Japan in a Nutshell

by Professor Solomon

- arts
- customs
- legends
- Zen
- what to see
- dos & don'ts
- how to fold a paper house
- Godzilla

Your guide to Japan!

"Across the sea is the land of Japan. With its ancient shrines, sumo wrestlers, Zen masters, capsule hotels, Laughing Festival, fortunetelling birds, haiku masters, phantom foxes, mania for bathing, musical crickets, tea masters, Living National Treasures, Moon Viewing Night, bowing etiquette, Festival of the Dead, dream-eating Baku, samurai films, Fuji pilgrims, and robots, it is unlike anywhere else in the world. Let me tell you about it."

—Professor Solomon

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Origins

Who are the Japanese? Where did they come from? What are the origins of this unique people?

During the eighth century a scribe named Yasumaro compiled—at the behest of the Empress—the oldest traditions that had survived. He produced two books: the *Kojiki* ("Records of Ancient Matters") and the *Nihongi* ("Chronicles of Japan"). These provide information about the earliest days of the nation, and about its cosmological origins.

In the beginning, we are told, the world was a watery mass—a sea that surged in darkness. Over it hung the Bridge of Heaven.

One day Izanagi and Izanami—brother-and-sister deities—strolled onto the Bridge. They peered into the abyss below. And Izanagi, wondering what was down there, thrust his spear into the water. As he withdrew it, brine dripped and congealed into a small island.

Izanagi and Izanami descended to the island. And they decided to live there and produce a country.

They began by building a hut, with the spear as center post. The next step was to get married. For a ceremony, Izanagi suggested they walk in opposite directions around the spear and meet on the other side. Izanami agreed. But when they met, she said: "What a lovely young man you are!"

Izanagi grew wrath. The male, he insisted, must always be the first to speak. For Izanami to have done so was improper and unlucky. So they walked around the spear for a second time. "What a lovely maiden you are," said Izanagi as they met.

Now they were wed. And they coupled. And Izanami gave birth to the islands of Japan…to the mountains and plains, rivers and forests…to the gods and goddesses of those places.

And they created a sun goddess—Amaterasu—and placed her in the sky. For the islands needed a ruler. And

they created a moon god, to keep her company. But Amaterasu and the moon god quarreled. So they decided to separate the pair—one presiding over day, the other over night.

And they created a wind god, to dispel the mist that shrouded the islands. And the islands emerged in splendor. And Amaterasu shone upon them, and reigned as their chief deity.

But a quarrel arose between Amaterasu and the storm god. And in a pique, she withdrew into a cave—plunging the islands into darkness. In consternation the gods and goddesses assembled. They discussed how to entice Amaterasu out of the cave. Finally, they came up with a plan.

A mirror was placed in the Sacred Tree. And a party was held—a raucous affair of wine and song. Mounting an overturned tub, the goddess of mirth performed an indecent dance; and the others laughed uproariously at the sight. Amaterasu peeked out of the cave to see what was going on. "Why are you rejoicing?" she asked.

Someone pointed to the mirror, explaining that a goddess more radiant than she had been found. Amaterasu stepped out of the cave for a closer look. And as she gazed upon her own radiance, they grabbed her and shut up the cave.

So Amaterasu resumed her place in the sky, illuminating again the islands of Japan.

But the darkness had left disorder in its wake—had allowed wicked spirits to run rampant. So Amaterasu sent her grandson, Ninigi, to rule over the islands directly. As symbols of authority, she gave him three things: her necklace, a sword, and the mirror that had enticed her out of the cave.

"Descend," she commanded him, "and rule. And may thy dynasty prosper and endure."

Ninigi stepped from the Bridge of Heaven onto a mountaintop. And he traveled throughout Japan, establishing his rule over its gods and goddesses. And he wedded the goddess of Mt. Fuji. But he offended her father, who laid a curse upon their offspring:

Thy life shall be as brief as that of a flower.

And so was born man.

And Ninigi's great-grandson was Jimmu Tennu, the first Emperor of Japan. Jimmu conquered the islands, established a form of government, and built the first capital. And his dynasty would endure.*

This, then, is what the ancient chronicles tell us about the origins of Japan. They go on to describe the doings of the early emperors.

And the modern view? What do science and scholarship have to say about those beginnings?

According to geologists, the Japanese islands rose from the sea during the Paleozoic era—the result of volcanic upheavals. And the Japanese people, according to ethnologists, are the product of a series of migrations. Nomadic Mongoloids came to the islands via Korea; seafaring Malays arrived from the south. Eventually they intermingled.†

The *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* were written, historians tell us,

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* It endures to the present day: the current Emperor is the 125th of the same lineage.

† That intermingling also included the Ainu (or Hairy Ainu, as they were once known)—a Caucasian people who were the original inhabitants of the islands. During historical memory the Ainu retreated to eastern Honshu, then to the wilds of Hokkaido, where a few thousand remain to this day. Many place names are of Ainu origin.

with a political purpose. By the eighth century the Yamato clan had imposed its rule over rival clans. To legitimize this ascendency, the clan claimed for its ruler a divine origin—an unbroken descent from the sun goddess. The scribe edited his material accordingly. And much of that material—the stories of gods and goddesses and early emperors—derived from the tribal lore of the Yamato.

Thus, the chronicles are a fanciful mixture of myth and history, fable and folklore. And the true origins of the nation must remain obscure.

Or must they? There is a Chinese legend that could cast some light on the question. It concerns a voyage of discovery launched from China during the Ch'in dynasty.

Leading this expedition was Hsu Fu, a Taoist sage. His aim was to locate the fabled Islands of Immortality—with their Elixir of Life—and settle them. Hsu Fu embarked upon the Eastern Sea, we are told, with a fleet of ships; 3000 men and women; livestock, seeds, and tools. They found the islands, but not the elixir. Deciding to stay anyhow, they settled in the Mt. Fuji area—a colony that was the nucleus of the Japanese people.*

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* Hsu Fu would seem to have been a historical personage. His tomb is located in the town of Shingu, along with a shrine in his honor. The locals say he taught their ancestors the art of navigation.

Islands

The Chinese called them Jih-pen—the Place Where the Sun Rises. To the inhabitants of the islands that became Nippon, or Nihon. And an early emperor—viewing his domain from a mountaintop and struck by its elongated shape—dubbed it Akitsu-shima, or Dragonfly Island.

Peaks of a submerged mountain range, the islands form a chain that stretches from Siberia to Taiwan. They are separated from the mainland by the Sea of Japan, with its strong currents. This barrier led to a physical and cultural isolation, and a unique perspective. It produced a hermit nation, for whom the dragonfly—with its eccentric beauty—is an apt emblem.

The Japanese archipelago comprises thousands of islands. Most of them are small; and it is the four main islands—Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu—that provide the nation with living space. Of these Honshu has the largest population; while Hokkaido, in the north, is still sparsely settled.*

Japan is basically mountainous—three-quarters of its terrain. These mountains are covered with forest and largely uninhabited. The population is crowded into valleys, coastal plains, and sprawling cities. Every inch of available land is cultivated; and a bird's-eye view reveals interlocking contours of mountain, river, and field.

Swift and unnavigable, the rivers have played a minor role in the settlement of the nation. Rather, it is the sea that has shaped Japan—and fed her. (The Japanese consume a tenth of the world's ocean harvest.) The coastline meanders endlessly (its total length approaching that of the equator); and no cove or bay or inlet is without its fishing village.

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* The last refuge of the Ainu, the northern island was originally called Yezo, or Land of the Barbarians. It was renamed Hokkaido, or Gateway to the Northern Sea, as a public relations ploy to attract settlers.

Geologically, the islands are young and unstable, having been thrust from the sea in relatively recent times. The legacy of that upheaval is an abundance of hot springs, geysers, volcanos (240 altogether, 36 of them active), and sulphurous exhalations from deep within the earth. But the most common reminder of Japan's instability are earthquakes. Daily occurrences, they are caused by movements of the Pacific Plate beneath the islands.*

Subject to frequent natural disasters—earthquakes, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions—and short on habitable space, these islands would seem an unfortunate choice for settlement. Yet they offer a compensation: ubiquitous scenic beauty. One is never far from a breathtaking vista—of mountains or sea or both. The farmer plants below a cloud-capped peak. The traveler follows a winding mountain road. The fisherman casts his net into a misty lagoon. And the poet sighs at a crag with its lonely pine.

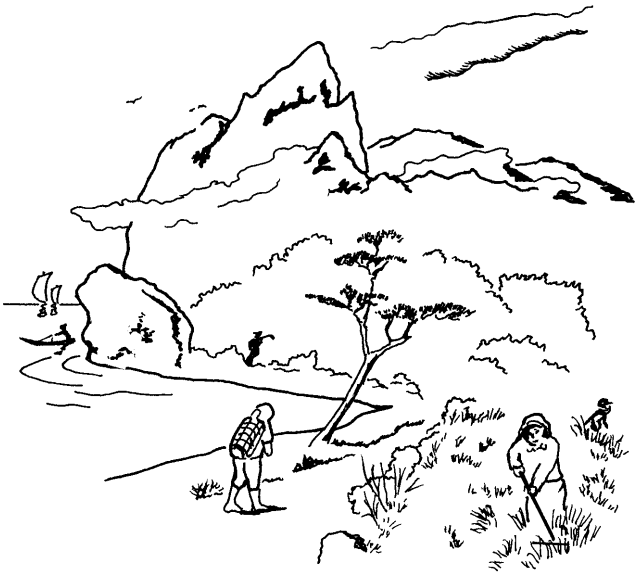
How this landscape has affected—has *shaped*—the Japanese soul may only be guessed at by an outsider. Lafcadio Hearn (see page 148) has attributed the artistic sensibility of the Japanese to the mountains in whose shadow they dwell:

> It is the mists that make the magic of the backgrounds; yet even without them there is a strange, wild, dark beauty in Japanese landscapes, a beauty not easily defined in words. The secret of it must be sought in the extraordinary lines of the mountains, in the strangely abrupt crumpling and jagging of the ranges; no two masses closely resembling each other, every one having a fantasticality of its own. When the chains reach to any considerable height, softly swelling lines are rare: the general characteristic is abruptness, and the charm is the charm of Irregularity.
>
> Doubtless this weird Nature first inspired the Japanese with their unique sense of the value of irregularity in decoration,—taught them that single secret of composition

* Quakes were once attributed to the movements of a giant fish. This creature was believed to be sleeping beneath Japan. From time to time it would stir, striking the sea floor with its tail and causing an earthquake. When it merely arched its back, the result was a tidal wave.

which distinguishes their art from all other art.…that Nature's greatest charm is irregularity.

This most aesthetic of peoples does appreciate the charm —as well as the sacredness—of its mountains. Indeed, its unique insight may be that the two are mysteriously linked.



Fuji

In ancient times the mountains of Japan were sacred places. Their shrouded peaks were deemed a gateway to the Other World; their wild recesses, the dwelling place of gods and ghosts. They were revered, too, as a divine source of water. The streams that flowed to the rice paddies below were a gift from the goddess of the mountain. Few mountains were without such a goddess, or a pair of shrines in her honor (a small one near the summit; a more elaborate one —for prayers and ceremonies—at the base). And adding to the mystery of mountains were their sole inhabitants: the *yamabushi* ("mountain hermits"). These ascetics were reputed to possess magical powers, and to be in communication with supernatural beings. They were sought out as healers.

Today only a few mountains have retained their sacred status. But one of them—a dormant volcano 60 miles north of Tokyo—has become the subject of a national cult. It has inherited the reverence once accorded to one's local mountain. I am referring, of course, to Mt. Fuji.

The high regard in which Fuji is held is suggested by the characters used to represent its name. They signify "not-two"—that is, peerless, one-of-a-kind. The name itself derives from *Fuchi:* the Ainu goddess of fire who inhabited the volcano. One can imagine the awe inspired in the Ainu, and in the Japanese who supplanted them, by a mountain that spewed fire. And in its day, Fuji was fiery indeed.

Tradition has it that Mt. Fuji rose out of the ground—amid smoke and fire—during an earthquake in the fifth year of the Seventh Emperor Korei (286 B.C.). Geologists, it is true, scoff at this account, insisting on a much earlier formation. But there were witnesses. A woodsman named Visu is said to have lived on the plain where the mountain emerged. As he and his family were going to bed that night, they heard a rumbling and felt their hut shake. Running outside, they stared in amazement at the volcano that was

rising out of the earth.*

Perhaps this account was inspired by a major eruption

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* The woodsman Visu was to become the Rip Van Winkle of Fuji. It seems that witnessing the birth of the mountain left him exceedingly pious—so much so that he did nothing but pray all day, neglecting his livelihood and family. When his wife protested, he grabbed his ax and stalked out of the house, shouting that he would have nothing more to do with her.

Visu climbed into the wilds of Fuji. There he wandered about, mumbling prayers and denouncing his wife. Suddenly he came upon two aristocratic ladies, sitting by a stream and playing *go*. He sat down beside them and watched, fascinated. They ignored him, absorbed in their moves and caught up in what seemed an endless game. All afternoon he watched, until one of the ladies

made a bad move. "Mistake!" he cried out—whereupon they changed into foxes and ran off. Visu tried to chase after them, but found, to his dismay, that his legs had become stiff. Moreover, his beard had grown to several feet in length; and his ax handle had dissolved into dust.

When able to walk again, Visu decided to leave the mountain and return to his hut. But upon arriving at its site, he found both hut and family gone. An old woman came walking by. He asked her what had become of the hut and told her his name. "Visu?" she said. "Impossible! That fellow lived around here 300 years ago. Wandered off one day and was never seen again."

