

# Walking Kii Mountains: A Journal of Pilgrimage

## Day 1: Beginning the Pilgrimage Trail



Snow shaking cedars:  
Susuki grass bending down  
in no wind at all.

Sunlight in little  
bits and pieces flitting about  
the shadowy green grove.

Stillness of cedars  
hidden in mountain hollows:  
When will the crows cry?

An eighty two year old man showed up at the first shrine we visited. He was wearing playtex gloves and was ready to clean the shrine. With a smile animating every word, he spoke of his enduring love for the shrine and the history that had bequeathed it him. At his home next to the shrine were many bonsai trees. Some of them looked over 100, perhaps even 200 years old.

As the walk of the first day ended Kumi and I found ourselves descending down the mountainside into the village of our first night's lodging. Simon had already gone below, where he was busily videoing the stream coursing between broad gravel banks down its valley. On the mountainsides, the trees were slowly darkening into evening, the silence over the forest was so vast and peaceful. And then from the valley floor, a bell began to intone the finishing of the day.

Descending the ridge  
The brown trunks of cypress trees:  
Buddha bell rings evening.

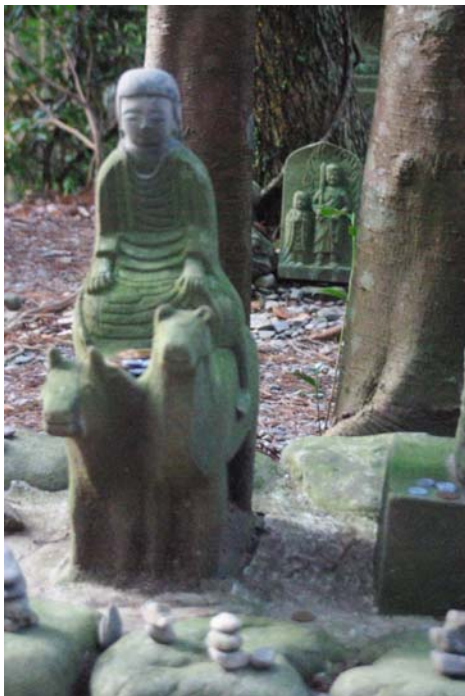
It welcomed us into the village. In its lengthening peals was spoken a commitment to dwelling in this particular place in this particular time among the eons of existence.

Later I discover that the cedar and cypress forests with their beautiful tall trees growing in straight lines are poor habitat for many of the creatures indigenous to the mountains. The forests are planted and nurtured to harvest for their wood. The monasteries, I gather, use them as a source of income. As a

result, bears are no longer found in this region. Should Buddha mind ever be without the presence of bears?

Buddhism is a letting go of things but also a holding on to things—the things of vestments, statues, places, temples, priests, monks, songs, loudspeakers and, even, forests. Perhaps for that reason there are those that think Buddhism can die. Perhaps they are correct too.

Some of the shrines along the way are framed in magnificent trees, or fed by bubbling springs or framed by cliffs. But some are simply a spot along the trail. Simply looking carefully anywhere makes it a shrine?



A young prince riding both an ox and horse. The statue had been recently vandalized, the head broken off and stolen. But a new head has been restored to it, so carefully worked into the statue that only a hard look can determine what has occurred. The prince was adept at adapting to the disparate roles of existence—to riding an ox and a horse. And so too this statue that commemorates the prince is itself riding tradition and forgetfulness of tradition. Buddhism does not need to surrender to the world that is changing. It is already there amidst the change riding the ox and the horse, walking the trails of Kumano Kodo and the aisles of Walmart. Because Buddhism has already surrendered so there is no conquering it. And yet, and yet... Japanese culture is very secular these days. A real disconnect exists between the spiritual instruction of this trail and the ambitious pursuit of security and prestige characterizing everyday life here and most everywhere else on the planet. Family continues to matter deeply to the Japanese as does the landscape. Perhaps these social and earthly

engagements are the contemporary translations of the pilgrimage way?

