

(a shorter version of this was published in *Shambala Sun* magazine, Feb. 1996.)

## The Way of a Tourist

by [Richard Hodges](#)

---

I am writing about a religious experience, my only one occasioned by the presence of artifacts from one of the major world traditions. This took place at a Buddhist temple in Nikko, Japan. Nikko is a major destination for Japanese domestic tourism. According to a brochure I picked up, there was a saying “you haven’t experienced beauty until you’ve seen Nikko.” Having myself recently before this experienced the solemn grandeur of Kyoto’s temples, the ancient richness of Kamakura, the sublime intimacy of traditional gardens, and other wonders, I was not expecting anything revelatory in Nikko. But I went, more out of touristic duty than as a passionate pilgrimage.

Dutifully, I walked and looked. I covered most of the temple precincts of Nikko, set so enchantingly on the forested mountainside. After half a day I was feeling saturated with impressions and thoughts, and to tell the truth, I was near exhaustion from carrying my heavy back-pack up and down the mountain, in the rain, and with symptoms of fever from a case of flu I was nursing. But I had two hours left until I had to make my way to the train.

In desperate need of refreshment, I trudged to one of the teahouses in the central plaza and sat down. As I ordered green tea, an old monk came in. Somehow I guessed that he spoke English and began talking with him. I learned that many of the temples of Nikko were in active use by a resident community of Buddhist monks, not Zen, but of a more “traditional” sect. He asked if I had seen a certain temple, saying that many monks lived there. I had not seen it.

When he left me to my tea, I took out my tourist guidebook and looked up the temple, out of curiosity. It was a little out of the way, it said, and off the main tourist circuit. It had been built some number of hundreds of years ago by a prince, for some purpose of the Imperial family. It had a small, but fine, shrine.

I was intrigued. Feeling rejuvenated, I set off to see it. A half-mile walk brought me to one of those great gates found all over Buddhist Asia, where one has to enter between two guardian warrior-spirit sculptures. The ones here were three times life size and very fierce, wielding terrible weapons, treading upon the still-writhing bodies of

recently vanquished chthonic beasts. Their gaze regarded one but little, seemingly looking past oneself toward more formidable cosmic enemies. The idea occurred to me that it would not be advisable to enter here with any thoughts inimical to the teaching of the Buddha; I tried to drop any such thoughts and leave them outside.

Past the gate, I was surprised not to be in the courtyard of an imposing temple, as elsewhere in Nikko. There was instead a low rather nondescript building, not particularly old. A sign politely informed me that, as these were residences, it would be a good idea to be quiet and not to go too near.

Off to the left was a second gate, with two more fierce guardians, these a little larger than life-size. I noticed that the gaze of the warriors seemed directed at oneself, and held not wrath but wariness. Their weapons were held not in the attitude of the act of destruction, but in readiness. They stood upon the earth, perhaps on the rocks of this very mountain. I redoubled my temporary vow of obedience to the Buddha, and dropped a few more bad thoughts on the pavement.

Entering through the second gate, a long switchback climb appeared, flight after flight of ancient stone stairs. Finally I arrived at a third gate. Here, the guardians were a little under life-size, and more surprising, they were not fierce at all. They did not seem to regard one; their gaze was fixed on some other world, perhaps an inner one. One of them, I remember, was balanced lightly upon what appeared to be turquoise waves of chaotic shape. Were these, I mused, the waves of unruly thought and feeling of the unenlightened mind? Or perhaps the incomprehensible energy waves of existence itself?

I pondered what it was I ought to give up in order to have the right to pass this gate. The guardians appeared unthreatening; but perhaps if I wanted to see whatever it was that they saw, I would have to be as indifferent to my imperious self, now standing before their gate, as they seemed to be. It was instantly born in upon me what a complex and massive thing a self was--it could not just be dropped, all at once. I resolved to dissect it and drop unnecessary parts of it on the path beyond the gate.

Through the gate there was another series of stairs. With each step, I recognized and laid beside the stair another inner burden--antagonism; fear; confusion; anxiety; love of comfort; impatience. Suddenly I came upon a strange image in the path--a pair of well-rounded breasts, with nipples, hewn from the living rock of the mountain. What was the meaning of this? Did it represent spiritual nourishment? The need to be as a little child? Was it a memorial to the love of some Imperial princess? Or, did it mean that this was the step at which I had to drop all sexual desires? I decided to assume it carried all of these meanings. As for sexual desires, these are never far from my mind, but in my weakened physical condition, they wore on me at that moment somewhat

oppressively. I noticed a surprisingly distinct sensation of relief when I dropped them beside the path. I made a mental note to pick them up again on the way back down.