Visu related what had happened; and the woman said he

that changed the shape of the mountain. For Fuji has erupted frequently—eighteen times—in historical memory. Each blast enhanced the supernatural awe in which the mountain was held. On one occasion (in 865), a palace was seen hovering in the flames. Another time precious gems were reported to have spewed from the mountain. And a luminous cloud was occasionally glimpsed above the crater. It was believed to surround the goddess Sengen. Apparently she hovered there and kept an eye out for any pilgrims to the summit. Those deemed insufficiently pure of heart she hurled back to earth.

The last eruption took place in 1707, adding a new hump to the mountain and covering distant Edo (present-day Tokyo) with a layer of ash. Fuji is now considered dormant. But the geological underpinnings of Japan are unstable; and one never knows. The fire goddess could return.*

Mt. Fuji (or Fujisan, as it is called) is an impressive sight. Its bluish cone is capped with snow and mantled with clouds. The highest mountain in Japan, it can be seen for hundreds of miles. The Japanese are connoisseurs of this view, which alters subtly, depending on the direction, distance, weather, and light. With its unique shape, historical associations, and mystic aura, Fuji has become the nation's symbol.

It has also been a frequent subject for poets and painters. The eighth-century poet Yamabe no Akahito wrote:

> Of this peak with praises shall I ring
> As long as I have any breath to sing.

900 years later Basho, gazing toward the mountain on a

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deserved such a fate—for having neglected his family. Visu nodded and looked contrite. "There is a lesson here," he said. *"All prayer, no work: lifestyle of a jerk."*

He returned to the mountain and died soon thereafter.

It is said that his ghost appears on Fuji whenever the moon is bright.

* For a cinematic imagining of that return, see *Godzilla vs. Mothra* (1964). As the monsters battle it out at the foot of Fuji, the mountain suddenly erupts. Even Godzilla is taken aback.

rainy day, composed a haiku:

Invisible in winter rain and mist
Still a joy is Fuji—to this Fujiist!

And Hokusai paid tribute to the mountain with a series of color prints, in his *36 Views of Fuji.*

Accepting these accolades with modesty has been Sengen, the goddess of the mountain. She continues to reside on Fuji, ready to hurl from its heights any unworthy pilgrim. And pilgrims have continued to climb the mountain, and to pray at shrines in the vicinity.

Of the origin of one of those shrines—built beneath a tree in the village of Kamiide—a tale is told.

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During the reign of Emperor Go Ichijo, the plague had come to Kamiide. Among those afflicted was the mother of a young man named Yosoji. Yosoji tried every sort of cure, to no avail. Finally he went to see Kamo, a yamabushi who lived at the foot of Fuji.

Kamo told him of a spring on the lower slope of the

mountain. Of divine origin, its waters were curative. But getting to this spring was dangerous, said Kamo. The path was rough and steep; the forest, full of beasts and demons. One might not return, he warned.

But Yosoji got a jar and set out in search of the spring. Surrounded by the gloomy depths of the forest, he trudged up the path. The climb was strenuous. But he pressed on, determined to obtain water from the spring.

In a glade the path branched off in several directions. Yosoji halted, unsure of the way. As he deliberated, a maiden emerged from the forest. Her long hair tumbled over a white robe. Her eyes were bright and lively. She asked Yosoji what had brought him to the mountain. When he told her, she offered to guide him to the spring.

Together they climbed on. *How fortunate I am,* thought Yosoji, *to have encountered this maiden. And how lovely she is.*

The path took a sharp turn. And there was the spring, gushing from a cleft in a rock.

"Drink," said the maiden, "to protect yourself from the plague. And fill your jar, that your mother may be cured. But hurry. It is not safe to be on the mountain after dark."

Yosoji fell to his knees and drank and filled the jar. Then the maiden escorted him back to the glade. Instructing him to return in three days for more water, she slipped away into the forest.

Three days later he returned to the glade, to find the maiden awaiting him. As they climbed to the spring, they chatted. And he found himself taken with her beauty—her graceful gait—her melodious voice.

"What is your name?" he asked. "Where do you live?"

"Such things you need not know."

He filled his jar at the spring. And she told him to keep coming for water until his mother was fully recovered. Also, he was to give water to others in the village who were ill.

He did as she said. And it was not long before everyone had recovered from the plague. Grateful to Kamo for his advice, the villagers filled a bag with gifts. Yosoji delivered it to the yamabushi.

And he was about to return home, when it occurred to him that the maiden—whose identity he was still curious

to learn—needed to be thanked, too. Nor would it be amiss to offer prayers at the spring. So once again Yosoji climbed the path.

This time she was not waiting in the glade. But he knew the way and continued on alone. Through the foliage he caught glimpses of the summit of Fuji and the clouds that surrounded it. Arriving at the spring, he bowed in prayer.

A shadow appeared beside him. Yosoji turned and gazed upon the maiden. They looked into each other's eyes; and her beauty thrilled him more than ever.

"Why have you returned?" she said. "Have not all recovered?"

"They have. I am here simply to thank you for your help. And to ask again your name."

"You earned my help, through your bravery and devotion. As to who I am…."

She smiled and waved a camellia branch, as if beckoning to the sky. And from the clouds that hung about Fuji came a mist. It descended on the maiden and enveloped her.

Yosoji began to weep. For he realized that this was Sengen, the goddess of the mountain. And he realized, too, that he had returned not merely to express his gratitude. Nor to satisfy his curiosity. Nor to pray. But to gaze upon the maiden with whom he had fallen in love.

Sengen rose into the air, the mist swirling about her. And dropping the camellia branch at his feet—a token of her love for him—she disappeared into the clouds.

Yosoji picked up the branch and returned with it to Kamiide. He planted and tended it. And it grew into a great tree, beneath which the villagers built a shrine.

The tree and shrine exist to this day. The dew from the leaves of the tree is said to be an effective cure for eye ailments.

Shinto

To the bewilderment of Westerners, a Japanese may adhere to several religions. Generally, these are Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto. Each has a province in the life of the individual. Buddhism focuses on death and the soul's future. Confucianism is concerned with ethics and social matters. And Shinto—an ancient faith indigenous to Japan—oversees daily life.

In examining Shinto, we may become further confounded. For it does not conform to our expectations for a religion. It has no hierarchy, theology, or founder—no sacred scriptures (although the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi* serve as authoritative sources for many of its traditions) or Supreme Deity. And while Shinto translates as "the way of the gods," it offers scant information about those gods. What it *does* provide is a way of connecting with them—an elaborate set of rituals and folkways with which to access the divine.

That is to say, to commune with the *kami.*

What are the kami? They are the native gods—the sacred spirits—the supernatural powers—of Japan. Taking their name from a word meaning "above" or "superior," they are the forces that matter. They are the arbiters of destiny, and are worshiped as such. A Shintoist prays and makes offerings to the kami. He seeks to please and obey them. They are the ultimate sources of good and ill—spiritual forces that to ignore or offend would be folly.

Reckoning with them, however, is no simple matter. For the number of kami is endless—myriad upon myriad of them—and their form diverse. The most common type are nature spirits. These inhabit notable features of the landscape. A cave, mountain, island, giant tree, junction of rivers, deep forest, secluded pond, rock with a curious shape—any of these are likely to harbor a kami. Also having a kami are natural phenomena such as winds and storms. An unusual animal may have one. In short, anything that inspires awe or mystery may be possessed of a kami, and must be dealt with accordingly.

Yet not all kami are associated with nature. A particular territory (or the clan that occupies it) may have its kami—its guardian spirit. An occupation, sphere of activity, or special problem may have one, protecting or aiding those who call upon it. There is, for instance, a kami for healing; one for help in exams; one for fertility; one for defense against insects; one for irrigation. A number of these were once living persons. For a kami can be some great personage of the past—a saint, a shogun, a scholar—who was deified upon his death.*

Finally, there are kami that resemble the gods of Greek and Roman mythology. The foremost among them is Amaterasu, the sun goddess, who rules over heaven and earth. Unlike most kami, this group has distinctly human characteristics.†

The kami, then, are the supernatural forces to which one turns when in need. And how does one do that? How does one establish contact with a kami? How does one enter into its presence and seek its aid?

By visiting a shrine.

There are more than 80,000 shrines in Japan. Each provides a dwelling place for a particular kami. One goes there to pray or worship or renew oneself; to celebrate a birth or marriage; or simply to experience awe and mystery. Standing in front of a shrine, the poet Saigyo remarked: "I know not what lies within, but my eyes are filled with tears of gratitude."

A typical shrine will be located in a grove of trees. This may be the scene of the kami's original manifestation, or simply a pleasing locale—a quiet, isolated site conducive to

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* The ordinary dead also were important in the Shinto scheme of things. Their function has been taken over, however, by Buddhism. See "Festival of the Dead."

† These gods and goddesses reside at their respective shrines, scattered throughout the country. But once a year they gather for a conference at the ancient Shrine of Izumo. The main order of business is to arrange marriages for the coming year. The conference lasts for most of October. So October is known as the month without gods: absent from their shrines, they are unavailable for supplication.

a spiritual experience. A *sakaki* (the sacred tree) may grow nearby. A spring may gush from the earth. The natural surroundings are important, and are considered part of the shrine.*

Important too is the approach to a shrine. The path leads through an arch called a *torii.* (The word means "bird perch.") The torii serves as gateway to the sacred precincts. Passing through it, one begins to feel the presence of the divine. The mundane world has been left behind.

The sanctuary itself is a simple building—unpretentious yet elegant. It is old and made of wood (to harmonize with the surrounding trees). Guarding its entrance may be a pair of stone lions. Out front are colored streamers (to attract the kami); a water basin; and a box for offerings. But the key element is kept in the inner sanctum, where only the priest may enter. It is an object called the *shintai*—generally a mirror, jewel, or sword. *In this sacred object resides the kami.* Without it the shrine would be an ordinary place. With it

* In cities shrines are sometimes built on the roofs of office buildings. Yet it was deemed crucial that they retain a connection with the spirit of the earth. The solution has been to run a soil-filled pipe between the shrine and the ground.

the site is sanctified.*

No regular services are held at a shrine. Instead, worshipers come when they feel the need. They begin by kneeling at the basin and washing their hands and mouth. This purification rite (known as *misogi*) is fundamental to Shinto, which sees man in terms of pure and impure rather than good and evil. One cannot connect with a kami unless spiritually purified—cleansed of polluting influences—rid of unclean spirits. In ancient times purification involved immersion in a lake, river, or waterfall. The rite has been simplified, but remains essential.†

After ablution, one bows and claps twice. The claps attract the attention of the kami. (A bell may also be rung.) One then drops a coin in the box, and offers a silent prayer —communes with the kami. One may pray for health, fertility, a good harvest, protection from fire or flood. It is also customary to inscribe a prayer on a wooden tablet. Finally one stops at a stall on the grounds and makes a purchase: an amulet, a slip of paper with a fortune on it, or an artifact for one's *kamidana.***

At least one priest resides at any sizeable shrine. But unless it is a special occasion or time of day, the worshipers will have no contact with him. For the Shinto priest con-

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* For anyone other than a priest to gaze upon the shintai would be an impious act. A certain Lord Naomasu once visited the Shrine of Izumo and demanded to be shown its sacred object. The priests protested; but Naomasu forced them to open the inner sanctum. Revealed was a large abalone, its bulk concealing the shintai. Naomasu came closer—whereupon the abalone transformed itself into a giant snake and hissed menacingly. Naomasu fled, and never again trifled with a god.

† According to the *Kojiki,* ritual purification originated with the gods. When Izanami died and went to the Underworld, Izanagi followed her there. He unwisely gazed upon her and became polluted. To restore himself, he hurried home and engaged in water purification. The rite was passed down to men.

** The kamidana ("god shelf") is a small shrine found in traditional households. It contains talismans (one for Amaterasu, another for the local kami); memorial tablets for one's ancestors; and offerings such as sake, rice, or cakes. Domestic prayers are recited at the kamidana.

ducts no service, delivers no sermon, offers no sage advice. He is solely a ritualist—a mediator between kami and worshiper. His duties include the recital of prayers, the performance of rites, and the overseeing of offerings. Garbed in headdress and robe, he blesses infants and performs marriages.

And, of course, he presides over the annual *matsuri,* or festival.

Many shrines are the focus of an elaborate festival. Held in honor of the kami, these festivals go back centuries. Their origins are diverse. Some began as a plea to the kami for protection—against plague, enemy, earthquake. Or as propitiation for an abundant harvest. Or as thanks for a boon bestowed on the community. Others commemorate some historical incident—a military victory, say. Others simply pay homage to the kami.

Such festivals evolved locally. So each acquired its own theme and imagery. There is a Sacred Post Festival, Whale Festival, Welcoming the Rice Kami Festival, Laughing Festival, Open Fan Festival, Spear Festival, Dummy Festival, Sacred Ball Catching Festival, Lantern Festival, Umbrella Festival, Ship Festival, Kite Flying Festival, Fire Festival, Rock Gathering Festival, Naked Festival—and hundreds more. But for all their individuality, Japan's festivals share the same set of rituals. And all have the same aim: to renew the bond between kami and worshipers.

A festival takes place throughout town. But it begins at the shrine. The sanctuary has been specially decorated with flowers, banners, and streamers. Elsewhere on the grounds the priests have been preparing themselves: bathing repeatedly and abstaining from certain acts. They gather now at the sanctuary, along with a select group of laymen, and conduct a purification ceremony.

Then priests and laymen approach the inner sanctum and prostrate themselves at the door. Sacred music is played; an eerie chant is intoned; and the door is opened. Revealed is the shintai—the mirror, sword, or jewel in which the kami resides.