## **Day 2: A Walk to Hongu Shrine.**

We spent the morning acquainting ourselves with the trail at a world heritage welcoming site and viewing the featured artwork of Christina Oiticica, who buries her paintings in the soil and then unearths them later, after they have recorded the various processes of decay inflicted upon them by mother earth. But does a mother cause decay in her womb? Isn't the womb of earth altogether different than the womb of a human mother? On the other hand, Christina senses this act of burial in a vegetable garden "would transmit the energy of my work to the food that nourishes" those eating from the patch.

Many guardian Bodhisattvas along the trail. Often the statues are covered/protected with yellow baby bibs, orange cloth or traditional straw rain coats. Priceless historical, religious and artistic treasures simply lying out in the open slowly succumbing to decay. These are pieces one would expect to see in

the Met or any other world museum. The Buddhas are often simply carved but always elegant. Their smiles are haunting.



In fact the whole of the mountains are haunted or better haunting. Haunting—a dwelling that persists in time, that radiates from one generation to another.

In one village a local carver had rigged up two scarecrow figures with wooden masks so that they were hooked into a Goldbergian contraption which raised up grandma and grandpa's hands when a bucket in a small brook behind them filled with water and then

tipped over. Kumi loved the surprise of it all.

At another village, ladles had been set out over a stone bowl being filled with water from a small plastic pipe. Pilgrims stop here to sip the sweet water offered by the local village. As the stream trickled onto the handles of one of the ladles and then into the water of the bowl the most delicate and pleasant sounds tinkled and plashed. Kumi, always on the outlook (or should it be "outlisten") for soundscapes, recorded these on a digital camera with audio. Upon reflection one realizes that the sound is being made because someone had placed the metal handle of the ladle just so in the stream of falling water. This consistent attention to the arrangement of minute details is a feature of the obsession, the aesthetic, the spiritual cultivation of Japanese culture.

Later we walked among tea fields perched on the sunny side of the mountain ridges. Yet another elderly man came out to speak with us and share his many opinions about the conditions of the trails and the reason that so many sheds and houses had been abandoned in the area. Almost everywhere the villagers on which the trail runs were welcoming and joyous, proud of their role as guardians or just nearby witnesses of the pilgrimage path.



Depopulation of Japan is a huge social issue. And a religious one too, I think. The villages we encountered along the pathway were so quaint and traditional because the children have left them and none are returning. The old men and women working on the slopes leading up to the trail give the sense of a deep veneration of and thankfulness for their landscape. But it must sting to the core not to have

someone to inherit this. This lends a renewed poignancy to the 82 year old man who showed up at the first shrine. He is looking, perhaps, to the pilgrims as the next generation? The land is, to a degree, in the hands or at least the minds of those who visit it reverently? Everywhere everyone is fleeing to the cities. For the first time ever on the planet, more than 50% of human beings live in cities. The landscape is emptying out even as human population is growing exponentially. How strange.

Owls everywhere. In the little village at an unattended stand, I purchased one. Crudely etched out from a wooden post, the eyes daubs of yellow paint, but a plucky owl nevertheless. Later at the stands surrounding the spindly but towering Nachi Waterfall, hoards of owls of every variety—ceramic, wooden, stone, cloth—were set out for the bypassing pilgrims and sightseers. Kumi told me about the play of words surrounding *hukurou*, owl. “It’s *kuro*, that second syllable means suffering; *hu* is negative, so no suffering. But also ‘happiness, good fortune,’ *huku*; and also *kuro*, ‘we’ll be coming.’ So the happiness or good fortune will be coming.” So the bird symbolizes good fortune. Auspicious omen and alert guardian. Also shared with other cultures, the owl is envisioned as a bird of wisdom. Japanese think of owls as living long lives and so a bird of wisdom. Every name has a story. And the better the story, the better the name.



Hongu Shrine—after our walk that began early afternoon and then deepened into dusk we came to a huge gate. We walked through it and then into a courtyard where a young monk was unloading supplies from a truck. We had entered through the backside of the monastery. As we rounded a corner suddenly there was a marvelous shrine, composed of layer upon layer reaching inward. At the very nadir of interiority, a closed door behind which was secreted a hidden Buddha. Tossing a coin into the offering box. The bell. The clapping of hands. The prayer before the Buddha sitting distantly.

