Celibacy, Tolerance, Time
Rob Walker

I am Tanzan.
In my forty-seventh year I gave my modest home to my wife and set off to lead the wandering life of a monk. The twenty years that have come and gone since are travellers, like me. My home is now a long road that has no end. Along it are the places I have lain my misshapen head, the minutes and days but stone markers along the side of that narrow path. The people I have encountered, the Wonders of Nature and moments bestowed upon me are more precious than the gold and jade of Emperors.

I had spent a few weeks in the generous company of the monks of Matsue Castle Town. One of the younger Brothers, Ekido, expressed his wish to join me in my pilgrimage to the Holy Shrine of Ise. It had been my wish for many years to complete this journey of faith to serve our Lord Buddha. A younger companion would ease the loneliness and allow me to share joys and privations which might well last more than the Four Seasons.

And so, having prepared a coat of paper, a cotton yukata for summer and a tatami straw cape to keep off some of the rain, we set off on the Twenty-Seventh day of The Tenth Moon, in the Thirty-Second Year of Genroku.

We left just before dawn, with the autumn sky as soft and misty as the shores of Lake Shinji in rain. We must have looked a comical pair, both in black robes, with shaved heads; his head smooth, like a mushroom, mine bumpy like a Summer melon left till Winter. He, tall and handsome as a bamboo, I, short and gnarled as a neglected old plum tree. My companion, thirty years my junior, was more heavily laden. He wanted to be prepared for anything that Fate might throw at him. We can never be thus prepared.

We divided the mochi and daikon that our farewelling brothers had given us. On his back Ekido had a rather larger pack than mine and extra clothing.

It seems to me that I have had many advantages by dedicating my life to God later in life. I was blessed with children and a good wife. I had made a good deal of money to provide for my wife and grown children. A life of celibacy and poverty is not to be entered without much thought.

Young Ekido was little more than a youth. He was hard-working and devout, but had little tolerance for others who were not. He had taken vows of celibacy at a time when his body yearned for the flesh of another. Perhaps this fuelled his occasional flashes of anger. There were times he would go off into the forest and I suspect, though it is not for me to judge, spill his seed on the ground.

As we headed generally south, the rising sun warmed our left cheeks on that first morning. Yet Ekido was testy. He wanted to put as many ri behind us as possible by nightfall. He became impatient with my old bones. He would surge ahead, angry that I couldn’t keep up, then wait, annoyed that I wasn’t there yet. He rarely spoke, but his deep sighs and clicking tongue spoke to me loudly. I suppose at his age I too grew frustrated by old men.

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In the afternoon we passed through The Forest of Giant Bamboo That Talks. This forced my friend to slow his pace. Perhaps he was less experienced at stepping through the roots and choosing the Path of Ease, which is often not a straight line. The weight of extra possessions brought droplets of sweat to his brow, which resembled a paddy-field before planting. His pack was wider than his shoulders and turning sideways did not help. Twice he misjudged the space the bamboo so that his belongings were a double-burden, causing him to fall heavily.

I recited old *waka* and sang folk songs to cheer him. The poetry failed, but my singing voice was so bad that he began to laugh. Then a breeze sprang up. The leaves over our heads washed like the waves of the Inland Sea and the bamboo trunks hit together, clattering the xylophone music of Nature.

Soon we came out of the bamboo to a clearing with a small stream. God had provided. Following the twitterings of small finches, we found berries we could eat with our *mochi* and bamboo shoots and bountiful water beside which we camped.

I awoke, refreshed. My makeshift bed of bamboo leaves had taken me some time to collect the previous evening, but rewarded me with a good night’s sleep. Ekido had been irritable at the end of our first day and too tired to gather leaves. This morning, he didn’t complain aloud, but I noticed that he limped all morning and his eyes were as red as those of a fox at night.

I remembered there was a hot-spring *onsen* along the path to the valley. I thought it may help Ekido’s aches, so we sought it out. We found the *onsen*. Alas, the Earth had moved over the Seasons and the water had been poisoned. Hot, poisonous vapours spewed from vents, smelling worse than the monks’ latrine after Onion Festival. Dead bees and moths carpeted the barren volcanic sands around the spring.

I have always felt that it is better to offer Long Life to everything – except Disappointment. Is there anything to be gained by regretting the past? Why kick the thorns that scratch you? What is simply is.

Perhaps God has a purpose in poisoned hot springs.
People say the mosquito is useless and a blight upon the Earth.
But the frog, the bat, and the dragonfly may disagree.
Perhaps Ekido would learn this one day.
This was not the day.

Downwind from the springs we came upon a copse of magnificent pines with raised roots. It was as if the soil had been washed away to the height of a man and exposed the roots of these old giants. They appeared to be standing on the tips of their toes to gain a better view.