An offering of food or sake is brought forward: an invitation to the kami to attend the festival. The door is closed;

and the group adjourns to a banquet hall. There they hold a sacred feast, which begins with a ritual sipping of sake. But the event soon becomes more informal—and the sake *flows.* Guests of the kami, they commune with it in a joyful fashion.

Now comes the high point of the festival: the procession. Priests and laymen return to the sanctuary, bringing with them the *mikoshi,* or sacred palanquin. The mikoshi is a miniature shrine attached to poles. It is ornate, gilded, and hung with bells. Atop it is a bronze *hoo.**

Again the inner sanctum is opened. And in a solemn ritual, the kami is transferred to a substitute shintai inside the mikoshi. Here it will reside for the duration of the festival.

Hoisting the mikoshi onto their shoulders, the laymen—directed by the priests—begin the procession. The idea is to transport the kami throughout the town, that it may bestow its blessings upon all. Exhilarated by the nature of the occasion (and having drunk large amounts of sake), the laymen dance and reel and sing as they go.

But the mikoshi bearers are only the vanguard of a larger procession. For they are soon joined by a collection of floats. On these wagons are giant figures—dragons, fish, samurai—that have been crafted from paper; historical tableaux; displays of flowers; and costumed maidens, dancers, and musicians. To the beat of drums, the procession winds through the streets.

Lining the route are local residents and visitors. These festival-goers have also been enjoying puppet plays, game booths, fortunetelling birds, sumo bouts, tug-of-war matches, exhibitions of classical dance. They have been buying toys, amulets, sake, snacks. Such amusements are considered an offering to the kami. As the crowd eats, drinks, and socializes, a rare loosening of restraints is allowed—a dispensation from the kami. The bond between kami and worshipers is being renewed; and it is a joyful occasion.

Also being renewed is a sense of community. For the fes-

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* The hoo is the legendary phoenix of the Orient. It is said to appear in a country only when a wise king rules.

tival serves to bring together the local parishioners. (Even those who have moved away return to their hometown for its annual festival.) They have gathered to receive the blessing of the kami—to pray for health and prosperity—to celebrate their solidarity as a group.

Among those present are a growing number of persons who have abandoned Shinto—who view it as an outmoded set of superstitions. They have come for the carnival; and they smile tolerantly upon the religious aspects of the festival. Yet as modern-minded as they are, they find themselves affected by the aura of mystery that hovers about the mikoshi. By the transcendental gleam of the sacred palanquin.

By the power of the kami as it passes among them.

Zen

A thousand years after the Indian prince Gautama had become the Buddha—the Enlightened One—while sitting under a bo tree, Buddhism (the codification and elaboration of his teachings) reached China and Japan. There it flowered into a number of sects. One of these—known in China as Ch'an ("meditation") Buddhism, and in Japan as Zen—was to be a major influence on Japanese civilization.*

What is Zen? The question can be a dangerous one, as novice monks in Zen monasteries can attest. Putting it to their Master, many have been answered with a slap, kick, or bop on the head. The luckier ones were answered nonsensically, told to go chop wood, or called "Blockhead!" Those who persevered have spent years trying to comprehend the nature of Zen—sometimes succeeding, sometimes not. What they have never succeeded in doing, however, has been to get a straight answer from their Master.

"What is the fundamental teaching of the Buddha?" asked one monk. "There's enough breeze in this fan to keep me cool," replied his Master.

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* The founder of the Zen sect was Bodhidharma, an Indian monk who had wandered into China. Legend has it that Bodhidharma was summoned to the palace at Nanking, and brought before Emperor Wu. A fervid supporter of Buddhism, the Emperor boasted of his accomplishments in behalf of the faith—building temples, copying scriptures, securing converts—and asked what his reward would be, in this world and the next. No reward whatsoever, said Bodhidharma. Frowning, the Emperor asked what the basic principle of Buddhism was. Nothingness, vast nothingness, said the monk. Taken aback by these puzzling replies, the Emperor asked: "Who *are* you, anyhow?" "No idea," said Bodhidharma.

Departing the palace, Bodhidharma made his way to a cave-temple in the mountains. There he sat in meditation for nine years, staring at a wall. As his followers grew in number, Zen Buddhism was born.

"What is the Buddha?" asked another monk. His Master replied: "I can play the drum. Boom-boom. Boom-boom."

What is going on here? What sort of religion is this? And who are these so-called Masters—these antic churls, so enamored of absurdities and seemingly indifferent to the progress of their pupils?

The answer is that they are the eloquent spokesmen of a worthy tradition. But that tradition has charged them with a difficult task; and in seeking to perform it, they often resemble slapstick comedians.

That task is *the communication of the ineffable.* The teaching of a truth that cannot be expounded. The imparting of a Higher Knowledge that is beyond words. For such (in a few useless words) is the aim of Zen.

Now a quest for enlightenment is not unique to Zen. All denominations of Buddhism seek to understand the Universe, and to enter into a harmonious relationship with it. To that end they have employed both intellectual and ceremonial means. In the temples and monasteries of the Buddhist world, logical discourse has flourished. Elaborate rituals have evolved. Endless volumes of theology have been written, circulated, and diligently perused.

But Zen alone has disdained such activity—in favor of an *intuitive* approach.

Learn to see with the inner eye, Zen urges seekers of enlightenment. Forsake reason, logical discourse, and books (and while you're at it, toss in dogma, ceremony, and icons). For a keener faculty than the intellect is available to you. There is a direct route to the Highest Truth—to the vital spirit of the Buddha. And that is via intuition. Via the heart, not the mind.*

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* Westerners may find it difficult to conceive of a non-rationalistic mode of philosophizing. The story is told of the abbot of a Zen monastery who gave to an American a gift of two dolls. One doll was a Daruma (the Japanese name for Bodhidharma). Daruma dolls are weighted at their base, the abbot explained. Pushed over, they spring back up. But the second doll was weighted in the head—pushed over, it stayed down.

"It represents Westerners," said the abbot, "with their top-

What Zen offers is a "hands-on" brand of enlightenment —a moment of perception—an *experience* of the Highest Truth. And it calls that experience *satori.*

What exactly is satori? Words cannot describe it, the Masters tell us (when they are not bopping or berating us). It is an ineffable but deeply affecting experience—an insight that opens a window on Reality—a mental flash that illumines the cosmos.

How does one achieve this insight? Via a pair of techniques that are the hallmark of Zen: meditation and pondering *koans.**

Meditation is a straightforward affair: one sits and empties one's mind. Koans are another matter. These absurdist parables (of which about 1700 have been collected over the centuries) are the enigmatic responses of Masters to questions. They are a species of riddle or paradox. A novice monk is given a koan and told to go ponder it. At first (often for years) he will find it baffling. For the koan is not meant to make sense, but to jolt the monk out of his accustomed mode of thinking—to defy and discredit logical

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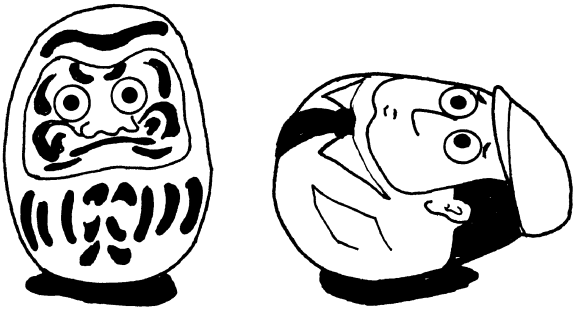
heavy intellectual approach."



* Two schools of Zen have co-existed since the earliest days. The gradual school (Soto) stresses meditation; the sudden school (Rinzai), koans.

If you're in a hurry, be aware that even the sudden school can take years: one meditates and ponders koans…until *ripe* for sudden enlightenment. But you might check out a newly-arisen school: Master Ishigoro's Prompt-Awakening Zen. This crash course can bring on an initial phase of satori, it is claimed, within five days.

analysis. Its purpose is to force him to abandon the intellect, in favor of an intuitive approach. If he does so, he is on the road to satori. For to understand one's koan is to understand the state of mind of one's Master—and thus to partake of his consciousness.

Some koans:

> A monk asked: "Everything returns to the One—but the One, to where does it return?" Master Joshu answered: "When I was in Seiju province, I had a robe that weighed seven pounds."
>
> "I'm new here," said a monk. "How should I go about studying?" The Master said to him: "Do you hear that babbling brook?" "Yes." "That's the entrance."
>
> "I am trying to avoid ordinary knowledge and reasoning," said a monk. "Give me something in the way of Zen to ponder." His Master knocked him on the head.
>
> "What is the road to wisdom?" asked a monk. His Master replied: "When you're hungry, eat. When tired, sleep."

The idea is to short-circuit the rational mind. By creating a psychological impasse, koans allow the intuitive faculty to take over. And when that happens, a direct perception of the Truth may come rushing in. That rushing in—that sudden illumination—is satori.

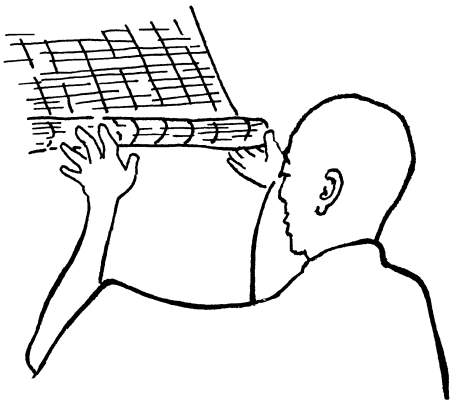
A monk who has achieved it (or who believes he has) will sit down and compose a satori poem. He then approaches his Master and explains the koan. The Master recognizes whether or not satori has been achieved. If it has, the monk gets certified.

What is satori like? Yun-men describes the moment as one's mind coming to a halt—like an old rat that finds itself trapped in a cul-de-sac—and one crying out: "Ah, this!" The entire canon of Buddhist scriptures, declares Yun-men, is but a commentary on that cry of "Ah, this!"

That momentous occasion—that lightninglike insight into the nature of Reality—can come at any time. Some monks have achieved satori while pondering a koan. But

Jakushitzu achieved it upon being slapped by his Master. (He had rashly asked, "What is Truth?") Another monk was listening to the roar of a waterfall, when it came. Another, exhausted after a lengthy meditation, tripped and fell—and lo, satori! And a classic case is that of Chokei.

Chokei had studied Zen for many years, going from one Master to another and wearing out seven meditation pillows. Yet enlightenment eluded him. Then one morning he achieved satori—while rolling up the blind on a win-



dow. Immediately he sat down and composed his satori poem:

> The blind goes up and everything is seen:
> An entirely altered, most enthralling scene.
> If anyone asks me where my mind's been led
> I'll take my broom and bop him on the head!

The experience itself—an exultation (like "walking on air")—a feeling that everything is connected and makes perfect sense—a *rapture* of revelation—does not last long. But its effects are permanent. The monk will have developed a new consciousness, a new sense of the world and of how to live in it.

And how *does* he go about living in it? To start with, he seeks to control his mind—to keep it free of hankerings, opinions, and random thoughts. This sought-after state is known as Buddha Mind, Original Mind, or No-Mind. "Abide in the Buddha Mind," said Master Benkei, "that's

what it's all about."

Having cleared his consciousness, the monk moves on to his life. He seeks to free it of complications and attachments. In touch now with Reality, he has need of little else. He has had a glimpse of the Glorious; and the result is a heightened awareness—an appreciation of the daily—a resolve to live fully in the moment. As one Zen-man had it:

> How full of wonder, how indescribably good;
> I fill my jug of water, I gather wood.

And—perhaps his prime challenge—the monk seeks to maintain an inner repose, an unshakable serenity. No matter what life brings, he endeavors to preserve his equanimity. Take, for example, Master Muso.

Accompanied by a disciple, Muso had boarded a crowded ferryboat. As it was about to depart, a samurai ran up and jumped in, nearly swamping the boat. And as it crossed the river, the samurai—who was drunk—lurched dangerously back and forth.

"This boat's too crowded," said the samurai. And pointing at Muso, he said: "Let's toss the monk overboard."

"Calm down," said Muso. "We'll be there soon."

"Who are you telling to calm down!" roared the samurai. "Jump out and swim—or I'll kill you!"

Unfazed by the threat, Muso maintained a look of calm. This so infuriated the samurai that he struck Muso on the head with the handle of his fan.

The disciple begged permission to fight the samurai. But Muso—reeling from the blow yet still unruffled—shook his head. "What's the big deal?" he said. "This is just the sort of situation we train ourselves to withstand. We must live up to our ideals." And turning to the samurai, he versified:

> We two are players in a game, I deem,
> As brief and insubstantial as a dream.

When the boat landed and everyone disembarked, the samurai followed after Muso. He approached the Master,

fell to his knees, and begged to become a disciple.*

Clearly, here is a discipline—an outlook—a faith—to be reckoned with.

So what exactly is Zen? Have we arrived at any rudimentary understanding? Or is the entire matter indeed beyond the reach of analysis?

Let's ask Master Fu.

Fu had been summoned to the palace, by the Emperor of Ryo, to expound upon a Buddhist scripture. He arrived, took his place on the lecture platform, and rapped for silence. Then, after staring intently at the Emperor and assembled court, he departed—without having said a word.

