

Splitting Open the Heart: Kumano Kodo 2011



HA



UM

Kukai's teaching on Om.

**Day 1: Beginning**

A single stone  
Splits open to its heart—the sapling  
Is rooting in.

Stopping for lunch—  
First, a few words from the wind,  
And then, for the rice.

One maple tree  
In a world of cedar,  
Is turning red.

Only becoming old  
Have I paused long enough to hear  
Cold wind blowing through ferns.

Even after I dropped  
A camellia blossom on the path,  
Its odor lingered.

In the Pilgrimage Trail Center wooden planks hanging on nails, each with a prize winning haiku. Tempei translates two off the cuff:

Each stone has its purpose—  
Boats of prayer.

The smell of the wind—  
My home is ocean  
And mountain.

Tempei notes each haiku has a double meaning that his impromptu translations simply cannot render true. In fact, I suspect, no English translation of a Japanese haiku ever does.

Trees too have double meaning in Japan: “As trees become old, they undulate, wind about,” Kumi had affirmed the day before during our orientation. She moved her hand in sinuous waves and then continued, “For this reason they are often called dragon trees.”



The grocer Jisho sells us a box of mandarin oranges—“*mikon*” in Japanese, for 1500 yen and then gives us a lecture on hiking the Kumano Kodo trail. “Your suffering, bring it on the trail. Let it afflict you so that you can be healed of it.” I tell him he is the face of Kumano Kodo. He loves the trail as do so many of the Japanese people we meet here. “Loves it with his whole heart,” I think. We ask him if he has any questions for us. He responds, “So many questions that no single one comes to mind. May I recite a poem?” I like this. When one is overwhelmed with questions, one does not give up. One simply recites a poem. His poem, which Kumi translates as he reads it, celebrates walking under the sky and upon the earth. It reminds me of a Navaho song that would do well to be sung here too on the Kumano Kodo:

“Beauty walks before me,  
Beauty walks after me,  
Beauty walks below me,  
Beauty walks above me,  
Beauty walks to the right of me,  
Beauty walks to the left of me.  
Beauty walks all around me”

Perhaps suffering walks with us too. As we begin our climb up the first steep mountainside of the trail, one of the men below begins blowing on a bamboo trumpet. Its bass note



trembles upward into the forest and permeates the air we are breathing. We are climbing the mountain path. Or is it climbing in us?

And already there is suffering in the gravity of the mountain. It pulls us down relentlessly even as the precipitous slope offers us the purchase for our next step upward. Large stones demand large steps as we learn to move in tune to the earthscape. John Tully practically turns yellow from the effort of climbing after staying out all night. But he persists. The mountain is teaching us.

My favorite image for the day, a crest of suzuki grass, not unlike those in my garden at home: These blades of grass are nearly weightless, even as they reach human height, dancing with gravity.

Wood shop. Free wood. Stopping at the shrine. The cat. Adam blown away by wonder. A fellowship of walking.

## Day 2: In the Midst of Walking

How still the forest!

Even beer bottles littering the trail

Have become shrines.

Suzuki grass crests

Hold still as a held breath

Until dawn budes them.



The Shinto priest  
Owns three cats  
To keep his shrine rats company.

The rotting tea house--  
Nearby a bird's nest  
Woven from grass.

A year gone by  
Yet on the eaves of the shrine,  
The nest of moss lingers  
Pissing into the ravine.

Just me

And the crows watching.

If there are dragon trees that undulate over centuries of growth, then might there not be dragon trails, undulated over centuries of walking. The trail ties the heights to the depths.

Bardo—dreams of punishment

**Day 3: Hiking to Hongu**



Regina, Joshua, Adam, Laurel, John

Today I have met the feet of Kumano Kodo

Smiling and gathering around

A stony forest spirit.

