THE TWO WORLDS

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My wife, Kathie, and I were in Fuji Kawaguchiko, a lakeside resort town at the foot of Japan's Mount Fuji. We had come to see, and perhaps climb, Mount Fuji, but we couldn't see it at all, only roiling silver-gray clouds. We'd expected as much — it was July, and the humid Japanese summers are often cloudy and rainy. Fuji is almost as famous for its absence as for its presence. Besides, I'm used to the idea that the more you count on the arrival of an important experience or accomplishment, the greater the likelihood that it won't arrive and that instead you will get to enjoy something completely different.

Studying such normal human experiences is one of the pleasures of Zen Buddhist practice. When I was abbot of Green Gulch Farm Zen Center near San Francisco, we celebrated the Buddha's enlightenment every year by going outside in the predawn hours to see the morning star, as the Buddha had seen it on the day of his awakening. Most years, however, we saw no star, only fog. So Kathie and I weren't much fazed

by not being able to sit in our hotel room's soaking tub while looking at the crown of Mount Fuji, as the travel brochure had promised. Instead we went for a stroll around Lake Kawaguchi, and then we decided to explore the town.

Though a resort town, Fuji Kawaguchiko is not fancy. In fact, it's a rather dull, ordinary spot. Its little shops reminded me of the small town in which I grew up. On our walk we noticed — as one can notice almost anywhere in Japan — the distinctive shape of a torii gate, signaling the entrance to a temple. The gate was open, as they usually are, so we went inside.

Walking into the temple compound, we walked into another world: quiet, serene, holy. Irregular stepping stones led us through a mossy garden to a steadily dripping little waterfall. Off to one side was a standing figure of Kwan Yin, bodhisattva of compassion, standing on a lotus pedestal. She gazed down at us with a modest, knowing smile that conveyed the ancient Buddhist feeling that all would be well in the midst of a world of inevitable suffering. The temple building, like the garden, was beautiful and well maintained. Its heavy wooden door was locked, but you could walk around on the veranda or sit on the steps and look out into the garden. We felt at home there, slowed down and refreshed.

When I began studying Zen in 1970, I was attracted to Japanese Zen's dynamic relationship to the arts — all the Japanese traditional arts owe their existence to Zen — and to the Japanese sensibility in general. I was a young poet, part of a generation in revolt against American values, and all things Japanese struck me as superior in every way to the crude violence of the West.

But years of serious Zen practice in America changed my attitude drastically. After seeing the raw spiritual needs of the people I was practicing with, I came to realize that arranging flowers, sipping tea, and viewing raked-gravel gardens were not going to help them much. And the complicated bureaucracy and stifling traditionalism of Japanese Zen weren't going to help either. People needed meditation practice, communities of support, teachings about suffering — the very things on offer from American Zen. In addition, I was disturbed by new scholarship that revealed how Japanese Zen teachers had supported Japanese aggression and had taught blind obedience to the emperor during World War II. Thus, I gradually developed a powerful antipathy toward Japanese Zen. This was an odd attitude for a senior Zen priest and abbot in a Japanese lineage.

Preparatory to our trip to Japan — which was Kathie's idea, not mine — we went to the Japanese tourist office in San Francisco to buy Japan Rail passes. The place was quiet and stacked with clutter, like a typical Japanese office or home, and everyone who worked in it was Japanese; not Japanese American, but Japanese. As soon as I entered, I felt the pervasive aura of tranquil courtesy that one feels in Japan. (Arrogance and aggression may also be characteristic of the Japanese, but these qualities were not on display in the Japanese tourist office.) The terribly sweet people there reminded me of the tender feelings I'd had toward Japan and Japanese people — feelings I still had somewhere in the recesses of my heart. But this is what happens to us all: In the ordinary course of life, we chance upon an idea that is partly true and freeze it into a prejudice. And, prejudiced, we are blind to other possibilities.

Entering that temple compound in Fuji Kawaguchiko reminded me that there is more to Japanese Zen than formality, bureaucracy, and aesthetics. We in the West have reduced the sacred to what we call the "inner life," which can be safely crammed into the space between our ears. Our scientific outlook has domesticated the uncharted world of mystery, allowing us to dispense with the need for anything we can't see or touch. Japanese society is also saturated with the scientific outlook, but, unlike ours, it has preserved a Buddhist sensibility in its primordial layers. That sensibility may be obscure to most Japanese people, but it lives within and around them. When Japanese people enter a temple compound, they are experiencing much more than aesthetic enjoyment. They feel a sense of connection to their ancestors, to the mystery of death, and to the deep, saving truths that the Buddha taught, truths that lie at the heart of what it means to be Japanese. There is great comfort in such experiences. This isn't the comfort that illusion brings, as Sigmund Freud — ever the scientist — might have said. It is the comfort of a palpable sense of shared meaning: a belief that one's busy, frustrating, bewildering life has purpose and context, however undefined or inexpressible that purpose and context may be. We have a basic human need for a sacred world upon which we can ground a feeling of meaning in our lives. Without it, individuals and societies go awry.

On another hot and humid July day in Japan, Kathie and I went to Toji, Kyoto's oldest Buddhist temple. It was full of the faithful, who crowded into the small shrine areas, where memorial rituals were in progress. Golden-robed priests rang bells, offered incense, and chanted sutras. Temple-goers stood with palms together, some of them crying. When the priests filed out of the shrine rooms, everyone bowed low with respect.

Outside the temple gate we saw a Buddhist nun of about sixty shaking a *vajra*, a ritual implement that symbolizes the destruction of ignorance. As she made her jangling music, she closed her eyes and began to chant sutras, her face ravaged but serene. There was a bent old woman walking by, and she stopped and bowed to the nun. The nun broke into a wide, warm grin; the women began to talk. It seemed clear that the old woman was telling her woes, and the nun was listening with great sympathy. After the recitation was over, the nun chanted blessings for the woman, turned her around, gave her a brief but serious back massage, and blessed her with the *vajra*. Then they embraced, and the old woman put some alms into the nun's bag and went on her way.

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