The Emperor sat frowning. A minister approached and

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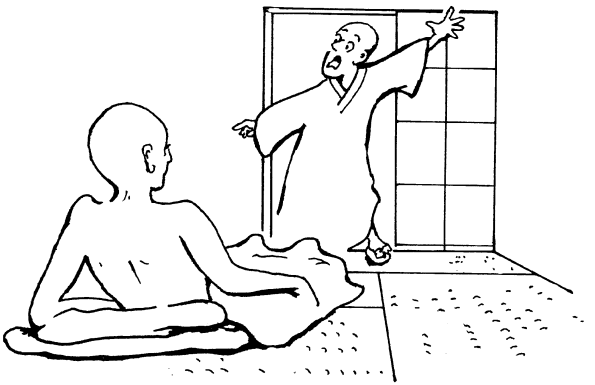
* Another master of self-control was Kaishu. He and some fellow monks were once crossing a river during a storm. As the waters boiled about the boat, his companions—terrified for their lives—began to pray to a goddess for help. But Kaishu sat and meditated, as calm as ever. When they had safely reached shore, he chided his companions. "What's the point of studying Zen," said Kaishu, "if one cannot put it to use. The goddess has been amused by your weakness."

But the prize for equanimity (and for living in the moment) must go to Master Tokai. He was staying overnight at a temple, when fire broke out in the kitchen. A monk burst into Tokai's room, shouting "Fire, fire!"



"Where?" asked Tokai, sitting up drowsily in bed.

"In the kitchen! Flee for your life, Master!"

"The kitchen, you say?" murmured Tokai. "Okay, let me know when it gets to the hallway." And he went back to sleep.

asked if he had understood Master Fu. No, said the Emperor.

"Too bad," said the minister. "That's the most eloquent he's ever been!"

Perhaps Zen is simply a mystery.

A mystery that lies at the heart of Japanese civilization.

Bushido

Just as Zen was taking root in Japan, a warrior class—the samurai—rose to prominence. Fierce yet discerning men, they found themselves attracted to the new sect. Its directness appealed to their manly sensibilities. Its emphasis on intuition struck them as practical. Its indifference to death seemed relevant to their line of work. And its monastic traditions—discipline, asceticism, a concern with the daily—would translate readily into a samurai lifestyle.

So the samurai began to frequent monasteries. They meditated, pondered koans, endured thwacks and shouts. And as the teachings of Zen merged with their martial ways, the result was a code of conduct called *Bushido*—the Way of a Warrior. Comparable to the code of chivalry (which arose in France around the same time), it provided a samurai with everything he needed: moral guidelines, fighting skills, and a practical philosophy.

Central to Bushido were those moral guidelines, which set forth the ideal character of a warrior. Of prime importance was the overcoming of any fear of death. A samurai was to face death unflinchingly, whether in battle or (should circumstances dictate) in the grim ritual of the short sword. Mandatory, too, were loyalty to one's lord, and the upholding of one's honor in matters large and small. The list goes on. Duty, courage, fortitude, frugality, generosity, self-control—these and other virtues were expected of the samurai. It was a lengthy—and daunting—job description.

As for the technical aspects of his calling, a samurai underwent rigorous training. Among the required skills were swordsmanship, horsemanship, and archery. Swordsmanship was paramount; for his chief opportunities for glory (or for a fatal mishap) would come in one-on-one encounters with the enemy. Many hours were spent practicing with a wooden staff, as he prepared to take up the sword that would be made expressly for him.*

* A skilled blacksmith forged the sword, using a secret process

Thus far the Japanese warrior resembles his medieval counterpart in the West. But where they part company is in their philosophies. The French chevalier saw himself as a soldier of God, a defender of the faith; whereas the samurai had a down-to-earth outlook. Spirituality was important to him—but as a *practical* matter. Its function was to aid his swordsmanship. And that was where Zen truly came into the picture.

For the samurai was aware that swordsmanship involved more than technique. Also required was a mental discipline. To defeat an opponent, one had to be in the proper state of mind. And what was that state? The mindlessness of Zen! The samurai had to cultivate the same blankness, composure, and spontaneity as the monk. He had to empty his mind—unfetter it from the bonds of thought—banish any concern with outcome or tactics.

Then and only then would he be ready to fight. Ready to *flow,* like a ball in a stream. His actions and reactions would be automatic, arising from the deep well of instinct—from the Original Mind. His sword would seem to have acquired a life of its own. His thrusts and parries would be instant and effective.

So the samurai set out to acquire the spirit of Zen, and apply it to his swordsmanship. What led the monk to satori would lead the warrior to victory. The key was to empty the mind. Ichiun, a master swordsman, said he wielded his weapon in the same spirit in which he ate breakfast. In each case he simply went about his daily business, with a cool mindlessness.

Yet one might ask the samurai if there was not a contradiction here. How could the Way of a Warrior conjoin with a form of Buddhism? Wasn't Buddhism pacifistic?

The samurai might reply that it was the practical aspects of Zen that interested him. He might also argue that he had no desire to harm anyone. A warrior simply does his duty. He defends his lord and land. An enemy appears; and the

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that made it at once sharp and unbreakable. The blacksmith was also a kind of priest. Donning a white robe, he chanted prayers over the sword and performed a rite of purification. The resulting weapon was deemed to have a spirit of its own.

warrior must kill or be killed.

And he might relate a tale of Bokuden, a renowned swordsman of the sixteenth century.

●

Bokuden was taking a ferryboat across Lake Biwa. Among the passengers was another samurai—a rough-looking fellow. As they crossed the lake, this samurai boasted of his swordsmanship and of the countless opponents he had slain. He was the greatest swordsman in the land, he declared. He would fight anyone. The passengers listened raptly to his bragging.

All of them save Bokuden, who was nodding off. Annoyed by this indifference, the samurai approached him and jabbed him on the shoulder.

"I see that you too carry a sword," said the samurai. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"My friend," said Bokuden, "we are of different schools of swordsmanship. You seek to defeat others. I seek only not to be defeated."

"What school is that?"

"I am of the Prevail-Without-a-Fight school."

"But you carry a sword."

"Only as a reminder—that a follower of the Buddha must slay desire."

"Nonsense!" spat the samurai. And he challenged Bokuden to a fight. Bokuden accepted, but suggested they settle their quarrel on a nearby island— in order not to injure any of the passengers. The samurai agreed; and the boatman headed the ferry in that direction.

No sooner had they reached the island than the samurai —eager to fight—leapt onto shore and drew his sword. He flailed it about and bellowed a battle cry.

"Relax," said Bokuden. And grabbing an oar from the boatman, he pushed the boat away from the island.

"What are you doing?" said the samurai. "Come back here!"

"This is my Prevail-Without-a-Fight school."

The samurai shook his fist at the departing boat and

called Bokuden a coward. But Bokuden—relieved not to have had to slay him—just waved back.

The Buddha Crystal

A government official named Kamatari had a daughter whose beauty was renowned. One day a delegation arrived from across the sea, with word that the Emperor of China wished to marry the daughter. As a wedding gift, she would be allowed to choose any three royal treasures and send them back to Japan.

The daughter agreed to the marriage, sailed to China, and was wed to the Emperor. Not forgetting the promised gift, the Emperor led his bride to a treasure room and bid her choose. She wandered through a trove of wondrous objects. Finally she selected a lute that played itself; a bottle with an endless supply of ink; and the Buddha Crystal. The Buddha Crystal was a translucent stone, inside of which was an image of the Buddha. Anyone viewing this image experienced an overwhelming sense of peace.

A ship was dispatched to Japan, bearing the three treasures. But as it entered the Bay of Shido-no-ura, a violent storm arose. Waves crashed over the ship; and the Buddha Crystal was washed overboard.

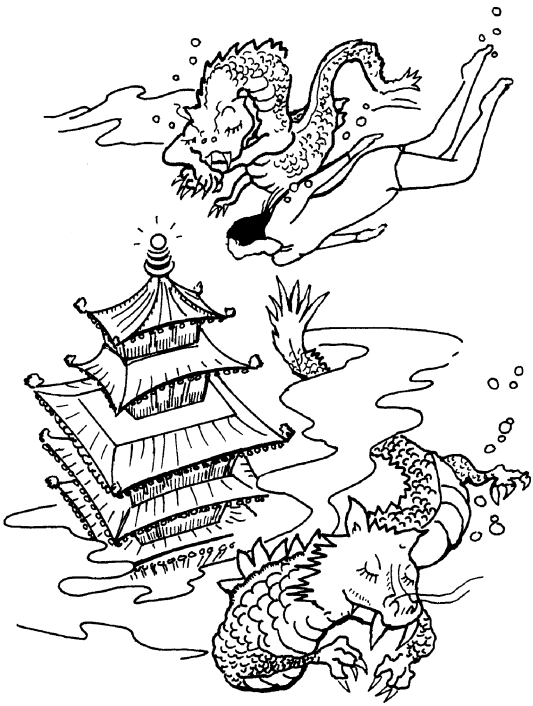
On hearing the news, Kamatari understood what had really happened. The Dragon King of the Sea, coveting the fabulous stone for himself, had caused the storm. Kamatari offered a reward to whoever might retrieve it.

Avid for the reward, the fishermen of the Bay of Shido-no-ura began a search. One after another they descended into the sea. But none of them was able to locate the Buddha Crystal.

Then a shell-gatherer—an impoverished woman with an infant son—came forward. She offered to retrieve the stone if Kamatari would adopt her son and raise him as a samurai. He agreed; and the woman dove into the sea.

Down and down she swam, until arriving at the undersea palace of the Dragon King. Atop the palace was a brilliant light—the Buddha Crystal. Guarding it were dozing dragons.

The shell-gatherer swooped down, grabbed the Buddha



Crystal, and swam away. But the dragons awoke and pursued her. She was able to elude them, but only after being dealt a mortal blow from one of their tails.

Crawling onto shore, she handed the Buddha Crystal to Kamatari. And with her dying breath she reminded him of his promise.

So Kamatari took the infant home and raised him as a son. The boy became a samurai, and eventually succeeded to Kamatari's official position.

In his mother's memory he built a shrine at the spot where she had crawled from the sea. That shrine—known as the Shidoji—still stands. Pilgrims come to honor the shell-gatherer and her sacrifice.

And the Buddha Crystal? That stone with its image of peace? Its whereabouts are unknown.

Tea Ceremony

1

"Tea gives one vigor of body, contentment of mind, and determination of purpose," said the legendary Shen Nung, Fire Emperor of China. His subjects agreed with him; and over the centuries the beverage came into wide use in the Middle Kingdom—as a medicinal tonic and sociable beverage. Poets referred to it as "liquid jade"; and one of them enthused: "When I drink tea, I am conscious of peace. The cool breath of Heaven rises in my sleeves, and blows my cares away."

As Buddhism, fine arts, and other achievements of Chinese civilization traveled to Japan, tea accompanied them. A major impetus to its use came from Eisai, the monk who introduced Zen Buddhism to the land. He also brought from China some choice tea plants, which he cultivated at his monastery. The monks drank the tea at their shrine to Bodhidharma, as part of a ritual.*

Eisai wrote a treatise on tea, in which he praised it as "the divine remedy and supreme gift of Heaven for preserving human life." This claim was brought to the attention of the Shogun, who had fallen ill. He summoned Eisai and commanded him to administer his remedy. Fortunately for the monk, the Shogun recovered. And as word spread of its medicinal (and stimulative) effect, tea was on its way to becoming the national beverage of Japan.

2

Among its first devotees were samurai warriors, who held lavish tea-tasting parties. Large amounts of sake were also consumed (prompting such riotous behavior that the parties were eventually banned); and any tonic effect of the

* They also used it to stay awake during their long hours of meditation—the penalty for nodding off being a thwack with a stick.

tea must have been offset by the toxicity of the alcohol. But the parties did serve to establish tea as a sociable beverage.

Around the same time, a special ceremony came into vogue in the castles of warlords. Inspired by the tea ritual of the monks, it involved the sharing of a bowl of tea by the warlord and important visitors. This formal event—a status symbol for the powerful—was held in a richly appointed chamber, with costly utensils. But the Tea Ceremony came to be modified in an important way. The man who modified it—and who is considered the patron saint of the Tea Ceremony—was Sen no Rikyu, tea master to Hideyoshi.*

Hideyoshi was drawn to the Tea Ceremony for its ostentatious display of wealth and the intimidating pomp of its ritual; and he gave Rikyu (his close advisor as well as tea master) a free hand in conducting and perfecting it. An aesthete of the first order, Rikyu took the Tea Ceremony and remodeled it into something wholly new in spirit.

What Rikyu introduced into the Tea Ceremony was what the Japanese call *wabi*—a concept that is difficult to translate. Wabi is an aesthetic term, referring to a quality of restraint—of plainness—of understatement—in a work of art. Its earliest associations were with Zen recluses living in the mountains. Their rustic ways, their rough exteriors (yet noble souls), the plainness of their dwellings—all this was wabi. Rikyu, who had studied Zen, was taken with its aesthetic values; and he set out to inject them into the Tea Ceremony.

His basic idea was that all things luxurious and pretentious—the gold utensils, fancy furnishings, elaborate dress—were anathema, and should be replaced with the plain, the natural, the (seemingly) artless. Indeed, Hideyoshi's tea chamber itself—a spacious reception hall—had

* Hideyoshi was the fiercest and most successful of the warlords. This upstart son of a peasant had brought the provinces of Japan under unified rule, and become the de facto ruler (under the Emperor) of the new nation. During his rule the Tea Ceremony became a kind of national sacrament.

to go. So Rikyu began by constructing, on the castle grounds, a tea *hut.* With its thatched roof and log walls, this modest structure resembled a hermit's shack. It was set in a garden—a simple, rustic affair of shrubs and small trees. To objections that his creation was scarcely the sort of place in which to receive the grand Hideyoshi, Rikyu quoted an earlier tea master: "'A prize horse looks best tethered to a hut.'"

The interior of the hut was equally austere. Its unadorned walls, somber colors, and dearth of furnishings lent Rikyu's tea room a monastic air. For utensils—drinking bowl, kettle, and other implements of the ceremony—he had sought out unrefined pieces of folk art. And he began to conduct, in this lowly venue, a version of the Tea Ceremony that had an entirely different feel to it.

