

Pilgrimage to Japan
Snapshots

Our trip to Japan was utterly joyful and fulfilling
An old aspiration was realised

Inestimable thanks to:
the Birthday Committee, to all who donated and well wishers

We disappeared into Finnair high above the earth
Carl only slept an hour, but I got a full four hours in
Yet both of us had no sign of jetlag
Carl said he had a little, but I put it down to lack of sleep
We had been diligent with our Jetlag homeopathic remedy
No it does! It does work

We were met by Yoshimura-san, a diminutive elderly woman with frenetic energy
who introduced us into the mysteries of Kyoshinsha, her father's house After some
time of wandering between Japanese, Chinese and English we came to understand
that the small black button turned the washing machine on, the large button below
started the wash and the small red button to the right of the small black button
turned the washing machine off By the time she left we were all of us exhausted

Walking along the river
But for a solitary small tree
No blossoms!
Too cold
But the sky is limpid blue and a white crane sits fishing
While black kites prey overhead
Right there in down town Kyoto

Kenninji monastery was where Dogen Zenji just sat
And was bullied out to Eiheiiji in a remote area by – yes – jealous Tendai monks
Huge ceiling in the Buddha Hall depicting the Dragons of the Wind and Thunder
in the ancient style of ink on paper by the great 17 century, Sotatsu
And of course the dry landscape garden – large rocks, green moss on white gravel
<http://happy-travellingcom/shop/kennin-ji-temple>

We'll be at Eiheiiji in a few days time!

Pure Land Buddhism is big in Japan
Big in UK too
Scholar Honen thought the Tendai Path too difficult for his degenerate age and
humbly turned to the easy path of Amida and his vow to save all
Repeat with profound sincerity the phrase: Namo o-mi-to fwo (I seek refuge in
Amitabha Buddha)
And you will be reborn the Heaven of Amitabha – the Buddha of Pure Light
From there liberation is a doddle!
Too good to be true?
I remind myself there are more ways than one.
Spring Service in full swing Crowds of devotees
Love bombed as we pass through the gate

Cool air but the sun is sharp and strong
Japan is the same latitude at Middle East.
We take refuge in English Breakfast Tea

Kyoto Station completed in 1997
Transport Cathedral of vast space and height
Such confidence!

[Kyoto Station](#)

The Miroku Buddha the future Buddha, is THE great treasure of Japan
Surrounded by statues of exquisite carving
Sadly barely enough light to see
Frustrated, I raise my monocular causing the guard to pounce (for fear of spy camera?)



The most famous Zen garden is at Ryoanji Temple
We sat on the wall and gazed with lots of others gazing
The meaning? Theories abound Very un-Zen
The still white sand punctuated by rocks, solidly grounded, keep the eye gently roving
Zen is minimalism
How could so little but calm the senses and pacify the heart



The Imperial Palace was stark
The sun blinds off the winged glazed roofs
Wide spaces of white gravel
No entrance to rooms gave the air of a mausoleum

But the gardens and pond were a majesty of delight

Sojiji, founded in 1321 by Keizan Zenji who did most to spread Zen, was still recovering

An earthquake had devastated the Temple in 2007

Tatami mats and futons

Unheated Zendo for sitting and Hatto for chanting at spring cold 4 am

I, softened by storage heaters, barely survived

Carl on his new low carb high fat (LCHF no less!) diet glowed

A tatami mat measures 85.5cm wide and 17.9cm in length (about 33.5 by 70.5 inches)

The space needed for a human being to sleep, eat, sit and stretch

A profound Zen influence

It's a unit measurement: The standard room size is 6 and 4.5 for smaller ones

Futons are rolled up

Why are whole rooms devoted to one third of our lives where we lie unconscious?

Harken those who care for their carbon footprint

Welcome break from temples!

A coastal walk

Strange hexagonal pipes of larva tumbling down

Sky blue Sea blue All pink blossom and green leaf

Cool day and hot sun And coffee on the way

And! a celebratory meal with special thanks to Miki,

Who organised our Zen visits and the walk



Next stop Eiheiiji, founded by Dogen Zenji in 1244

Just the evening, night and morning with others

Similar – cold and minimal

But the room they gave us looked up into a valley of tall conifers

The clouds slowly descending down through the rain

Just as you see in those paintings

Magical!

So many thanks to Miki for organising all this for us

It was the heart of our visit

Carl had also started with Zen



Myself and Carl at the statue of Dogen Zenji

Nara was the old capital and the statuary was simply stunning
The main one was the huge Buddha Viarocana who personifies the concept of
emptiness
And after walking for 10 miles
We felt empty enough for a large meal



Both of us beginning to feel Temple Head
It's what happens when you tramp around dozens of temples
But the view from the top of Kiyomizu Temple was worth the climb
Hundreds of pilgrims
Going at their speed is the trick



Hiroshima
The skeleton of the A Bomb Dome

Museum photos of devastation



Unspeakable sadness
Now surrounded by a beautiful memorial park



(DVD: BBC Hiroshima - if you want the inside story and harrowing aftermath)



At Memorial in Hiroshima

Met Beatrice, French woman who found her teacher here
An immigrant no less
Set on starting a programme of mindfulness
With spiritual depth
Sat with them all at a local temple one cold morning