*Gagaku*, a music of the earth. Flutes are air. Strings are the heavens. The human voice is the earth. In three instruments the entirety of creation.

The long stairway down into the ordinary world. Each side lined with white flags proclaiming the names of the donors who sustain the temple. The flags in turn are towered over by great cypress trees reaching into the evening sky. Then the intoning of a Buddha bell.



### Day 3: After the Hot Springs

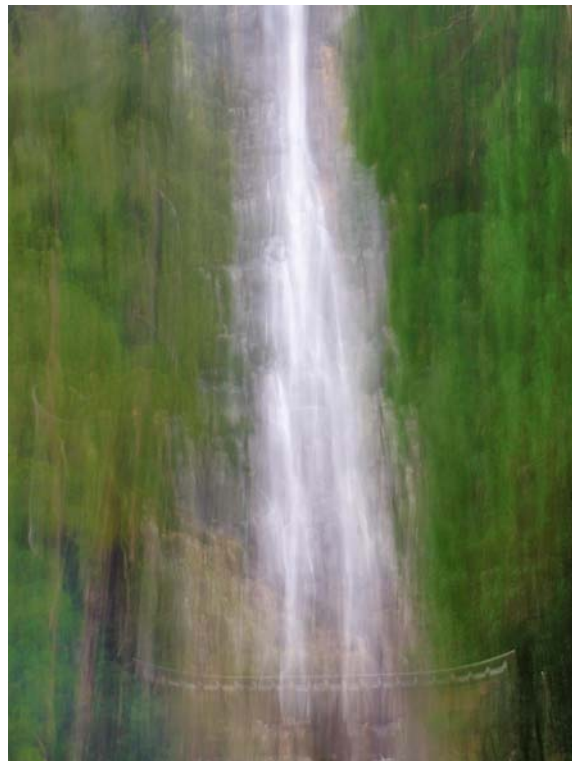
Kumi awakes yawns, drinks water and announces: “The bath water last night was so beautiful, it felt like warm clouds, like just floating in clouds.” Before going to sleep, Kumi and Simon had bathed at a World Heritage Site fed by hot springs. Only two at a time are allowed to immerse themselves in its waters. The pool, Kumi reports, is like a bowl with milky blue water, cloud water, pebbles lying in the curve at the bottom of the bowl. Outside Japanese families boil their food in the hot waters of the hot spring. 10 minutes are sufficient to hard boil an egg; 40 minutes are needed for a bag of yams.

Kumi smiles blissfully and moves her hands about like clouds. The way the pilgrimage path takes, she claims, is a feast or prayer of the senses. She speaks of a whaler she met. Late in his life, he told her, he feels a grief over the whales he has hunted and killed. He searches for reconciliation, for atonement to address his sorrow. Is it that he killed the whale, I wonder, or that he killed it without mindfulness, without thankfulness?

Yesterday at Hongu Shrine I bought a picture of a comic and yet ferocious tiger to honor the year of the tiger. The Japanese word/character for tiger also can mean the way, the dao. The tiger is my path. If the tiger meets me on the road, will it devour me?

The beauty of spoken Japanese—like water flowing over smooth stones punctuated by gurgles and splashes. The wall dividing our room from the next one is actually topped by a grillwork that allows conversation from one side to filter over into the other. How soothing the voice of the women, how earthly the voice of the man who speak in emotional subtleties to one another in the next room. Is Japan a culture defined through overhearing others subtly and discretely. The conversation is not straightforward but nevertheless it occurs.

At the beginning of our climb of 536 steps to a cliff-top shrine we meet a Buddhist priest who stops to chat in English. Transverse flutes, he informs us, are best played at shrines; my recorder, he notes, is better played at a temple. He takes out his flute and plays a song for us. It is simple but so perfect. Shrines are Shinto, Kumi informs me, tied into various places, holding the spirit guarding a locality; temples, on the other hand, are Buddhist, dedicated to the Buddha and of a more universal nature. The transverse flute, Kumi muses, holds its notes less insistently, is less piercing, more tentative in its sound. The recorder, I muse, holds its tone, cuts into the air, opens up a path beyond the comings and goings of the local.