To attend to one voice

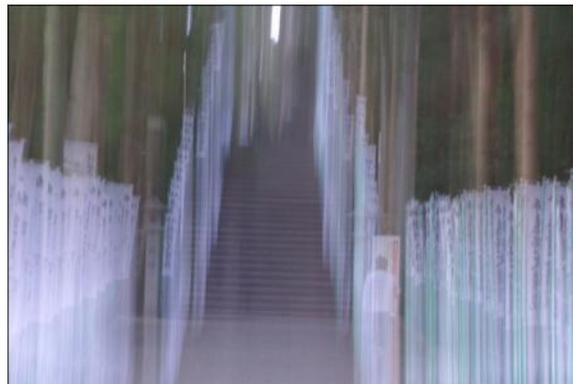
First, hear the ten thousand ferns,

Until they are without number.

To walk is to move  
At the speed of thought,  
Or in tune to falling leaves.



Ka Do: Ancient Way



Hongu Taisha: A Temple Veiled

## Day Four: Nachi Falls

Asahi Guji, the voice  
of Kumano Kodo, head translator  
for multitudes of deities.



The head Shinto priest at Nachi is, Kumi has experienced, a Japanese Dalai Lama. Bald and wearing glasses, he does not give the impression of being old, even if he does of being an elder. His smile greets one wholly without invading one's own person. He listens. He walks quickly, energetically, with his retinue, which now includes ourselves, running to keep up. As he lopes across the temple ground, the faces of pilgrims from every corner of the square turn to him in surprise. Many take pictures. Others simply gaze reverently. He guides us to the back area of the main shrine, where, he reports twelve, no thirty-two, no one hundred and some gods are in residence. "They are here," Kumi translates, "but if you go into the individual temples you see nothing. They are here in another way than that." The gods are both male and female, each building reflecting in a subtle angling of the crest of the roof which gender resides in that particular palace of divinity. Asahi stops near a rock and says, "This was raven. He flew here and now is this stone." Those particular sentences remind me immediately of what I have heard in the teachings of Inuit and Aleutian peoples.

John Tully names him the voice of Kumano Kodo. Asahi responds by speaking of how the depths of nature are suggested by the depths of the ravines cutting into the mountains across which the trail stretches. The landscape speaks the holiness of existence, is its ideogram. I think back to the day before on the trail, when I looked down into one of the precipitously descending ravines and mused how the shadows of the trees were dropping away not merely to the surface of the earth below but into the soil itself until they came to the very core of the earth. A depth was suggested in that intensifying darkness that could not be consummated by the thought of a shadow merely touching ground. Underneath that shadow was yet more depth, more shadow. It seemed to me that image had something in common with the priest's words about Shintoism reaching to a mystery opening up the depths of a ravine to yet greater mystery, greater depth. The expressive symbolism of a ravine, an ideogram of Buddha mind? Except Shintoism is not so much at ease with Buddha mind, I am suspecting, as Buddhism is with the pantheon of divinities populating Shinto existence.

Reverend Guji speaks of how nature's depths call for our gratitude. We owe our parents gratitude, he argues, but they did not create us alone. They too are dependent on their parents, on the ancestors. But all of these, from whence did they arise? From the depths of nature, from a darkness that cannot be illuminated directly by human effort alone. But are we not, he asks us, not only often without gratitude but so lost as to have forgotten even that gratitude matters?

Nachi Falls: "If you drink one bowl of its water, you will live until 10 extra years; If you drink two bowls, you will live twenty extra years; If you drink three bowls, you will live until you die." The trick really is to live truly until one dies. Socrates said as much to the Athenians 2500 years ago.

Technology: "We have become very selfish."

Ceremony: The woman with the bell and sash. How we gaze down as she blesses us. My sense of something being accomplished beyond my ken. A giving up of perception, even as one knows a movement of the holy is afoot or rather over one's head. The profound grace of the priest and priestess. Noh mindfulness.

**Day Five:** Visit to Kimiidera. Buying tea cups and high quality green tea in a tea shop.



Muddy Buddha pool:

Reflections stirring up the names

Of so many incarnations.