Amazingly, Hideyoshi appreciated and participated in the new aesthetic (although he continued to hold lavish Tea Ceremonies at well). The warlord who had sought out the most ornate utensils (usually imported from China), now gathered plain, homespun items—the beauty of which his tea master had taught him to discern. Returning from an invasion of Korea, he brought back a trove of rough—yet exquisite—Korean pottery. With it came a group of captured potters, who would establish the style in Japan.

With Hideyoshi's support, the renovated Tea Ceremony flourished. After Rikyu's death (he had a falling out with Hideyoshi that proved fatal), it was preserved and refined by his disciples. And as it spread from castle to castle, and to private homes (the merchant class was eager to join in), the Tea Ceremony became a hallmark of Japanese culture—which it has remained to the present day.

The irony, of course, is that a ritual with airs of poverty has been practiced mainly by the well-to-do. The means to maintain a hut and garden; the leisure to sip tea all afternoon; and the good taste to be drawn to such a ceremony—these are not the advantages of the poor. But among the tastemakers of Japan, the wabi-infused Tea Ceremony became a cherished custom. And it came to exert thereby an enormous influence on Japanese art and

culture.

How is it that the sipping of tea, amid circumstances of artificial poverty, could have had such an influence? What is the Tea Ceremony all about? And why has it endured, virtually unchanged over the centuries?

To find out, let us attend a typical session.

3

At the appointed hour, the guests (a maximum of four*) begin to arrive at the home of their host. They are neatly and soberly attired (no Hawaiian shirts), in kimonos or contemporary dress. In a reception room they sample the water that will be used, and don special sandals. Then they are led outside to the garden.

There they are seated on a bench and left alone for a while. They savor the fragrances, listen to the hum of insects, enter into a contemplative frame of mind. When everyone has arrived and is ready, one of the guests rings a gong.

The host appears and leads them along a winding path. Surrounding them is a rustic simplicity. A backyard enclave of pine trees, moss-covered stones, bushes, and ferns has

* One tea master has insisted that the ideal number of guests is zero—the ceremony attaining aesthetic perfection when celebrated solely by the host.

been artfully contrived for a natural effect. Everything is tranquil and harmonious. Already the guests have left behind their ordinary thoughts, in this sanctuary from the hurly-burly of the world.

On reaching the hut, the guests remove their sandals. (In olden times, samurai would also remove their swords and leave them in a rack.) Then, one by one—in order of age, refinement, or relationship to the host—they enter the hut. This is effected via an unusual doorway. Only a few feet high, it resembles a low window. Each guest must crouch and crawl inside.*

The guests find themselves in a room that is nearly empty. Its walls are bare plaster; its ceiling is unfinished wood. Straw mats *(tatami)* cover the floor. A subdued light filters in through paper windows. Everything is immaculately clean. (As part of his artistry, the host himself has swept and dusted.)

But the tea room is not entirely devoid of furnish-

* Even Hideyoshi had to crawl through such a doorway. In designing it, Rikyu is thought to have been inspired by the "mouse wicket" entranceways of the theaters of his time. He may have wished to provide the same sense of passing into another world—into a magical realm. (The original ideograph for tea

ings. For in the *tokonoma* ("alcove of honor"), two items have been placed. One is a scroll bearing a delicate ink painting. The other is a vase, in which a sprig of leaves and buds (cut by the host at dawn) has been carefully arranged.*

The guests approach the tokonoma and acknowledge it with a bow. Then they seat themselves around a brazier in the center of the room. In silence they let the chasteness of the decor—the lack of furnishings and ornamentation—

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hut signified "Abode of Fancy.") He may also have intended to instill in each guest—including the grand Hideyoshi—a feeling of humility.

* The tokonoma derives from the altar to Bodhidharma, at which the monks drank tea. The simplicity of its contents was established by Rikyu, and is a prime example of wabi. A tale is told of Rikyu and the tokonoma.

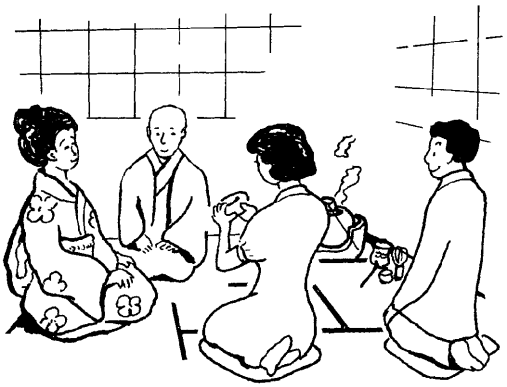
It seems that Rikyu had been cultivating morning glories, having acquired seeds of this exotic flower from the Dutch. Word of the beauty of the morning glory reached Hideyoshi; and he notified his tea master that he wished to take tea with him, and view the blossoms in their fullest splendor.

The next morning Hideyoshi arrived in the tea garden. He went to the spot where the morning glories had been planted—

give rise to a certain mood.*

The host now enters and joins them at the brazier. He lights the fire, using charcoal that has been cut into prescribed lengths and shapes. From an engraved case he takes chips of incense and adds them to the fire. He hands the case to the principal guest, who has asked to see it. The principal guest praises its design and inquires as to its history. The case is passed from guest to guest.

A light meal is served. Then it is time for tea. The host brings out his utensils, which include pot, drinking bowl, and caddy of powdered tea. The guests compliment him on



his taste in selecting these. The bowl receives particular attention. Irregular in shape (another hallmark of wabi) and

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and found that they had been cut and removed. Not one remained! Furious, he strode to the hut to demand an explanation of Rikyu.

As he entered, the warlord was greeted by an exquisite sight. In the tokonoma was a single morning glory, its petals still moist with dew. Rikyu had disposed of all the blossoms save one —that Hideyoshi might savor it in the proper spirit of restraint.

* Compare this austerity of decor with the overstuffed Victorian look that has prevailed in the West. To the Japanese eye, a typical Western interior—crammed like a treasure house with art, furniture, and bric-a-brac—seems an exercise in vulgar display.

unglazed, it has an almost primitive look. As the guests pass it about, they ooh and ah. They praise its patina of age—a weathered look that bespeaks years of service. They inquire as to its past owners. Is it a valuable antique—the bowl of some renowned tea master? Has it acquired a name (based on its appearance, or on the craftsman who made it)? The host smiles and modestly relates its history—including the circumstances of any faults it has acquired. For chips, cracks, and repairs are seen as enhancing the time-worn look of a utensil.*

When his utensils have been inspected and admired, the host brews the tea. Quality water and costly tea unite; and that "liquid jade" is born. Everyone bows in unison to *O Cha,* or Honorable Tea. Apologizing for its poor quality, the host—with a practiced gesture—pours tea into the bowl.

The principal guest takes three sips, then passes the bowl on. The next guest wipes the rim with a napkin, turns the bowl clockwise, and sips. As the bowl travels from guest to guest, they comment (in a restrained, non-effusive manner) on the high quality of the tea, and praise again the

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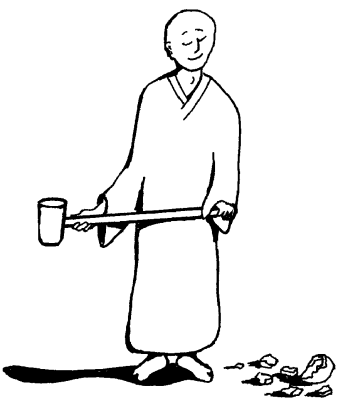
* Oribe, the chief disciple of Rikyu, would purposely break bowls, then mend them. The idea was to further this desired quality, known as *sabi.*



Sabi refers to the beauty that arises when something has been mellowed with age. The dignity and character acquired by an object as it becomes time-worn is something the Japanese keenly appreciate. An ancient bowl, cracked but serviceable; a frayed scroll; the moss-covered stones of a dilapidated temple—these are prized for their humility, naturalness, and air of melancholy. New objects, on the other hand, are often disdained for their crass assertiveness. The Japanese are appalled by our predilection in the West to restore an antique to its original, pristine condition. To their discerning eye, its patina of age—which we labor diligently to remove—is an antique's most distinguishing and valuable quality.

bowl. When everyone has sipped, the group bows in gratitude.

After a second bowl and a serving of sweets, the guests loosen up. They begin to converse, in a relaxed, spontaneous manner. Certain topics—such as contemporary affairs, or anything controversial or scandalous—are avoided. Rather, they touch upon the signs of the season; the artistry of the scroll in the tokonoma; the skill of the flower arrangement. Someone recites a poem. Philosophical and artistic questions are discussed.

Then everyone sits in silence, savoring this unique occasion. They listen to the hum of the kettle…the chirp of a cricket…the brushing of a branch against the roof.

Finally the guests take their leave. After final compliments to the host and an exchange of bows, they file through the garden and are gone.

Now the host sits and takes tea alone, beside his bubbling kettle. He gives himself over to the mood of the tea room; to the harmoniousness of his surroundings; to a sense of oneness with the world. Eyes half-closed, he murmurs pleasurably.

As the last rays of sun illumine the tokonoma, he gazes up at the flower in the vase. How lovely it is, he thinks—and how transitory. It started the day as a bud; bloomed at midday; and has begun now to droop and wither. A poignant symbol of our own mortality.

He sips tea.

A breeze rustles the roof.

4

What is the point of all this? What has so attracted generations of Japanese to the Tea Ceremony? And what has been its influence on their civilization?

A clue to the significance of the Tea Ceremony may lie in its monastic origins. For much that is associated with Zen monasteries is characteristic of the tea hut as well. Beneath its thatched roof is to be found the same air of asceticism and tranquility. And like a monk, the tea-sipper seeks to escape the turmoil of the world; to embrace simplicity; to enter into a meditative frame of mind. Only their aims differ: an aesthetic experience for the one; enlightenment for the other. And while the Tea Ceremony is not explicitly religious, it is grounded in Zen. It is a spiritual path—one that adores the beauty to be found in ordinary things and acts.

Such a path would seem to have a multiple attraction to the Japanese. For one thing, it speaks to a yearning in the national soul for wabi—for the aesthetic pleasure of plainness. It satisfies, too, a craving for discipline in daily activities. And it appeals to a love of ceremony. All this converges in a social occasion—a communing with friends amid agreeable surroundings. No wonder the Tea Ceremony has endured.

But for a definitive analysis, no less an authority than Rikyu himself is available. In the pages of the *Nanbo-roku** he discusses the Tea Ceremony—"an ascetic discipline based on Buddhist Law and aimed at spiritual deliverance"—at length. But the real lowdown comes in this brief verse, delivered in the best Zen, head-bopping tradition:

> You ask me what transpires in this room?
> It's simple, sir: boil, brew, consume.

That simple act—highly ritualized and perfected—was

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* The *Nanbo-roku* is a collection of Rikyu's sayings, preserved by his followers. It is an example of the Japanese institution of *hiden:* a manuscript containing the secrets of an art, which is hand-copied and passed down from master to master.

Rikyu's gift to his countrymen. Yet his legacy does not stop there.

For it is a startling fact that *most subsequent Japanese art* harkens back to Rikyu and his infusion of wabi into the Tea Ceremony. The plainness of his hut—its chaste, impoverished air—became the basis for Japanese architecture. His garden became the prototype of the Japanese garden. The meal he served before tea—austere yet exquisite—became the norm of Japanese cuisine. The sober hues to which he was partial became standard in dress and decor. His sprig in the tokonoma inspired the art of flower arrangement. His taste in scrolls significantly influenced painting; his taste in utensils, ceramics. The list goes on.

In short, the aesthetic values of Sen no Rikyu—embodied in the Tea Ceremony—became those of the nation. It is a remarkable achievement. In linking tea with a Zen-inspired sense of beauty, he endowed his countrymen with a ritualized expression of their deepest sensibilities. Indeed, so central did tea-drinking become to the culture that a Japanese insensitive to the finer elements of life is said to have no tea in him.

What are we in the West to make of this? Certainly, we can attend—and take pleasure in—a Tea Ceremony. But can we arrive at any understanding of the soul of its practitioners? Of their sensibilities? Of their Zen-influenced worldview? Can we ever come to have any tea in us?

The story is told of a university professor who came to visit Nan-in, a noted tea master of the Meiji era. The professor—a westernized individual—was frustrated by his inability to understand Zen, and asked Nan-in to explain it to him.

Nan-in declined to speak on the subject. Instead he led the professor into his tea room, sat him at a table, and brewed tea.

When it was ready, Nan-in bowed to the steaming pot. Then he poured tea into the professor's cup. He kept on pouring. The cup filled and overflowed onto the table.

The professor stared in dismay at the growing puddle. At first—out of a deeply-ingrained politeness—he said nothing. But finally he cried out: "Stop, my cup is overfull! It

will hold no more!"

"Just so," said Nan-in. "And you too are overfull—of your own thoughts, opinions, and preconceptions. How can I teach you about Zen until you have first emptied your cup?"

Battle of Dan-no-ura

On a fateful day in the spring of 1185, the navies of two clans clashed in the Straits of Shimonoseki. At stake was dominance of the nation.

For five years the Taira and the Minamoto had been at war. Each sought supreme power, and supported a rival claimant to the throne. As the situation had deteriorated for the Taira, they had retreated to strongholds in the west. With them were Antoku, the child-Emperor, and Lady Nii, his grandmother.

Finally the clans met for a decisive battle. A thousand or more ships faced off near the fishing village of Dan-no-ura, and began to fight.

The current in the Straits of Shimonoseki is swift, and changes direction with the tide. Initially it ran in the Taira's favor; and their fleet was prevailing. But then the current changed (as the Minamoto had anticipated); and countless Taira ships were forced onto rocks or swept away. To make matters worse, many of their steersmen were lost. (Minamoto archers had been ordered to concentrate on steersmen.) Cries and crashes filled the air as the battle raged.

