

Rijumati: a pilgrimage to the Japanese teachers on the Refuge Tree

Dear Friends,

I am just about to leave Japan, I should embark on a freight ship for Canada tomorrow morning if there are no further delays due to local typhoons. The time here has been so rich, I feel as if I haven't yet digested the entrees, let alone the main courses, side dishes or desserts.

Here is a particularly Buddhist piece about the four Japanese teachers that we especially revere in the Western Buddhist Order. I visited the key sites associated with each and have written something and sent you some photos from each place. Try Kulananda's 'Teachers of Enlightenment' or [Free Buddhist Audio](#) for a more general introduction to the Refuge Tree.

There is much more I would like to write about Japan, especially about the pilgrimage I made on Shikoku which is a highlight amongst highlights of my stay here.

Lots of love. Rijumati (August 2008)

Seeking Shinran Shonin

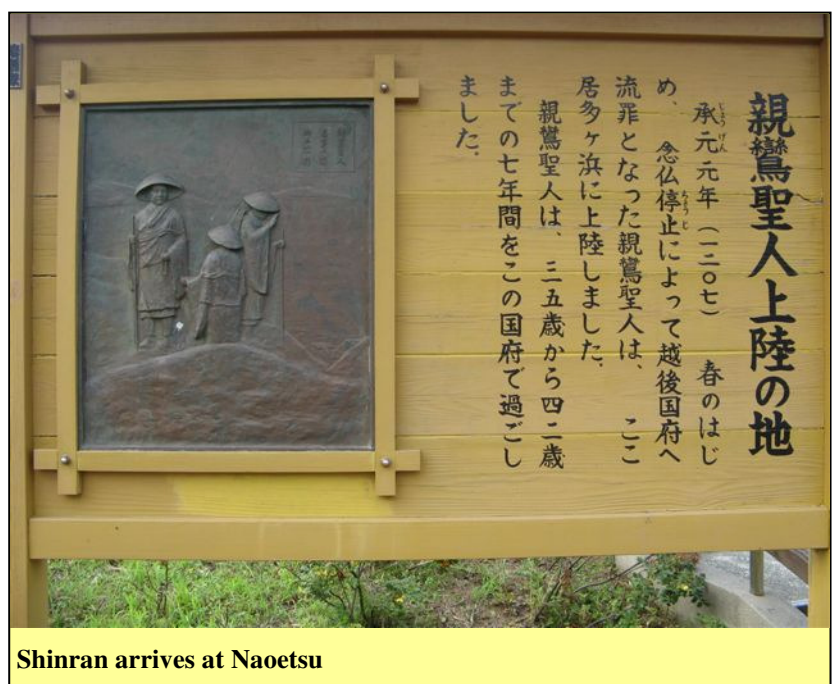


I remembered that the great Buddhist teacher, Shinran Shonin had been exiled to the coast of northwest Honshu in the 13th century. So when I unexpectedly found my journey taking me to that very coast I conceived a strong desire to visit and pay my respects at the place he had served his term. This period of exile turned out to be the most spiritually creative time of his life during which he completely recast his understanding of Buddhism, rejected his 20 year monastic training, founded the Jodo Shin Shu, Japan's most prolific Buddhist school, and wrote the ground-breaking *Kyogyoshinsho*, seminal text of the Pureland schools.

One of the great ironies of travelling in Japan is that I found the telecommunications the most difficult of my entire trip. My mobile phone, fried by the vagaries of Russian voltages, was obsolete by Japanese standards, so nowhere could I find a spare battery. Even if I got it fixed it wouldn't work on the high speed 3G mobile network which is standard here. Add to this a great poverty of internet cafés and international enabled payphones, and I was struggling to type, research or stay in touch. I spent two days seeking an internet café, whilst travelling south by bus and train, at which to research Shinran's exact whereabouts. In Niigata station, prefectural capital and local transport hub, I finally found a free internet point, and with jaw dropping amazement discovered that Niigata prefecture was exactly where Shinran had been exiled.