**Day Six:** Train to Kyoto. Thoughts of the coming ascent to Koyasan.

Snowly, snowly we  
Would walk to Buddha, the Budding  
Winter Chrysanthemum Buddy.

Talking with Jason, a former student at SU, and his wife, who is working on the role of women in a forward looking 19<sup>th</sup> century breakaway Buddhist sect. Shintoism, she reports, perhaps was never an “ism” until Buddhism appeared in Japan. Before that there were many local practices of many varieties. But only with Buddhism’s arrival, with its insistence on addressing the Japanese world in regard to Buddha’s teachings, did the necessity for a concept of a singular religious tradition with which Buddhism could speak and dispute arise. The same logic was at play in regard to the instantiation of Taoism in China.



The Great Temple in Kyoto in Moonlight

## Day 7: Climbing to Mount Koyasan

The boar's bloody snout

Testing the trap's iron bars—

What noble truth, this?



As Jasu and I walked from the grizzly scene, we heard the hunter's shotgun (or is it *hunger's* shotgun?) delivering the death blow. Jasu shuddered. I felt awkward. I am not against hunting feral animals that interfere with biodiversity, but must the process be so violent? Is hunting inevitably cruel, not just violent but cold-hearted? Here, an ideogram of Buddha mind on which to contemplate. I might have shared another picture in which the boar looks at me, almost in an appeal. After which, he immediately exploded into frantic motion. It is that transformation that is pictured here. The boar had amazing strength for so small an animal. He so deeply craved to continue living.

A poisonous moment? The trail has been sucking toxins buried deep in my psyche to the surface. Several students have reported vivid dreams, a not unusual occurrence when first arriving in a foreign place. But the theme of many of the dreams is confronting guilt, the resurgence of regretted past events. I too have been dreaming these dreams, often in intricate detail, and I have been thankful for these at times during this trip. That these memories arise on their own testifies to their strength, to their part in making up whom I have become. Does expiation mean expelling our wrongs? Or coming to terms with them? Hearing them in new terms? The ritual of walking, not to mention all the rituals associated with the shrines and temples, offer opportunities to reintegrate what had been lost, to revivify the reddened sheet ice of memory's frozen blood. Paralysis gives way to movement and movement to reconfiguration. This is certainly in part a gift of this time here. But this gift requires enormous effort on my part to receive it. Might not that capacity to exert effort, to take responsibility, be yet a gift within this gift?

That night I dream of Shlomo, or is it Mac—my deceased orange tabby cat—running to safety with me under a building. But instead of making it, Mac slips down into a great hole

just at the building's corner, an abyss surrounding a great root reaching into darkness. I grab for him and miss. I had misled him!

### **Day 8: Visiting Kukai on Mount Koyasan**

The night before we eat a substantial vegetarian meal sparkling with the contrasting textures and flavors that Japanese cooking cultivates. This is a beautiful moment of Buddhist culture but what makes it a surprising one is that the monk who is going to perform the service the next morning sits with us and serves us our meal. This is his privilege, he comments, when I question him. More questions and answers ensue. The one that I remember most clearly occurs when the monk responds to the inquiry of his mental comportment during a time of prayer. He responds that his words come from the mouth of Buddha and that as they are repeated in his own mouth he listens to them preaching to him. An insight comes to me: Shingon Buddhism affirms the entirety of existence as a preaching of Buddhahood through Buddha's cosmic instantiation as Vairocana, the Sun Buddha. Indeed the very meaning of Shingon—"true word"—alludes to the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit for "mantra." All creation is a complex interfolding of mantras, of "true words." All worldly entities are words in turn emanating from sounds uttered by Buddha, sounds that can resonate in one's own mouth and so find their way to one's own ear. Prayer for the monk is the performed embodiment of teaching, a teaching that preaches salvation. I should think out this question more fully in the future—how exactly is preaching a mode of teaching and how does this mode differ from other modes?

