

88 Temples with Amachan

Chapter 4

Unexpected Help On The Road To Temple 12

Fujidera, or 'Wisteria Well Temple' was closed. The temple gate I had been planning to sleep under was planted on a slight slope, and the now familiar fierce guardians either side of the covered entrance to the 11th temple on my journey were watching the rain trickle across the cold, hard concrete of my bed. As I looked around to see if there was an altogether more pleasant place to put my sleeping bag and mat down for the night, Sven, the German cyclist I met 10k ago, talked to one of the men from the temple and discovered there was an inn not too far away. My pounding feet abandoned the search for dry land and decided that the inn was the place to be before he had even finished telling me about it. The temple man waved us towards our destination and politely recommended we return at 7 am, when Temple 11 and its five-colored wisteria welcomed pilgrims once more. So we set off again, Sven plodding and wheeling his smart, overloaded bike along, whilst I limped and made silent grimaces to indicate to myself how much pain I was in.

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Fish eyes. They are not offensive on a little goldfish in your tank at home, and they can be quite impressive on the grandfather Koi Carp gracefully gliding under attractive mini-bridges in the temple ponds. These kind of eyes I am okay with. However, the eyes staring blankly up at me from my plate, belonging to three small grey fish, at 6 am - yes, that's 6 *in the morning* - came under the category, 'not okay' for me. They were watching me as I ate around them.

They watched as I cracked a raw egg onto my rice and swirled it around, adding some soy sauce to the goopy mixture before ladling it into my mouth with chopsticks. They watched me delicately pick up each small pickle and enjoy the satisfying crunch they made, and they stared accusingly at me as I looked up in horror when the manager of the inn announced there was a typhoon coming and I would have to climb what is thought to be the most difficult mountain of the entire pilgrimage in its midst.

"It is the most difficult mountain is it?" I exclaimed in my unnatural Japanese.

"Of course," he smiled a big happy smile.

I felt sure the fish eyes were wondering how I didn't know that already.

I scrambled for the map book in my bag cursing my lack of map-reading skills under my breath. I had been following the big, red dotted line and I didn't even notice the tiny contour lines and color changes between temples 11 and 12.

The fish eyes were telling me not to be so hard on myself now. Map reading was not something I had done before and the map was not the most detailed affair. I sensed this was going to be a challenging day and I showed myself I was going to approach it with courage and spirit by cutting off the heads of the fish and putting them on the side of the plate in a neat row to continue watching as I consumed the rest of them. My usually

vegetarian self had agreed that eating fish would be a part of my pilgrimage out of necessity, but I drew the line at eyes.

My task, should I choose to accept it, was to return to Temple 11, deliver a prayer for Monika Zands and her family and then take on a 13 kilometer, six-eight hour hike in the pouring rain, up Mount Shosanji to the temple of the same name. And, Kenji, the manager of this inn happily informed me, it was then to continue for an hour or so to the next available inn, which he promptly booked over the phone. I stood moving my weight from sore foot to sore foot, then centered my balance and took a deep breath letting it whoosh out again. 'I can eat the fish that were staring at me and I can do this' I told myself. First, I unpacked and took out all the books that were not the map book, some socks, my glasses case, a random glass jar (what was I thinking?) sun cream (not really the weather for it) my liquid soap (too heavy) and a t-shirt (two is enough). Kenji had kindly offered to post them for me, and I felt as grateful for him then, as we stood in front of the rows of shoes at the entrance to the inn, as I had last night when I hobbled behind him as he showed me and my aching body to the hot, rejuvenating public bath and told me to lock the door and take as long as I wanted.

Sven and I said our water-logged goodbyes at the officially open Temple 11 as drenched biker pilgrims follow the road up the mountain to Temple 12, whilst sodden walking pilgrims follow the inner mountain path. I knew this was the last time I would see him as he would be long gone by the time I arrived. As I watched him ride off on his adventure, I felt happy we'd met and took a moment to appreciate the fact that my feet were not so painful, then I trudged over to the small path behind the temple.