At Niigata tourist information there was great consternation and awe, when amidst the stream of people wanting trains, buses and hotels, I asked for information about Shinran Shonin (Shinran the Saint) in Niigata prefecture. The young assistant, Miko spoke a little English and kept apologising profusely that she knew next to nothing about Shinran - she seemed to feel very ashamed that she knew so little of her own heritage.

She did a rapid research job, reading the kanji webpages that were incomprehensible to me, and discovered that Shinran had lived out most of his exile near Naoetsu 100km to the south. Also there were 7 miracles associated with Shinran's time in Niigata. Miko giggled nervously as she retold the story of Shinran casting a grilled fish into the sea, which then swam away, as if to say "but only a child would believe it." I tried to reassure her that this was exactly the sort of story that I wanted to hear



Shinran arrives at Naoetsu

about, but perhaps all I managed to do was convince her that I was a very eccentric gaijin.

The sites commemorating the 7 miracles around Niigata are all accessible by bus, but the information was typed in kanji, my guide book had not a single reference and the local department bookstore had no english language books on Shinran. I imagined myself wandering around Niigata, trying to get off at an unknown bus-stop and find a monument to a miraculous grilled fish all in an unintelligible language and gave up the idea as even beyond my own limits of adventurous madness! So I settled for a stay in Naoetsu, once a tiny fishing village and now a commercial port, where I was assured they had lots of information about Shinran.

It was a grey, hot and humid morning in Takada, near Naoetsu, as I walked slowly but with masked anticipation to Jokoji temple. When I arrived the precincts were deserted, however the statue of Shinran in his pilgrims hat and holding a rosary was unmistakable. The main avenue leading to the hondo, or shrine hall, was lined with gently twisting ginkgo trees, and in some huge pots were growing large flowering lotuses. I bowed to Shinran and entered the hondo. The interior was the classic Japanese combination of dark wood, tatami, black lacquer and gold. On the shrine was a lovely standing Amida Buddha.

The solitude and aesthetics put me in a devotional mood so I lit some incense and chanted a mantra to Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, who is the presiding figure for the Jodo Shinshu. Eventually a woman appeared and proceeded to mop the verandah of the hondo; we bowed respectfully to one another as I left.

Shinran founded Jokoji during his period of exile for his "heretical" views, views that he enshrined in the Kyogyoshinsho which is a masterpiece of Buddhist thought. It was at Jokoji that he completed this work, as well as the work of remaking himself after his seemingly fruitless years of being a monk. Shinran was very inspired and happy during this time at Jokoji. Having studied the Kyogyohinsho some years previously I too was very inspired and happy to be at the place where the master had worked.

I went in search of the office to see if I could gain access to some of Shinran's personal affects - including rather macabrely his skull - which is reputedly kept at Jokoji. I met the wife of the head priest and managed to convey in broken japanese and english that I was an english Buddhist and student of Shinran's writings. She seemed delighted to help and unlocked the small room containing scrolls, cabinets and paintings associated with Shinran. The skull it seems had been lent to another museum! Inspired by the visit I wrote two haikus.

*Jokoji temple
Happy happy the place
Where the Buddhist Saint
Completed his great work*

*The lotuses of Takada
Bending in a summer breeze
Blush gently
Shy of their beauty*

Dogen's Legacy



Eiheiji monastery, seat of Dogen Zenji, one of the greatest Zen masters, is a very beautiful temple. Built into the side of a steep hill, surrounded by towering ancient cedars and pine, waters tastefully cascading under stone-arched bridges, mosses and ferns neatly covering the rocks, all topped with pagoda roofs and wooden vaulted cloisters. One would seem to have arrived in a sort of Japanese picture postcard paradise.

Yet I didn't take to Eiheiji, for there was something that irked in the mood there. Unusually for Japan the welcome seemed rather inhospitable, certainly for a gaijin who can't read kanji. Not seeing any recognizable directions on my arrival I followed some people to a building in which there was a ticket office, and I bought what I guessed was a ticket to see the old monastery. I asked if there was any information in English but instead of being given a pamphlet was directed to a large modern building that looked like a temple office block. Following another group into a doorway, still confused about where to go, I was shouted at by an old lady and directed to a different doorway.

