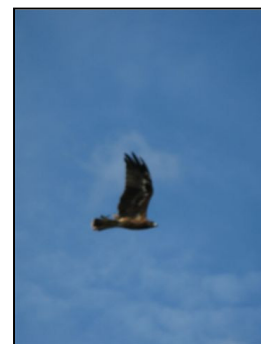
As I left the station I asked two elderly and friendly ladies the way to minshuku Inoue. There followed one of the most bizarre communications that I ever had in Japan. In one moment I felt that I understood completely what they said, yet the next moment I was utterly confused. All in Japanese they seemed to suggest that Inoue was not a good place to stay and I should try somewhere else further down the coast, so they wanted to know did I already have a phone reservation, to which I confidently replied "iie," no. How I comprehended this, far beyond my meagre dozen words of Japanese, I don't know. But then my intention to stay in Kannoura would assert itself and I would doubt if I had understood them at all. What was wrong with Inoue, and how on earth would I find somewhere else to stay if I didn't even know the name. Finally one of the words they kept repeating seemed to strike me as the name of a place I could read on my map "Ikumi." An inner tussle took place between sticking with my original plan and following the direction that

these two helpful strangers were suggesting. I'm pleased to say that the latter prevailed, even though it was getting late and I really wasn't sure where I was going.

As I headed off down the coast for another few kilometres the complete rightness of this choice hit me. It was a way to reconnect with the walking retreat. So I re-robed and felt the delight of being a henro once again. There would be nothing now but my feet to carry me from here to the hallowed ground of Muroto-misaki. Even having to hug the wall as I made my way through a noisy, smelly road tunnel on Route 55 didn't dampen my spirit of adventure.

Ikumi minshuku is a little known shangri-la (and long may it remain so). The proprietor, Ten - who introduced himself as "one more than nine" - is a warm-hearted Japanese flower-power surfer running a super-value guest house and cafe on what must be one of the loveliest beaches in Japan. Ten-san and I immediately took to each other, and he adopted the honorific Riju-san whenever he called me. Though I arrived too late for the cook to make me dinner, on discovering that I was vegetarian he said that since I wouldn't find anything suitable elsewhere along the beach they would rustle me up something anyway. As it dawned on me what a jewel of a person Ten-san and his family were, I realised that those two old ladies of Kannoura were in fact bodhisattvas or guardian angels, who had not only helped me to reconnect with my deeper purpose, but also given me a teaching on being attached to pre-conceived plans and ensured that I arrive at a lovely resting place. So I stripped off and hobbled, as best my poor blistered feet would manage, down the beach to the mighty Pacific breakers and plunged headlong into the surf.

The next morning was electric blue on the Muroto peninsula. Sky and sea met in a thin vanishing line, merging into a total Universe of Blue. It was going to be a hot day on the asphalt, I hit the road early. At the small town of None (pronounced no-ney), I did in fact find Plenty in the supermarket to sustain me for breakfast. Sat on the breakwater munching vegetarian sushi and gazing out across the beach and harbour I noticed a large flock of eagles or perhaps they were kites, perched on the electric cables. They eyed me carefully and as I set off again and soon took to the skies, perhaps two dozen in total, soaring ever upwards on the morning thermals. With a backdrop of the tumbling forests of the Shikoku mountains and clear sparkling waters of the None river, they were a mesmerizing sight.



I have long identified with the Eagle, King of Air, as a personal symbol, a family totem. On an archetypal level we have a strong affinity, and on that sun-drenched morning I felt myself to be very much part of their family, a feeling that was sealed by finding a single long, graceful eagle feather lying on the road in front of me, a sort of "welcome home" gift from the skies. Muroto-misaki was already starting to work its magic upon my soul.

It is hard to capture the solitary experience of these two intensely hot days walking the great route 55 to the cape. At times the August heat was so knockout that there was no choice but to seek shelter. At times sitting astride a large rock and watching the breakers roll in, I contemplated the vastness of our universe and thought of Kukai gazing out at the sky and sea all those centuries ago. At times I would walk with a grim determination, utterly drenched in sweat, all blisters and sores, shoulders aching, but in a perverse way delighting in the endurance and knowledge that I would never give up until I reached the goal.