Later we watch the falling waters of Nachi Falls. A bridge stretches through the lower part of the falls. Some Buddhists participate in an ascetic practice of bathing in the falls in the middle of winter while standing on the bridge. To have a mind of snow, as Wallace Stevens would put it.

#### **Day 4: Whale Slaughtering Waters**

What is the difference between a sightseer and a pilgrim? How does one act out each role? Is either role possible to escape? And what of witness? When we entered Taiji yesterday evening, Simon pointed out “the cove” that was the subject of the documentary film by that name. Its opening framed by cliffs lay out in waters easily seen from the highway. A rope securing a netline bowed from one rocky side of the cove to the other. It was hemming in dolphins even at that moment, Simon stated. Sure enough, I could see dolphins dimly in the darkening evening arching in the waters. Devastating. The image has colored my sleep, disheartened me. The scene lends a darkened resonance to Yeats’ line: “the dolphin torn seas.” Each action we take lends renewed meaning to a great poet’s lines. What meaning will we lend to Yeats’ dark forebodings in this century?

Darkening waters,  
A moon that has not risen:  
The dolphins thrashing.

How does one show solidarity with human beings who insist on killing dolphins in such a brutal manner? How do we balance the slaughter of our fellow mammals with their exuberant affirmations of earthly existence, with their frenzy, particularly in the case of the dolphins, at their impending doom? With water so mixed (not just stained) with blood that it beggars the possibility of being refreshed, renewed.

One must take on the suffering of the dolphins, I think. One must be torn into shreds and yet one must persist in speaking to the whalers with compassion and attentiveness. One must learn from the whalers—they have important lessons to teach us all. And one must remember it is the desires of many humans, as much as the acts of these particular townspeople, that lead to the slaughter of whales. A numbness to the living world pervades everywhere that we turn in our commercially driven existences.

Soft covers, warm bed,  
Foggy windows, splashing rain:  
Crow caws in winter.

Last night Simon dug out his file full of information about Taiji. He dreams of solidarity with both humans and dolphins. He is deeply pained by the way in which the violence of the dolphin hunt has become the hallmark of social status in Taiji. He shows me an amazing set of pictures he has gathered from Edo manuscripts recording the activities and tools of the whalers during their traditional hunts. From the harpooning to flensing, to butchering, to rendering. In one picture a huge whale carcass is half hollowed out and inhabited by workers climbing about its innards to finish their work. Two types of boats are pictured—those that led the attack and others, like oar powered sea-semi-trucks, that brought home the carcass. One brave whaler would be consigned to climbing on the whale once it was

exhausted from bleeding, tangled in harpoon lines, and cut its breathing passage through the blowhole in such a fashion that the whale would suffocate.

How do we square the traditional values of whaling with those currently in practice? Is rounding up passing-by dolphins with power boats, as if they were a herd of domestic cattle being corralled in, really the same as plying the high seas in wooden boats to hunt an animal dwarfing the humans in pursuit of it? Is the tradition merely the practice of deriving benefit from the land, or does it require something more of us?

The visual language of the Edo manuscript is in some ways reminiscent of Hokusai but in other ways quite different. It is the manuscript of a census taker or a tax collector. The images are given to the gaze of a sovereign who wishes to know the activities of his subjects and the localities of his kingdom. How different from Hokusai's enumeration of the many activities of man in the shadow of Mt. Fuji. And yet how similar.

Evening: Dinner at Machiko's Mountain Farm.

In the mountains above Wakayama, Machiko a talented fabric sculptor with an international reputation, has taken on during the last decade the restoration of a three hundred year old farm house and out buildings at the core of a traditional vegetable farm. Among the fruit grown there: kiwis and mandarin oranges. The homestead is nestled along a small creek wandering down a forested mountainside. Machiko sells organic tea she has roasted herself as part of the farm's produce. She also uses the farm as a gathering place for intellectual and artistic conversation. Why is she here? The land has called her, she responds. It is teaching her how to exist. The family that had been here for centuries sold the whole mountain to her. The children no longer had the will to cultivate the vegetables. The buildings had been in disrepair, termite infested, crumbling back into the earth. As one now stares at three hundred year old cedar beams as thick as elephant legs in the beautiful dining space, one is deeply thankful this building has not been lost, at least yet, to the ravages of time. When Machiko bought the land, local farmers dropped by and insisted she learn the birds and plants indigenous to the landscape. One encounters here a sense of community and cultivation that is deep and yet also vulnerable to the urbanization at work everywhere on the world's face.