Antoku and Lady Nii were on a ship anchored off Dan-no-ura. Its captain had gone over to the enemy; and the ship was burning. When it became clear that the situation was hopeless, Lady Nii took the seven-year-old Emperor into her arms. "The world is a vale of tears," she said, "and we shall leave it. At the bottom of the sea is a Land of Bliss. Let us seek it out."

She had him pray to Amaterasu and to the Buddha. Then she leapt from the ship, drowning herself and Antoku.

Thousands of Taira—warriors, noble ladies, children—perished that day. Many not slain in battle took their own lives, to avoid the shame of execution. Taira ships burned like funeral pyres, blackening the sky.

The clan had come to a grim end.

For years thereafter, debris from the battle washed ashore at Dan-no-ura. But more than debris remained. For it was

said that *the ghosts of the Taira* haunted the site. Villagers insisted that the sounds of battle could still be heard, and that strange lights flickered over the waves. Occasionally, a ghost would pull a swimmer beneath the waves and drown him.

To pacify the ghosts, a temple and cemetery were built. The cemetery overlooked the scene of the battle, and was filled with monuments to the Taira.

And the ghosts were allayed. Yet they never completely went away, say the villagers…who will tell you the tale of Hoichi.

●

Hoichi was a blind bard who resided at the temple. He was famed as a chanter of tales and virtuoso of the *biwa* (a type of lute). His speciality was tales of the war between the Taira and the Minamoto.

As he sat on the temple porch one night, strumming on his biwa and drifting into a reverie, Hoichi heard the approach of footsteps.

"Hoichi."

"Yes? Who's there?"

"My master has come to Dan-no-ura to view the site of the battle. He and his entourage are staying at a noble house in the vicinity. Hearing of your talent, he desires that you appear before us and sing of that sad day. Come with me."

Welcoming the chance to perform for a noble audience, Hoichi was pleased to comply. He let the stranger lead him from the porch and along the road. The man was a samurai: Hoichi could hear the jingle of his armor.

Passing through a guarded gate, they negotiated a series of corridors and entered what Hoichi deemed to be a crowded hall. He could hear the rustle of silken apparel, and a murmur of expectation. His guide seated him on a dais and bade him sing.

Voice quivering with feeling, Hoichi began to sing. In stirring detail he told of the Battle of Dan-no-ura. From his biwa arose poignant strains, and the sounds of battle: the shout of warriors, clash of swords, zing of arrows, wail of women, surge of waves.

Hoichi recreated the battle; and his audience responded emotionally. As he described the ships crashing onto rocks, they moaned. As he told of Lady Nii's leap into the sea, they wept. And as he sang of the annihilation of the Taira, they wailed.

When Hoichi had finished, his guide thanked him, praised his skill, and led him back to the temple.

"We would like you to sing for us again," said the samurai, "tomorrow night and for several nights thereafter. But tell no one of these performances. My master, you see, is traveling incognito."

So the following night Hoichi was led back to the hall, where he performed once more. But his absence from the temple was noted by a priest, who asked him upon his return where he had been. "Out for a walk," said Hoichi.

But the priest was suspicious. And the next night, finding Hoichi gone again, he went in search of him.

Passing the cemetery, the priest heard the sounds of a biwa. With trepidation he entered the grounds and crept among the monuments.

He came upon Hoichi sitting in front of the monument of Antoku. The bard was playing his biwa and singing of the Battle of Dan-no-ura. Throughout the cemetery could be seen flickering lights. They seemed to hover over the monuments.

"Stop!" cried the priest. "You have been enchanted!"

But Hoichi sang on, as if in a trance.

The priest grabbed him. "Stop, I say!"

"Leave me alone," said Hoichi. "Can't you see I am playing for these lords and ladies?"

The priest dragged him to his feet and took him back to the temple. When Hoichi returned to his senses, the priest described to him what had happened.

And they realized that he had been performing for the ghosts of the Taira. The clan that had perished in the Battle of Dan-no-ura had assembled to hear the tale of its demise.

●

Today tourists come to Dan-no-ura. They visit the tem-

ple and cemetery, where they are told about Hoichi—and of the strange lights still seen upon the waters.

And they are taken to the beach and shown a local species of crab. On the shell of the crab are markings like a face. These crabs, it is said, are reincarnations of the Taira.

Of those unhappy souls bound forever to the scene of their destruction.

Basho

Castle

Matsuo Kinsaku—the future Basho—was born in 1644 in Ueno, the capital of Iga Province. His father was a samurai who, in an era of peace, had taken to farming. Looming over the town was Ueno Castle, from which Lord Todo governed the province. It was to this castle that Matsuo was sent, at the age of nine, to serve as a page. He was assigned to a son of Todo, eleven-year-old Yoshitada.

Matsuo became Yoshitada's companion and study-mate; and the two were soon fast friends. Together they learned their ideographs—roamed the corridors of the castle—sported in the surrounding hills. Entering adolescence, the boys found themselves drawn more to literary than to martial arts; and a poet named Kigin was brought in from Kyoto to tutor them.

They took to poetry with a passion, dashing off haiku after haiku and even adopting pen-names (Sobo and Sengin). Kigin was pleased with their efforts, and secured publication—in an anthology issued in Kyoto—of several of their haiku.*

So Matsuo and Yoshitada grew into manhood together. Even after Yoshitada married, they remained close friends and continued to trade poems. For both the future seemed bright. Yoshitada was to succeed his father as governor of the province; and Matsuo could look forward to a high position under him.

Yet each spring, as the cherry blossoms made their brief appearance in the courtyard, the friends may have mused that human life and its blessings were no less ephemeral.

Indeed they could be brief. In his 25th year Yoshitada died suddenly of an illness; and Matsuo was plunged into

* A haiku is a formal poem of seventeen syllables. Until Basho infused it with a new spirit, the form was little more than a vehicle for wordplay and wit.

grief.

More adversity was to follow. As a retainer, Matsuo was reassigned to Yoshitada's brother. He found the relationship uncongenial, and asked to be released from fealty to the family. His request was denied. In desperation he resigned his position and ran off to Kyoto—in effect, renouncing his status as a samurai.

A new life was about to begin for the unhappy young man, in the imperial capital.

Kyoto

For several decades Japan had been governed from Edo (present-day Tokyo), where the Shogun—the military ruler—had established his headquarters. But the Emperor and court remained in Kyoto; and their patronage had given rise to a concentration of artists and scholars. The result was a lively and stimulating milieu—a cultural scene.

Seeking to assuage his grief, Matsuo gravitated to this scene. He looked up Kigin—who was living in a temple in Kyoto—and became his student again. Under Kigin, Matsuo studied the literary classics of Japan. He also sought out instruction in calligraphy and Chinese literature.

And he wrote poetry, gaining a measure of recognition. His haiku of this period are elegant and witty. They are also pedantic. Showing off his learning, he loaded them with allusions to the classics, court poetry, and *Noh* drama.

In 1672 he published his first book, *The Seashell Game.* It is a compilation of haiku by other poets, with a witty commentary by Matsuo. His own work, meanwhile, was appearing regularly in anthologies (under the name Sobo). Yet he probably had no intention of becoming a full-time poet. It was simply an absorbing pastime—one that could be either intellectual and solitary, or, in the case of *renku,* high-spirited and sociable.*

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* Renku, or linked verse, is a literary form unique to Japan—a parlor game for poets. Here's how it works:

A group of poets get together in pleasant surroundings. They wine and dine themselves. Then they set out to compose a

For five years Matsuo resided in Kyoto (returning now and again to Ueno). Little is known of the details of his life during this period; but his artistic and scholarly pursuits would seem to have been coupled with a bohemian existence. A woman named Jutei is believed to have been his mistress for a time.

Then Kigin—having found employment with the Shogun—moved to Edo; and Matsuo decided to follow him there. On the eve of his departure he knelt at his table and wrote a haiku:

Kumo to hedatsu
Tomo ka ya kari no
Ikiwakare

Or, loosely rendered:

Like wild geese that vanish in the sky
I leave forever. My treasured friends, goodbye!*

---

lengthy poem.

The leader begins by writing a haiku. He hands it to the poet beside him, who adds two lines—creating a stanza.

This stanza is given to the next poet, who copies only those two added lines. Using them as his *opening lines,* and taking off in some new direction, he composes the second stanza. And the game continues. Each poet contributes a stanza—its opening lines always the closing lines of the previous stanza.

This goes on until 36 (or more) stanzas have been completed. Each is independent—a kind of mini-poem—yet linked to the others. Limited only by the participants' imagination, the renku keeps shifting its scene, subject, and mood—taking the most unexpected twists. It can move abruptly from mountain to city, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Anything goes—though certain rules must be observed. For example, at designated points a reference must be made to the moon or to cherry blossoms.

The stanzas are read aloud as they are written—to sighs of appreciation, laughter, and calls for more wine.

* In translating haiku, I will follow the lead of Lafcadio Hearn, who declared: "Although some of my renderings are far from literal as to language, I believe that they express with tolerable faithfulness the thought and feelings of the originals."

Edo

Edo was a bustling, growing city—the seat of government and a commercial center. Matsuo was nearly 30 when he arrived, with little money and no prospects. He supported himself at first by taking odd jobs, including a stint as a scribe. Eventually, he found part-time employment with the Municipal Waterworks—a position he would hold onto for four years.

In his free time he devoted himself to poetry. Rival circles of poets had sprung up in Edo; and Matsuo joined one that advocated a wider choice of subject matter—an embrace of everyday life. Still using the name Sobo, he participated in renku sessions; judged haiku contests; and appeared frequently in anthologies. It was not long before he had acquired a solid reputation.

During his third year in the city, he was able to capitalize on that reputation—by opening a writing school. The composition of haiku and renku had become a popular pastime for the middle class; and his pupils were prosperous merchants and their children. Matsuo taught the basics of composition, and did correcting for a fee. According to reports, he was an inspiring teacher as well as a warm and likeable individual.

Artistically, this was a transitional period for Matsuo. He was both absorbing the latest trends in poetry, and beginning to develop a style of his own. Puns, witticisms, and classical allusions still appeared in his poems (though the allusions tended now to be mocking). But increasingly he was writing about everyday things, and using colloquial language in a vigorous way. A down-to-earth humor had found its way into his work. Take, for example, this haiku (written while moon-viewing from a boat):

> Bobbing on the waves, sipping wine
> And gazing—tipsy—at the moon divine.

Some of his poems were altogether humorous. After consuming a bowl of *fugu* soup (fugu, or puffer fish, is poisonous if not prepared properly), he wrote:

Fugu soup a day ago I drank—
Yet still alive! My lucky star to thank!

On the other hand, serious overtones had begun to appear. Consider the following poem:

Mr. Spider, you don't sing much, hey?
The autumn wind, in whose sigh you sway.

The spider, waiting in its web, is jokingly compared to a musical cricket. Yet a melancholy note is struck with the reference to autumn wind.

Matsuo was a successful poet by now—a luminary on the literary scene. He had acquired a coterie of followers, as evidenced by the publication in 1680 of *Best Poems of Tosei's Twenty Disciples.* (Tosei, or Green Peach, was the new pen-name he had adopted.) Indeed, so devoted to their master were these students that one of them—a fish wholesaler named Sampu—magnanimously bought him a house.

Hut

Actually it was only a hut, in the swampy, undeveloped Fukagawa district. Overlooking the Sumida River, this former watchman's lodge was just the place for a poet. Its thatched roof was picturesque; its surroundings were rustic. Matsuo (who had been living in rented rooms downtown) brought over his few possessions and moved in.

The hut came with a yard, overgrown with reeds. Students stopped by to tidy up the yard. And one of them brought a sapling and planted it by the door. It was a *basho,* or banana tree.

The plant thrived; and Matsuo soon had an exotic tree to sit under. In so temperate a climate it would not bear fruit. But the large leaves provided shade; and there was an aesthetic attraction:

> A banana tree need not fear the ax, for it is useless as construction wood. But its uselessness is precisely what I love about my banana tree.…Lounging under it, I savor the wind and rain beating on its leaves.

So distinctive was this tree that neighbors began referring to Matsuo's abode as the *Basho-an,* or Banana Hut. And they were soon attaching a moniker to the poet himself: Master Basho. He liked the sound of that, and decided to adopt it as his pen-name.

So he dropped Tosei and began to sign his poems and letters Basho. Friends and students started calling him that.

Thus it was that Japan's greatest poet became known as Basho, or Banana.*

Since moving to the hut, Master Basho had closed his poetry school and ceased to give formal lessons or to correct for a fee. But he was still a teacher, with students who looked to him for guidance. They would hike out to the Fukagawa district and drop in on him. Tea would be sipped, poetry discussed. Basho welcomed the company; for though enjoying the isolation of his new home, he was no recluse. From time to time he even gave parties: congenial affairs at which poetry was written and sake imbibed. Or he would walk into town, to visit Kigin or some other friend.

Yet the hut was essentially a retreat—a secluded location for writing, reading, and pondering. Part of its attraction for Basho was its resemblance to a mountain hermitage, the traditional dwelling place of poets and sages. Humble and out-of-the-way, the Banana Hut was a cozy hideaway. Even the leaking roof was part of its charm:

> In my banana tree, the wind's refrain
> And in a bucket, the pattering of rain.

His stay in the hut was a milestone for Basho. On the one hand, he had distanced himself from the literary scene in Edo. On the other, he found his stride, making the transition to a mature and individual style. A poem published in 1680 has been seen as inaugurating that style:

> Perched upon the withered branch, a crow.
> Autumn evening. In the west, a glow.