Standing at the bottom of the steep, rugged mountain path, I felt incredibly small and a little afraid of going into the unknown alone. At that moment, a middle aged Japanese man and his bright orange backpack appeared. Having exchanged names, we set off together and soon discovered that I couldn't understand a word he was saying. Not a word! Nothing.

Ota san was a round-faced, pleasant pilgrim with large glasses and no concept of using easy words or speaking slowly to foreigners. The barrage of Japanese words coming towards me at 90 miles an hour, toppled over each other as they plowed into my head and elbowed each other out the way in an effort to be the first to confuse me. I was grasping at thin air, I couldn't even begin to guess what he was talking about. Five minutes into our climb I could feel his frustration merging with mine and lingering in the space between us as we puffed our way up the rocky path. I asked him in Japanese to, "Please speak very slowly" and he replied at a little less than the speed of lightI had no idea what he was saying. Was this officially the experience of the 'no-communication theorem' I have read about, 'in which instantaneous transfer of information between two observers is impossible'? (See Wikipedia for more information on this infinitely fascinating or interminably dull subject.) After 10 minutes, he decided to give up saying anything at all and we were both relieved. We naturally drifted apart and I saw him only a couple of times during the rest of the day. Nevertheless, it was comforting to know that I was not the only one climbing the mountain.

What happened later on the mountain was painful, incredible and wonderful all at the same time. It involved hearing a voice - clear as anything - that was definitely not mine. I'm certain it wasn't Ota san hiding in the undergrowth either, firstly because I understood what was said and secondly because I would definitely have spotted the orange backpack.

I heard a voice like this once before, years ago when I was living and teaching in Japan. I had been reading 'Illusions' by Richard Bach and was inspired by the part where Don teaches him to draw things to him by thinking about them, picturing them and feeling them with him. I decided to test this out for myself and chose something I rarely saw in Japan - a black cat. Feeling enthusiastic, for days I pictured the cat, thought about black cats, tried to feel how exciting it would be to see one, pictured it some more, imagined inky felines lounging around my students necks as they struggled to form sentences, fooled myself into thinking there would be one waiting for me every time I turned a corner and tried willing them to me as I did my chi gung exercises in my house at night. Nothing. Then, one night, standing with my hands around an imaginary ball, feeling frustrated at my ineptitude in the area of manifesting cats and generally annoyed with myself, it happened. A clear, calm, surprisingly loud voice in my ear and not in my ear at the same time.

"Stop fighting for it." It said.

I dropped my imaginary ball and turned around. Well, to be honest I kind of flung the ball across the room and spun around, but there was no one there. Only me. I flopped into my chair, my heart pounding in disbelief and wonder and sat in silence as the wisdom of the words slowly soaked in. The next thing I noticed was tears running down my face. It was true, I had been fighting. And not only with the cat, I'd been willing things, trying to *make* them happen. I felt relief as it dawned on me that I could let go and I was flooded by a warmth that circled my body, tingling as my thoughts returned to the voice. It didn't seem important to know what it was but it was a good feeling, like I was being looked out for. I got up, walked over to open the back door for some fresh air and looked up as I heard a sound. Sitting on next door's roof, overlooking my Japanese-sized back garden was a black cat.

The following day there were black cats everywhere. They were meowing at me from rooftops, running past me on the street, jumping out from behind dustbins and a group of them were playing in a field I passed on my way to work. It was incredible. I was beginning to have visions of news headlines, "Woman found under pile of black cats after over-manifestation incident." Nevertheless, I was grateful for the amusing way I was learning, and 'let go' became my focus from then on.

As much as I would have liked to, I didn't hear any more voices of wisdom after that - until I was climbing the mountain to Temple 12 of the Shikoku pilgrimage during a typhoon. Only this time, I wasn't holding an imaginary ball, in fact I didn't even remember the last voice, or the cats, I wasn't really in a position to question or think about anything. To be honest, it felt just like a wise and trusted friend had turned up in my moment of need.