### **Cape Muroto**

It isn't hard to understand why Kukai came to Muroto-misaki. Surrounded by the far horizons of the Pacific in three cardinal directions it is an awesome setting. Gazing into the distance the sky is intensely bright, and the deepening Pacific waters shade from aquamarine to dark blue. Hovering above the vanishing point are towering cumulonimbus, the King of Clouds, poised ready to unleash a thundering storm. At one's back, drenched by a tropical sun, the Muroto forest is a tough, shiny green, resilient against the blistering heat. The sound of the semi-cicadas, at times almost deafening, echoes across the jagged hills. Rock, sea, sky come together to give one the feeling of teetering on the edge of the known and staring reverentially towards the Unknown.





The name Kukai took for himself here means "sky and sea" and Mikurodo cave, where he lived over 1200 years ago, is the place he had a pivotal mystical experience that was to leave a permanent impression on him. In his writings he says "The morning star, which shines in the sky, entered my mouth." Apart from the concrete plinth and granite altar the cave has probably changed little in the intervening centuries. Dark, damp, dripping and attended by an assortment of fantastically coloured crabs - from intense blood red to bruised purple and yellow - it sports an other-worldly atmosphere. As I stood there for sometime intoning sacred verses, the crabs lost their inhibitions and started to creep out of every crevice. They seemed to me very beautiful as they performed a sort

of scuttling dance of bright colours around the altar. Forward, stop, left and right, back again - it could have been a modern choreography. They were the true keepers of this sacred place, surveying the offerings of the faithful, tidying away the donations. As soon as a party of tourists arrived they all disappeared, only to re-emerge cautiously when the party had gone. Apart from myself no one seemed to tarry long in Mikurodo; I suppose that a dark, damp, crab-infested cave isn't the most enticing of tourist attractions. But it is indeed a special place, for here the master practiced deep mystic meditations and founded an unshakeable intention to work for the well-being of the many. It is also a cool haven from the hours of intense asphalt heat that pilgrim's road to Muroto-misaki entails.

After the long hot hours of walking Highway 55, the steep climb to Hotsumisaki, temple 24, feels like a crucial and cathartic struggle, at once gruelling and rewarding. Here at the southern tip of Shikoku the forest fully becomes jungle, with its tough leaved evergreens, spicy smells and a thunderous chorus of insects. Hotsumisaki is perched on the summit of a huge finger-like cliff, gazing into the distance, a lone outpost of the Buddha's teaching at the far extremity of the known, surrounded by the Unknown. Arriving here was for me close to an ecstatic experience as all the effort and energies coalesced in the moment of achieving this long sought goal. Of course many of the other visitors had driven by car or bus and were no doubt on their way to somewhere else. For them Hotsumisaki was just another temple, and the irony of this contrast was not lost on me. Had I expected there to be bells and banners just for my little efforts? After the usual devotions and gazing for a long time out into the vastness of the ocean I slowly made my way down the cliff.

Muroto city clings like a small limpet to the narrow seaboard strip, the smallness of the habitable area a reminder that nature is pre-eminent in this far-flung land. I stayed in a small ryokan, which I later found had taken its name from a famous boat caught in one of the A-bomb blasts: Fukuyo-maru. My hosts were a lovely elderly couple who despite being rather perplexed by my dietary requirements cooked a splendid attempt at a vegetarian supper. Unfortunately the rather chewy carrot tempura turned out to be made of squid.

This being the end of the walk, I wanted to celebrate and share the achievement with someone. But there really wasn't anyone with whom I could communicate what it these 7 days had meant. Since there are no beaches at the far point of the cape, just rock meeting ocean, my evening plunge into the surf was taken in a rock pool, so I communed with the crustaceans, they alone were my witness. That night I watched a spectacular sunset over the western ocean, perhaps the most fitting end to any pilgrimage.

Mistaken as a tree  
The semi-cicada  
Jumped onto my lip  
The taste wasn't good