Here I entered what can only be described as a Buddhist airport departure gate. In several directions were long counters with monks and laywomen sitting behind computers and telephones with many civilians filling in forms or making payments. In front of me was a big sign, the only part of which I could decipher was 1500 yen, and ladies selling yet more tickets. Had I bought a ticket to the wrong thing? In vain I asked for the way to the old temple, but no one could help and there was not an english sign in sight.

Eventually, after trying all the desks I was directed to a monk who gave me an english pamphlet about Eiheiji - hooray! But he immediately told me that I couldn't go to see the introductory video in a nearby room since "it is just for Japanese" though I would have been happy to watch it without knowing the language as a way of getting a sense of the monastery workings. He motioned that I should ascend an unlikely looking staircase, the sort of staircase that you might expect to see as a fire exit for a university faculty building. In fact he was very insistent until I just ignored him and sat down to read the pamphlet.

Inserted before the contents page was a leaflet called "Rules for Visitors" neatly typed and giving 8 rules. Things like "don't leave the wooden walkway because your socks will become dirty and bring dirt into the temple." If the paying customers get 8 rules for a short visit, one wonders how many rules the monks have to follow!

The unpromising staircase lead to several unpromising neon lit corridors and eventually to a big modern hall, the first named part of the tour. I wasn't detained long. However after weaving the way through various corridors I suddenly emerged into a beautiful sunlit cloister with old timbers, ferns and mosses. This was old Eiheiji, now connected to the modern complex by new walkways.

Some of the monks were friendly, others less so like one who shooed me out of one of the halls with a very dismissive waving of the hand. The Daikuin, or kitchen, was one of the main places I wanted to visit, it being the inspiration for Dogen's most approachable writings on zen practice at work - the advice to the Tenzo (monastery head cook). Sadly, although it was marked as part of the tour one wasn't allowed to see the kitchen, just the lobby that led to it.



The gate at Eiheiji

I couldn't resist breaking at least one rule. With a naughty boy delight I padded in my stockinged feet down some stone steps to get a better view of the impressive main gate - it being impossible to see it properly from the wooden walkways. I did of course brush all the dirt off my socks before returning to the temple walkways. But no alarms went off, the zen police didn't descend on me. Perhaps the rules weren't to be taken so literally after all. What would Dogen have made of it all?

Kukai: Meeting Kobo Daishi



The baffling sequence of trains that connect Kyoto to Koyasan (no less than four trains and two different railway companies) only in fact take one 80km. But the change in environment couldn't be more pronounced. From urban intensity to mountain retreat, except that Koyasan isn't the mountain retreat that it was when the temple was founded by Kukai (known honorifically as Kobo Daishi) in the 8th century.

The isolation of this remote mountain forest plateau has been eroded through the centuries by the arrival of nearly 70 temples, lots of souvenir shops and a spectacular funicular railway. The train ride through the winding mountain gorges and the final funicular ascent are worth doing in their own right. Despite it's evident transformation into a tourist destination the charm of Koyasan remains, even the souvenir shops are fairly tasteful.

As I boarded the connecting bus at the Koyasan funicular terminal I was accosted, no lesser expression does it justice, by a lively and garrulous middle-aged english woman called Sheila. Where was I going, where had I come from, what was I doing in Koyasan? Sheila vigorously informed me, and anyone else we happened to meet, that though she was english she was currently living in China and had done so for the last few years. It turned out that we were staying at the same temple, Haryoin, so we made our way there together.

Arriving at Haryoin we rang the bell and waited for what seemed like an age before the sliding door was unlocked and a physically disfigured man appeared before us. He was bent over in a hunched shape, and dragged his right leg along as he walked. Sheila quickly ascertained that he had suffered from some kind of brain trauma that had

left his body rigid and misshapen. He greeted me politely but was sterner with Sheila. Though she had booked she had forgotten to reconfirm on a certain date and he made it very clear that she was at fault. I waited to see if she would get a room or not, but in the end it turned out fine. I reflected that his attitude wasn't altogether welcoming, something that was to be dramatically confirmed for me later on.