I saw then that poisonous *onsen* do have a purpose. These pines had been sculpted by the hand of The Master Gardener. On one side of each tree the new tips had been pruned by the toxic mists, like windswept cliff trees moulded by salt winds. The shapes produced were pleasing, like the curves of a beautiful woman.

Soon the path became even narrower, wending into a valley engulfed by dark pines. It was cold in here. Dew dripped from the mosses growing on exposed roots and trunks.

It was clear that we could not get through this vast forest before the sun fell to earth. We needed a dry place for the night. The path continued to narrow. I judged it to be rarely used except perhaps by the occasional hunter or woodcutter. Ekido began...
to predict that we would die of the cold or starvation this very night.
‘Yes, we might,’ I replied. ‘Or we may not.’
When it appeared that our path might peter out completely like a guttering candle on a dark night, we turned a corner around a large smooth boulder and our tiny path intersected a wider road. Not more than fifty paces ahead stood an old cottage, falling down in places. A curl of blue woodsmoke welcomed us like a beckoning finger.
This was not an inn, but the poor owner would not turn us away as the evening air chilled and he warmed us with hot miso soup. I noticed the bowl was cracked. I would give him my begging-bowl before I left.
It was indeed a poor and wretched place. After our soup there was thunder without and a heavy downpour. Inside there were fleas, mosquitoes and the roof leaked. Ekido was complaining about our luck so I gave him my corner, which seemed a little drier. I was so exhausted from our day’s walk that I fell asleep immediately.
Some hours later I awoke – although at first it seemed it was a dream. The rain had eased and a full moon shone on my face from the slatted window-opening. The frogs were singing. There were voices drifting through the rice-paper shoji screen to the only other room. They were the voices of young women. The voice of an older man – perhaps the kind owner – mingled with theirs. These guests must have arrived after we had fallen asleep.
I gathered they were ladies of pleasure. They had the practised, girlish giggles of geisha - or maiko-san. I fell asleep, their chatter forming part of my pleasant dreams.

In the morning Ekido’s spirits were low. Water had leaked in during the night, leaving a puddle on the earthen floor which seemed to be restricted to Ekido’s corner of the room.
One of the young women approached us. ‘We are lost. We know not the way. We wish to pray at the Holy Shrine of Ise!’
I smiled and told them we shared their destination.
Ekido blushed and scowled.
‘Please extend to us your priestly Mercy and Compassion so that we too may be blessed by The Buddha! All we ask is to follow you at a discreet distance.’
It is not for me to judge.
I nodded.
Ekido almost choked on his radish.
We left after a simple meal of boiled rice. I gave our kind host a bowl and my summer kimono.
The young ladies kept their promise, following about fifty paces behind, although Ekido looked behind often, to be sure. They would not have made good hunters. Even in the denser parts of the momiji forest their voices could be heard carolling like the dawn chorus. When we stopped for water they almost stumbled over us and covered their nervous giggles with their white-gloved hands, overtaking us in an arc to avoid conversation and embarrassment.
At the next bend in the road it was we who surprised them. The girls had reached the intersection of two well-trodden paths. The tracks had turned to rivulets

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during the night and their confluence was now a small lake. The first girl had braved the depths. She waited forlornly on the other side, taking off her muddied geta and white toed-stockings, now soaked and filthy. The second girl, in the fine silk kimono the colour of wisteria, looked across through tears that pooled in her eyes. These tears seemed destined to join the huge puddle below.

‘Wait!’ I yelled. I ran and scooped her up, wading across in my sandals which could become no muddier in any event. Her waist reminded me of my own daughter’s, so many years ago. She had almost no weight at all. Perhaps her weight had been transferred to Ekido. He seemed to carry a great burden for the rest of the day.

By fall of night we had reached The Temple of the Burning Bower.

It was then that Ekido gave me his lesson in morality. ‘We monks don’t go near females. Especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?’

‘I left the girl there,’ I said. ‘Are you still carrying her?’

Ekido flushed hotly.

I could have added that a young celibate and pious monk would not even have noticed that she was young and lovely.

But there was nothing to be gained.

He will be cured of his intolerance.

All he needs to do is wait thirty years.
POST-SCRIPT

This story is a retelling and elaboration of the traditional Japanese tale *Tanzan and Ekido* which is usually related in one or two brief paragraphs. Many apocryphal stories still circulate of Tanzan who was a popular Buddhist monk and later Zen master and Professor of Philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University during the Meiji Period.

My own interest in Japanese Folk Tales – and much of the detail in the narrative – came from living in and travelling around Japan in 2008 and 2012 when I was teaching English to high school and community university students in Himeji.

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