The next morning, the same monk comes into the temple dressed in silken robes of green and yellow. He is accompanied by a novice more simply attired in white who will pray, so to speak, as the second fiddle. The prayers are chanted—sometimes in harmony and sometimes in unison--and I hear in them beyond the non-sensicality of their semantic meaning, the sensicality of their utterance. The world is being uttered in so many tongues, so many voices, so many sounds. And in the flurry of words chanted comes the names of three parents—my mother and father and Adam Kempler's father. I shudder to think of my parents now only found in this world through whatever memory I can offer them. Also at one point in Sanskrit I hear repeatedly intoned "Amida" a name of Buddha. The emptiness of existence has been witnessed, the dead have been attended to, and ancestors have been named; now one's day can properly begin.



Tomb for a Poem by Basho

I	II
Amidst	Feet
the	sinking
named	into
stones	fallen
of	snow,
one	as
hundred	cedars
thousand	lean
souls—	in—
Basho's	ghosts
poem,	are
snowed	drawing
under.	near.

There are at least three ways to read these two haiku.

Basho read Chuang Tzu, as well as being profoundly influenced by Kobo Daisha. Of course!

### Day 9: Wakayama Universtiy

I rose early and took care of all sorts of trip business so there would be time to practice Tai Chi in the park nearby. With the sun still fairly low in the eastern horizon, orienting myself was not difficult. And as I came to Standing Crane my gaze alighted on a great grandfather tree with its own shrine. On the way back to my room, I paused to gaze at a small fountain hidden away among trees. There one could see the remains of the dinner of one of the hawks frequenting the garden. Or perhaps a feral cat, which are numerous here.

Droplets drop on stone—  
On winter boxwood, three clumps  
Of sparrow feathers.

A Tea Ceremony at Wakayama University:

Transliterated from the calligraphy scroll:

“Begining  
comes.  
Not  
one  
object.”

Translation:

“When  
we  
are  
born,  
we  
begin  
empty.”



Author: Sensei Sota.

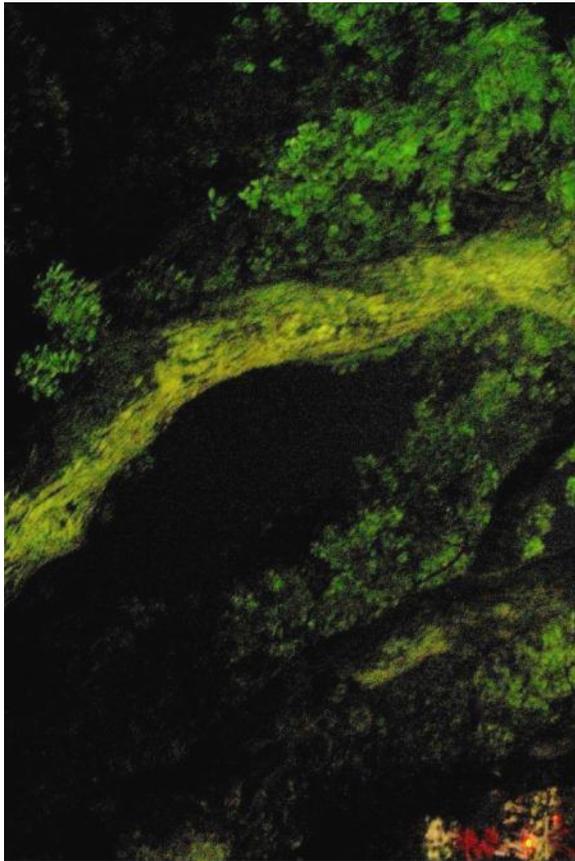
These sentiments are at the soul of the tea ceremony. Each participant comes in stripped of class or rank, of weapons or implement. No Samurais, no commoners here. One simply shares the act, in all its profundity, of drinking tea. In the sense that we are all born empty comes a radical notion of equality.