In a gentlemanly sort of way I decided to wait for Sheila, even though she chattered incessantly. As soon as the formalities of arriving at Haryoin were over, we set off to see the sites. She plied me with many questions, some of them quite deep questions about my life. I hesitated, but eventually decided to attempt a meaningful answer to her questioning. However just as I was articulating one of the deeper motivations that had led me to travel the world, Sheila disappeared. Turning I found she had darted into a shop and was fascinated by a lady weaving at a loom. I waited for a few minutes and then bid her farewell, she nodded momentarily and then seemed to forget I was there. I was rather relieved to be on my own again.

As I made my way through the village, passing the many trinket and souvenir shops, my purpose was very clear, I was here to meet Kobo Daishi. The most important shrine in Koyasan is the Okonuin, the inner sanctuary, which is situated at the far side of Koyasan's huge and ancient forest cemetery. Here it is said that Kobo Daishi is still in meditation, awaiting the next Buddha whose message he alone will be able to interpret for humankind.

To approach the road through the cemetery one passes many of the temples, and one in particular, Shojoshin-in, caught my attention. Whether it was the wood carved gate, the beautifully manicured pines, the little stream running by or something altogether non-rational, my feet propelled me into the temple grounds. Here I was greeted by a Japanese man who was mindfully sweeping the wooden verandah. I removed my shoes and wandered down the corridor. On one side was a wonderful garden, on the other elegant rooms each with a different shrine. Eventually I came, at the very end of the corridor, to a dimly lit classical Japanese room. Painted sliding screens, tatami floors, and in the centre a formidable image of Kobo Daishi, holding the vajra to his heart. Surprised to be meeting him face to face like this, I felt a surge of emotion and decided to chant some devotional verses. When I had finished these ministrations, Kobo Daishi was smiling at me broadly. I left that small, dim room feeling quietly elated.

Walking through the forest cemetery and visiting the Okonuin was one of the most atmospheric and moving moments of my entire time in Japan. Amongst the immense pillars of towering cedar are arrayed a million or more tombs of the good and the great from Japanese history. In the deep green light the mosses and ferns cling to the stones and one passes into a timeless world, at once delightful and reflective. Here surrounded by gentle beauty and monuments to the dead one is called upon to reassess one's assumptions about life and death. The paved way to Kukai's mausoleum winds slowly through the forest, each turn revealing another striking monument or mighty giant of the forest. Eventually one arrives at a small complex of traditional wooden buildings where the faithful purchase their offering plaques and prepare to make their devotions.



Tombs in the forest at Koyasan

Amidst the afternoon throng of visitors I joined in and anointed the arrayed Bodhisattvas at the entrance by splashing them with mountain spring water. Further along the track is the Miroku-ishi, a stone locked in a cage whose weight is determined by one's impure deeds. Pilgrims attempt to lift it from a lower to a higher shelf. I put my arm through the tiny gap and tried to lift, it was indeed a strain for my arm muscles. But by taking off my watch I was able to squeeze my second arm through the gap and then the lift felt as light as a feather. No one said that one had to lift purely with one hand!

Finally I ascended the steps to the Okonuin hondo. Inside the clouds of incense were thick and thousands of paper lanterns lit a large shrine space, at the centre of which a Shingon priest was intoning a puja or worship. I removed my shoes and joined the small crowd of worshippers in attendance. As the bells rang and the drum beats resounded, a sort of peaceful one-pointedness descended on us. At a certain moment in the ceremony we individually took turns to offer some incense and bow to the shrine. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

After the worship had finished I walked around the hondo and spent time gazing at the mausoleum where it is believed that Kobo Daishi still sits meditating. Many people came and went, making offerings in a spirit of joy and sincerity. The atmosphere was uplifting and inspiring. The Okonuin was the most tangibly holy place I visited in all Japan.

Descending to the lower hall one enters a room filled with a million small statues of Kobo Daishi, arrayed on shelves from floor to ceiling, all individually numbered. Each statue is just 5cm high. I almost reached out to touch and pick one up, but propriety stayed my hand.