A little weeding before tea
The monk told us no great difference between Soto and Rinzai Zen
Both schools use the koan and both schools teach without

Most temples have a Shinto shrine
We shake the rope that rattles the bell: Come listen to us, oh mighty Kami!
We bow twice and clap our hands twice and bow again
Make a wish
I did! Hope it comes true



Finally we take the funicular and 'ropeway', to the top of Mount Hiei
I had wanted to walk the path around the mountain as the monks do
Until they feel strong enough to undergo the eight day fast of no food or liquid
On occasion a monk dies!
By now, our legs weary of 10 to 15 kilometres a day
And temple weariness is setting in
But the view is stunning of Lake Biwa



Took a break from Kyoto so see Himeji Castle
Quite splendid and all the more remarkable made of wood!
A fabulous landmark for shoguns, samurai and ninja warriors
Took the shikansen there too The fabled bullet train Fabulous cost



Time to leave
Met with Miki and her journalist friend, Hiroku
Interview for an article
Fame at last?
Paid for a taxi to the station
Very grateful

Plane was cancelled and we were lucky to get onto an Air France flight to Paris
Recalling the pilgrimage
Heart glows with delight

And I have a special thankyou to Carl
A constant companion
Afraid of my stumbling (funny leg)
My guardian



Carl as One of the Four Great Guardian Kings

Lasting images
Luscious moss! Such variety
Thought Wales was damp
People wearing masks to stop others catching their cold
Such social responsibility

Didn't stop me returning with a terrible cold, mind!
Restaurants and cafés with modern jazz softly messing about in the
background

Starbucks everywhere with pop singers bellowing their pain
Futons to sleep on

To my surprise my back gets a little better
Once I'd worked out how to lie down differently

A gentleness and courtesy

Reminiscent of my parents' day in long ago 50's

Varied food looks delicious

Vegetarian food virtually unknown

Carl is on a low carb, high fat diet



So we eat mainly at home

Cleanliness – everywhere

Determined to get a Japanese toilet!

[Westerners Guide to Japanese Toilets](#)

How much Zen has influenced society!

There are rules to be kept

Beware those who step out of line

Happy with small dwellings

Such precision in all things

Always more to be said ...

Carl's Reflections

Visiting Japan has been a lifelong ambition for me. Like Bhante, I too started off in Zen, although mine was Rinzai Zen, and reading about the temples with their wise masters and terrifying teaching methods (beating with sticks and cutting off fingers) filled my 19 year old mind with a vision of Japan I was sure could not possibly exist. Of course, I hoped that the Japan I'd read about had existed at some point in the past, a halcyon time of beauty and wisdom, but had no expectations that this dream-Japan existed now. Imagine my surprise, then, when, nearly thirty years later, we arrived at Kenninji, our first temple visit, and found that its beauty far surpassed what I had been able to imagine.

And this was the story of my experience; impossibly beautiful places where the arrangement and placement of not just each individual building, plant and tree, but everything was, somehow, perfect. Where the temples and their grounds are carefully designed to elicit a sense of peace and calm in the awesome beauty within them. Where each day was filled with joy and wonder at the exquisite splendour present.

But the amazement didn't end there. Everything appeared to be well designed and perfectly implemented. The trains ran on time. Always. They were well appointed and spotlessly clean. The seats, usually always facing forward, even have a lever so that they can be turned around, allowing you to make ad-hoc four-way seat arrangements. If guards were present on the train, they would bow as they walked into the carriage, and bow as they left. I don't remember seeing any litter anywhere other than those places frequented by tourists. Even the refuse bags on collection day (three times a week!) were covered in netting, providing them with both an aesthetic quality and something to stop them from being blown away.

In person, the Japanese people are respectful, to the extreme, and have a wonderful social responsibility, as well as a regimented orderliness that is quite literally remarkable. People will approach something like an ATM via the specifically designated queuing area, even if there's no one in front of them. They'll wait at a crossing while the light is red, even when there is no traffic in sight. It's really quite something to see.

Japan, then, was truly magnificent, and getting to visit it with Bhante was a wonderful blessing. I am exceptionally grateful for the opportunity to spend this time with him, and share in his 70th birthday pilgrimage. Like him, our stays at Sojiji and Eiheiiji were two stand-out events (thanks Miki!). Our walks, along the coast at Tojinbo (thanks again Miki!) and in Kyoto along the Philosopher's Path, were wonderful and welcome breaks from all the amazing temples, and our visit to Hiroshima was both momentous and sad beyond my ability to express. Turning the corner to see, in front of us, the so-called "A-Bomb Dome", something I'd seen many times before but was completely unprepared for, immediately filled my eyes with tears, and neither of us said anything for a while.

I would like to thank Miki for arranging the trips to Sojiji, Eiheiiji and Tojinbo, all three counted as some of the stand out moments of the trip; the birthday committee and all the people who donated to Bhante's birthday fund for making this trip possible; Rene, my wife, for being nothing but loving and encouraging, and fully supporting me in my desire to go; and, finally, Bhante for his immense patience and great humour over the three weeks. How he put up with me, I will never know. :-)