Ikebana: Using a branch not only with flowers but also with buds. As the bud blossom into flowers, the power of nature is expressed. “It is difficult to say things Japanese in English.”

Later from another tea ceremony at Machiko's mountain farm: "We need not speak of things we already know. Rather we speak of them through allusions, through hints and abstractions."

When I do some research into the Kanji on this scroll, I discover the spoken word associated with the ideogram for object—"butsu" —can also denote Buddha. Further, a spoken word for nothing is "bu." Is this interweaving of homonymical meanings about a particular phoneme, even as it finds its way into expression in various ideograms, an example of that allusive and elusive quality of Japanese thinking that is continually being mentioned here? To begin empty is to begin Buddha? "Not one Buddha" (one possible translation of the last three ideograms above?) is, after all, exactly Buddha in the way Buddha is most often named. Really, there is no way to not name Buddha, once one enters into this religious realm. Unless, of course, one insists on naming Buddha. Which still, even as it fails to name Buddha, names Buddha.

That night I go back to the tree of my Tai Chi exercise and photograph it under moonlight and above shrine lamplight. This is the tree the Kumi has dedicated in her mind to Rick Maloof's untimely death. She has asked Simon to take a photograph of it for Joan. I have decided to make my own interpretation as well.



**Days 10, 11, 12:** Machiko's Mountain Organic Farm

Kumi: "To see something is to become its witness. And to become its witness is to be responsible for it." After these words, I turn and ask John Tully: "So you saw some snow this morning? Now you are its witness. How will you be responsible?" He thinks for a moment, then answers: "I will name it 'snow.'"

The snow names us this morning. It began barely perceptible. Perhaps just a promise. And now a cold delight. Enough to invoke wonder without covering one's toes too quickly or thickly with frost. It melts on the roofs of Machiko's compound and transforms into icy spring gurgling from each spout.

Taking off my hat—  
The hissing of falling snow,  
Just barely.

I	II	III	IV
Wet	As	Only	Sitting
snow	snow	a moment	in
floats	silences	to admire	repose
into	Machiko's	the	contemplating
burning	mountain	falling	timeless
brush—	farm—	snow—	snow—
smoky	the	then	my
fields	chainsaw	the	toes,
swirling	sputtering.	chores	so
upward.		begin.	icy.

I am putting down my journal for a moment to put on another pair of socks!

There, socks on and much better. But also I took about 20 minutes out to shoot various scenes from the viewing window before which I have been perched. Here on Machiko's farm there are possibilities for the thought of mind but also for the thought of practice. I am sitting here typing as Simon busily rummages through the forgotten if dilapidated treasures he is digging out of a shed down the hill. Both activities are suitable for this snowy morning. The pilgrimage offers this gift.

At the tea ceremony yesterday, Shima-san, explained how Japanese culture has cultivated the sensuous both through variety and through delicacy of sensation. The notion of delicacy is extremely important. It can be seen as yet another mode of a pervasive cultivation of etiquette that permeates Japanese activities. In delicacy we are attentive to the emergence, barely perceptible, of sensations from out of our surroundings. The precise way bamboo crunches between one's teeth as the sauces it has absorbed break upon the tongue has a particular configuration, a particular way of expressing itself. The young woman across from me at the dinner table, Moe-san, invited me to notice just this as I ate a particular morsel. And then, she asked me to attend to the gummy, softly sweet quality of a potato-like vegetable. And then one attends to mixing in different orders the delights of each sensuous breakthrough.

My dreams are now not so filled with regret over past wrongs as realizations of possible goods nearby. And sorrows currently undergone as well. A Jewish woman sharing her father's philosophy with me who becomes judgmental when I admit I am not orthodox but reformed. I steal her father's book and her brother comes looking for me. I tell him: "Send your sister if you want back your father's book." In spite of her anger at me, I am convinced she is the one.