The last treat of the Okonuin temple is the lantern room. Largely by-passed by the other visitors I found myself almost alone in this subterranean space lit solely with thousands of paper lanterns. Like a maze, one weaves back and forward through the aisles and rows of identical lanterns. It is a kind of symbolic journey to the central shrine, which I undertook whilst chanting sacred invocations.

Through this series of ceremonies and activities I had a tangible sense of meeting Kobo Daishi; the magic of the Okonuin had begun to work on my soul.

Later on I met Sheila again and though not a practising Christian she expressed her view that the Christian emphasis on good works was much preferable to the Buddhist emphasis on personal spiritual practice. In particular she was rather dismissive of the Tibetans and their devotions. I wanted to say that if she did a bit of meditation she might be less distractable, become more aware of other people and what good works would really help them. But sensing that it would give offence and probably be a fruitless piece of feedback the courage to speak escaped me and I kept silent, to my later regret.

Back at Haryoin I bathed and joined the guests for dinner, but I was feeling rather uncomfortable there. The feeling came from the little details of the place. Though we were paying what for me amounted to a fairly expensive night's stay, Haryoin seemed quite ungenerous: the dinner was meagre, there was no guest towel, the rooms were stuffy with no mosquito screens so that opening the windows was not advisable, and when I asked for some cold drinking water I was refused. Since I had run out of change for the drinks machine this left me very thirsty in the heat. I began to feel that the place was rather oppressive and decided to go out for a walk.

In the night-time dark the streets of Koyasan village were deserted. I had no idea where I was going, but just that I needed to get out of Haryoin. As if leading me on, my feet just seemed to take me in the direction of the Okonuin and forest cemetery. I felt a frisson of fear and excitement as I entered the forest. The path was lit with elegant stone lanterns, but deserted and at night the forest was an altogether different place.

The silence was complete and arresting. From the shadows forms seemed to take shape and then dissolve again as one walked past. Occasionally a sudden sound would startle me, but the atmosphere was strongly benign. I began to enjoy being in another world, and a certain intensity and one-pointedness filled my mind, it was exhilarating. I wanted to continue all the way to Kobo Daishi's mausoleum but it would take a couple of hours to get there and back and I didn't want to inconvenience the temple so I turned back halfway. As I emerged from the forest there was a party of young boys entering led by a teacher, they looked at me somewhat startled and amazed before erupting into calls of "Hello", "How are you?" "Good-bye" and whatever english phrases they could remember... I smiled at them, exchanged greetings and walked on.

When I arrived back at Haryoin it was about 9.15pm. Though I had told them I was going out and would return soon, the gate was well and truly locked. I knocked vigorously for some minutes, and eventually heard some noises from inside. Our disabled host finally arrived and unbolted the gate. As I took off my shoes he was clearly very agitated. "You must obey rule!" he said several times before finally asking me forcefully "You understand?!" to which I had to say "No." Finally it dawned on me that they must have a locking up time and I had come back too late. As I turned to go to my room he again said forcefully "You must say 'very sorry'" The fact that 9.15pm didn't seem outrageously inconsiderate, that I had been unaware of their locking up time and his aggressive manner meant that I didn't feel particularly sorry, but he was clearly very exercised by my behaviour so I offered a mild "sorry" and walked back to my room. There I reread the rule sheet I had been given on arrival and there was indeed a sentence which included the number "9" but since it was written in kanji, there was no way to guess that it said they locked up at 9pm. I couldn't help wondering to what extent the rigidity of our host's adherence to rules and the rigidity of his physical form were connected. My feelings for Haryoin as an unfriendly and somewhat oppressive place were confirmed, and I decided not to attend their morning worship, but instead to go and visit the Okonuin one more time.

In the morning quiet the forest and Okonuin had yet again another atmosphere. Some early pilgrims were out, but the main throng of tourists had not yet arrived. The cool of the early morning was lovely and refreshing. Morning, afternoon and night each brought a different mood to this most magical of places.