I have mentioned that the path went up, but in truth, it went up, up some more, down a lot, up again, down further than before and then gave me the opportunity to experience a steep climb, followed by a steeper one. Apparently, this was not just one mountain. The down parts brought me a new kind of knee pain and temporary exhaustion relief, which was hampered somewhat by the knowledge that in the world of climbing a mountain, what goes down must go back up, and then some. My wet feet were hurting again and I could feel the intensity increasing with each squelchy step. Just as I was beginning to feel sorry for myself, my mind brought up the memory of trekking in the Himalaya whilst enjoying a hearty case of diarrhea. 'I may be tired, but at least there's no clearing up to be done,' I thought. Feeling slightly better, I began to

enjoy the contrast between the inner mountain path - just little me surrounded by tall trees on all sides and that wonderful fresh, alive smell a forest emanates in the rain - and the clearings where I could catch glimpses of the thick, lush mountains rolling away into the distance.

Then, the pain in my feet hit me, held me down and put me in a headlock. Suddenly, the rain that had been pouring down, began bucketing, and the path up the mountain became increasingly treacherous. By now I was wet from the underpants outwards and the path had become incredibly steep and narrow, winding up through the undergrowth and trees. The rain gushed down the rocks leaving them slimy and filled with mud. I was using both hands and feet to climb, though I could no longer find foot holds and kept slipping. Feeling as if I was negotiating the rocks of a waterfall, my pack getting heavier with the water it was holding, I felt my spirit and my willpower leave me. After so many hours of this I was completely exhausted and my feet were hurting so much that each step made me wince. I looked up and couldn't even see the top. I recited mantras to try to help me keep going, and they worked for a while, until I *knew* I couldn't go on any longer and I just wanted to lie down and let the water wash me away. I started crying from sheer exhaustion and hopelessness. I was done.

The quote my mum had given me before I started this journey, appeared in my head; "Great Spirit, do not move my mountain, give me the strength to climb it". At my wits end, looking up into the water streaming down the rocks above me, I prayed for help.

Clear as anything, above the noise of the torrential rain battering everything in sight, I heard a voice. It was in me, and outside me at the same time. It simply said, "*You have the strength inside you.*"

So clear, so encouraging and so confident that I knew it was true. It was as though a large hand had gently lifted me, given me a squeeze, put me down and with a friendly push shown me it was time to go on. I lifted my aching limbs, drained of all energy, planted my walking stick into the ground and hauled myself up. My eyes fixed on the rocks in front of me, I felt a wave of determination come over me and began to repeat to myself over and over as I climbed, "I have the strength, I have the strength," mustering everything I had to take a step with each, "strength".

But it was too far up and after God knows how long, I lost it again and burst into tears. I knew I couldn't go on. This time I *really* knew it, I was utterly exhausted and had nothing left. There was no where to sit, so leaning on the side of the mountain, not knowing or caring what was tears and what was rain streaming down my face, I officially gave up.

"*You have more where that came from.*" Crystal clear. Another gentle, supportive nudge.

Without thinking, I turned around, lifted my right leg, found a foothold and used my hands to heave myself up.

Six hours after leaving Sven at Fujidera Temple, One hour after 'knowing' that I couldn't go any further, I hobbled up through the gate to Temple 12, Shosanji, and hauled myself up the large steps lined on either side by huge cedar trees. I was soaked to the skin, totally exhausted, and thoroughly exuberant at having achieved the seemingly impossible. Plonking myself, and all the water that came with me, down in the mini udon cafe beside the main hall of the temple, I allowed myself to keel over and flattened my face against the table. I closed my eyes and sat there, dripping.

When I opened them again, there was a hot cup of tea and a steaming bowl of udon sitting next to me. Squelching and hurting as I moved, I looked up to see the friendly, round face of the woman working in the cafe smiling gently down at me. Next to her, an older Japanese man, at least 65 grinned at me.

“It’s not easy is it.” He said cheerily.
He had just walked the same route as me.