Another dream: Kathy McGlynn, the wife of Fred McGlynn, my mentor in philosophy for four decades, appears before me and tells me she wanted to share that she is dying. I should prepare, she said. She is radiant and young.

And waking from these dreams at four in the morning, I hear a rustling in the fields and a squealing up in the forest. Everywhere darkness. The boars have returned. I go out and clap my hands from the terrace. They just keep mucking around down there. Silly human.

The next morning, winter sets in...



Even as snowfall  
Thickens, birds begin to sing—  
Then fields going white.

Have to go! Alas.

Cast of Unforgettable Characters on the Farm:

Shima-san—the lady who taught tea.

Menimone—Kumi's student who taught the tea ceremony.

Kasuge-san—Machiko's right hand farm hand.

Moe—The 16 year old daughter of a student of Machiko.

Utero—A young woman and student of Machiko.

Machiko. NYC Zen Center, Rinzai, Kiuksu-all white flowers her land art

Kasuge-san's wife.

Machiko's son.

And other assorted women working in the kitchen.

Waxy Plum blossoms

Grow white, their fragrance still

Clinging to the snow.

Yellow Robai, also called Waxwork Plum, blooms in the midst of the snows and is known for its sweet penetrating odor. It was the flowering stem with buds that was part of the Ikebana arrangement explained by Menomine at the tea ceremony. There is one tree blooming in Machiko's yard that persists in its insistence to be a flower even amidst the winter weather.

### **Day 15:**

Yasu mentions to me at our good-bye banquet he is impressed that our course is not simply an excursion but something substantial, that the students actually learn from the landscape and from those writing from out of history in relation to the same landscape. We learn that to share a landscape is to share history? Yasu wants to see the readings for the course—he is interested in the content. This pleases me.

An extended discussion at the table about what it means to story one's life and to live one's story. A pilgrimage asks this of us. And to tell a story, we must already be speaking amidst stories. Too many of the stories, the students are realizing, come from the media. We live fictive stories. And that is quite different than living legendary ones. Or ones given to us by the Most High.

Simon: "What is the sound of the moon?" A cry escapes involuntarily from my lips right then and there at the dinner table. Such a great question! A koan, even. One answer, one given in Okinawa: the tides moving to and fro. Another, perhaps given in the ancient reaches of Appalachia: the quiet that overtakes a forest as the protective darkness of night is lit up from above.

**Day 16 or 17:** How pertinent that I am not even sure of the date as we find ourselves on the way home. Suddenly we are not only *here* but also *there*. Homecoming is an essential theme in the trope of pilgrimage. It motivates the story and keeps pilgrimage from being merely a quest. The narrative doesn't end at the goal of one's pilgrimage. As much remains as has already occurred. How does Odysseus come home? Moses? Martin Luther King? Richard Nixon? For Stalin or Hitler is any chance to come home even left?

I am taking photographs of a sacred camphor tree "older than our country," as one of the students, was it Nicki?, put it at the good-bye dinner last night. Still green in the midst of winter, the tree is located in the park lying below Lord Tokugawa's reconstructed castle

(out of concrete after World War II), which at the moment is swept by wind. From time to time the clouds part and sunlight touches my neck like a memory barely acknowledged; a dream of light, of what light might be, is announced.

The feral cat sits  
And licks his paw—The winter sun  
for a moment, *there*.

Pigeons crawl into  
The crannies of a stone wall—  
Who objects to this?

The feral cat sits  
and licks his paw—The winter sun  
For a moment, *there*.

Here I am, and now here I leave: The story of the pilgrim.

Yochi-in Temple. Yochi-in (lit. cherry blossom pond) is one of the higher ranked temples in Koya, which allowed to carry imperial crest, 16 petal chrysanthemum. The Sho-jin Ryori (temple vegetarian meal) was rather a feast contrary to our expectation. The deep sound of temple bell at 9 took us to a quiet sleep into the Koyasan night.

THE ENTIRE TRIP AS A MANDALA, A PLATIALITY OF HUMAN MIND