Over the centuries many pilgrims have come to Koyasan to ask for Kobo Daishi's blessing before undertaking the hardships of the 1200km pilgrimage to the 88 temples on the island of Shikoku. I too was planning to do part of the pilgrimage and it seemed quite natural to be at Koyasan seeking to meet with Kobo Daishi. The pilgrims of the Shikoku 88 temples say that you never undertake the pilgrimage alone since Kobo Daishi is always at your side, often symbolically represented by the traditional walking stick. As I basked in the atmosphere of Koyasan's Okonuin and forest cemetery I began to feel that indeed I wasn't fully alone. Occasionally this would bring tears of gratitude to my eyes. All of us are travellers on life's difficult journey and perhaps more than anything else a human being needs to feel the companionship of a kindred spirit.

Thinking about my experiences at the temples of Koyasan and Eihei-ji I was struck that in this faultlessly polite and welcoming country the only two places where I felt very unwelcome were two of the "holiest" Buddhist sites. What a strange irony! I was left reflecting on the detrimental effects of high reputation and throngs of tourists on religious institutions.

Hakuin: Looking for the Wild Ivy



Latter day Shoin-ji isn't the haven of natural tranquility that one might expect from the temple at which a formidable Zen Master like Hakuin was abbot for 40 years. The urban sprawl of modern Japan hasn't favoured Shoin-ji, the birthplace to which Hakuin had returned to escape the politics of the Kyoto temples in the early 18th century. It is in the middle of a little town called Hara, with the JR railway line at its back and a major highway just in front.

In the front of Shoin-ji is a very old and beautiful tree named the Suribachi pine. Given pride of place it is a wonderful example of the appreciation the Japanese have of plants as part of their heritage. The temple complex was partially a building site when I arrived, with new foundations in the process of being laid and large piles of building materials filling the gravel entrance. I wandered around trying to find Hakuin's tomb, which the city plan indicated was on the temple grounds. Amidst the hundreds of stones I was unable to decipher enough of the Kanji to be sure that I'd found the right one. I asked a man, who might have been a gardener, but he just waved me on in a vague way leaving me none the wiser.

Having wandered around for a while without encountering anyone who could enlighten me about Shoin-ji and Hakuin I just took to the hondo and decided to offer some incense, chant some traditional Buddhist verses and meditate; Hakuin was a rigorous meditator usually practising for long hours everyday. The hondo was small and had a friendly atmosphere. On the main shrine was a classic line drawing of Hakuin and a photo of an elderly monk laughing.

As I meditated I felt very contented and peaceful; contemplating Hakuin's unique contribution to Buddhism moved me deeply. From his biography it is clear that he was a very sincere seeker of the Truth. Though he is attributed with having been "enlightened" whilst still a young monk, he felt that his experience was only partial, since he found he couldn't maintain the insights he'd had in the bustle of everyday living. He strove to integrate his understanding with everyday life. In his biography he says "I feel like a physician who possesses a wonderful knowledge of medicine but has no effective means of curing an actual sickness."



The Surabachi pine at Shoinji

After a blissful meditation I went in search of someone and found a very little old nun with a kindly face and dressed in a blue-grey pyjama suit. She led me to a little hall with a neatly lined set of meditation cushions. At the far end was a raised cupola and ascending the stairs I saw a beautiful shrine with a strikingly lifelike wood carving of the Zen Master. "Hakuin-san" she said with a great smile in her eyes, I gasped and bowed deeply. She left me alone with the Master and once again I lit some incense and chanted sacred verses. I couldn't resist taking a photo of Hakuin gazing at me, though he gave me a stern look as I did so.

Contrary my usual habit of leaving only a token donation at the temples I visited - many of which were already immensely rich - the simplicity of Shoinji, their unfinished building works and the unpretention of the old nun moved me to leave rather more. As I offered her the 1000 yen note she gasped and asked me if I would like some tea. Unable to speak together we sat in silence whilst I drank some delicious ice cold green tea. As I parted she gave me a present of a simple plastic fan on which was printed an iconic image of Hakuin.

As if to capture the specialness of the visit to Shoinji, when I set off for Hara station I caught a glimpse of Mt. Fuji through the August haze. I gazed in awe at the majesty and grace of it's silhouette, no longer clad in winter snows. Within 30 minutes Mt Fuji had disappeared again, enveloped by cloud, I felt touched by a blessing from the mountain

Rijumati, August 2008