Climbing on, at last I came to the vestibule of the shrine. As is customary in Japan, I removed my shoes, bowed slightly, and stepped inside. I was alone except for a caretaker, here high above the throngs of tourist Nikko. I was in a largish nearly empty room with a floor of tatami rice-straw mat, cool and inviting to bare feet. The only furnishings in the room were antique religious artifacts displayed along the walls, each with a little tag specifying date, provenance, and function. These items were as old as almost any I had seen in Japan.

As I came halfway round my circuit of the room, I observed that there was a doorway leading to a smaller room. There was a rope in front of it, and a sign that tourists were not to go past this point. The smaller room was also covered in tatami, and held antique artifacts, apparently older still.

Beyond the second room was a third small room, slightly elevated. In it was a long low table of age-blackened polished wood. On the table were small artifacts of very fine workmanship, and, it seemed to me, high artistic merit and spiritual significance. On each side of the table were three round cushions, so that six monks could sit in two rows, facing each other. The atmosphere was charged with that specific eerie quality of feeling often encountered in the inner court of Asian temples. I mused on the purpose of esoteric ceremonies that must have been performed so many times here over the last hundreds of years, and that might perhaps be performed this very evening.

Suddenly I noticed that beyond the small room there was yet a further room, or perhaps it should be called a crypt--it would only have been possible for a very small person to get into it. It was partly closed off by a curtain. Something very dark was inside, but I could not make out what it was.

As I shifted my position to the center of the rope to get a better view, it hit me. A collimated beam of emanations was coming out from whatever it was in the crypt, focused through the axis of the two intermediate rooms, and entering direct into my body as I stood there. I felt as I had never felt before--overwhelming peace, love, the unity of everything, and the supreme perfect beauty of that unity. I felt that what was passing through me was not for me, but for the world, and that it was powerful and deep enough to touch the whole world, no matter what individual people who received its full force might do with it. But words fail and die away in front of such facts, and I have already said more than I ought, though also perhaps far less.

I did not stay long there. I felt instinctively that to tarry would be to court fantasy, and to spoil the purity of what I had tasted. In any case, nothing could possibly be added to that experience.

I left the shrine quickly, pausing only to buy a souvenir trinket from the caretaker. On the way back down the mountain, I carefully picked up each thing I had dropped on the ground.

As I walked slowly away, I mused full of wonder about how much human time and energy and, probably, lives, not to mention how much money, had been spent over the centuries to nurture and empower whatever it was that was transmitting from here. Perhaps only a very few of all those people had been given to experience what had been given to me; for the rest it was only a tale of wonder. But surely even a tale of a tale of that wonder would have been candle enough to lure a whole army of moths to its flame, if nurtured and carried lovingly and knowingly in the form of the rituals and texts and artifacts of a great tradition.

I am not writing such a tale. For one thing, I think there are many people, including myself, for whom it is not possible to live as a Buddhist, or on any fixed path, in the contemporary world. Yet, just for those of us whose “civilized” way of life alienates us from tradition, whose spiritual hunger usually goes unrequited, it seems to me that there is another possibility, to which I am trying to point. Just for us, it is not too difficult to go almost anywhere in the world. Or, even if we simply stay in place in one of the great centers of contemporary culture, almost everything in the world will eventually pass by our door and beckon our attention.

In a way, life for us “post-modern” people is potentially richer than for almost anyone at any previous time of history, spiritually as well as materially. But, it must be squarely faced, this potential is only very rarely realized--almost without exception, we settle for routine, for pre-packaged experiences and ideas, and successfully avoid both the difficulties and the adventures that are offered to us. The question is, how to be free enough innerly to recognize and profit from the extraordinary encounters our external freedom makes possible. The answer, I am suggesting, lies in the combination of a rigorous sincerity about what one wants and needs, coupled with a spirit of playful and wholehearted engagement. That is what I mean by “The Way of a Tourist.” It is a difficult craft, worthy of serious study.