## Days 5 and 6: Wandering the City



Wakayama Fortress:

Stone piled on stone:

Crows wheeling, dipping, rising

As bare trees darken.

Wakayama Modern Museum of Art:

E ep alon a han i m a  
a st g the guided by d a o like wave than in a simple line.  
ch stairway is r ving rather



Wakayama University:

Sun lights snow on sun:  
The smell of snowflakes driven  
along mountain slopes.

How long have these crows  
called this forest home?  
Each takes a turn,  
saying so.



## Day 7: Koyasan

Awakening this morning to the third or fourth day of reportage on the terrible earthquake in Haiti. Japan too is a land of earthquakes. I think of Joe Lawrence, a colleague who teaches at Holy Cross College, who lost one of his best friends when the Kobe hotel in which they were sleeping collapsed into rubble at 5:46 a.m. on Tuesday, January 17, 1995. The Kobe earthquake radicalized Joe's religious and environmental thinking. Emphasizing the fallenness of creation, both literally and metaphorically, he became Gnostic in his earth theology. I can still remember the look of immeasurable pain in his eyes as he recounted his story of loss at a philosophy conference. Today Koyasan will be sublimely still, covered in snow and ice, its birds combing the slopes for shelter and provender. What is the duty of the pilgrim when the world continues to be overbrimming with catastrophe, disaster and heartache? To bring the suffering near and then let it go out again? To be one moment in the heartbeat of existence?



Body of blood  
Mind of snow  
Buddhas of bronze  
and icicles.



A thousand years of gravestones line the way to the ultimate temple in the Pilgrimage. All the monks and nuns who have lived here, now buried on this final ground, now dipping from the earth into eternity, meditating ceaselessly, the believers believe, in the pure land of Shingo Buddhism. The dead are home and it is the living who are wanderers. Pure Land Buddhism has many affinities with an Abrahamic belief in an afterlife and in a compassionate creator. All the earth articulates Buddha mind. Unlike all the other buildings on the pilgrimage route, which are colored an intense orange, the temple marking the grave of Kukai is dark brown and emerald green. Understated. No cameras allowed. At Kukai's grave a group of Buddhist pilgrims chanted for several minutes. I listen transfixed.

### **Day 8: Flying the Jetstream.**

Walking along the Incheon Air Mall with Clark Davis, a civil engineer who works on water and earthquake preparation for the city of LA.

He's just returning from Kyoto where he gave a lecture to the University there. He knows a colleague of mine at Salisbury University by the name of Limbo. China, he says, adopted the American model of automotive transportation and has built a large highway system. They also are focusing on earthquake prediction at the expense of earthquake preparation. "Even if they know an earthquake is coming, he asks, what will they do when its epicenter might be a city of 10,000, 000? In China, 'towns' number 500,000 to 1,000, 000."

And walking past shops and cafes named Starbucks and Lancome and Dior, I remark: this too is part of the pilgrimage. Kumano Kodo goes wherever there is Buddha mind and Buddha mind is without constraint. In fact, I muse, this pilgrimage started before I might have even had a mind to do so.

Thinking of Kukai eternally in meditation reminds me of the 36 righteous, each of whom recognizes a compassion without measure at the core of things and is moved by it openly. Moved without being moved? Moved by already having been moved? Moving and not moving I am now making my way at 33,000 feet back to LAX. Next to me is a lovely, energetic 3 year old Korean boy with a large rubber Tyrannosaurus Rex. The boy squirms and twists ceaselessly, full of life to the point it pains him. Bothersome, yes. But a bother that is miraculous, gracious, illuminating. Here is witnessed the renewal of a human generation from a side of the earth I have only now just encountered for the first time The coursing of motherhood through time moves faster than we could ever imagine it—all those births everywhere at every moment.