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* Whimsical pseudonyms are not unknown among writers—Mark Twain, Shalom Aleichem, Boz.

The poem is startling in its simplicity. Wholly descriptive, it offers no commentary, wordplay, or wit. It captures a moment in nature—and that is all. No meaning is intended. Yet how suggestive an image—how fraught with overtones—how rich in wabi and sabi!

Henceforth, Basho would leave behind his old concerns and techniques. His haiku would focus on daily life, his own feelings, and the small miracles of nature. And they would have a consistent goal: *to uncover beauty.*

He had reinvented the haiku. What had been a vehicle for wit and pedantry was endowed with a seriousness of purpose. The form would appeal to the most profound sensibilities, and become a mainstay of literary expression.

Meanwhile, life went on for Basho:

> I live alone in a dilapidated hut by the river. I sit and admire the view of distant Fuji and of passing boats. In the morning I watch boats sail out of the harbor. At night I sit in the moonlight, listening to the wind in the reeds and lamenting the emptiness of my cask. Even in bed I lament—the thinness of my blankets!

Fire

Basho was successful now. He had literary fame, follow-

ers, and a livelihood of sorts. (Students would leave rice in a gourd by the door and sake in a cask.) It was a life of genteel poverty that suited his temperament.

Yet a dissatisfaction was gnawing at him. He had moved to the Fukagawa district to escape the literary scene, with its vanities, and to simplify his life. But nameless ills had pursued him even here. And he began to experience an uneasiness—a melancholy—a malaise.

> The wind is brisk, the hour late.
> Dead leaves swirl against my flimsy gate.
>
> A winter night. The sound of an oar
> Makes me weep. Chills me to the core.

In an attempt to overcome these feelings, he had immersed himself in his work. But something more was needed.

Staying nearby was a priest named Buccho. (The head of a Zen temple in Hitachi province, he had come to Edo to settle a lawsuit.) Basho became acquainted with him, and began to study Zen under his guidance. The poet meditated, grappled with koans. He took to wearing a monk's robe. He pondered the transitory nature of existence—the emptiness of ambition—the possibility of enlightenment.

As if to impress these teachings upon him, in the winter of 1682 a major fire struck Edo; and the Banana Hut was among the dwellings destroyed. It was a harrowing experience for Basho. Under a sky black with smoke, he had taken refuge in the river, submerging his body and covering his head with a mat.

Leaving the stricken city for several months, Basho resided in Kai province with one of Buccho's disciples. Soon after his return to Edo, he received word that his mother had died.

Those withered leaves were swirling.

His students took up a collection for Basho. They found him a new abode in Fukagawa, furnished it, planted a banana tree in the yard. Upon moving into this resurrected Banana Hut, he knelt at his desk and wrote:

The same old oak am I—useless, aloof.
Hail pounding on a brand-new roof.

For a while life went on as before. He published an anthology called *Shriveled Chestnuts.* It was acclaimed; and his fame grew.

But that dissatisfaction did not go away. So Basho did what any Japanese—spiritually restless—might have done. He embarked upon a pilgrimage.

On the Road

His destination was Ise, with its shrine to Amaterasu. But after paying his respects to the goddess, Basho intended to keep traveling. He wanted to sightsee; to visit friends and family; and to write poetry along the way. His inspiration in this was Saigyo, a twelfth-century poet who had wandered about Japan, and the itinerant sages of China.

In the black robe of a monk and the straw sandals of a traveler, Basho set out upon the highway. In *Records of a Weather-beaten Skeleton* (the travel sketch he would write upon his return), he describes the moment of departure:

> Like that priest of ancient China who traveled endlessly without worrying about his next meal and who reached a state of ecstasy in the moonlight, I left my lowly abode on the Sumida River in the eighth month of the first year of Jyokyo [1684], just as the autumn winds were starting to blow.

Basho was accompanied by one of his students, who served as both companion and servant. They journeyed on foot (though occasionally renting a horse or taking a boat). Travel was a daunting affair, even in this era of peace. The roads were primitive, the terrain rugged. And there would be storms, disease, and highwaymen to be reckoned with. Almost immediately, for example, they were detained—for several days—by the rain-swollen Oi River. But Basho was determined to press on. Should he perish and become a pile of bones beside the road (that weather-beaten skeleton), so be it!

After several weeks they reached Ise. On account of his Buddhist garb, Basho was refused admission to the shrine itself. But he was content simply to linger on the grounds, and to pray amidst the ancient cedars. He was drawn to a tree known as the Cedar of Five Hundred Branches:

> A moonless night. A celebrated tree
> Embracèd by the wailing wind…and me.

His next stop was Ueno, where he visited relatives and paid homage at his mother's grave. It had been eight years since his last visit.

Then it was on to Mt. Yoshino, to view the cherry blossoms there and to inspect a hut in which Saigyo had lived. Coming upon a spring where Saigyo had washed, Basho too washed there. He describes how the temple bells, ringing throughout the mountains, "moved me at the core of my being."

And he journeyed on. Staff in hand and faithful student at his side, Basho trekked through central Japan. His accommodations included inns, temples, and the homes of fellow poets. Wherever he stayed, Basho spent the evening writing or reworking poems.

> A simple violet by the mountain road
> Has conjured me. With love I overload!

> Spring is here! And a morning thrill:
> Haze hovering on that nameless hill.

> My horse is pondering a roadside flower
> An exquisite mallow—which he proceeds
> to devour.

By the end of April Basho was back home. And he realized that the goal of his journey had been, not Ise, but his own inner self. For he had found his mission: to be a wandering poet. To roam the land, as Saigyo had done, in search of beauty. Therein seemed to lie the answer to his doubts and dissatisfaction.

Lounging under the banana tree, he discovered a

memento of his travels:

> Something by which my roaming to recall:
> In this summer robe the lice yet crawl.

Idle Days

For a time Basho lived comfortably in his abode. Friends would drop by for tea and conversation. And he would give parties—jovial gatherings dedicated to moon-viewing, snow-viewing, blossom-viewing. Though barely 40, Basho referred to himself now as "an idle old man." But his brush was not idle; and he continued to capture poetical moments.

> High above the heath a skylark sings
> Unattached to any earthly things.

> All day the lark has sung—melodious fop!
> And still he sings. He just can't stop.

A friend named Sora lived nearby; and the two exchanged regular visits. When Sora dropped by one day after it had snowed, Basho wrote:

> You prepare the fire, tea, and bowl
> Whilst I a giant snowball go and roll.

It was during this period that Basho composed his best-known poem. He was meditating with friends in his garden—when a frog jumped into the pond. Spontaneously, Basho murmured part of a haiku. After a discussion on how to complete it, he came up with the rest.

> The stillness of a pond. Then, *ker-plop!*
> Into the water a frog decides to hop.

Taken with the notion, he decided to host an evening of poetry writing in which the subject would be limited to frogs. The event was held at the Banana Hut. Ink and sake flowed as poets vied with one another to come up with frog poems. The results were published in an anthology called

Frog Contest.

Basho was enjoying himself. But the desire to travel was gnawing at him. And in the fall of 1687 he was on the road again.

Kashima

Basho was headed for Kashima, a popular shrine 50 miles away. His purpose was twofold: to visit Buccho, his Zen master, who had retired there; and to satisfy an "irresistible urge" to view the harvest moon from Kashima—a sight said to be incomparable.

He was accompanied by Sora and a priest with a portable altar on his back. In an account of the trip, Basho notes that he and the priest are dressed alike. Yet poets are neither priest nor layman, he muses, but something in between. They are like bats, which are neither bird nor mouse.

At Kashima they stayed with Buccho in a temple. Alas, the night was rainy; and the moon could not be seen. But Basho was consoled by the tranquillity of the temple. And rising before dawn, he was granted a glimpse of the moon.

> From my temple mat I groggily rise
> And gaze upon the moon with grateful eyes.

Battered Satchel

Soon after returning from Kashima, he was off again—on a journey that would last nearly a year. As friends gathered to bid adieu to him and a companion, Basho composed a departure poem:

> Marching off, the morning dark and wet.
> A traveler again. How far will I get?

To which a friend appended the line:

> You'll sleep among flowers. Do not fret.

The usual hardships lay ahead. But Basho was ready for them. In the satchel on his back he carried (along with the

all-important brush, ink, and paper) a winter coat, medicine kit, and lunchbox. Wrapping his raincoat about him, he set off down the road.

> Like Saigyo [he recounts in *Records of a Battered Satchel*] I trudged along…savoring the beauties of mountain and sea; stopping at secluded places where sages had dwelt; visiting with poets. As a wanderer, I had no desire to acquire anything; and without possessions, I had no fear of being robbed. I ambled along, content to be traveling by foot. I ate the simplest of meals. With no itinerary, I let the wind lead me. My only cares were finding a place to stay at night, and replacing my sandals. I kept coming upon things that were new and fascinating.

As Basho plodded along highway, back road, and path, almost anything—a waterfall, the ruins of a temple, a peasant digging potatoes—might catch his fancy and inspire a poem. Inns were his usual accommodations for the night. But in towns he often stayed with poets, who were honored to play host to the master of haiku. In Nasoya a group of poets invited him to a snow-viewing party.

> The snow is deep beneath my stumbling feet.
> Falling, I ooh and ah—how *white* this sheet!

From province to province he traveled; and the haiku flowed from his brush.

Mountain spirit, I discern your face
In the blazing blossoms of this place.

Toward a distant isle the cuckoo flies.
Fading in the mist: its forlorn cries.

But the most poignant lines were written in Ueno. Basho visited the castle—presided over now by Yoshitada's son—and gazed upon the cherry blossoms in the courtyard.

Ah, the very trees I left behind.
What memories these blossoms bring to mind.

Toward the end of his journey he was joined by a friend named Etsujin. Basho describes this dyer from Nasoya as "someone who labors for three days, then takes three days off—a lover of sake who likes nothing better than to get drunk and sing old ballads." The pair rented a horse and—"inspired by the autumn moon"—headed for the mountain village of Sarashima. They wished to view the harvest moon from scenic heights.

Sarashima could be reached only by a perilous road that wound into the mountains. Neither man was experienced in this sort of travel; and during the climb, they kept making blunders. "These made us laugh, however," says Basho, "and gave us the resolve to press on."

> Above us mountain towered over mountain; while directly to our left, a sheer cliff plunged a thousand feet to a raging river. Clinging to the saddle, I froze with fear whenever the horse gave a lurch.…The road ascended into the clouds. I got off the horse and staggered along, made dizzy by the height. Our servant mounted the horse, and—oblivious to the danger—kept nodding off. I was sure he was about to slip from the saddle and tumble over the cliff! Whenever he started to doze, I was terrified for the fellow. But it occurred to me that we are all just like him: wandering the world in a storm, oblivious to unseen dangers. Watching us from heaven, the Buddha must be as apprehensive for our fate as I was for that of the servant.

They were rewarded with a magnificent view of the moon.

It was late autumn when Basho arrived back at his hut. His satchel was battered, but filled with poems.

North

> …I yearned to be traveling again—northward this time. My soul was in the grip of a god, who urged me to depart. I was beset with thoughts of the open road, until the walls of my hut became unbearable. As I prepared to roam —replacing the strap on my hat, mending my pants, strengthening my legs with *moxa*—I dreamt of the moon over the islands of Matsushima.

Thus begins *Narrow Road to the Deep North,* the account of his next—and most famous—journey. Basho had decided to ramble through the northern provinces—a rugged region that drew few visitors. Before doing so, he sold the Banana Hut. Either he had tired of it, or did not expect to return.

He set out in the spring of 1689, accompanied by Sora. His aim was to visit the usual assortment of scenic locales, sacred mountains, shrines, monuments, waterfalls, ruins—following again in the footsteps of Saigyo (for the medieval poet had been here too). But Basho also wanted to savor the traditional way of life—the folkways that had survived intact in this backward area.

And, of course, he planned to return with souvenirs of their trek. With haiku.

On the third day they reached the shrine on Mt. Nikko—a site so holy that Basho refuses to describe it. He will say only that Nikko means "sunshine," and that the shrine illumines the nation with its benevolent influence. On the mountain he prayed and gazed over the countryside.

> The new leaves, brilliant in the light
> Fill me with awe—rapture—downright delight!

Their next stop was the willow under which Saigyo had rested and written:

> A shady willow
> By a rill
> I stop to rest…
> I'm stopping still.

Basho, too, sat in its shade and came up with a poem:

> So long we linger (whom these boughs enchant)
> The farmers an entire field plant.

Finally they reached the barrier-gate at Shirakawa—a military checkpoint that marked the start of the northern region. The guards eyed these two characters with suspicion, but allowed them to pass.

And Basho and Sora began to explore the deep north. They listened to farm girls chant rice-planting songs (a custom that had died out in the rest of Japan)…had tea at a temple that claimed to possess the sword of Yoshitsune (a legendary warrior) and the satchel of Benkei (his sidekick)…bathed in a hot spring…located a hut where Buccho had

stayed…listened to a blind musician sing archaic songs… visited the Tsubo Stone—a thousand-year-old monument before which Basho, sensing the presence of the ancients, wept with joy.

And they viewed the islands of Matsushima—hundreds of islands in a bay—said to be the most breathtaking sight in Japan. In their inn that night, Basho found himself unable to complete a poem. "My brush sought in vain," he laments, "to comment upon this divine wonder." Instead he sat with windows open to the vista, reading poems by others about Matsushima.

More often, though, the haiku flowed from his brush. After visiting a historic battlefield, Basho wrote:

> This windswept field of summer grass
> All that's left of valorous deeds, alas!

After traveling by boat down the swollen Mogami River:

> The rains are gathered in a single flow
> And in torrents to the ocean go.

After visiting a picturesque lagoon:

> Shallows at Shiogoshi, cool and wide
> Cranes hop and ponder in the tide.

After viewing Lord Sanemori's battle helmet, on display at a shrine:

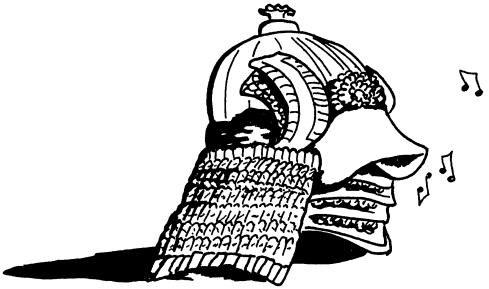
> Sanemori, dreaded in his day—
> A cricket in his helmet chirps away.

After gazing out to Sado Island (notorious for its prison):

> Toward distant Sado, over a surging sea
> The Milky Way flows eternally.

In September Basho reemerged into familiar territory, having traveled more than a thousand miles. On horseback he entered the town of Ogaki, where friends lived. With jubilation they greeted him.

"They were overwhelmed to see me," he remarks, "as if I had come back from the dead."



Fame

Basho was at the height of his fame now—and homeless. For the next two years he drifted about, living in summer cottages loaned to him by friends. These rustic retreats—with names such as the Unreal Dwelling, the Nameless Hut, the House of Fallen Persimmons—were located near Lake Biwa or outside of Kyoto. In them he worked on *Narrow Road to the Deep North* and other projects; "thought about right and wrong, by lamplight at night"; and entertained guests. He was particularly fond of the Unreal Dwelling, with its panoramic view of lake and mountain. In the vicinity were ancient shrines and temples, which Basho would visit.

> A monk in silence sips upon his tea
> Chrysanthemums his only company.

Then he returned to Edo, where his students built for him a new hut—even planting five banana trees in the yard. Basho gratefully moved in. But he found himself unable to write or to ponder. For his fame was such that admirers were constantly appearing on his doorstep.

At first Basho seems to have enjoyed this gregarious existence. The literary scene in Edo was thriving; and he was its star. But he began to yearn for solitude—and for relief from responsibilities. For he was contributing now to the support of several persons: his former mistress Jutei and her

children, and an ailing nephew.

Finally this worldly involvement became too much for him. So Basho locked his gate and became a recluse. In solitude he contemplated his situation.

> My gate is bolted, my garden overgrown
> With morning glories. I sit alone.

A month later he unlocked the gate and emerged. A solution had come to him, he told friends—a philosophical stance he called *karumi* ("lightness"). Essentially, it was a detachment whereby one could be in the world, yet not of it. A bystander, rather than a participant.

His friends welcomed him back. And Basho settled into the role of celebrated poet. He was able to smile now upon the rigors of fame and the bustle of the city.

> Is that a cuckoo, caroling from afar
> Or just a pedlar, whose cries the quiet mar?

Final Journey

But again the road beckoned. And in the summer of 1694 Basho set out on what would be his last trek. His destination was the southern tip of Japan.

He got as far as Osaka, where he was stricken with dysentery. His condition worsened; and it became evident that Basho was dying. Friends and students gathered at his bedside.

They requested a *jisei*—the death poem of a sage, in which he sums up his view of the world. At first Basho refused. Each of his poems for the past decade, he insisted, had been composed as if it were the last.

But that night Basho had a dream; and waking from it, he conceived a haiku. Calling for his attendant, he dictated:

> Fallen ill while on a rambling tour
> In dreams still roving—on a lonely moor.

Later Basho called a student to his bedside; recited another version of the poem; and asked which was bet-

ter. Then he said:

> What am I doing, writing haiku while on the threshold of death. But for 50 years poetry has been my life—my obsession. Even in sleep I would roam under a cloud-filled sky or in the twilight, and be struck by the sound of a brook or a bird. According to the Buddha, such attachment is sinful; and I have been guilty of that sin. I wish I had never written a poem—never written a poem!

Several days later he expired.

Hundreds of mourners followed his body in a procession to Lake Biwa. And in a cemetery overlooking the water, Basho was buried.

The Bronze Buddha

The Bronze Buddha of Kamakura is a wonder of the land. It is famed for both its height (over 40 feet) and its artistry. Built when Kamakura was the capital, it has sat in mute contemplation for the last seven centuries—except on one occasion.

At the time in question, the statue resided in a temple. (Today it sits in the open air, the temple having been destroyed by a storm.) Pilgrims came in droves to see what was said to be the colossus of the world.

Word of the statue reached the Whale, who was cruising the Inland Sea. At first the great beast refused to believe that he might have a rival in size. But disbelief turned to jealousy, as he was told of the crowds that were flocking to Kamakura. Furious, he thrashed about in the water. Could it be? Was the Bronze Buddha truly larger than he?

The thought was intolerable. So the Whale resolved to find out just how large the statue was. Donning a pair of magical boots, he strode ashore at Kamakura and headed for the temple. Reaching it at midnight, he knocked on the high door.

The priests were all asleep. So the Bronze Buddha called out: "Yes? Come in."

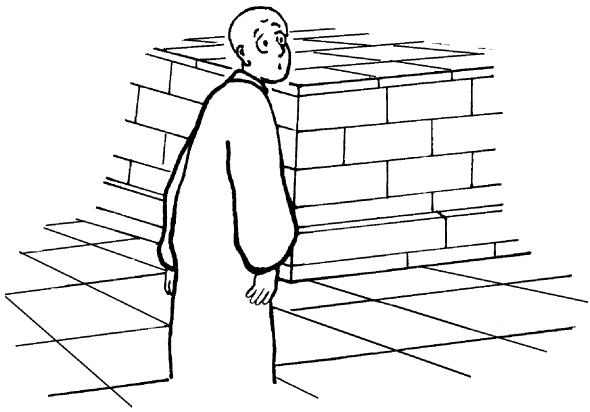
"I cannot do that," said the Whale. "I am too large to fit through the doorway. You come out."

The Bronze Buddha frowned. Who could this be? And descending from its pedestal, it walked to the doorway, bent low, and squeezed through.

In the moonlight they regarded one another. The Bronze Buddha was amazed to see so gigantic a creature. And the Whale was dismayed to find that he did indeed have a rival in size.

Meanwhile, one of the priests had awoke; and passing through the hall, he gasped. The Bronze Buddha was gone —its pedestal was empty!

Then he heard voices from outside. Deep, rumbling



voices. Peeking through the doorway, he slapped himself in disbelief. There was the statue, engaged in conversation with the Whale. They were debating something.

The Whale noticed the priest and said: "You there! Measure us and determine who is the larger."

The priest went and got a ladder. And using his rosary, he carefully measured each of them—announcing finally that the Whale was two inches larger.

"Hah!" cried the Whale. And striding off in triumph, he returned to the sea. There he has been boasting ever since of his supreme size.

The Bronze Buddha, for its part, returned to the pedestal and sat down. "So," it murmured, "there is a creature larger than I." Thankful for the lesson in humility, it resumed its blissful expression.

Paper

Nowhere has paper been more appreciated—more honored—more *utilized*—than in Japan.

A Chinese invention, paper was introduced along with Buddhism and writing. The manufacturing process was refined; and Japanese paper was soon of a surpassing quality. Its earliest uses were for official documents, sacred texts, and Buddhist charms. And paper flowers were used to decorate altars.

The rise of an idle aristocracy led to further uses. These refined souls could not have functioned without paper. Elegantly textured sheets of it bore their poems, diaries, and love letters. The paper was sometimes perfumed.

Paper also found its way into Shinto shrines. Strips were folded into zigzags and offered to the kami. A paper broom was used for purification. Paper cut-outs adorned the shrine.

But it was in articles of daily life that paper truly came into its own. Parasols, fans, lanterns, kites, masks, and gift-wrap were turned out by skilled craftsmen. And paper walls became an integral part of houses.

Why this passion for paper? Why did the Japanese take to it in such a fashion? Perhaps its fragility appealed to the national character. A parasol, pounded by rain, is at once exquisite and ephemeral. The same sensibility that was fond of cherry blossoms was attracted to paper.

That attraction gave rise to a popular pastime. Idle individuals began to fold paper into recognizable shapes. They explored its sculptural possibilities; and thus arose origami, the art of paper-folding. Over the centuries a multiplicity of forms—samurai, butterfly, crane, frog, boat, pagoda, etc.—have been devised.

For more on origami, see "How to Fold a Paper House."

Festival of the Dead

Opinion has varied in Japan as to the fate of the dead. The earliest traditions speak of a ghostland beyond the mountains, or of an Underworld—a dark realm of polluted souls. With Buddhism came belief in heaven and hell. The virtuous could look forward to an Abode of Bliss; the wicked, to a place of punishment. Buddhists believed too in reincarnation. Souls that had failed to achieve perfection would be reborn in an appropriate guise (after storage in a kind of cosmic warehouse).

As Buddhist sects proliferated, they formed differing concepts of the afterlife. In one important matter, however, all agreed. *Whatever his fate, the deceased retained an intimate connection with his family.* Indeed, he was still a member of the household—to be honored, communicated with, and fed!

This belief—that the dead remain in a vital relationship with the living—is known as ancestor worship. All societies seem to have practiced it, at an early phase of their development. (It was an important element, for instance, in Greek and Roman culture.) But as societies develop, they tend to abandon ancestor worship. Only in China and Japan, among sophisticated civilizations, did it retain a central place. And only in Japan has it continued to thrive.

The focus of Japanese ancestor worship is a household altar known as the *butsudan* (not to be confused with the kamidana, or god-shelf, also found in most homes). The butsudan is a cabinet containing an image of the Buddha; wooden memorial tablets for close relatives who have died; and the Book of the Past—a scroll listing the names of remote ancestors. A daily prayer is recited at the butsudan; and an offering is made—usually rice and tea. Incense is burned; a candle is lit at night. Hovering about this sacred place is a sense of the presence of one's ancestors. Wherever they have gone, one is *in touch* with them here. The prayers and offerings serve to honor them, and to make them comfortable in their new home.

But these rites are also for the benefit of the living. For the deceased have become kami, with supernatural powers. If duly venerated, they will intervene in the affairs of the family—promoting its prosperity and helping to avert misfortune. Thus, one prays to the ancestors and requests their aid; thanks them; apologizes for misdeeds. One may also solicit their advice (attainable via a dream or a medium).

Such ceremonies are a daily event in any traditional household. And they are augmented and expanded on certain occasions. The most important of these is a three-day holiday called *bon matsuri,* or Festival of the Dead. Held in mid August, the Festival of the Dead is one of the high points of the Japanese calendar. For during it one's ancestors drop by for a visit.

The Festival of the Dead is essentially a family reunion. As with Christmas in the West, people travel long distances to be home for the holiday. Cars clog the highways; trains and buses are packed. But this is a reunion with a difference. For busy too are the celestial byways. *The ancestors are on their way.*

To welcome them, the house has been meticulously cleaned. It has been decorated with fruit and flowers. Favorite possessions of the departed—pipe, book, musical instrument—have been brought out. By the door has been placed a bucket of water: the ancestors will want to wash their feet upon arrival. On the front of the house has been hung a paper lantern. It will light the way to the door. (If a death has occurred during the year, additional lanterns—contributed by friends and neighbors—have been hung.)

As evening falls, the streets come alive with lanterns. Families emerge from their houses and make their way to the cemetery. There they decorate the graves of their departed—with fruit, rice balls, sakaki branches. They light a lantern and place it on the grave; and the cemetery, too, is soon ablaze with lights. It is an invitation for the spirits of the dead to rise from their graves, and to join their families in celebration. The spirits accept the invitation, and—by the light of yet another lantern—are escorted back to the house.

At the door shoes are removed (by living and dead alike);

and everyone passes inside. The butsudan is opened. In front of it is assembled a spirit altar, on which are placed the memorial tablets. The spirits of the departed enter the tablets, where they will reside for the duration of the festival. Prayers are recited. Incense is lit. Then the spirits are served small portions of their favorite foods—offerings that serve to welcome them home.*

The family (its flesh-and-blood members) sits down now to a meal whose portions are far from token. A feast! The occasion is at once solemn and joyous. For departed parents and grandparents have returned—have rejoined the family circle. Spoken to as if physically present, they are brought up to date: on accomplishments, transitions, problems. New members of the family are introduced to them. As the evening unfolds, feasting and conviviality are the rule. Yet the formalities are not neglected. A priest may stop by to chant sutras before the altar. (It is not unknown for a medium also to visit and communicate directly with the dead.) And additional ceremonies are enacted.

Thus are the departed brought back to the family residence and feted. But on the second day, the focus of the holiday shifts from home to street. It is festival time; and a carnival—with food, games, and entertainment—is soon underway. The main event comes in the evening: a wild dance called the *bon odori.* An outdoor stage has been erected and hung with lanterns. On it musicians lay into drums, gongs, and flutes. The din rouses the crowd, who form concentric circles around the stage and begin to dance. They strike poses, gyrate in unison, sing and clap. It is a Japanese version of the bunny hop. The ostensible purpose of the bon odori is to entertain the spirits. But it also serves to enliven the living, and to unite them in a communal rapture. The dancing may continue until dawn.

On the third night of the festival the ancestors are given a send-off. A final offering—of rice balls to sustain them on their return journey—is placed on the altar. Farewell fires

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* In many households a second altar is set up—for spirits who have no family to pray for them and therefore are wandering about in a troubled state. The idea is to pacify them.

are lit in the streets. (In Kyoto a huge bonfire in the shape of a *dai*—the character for "huge"—is lit on the side of a mountain.) And the soul-ships are brought out. These are blocks of wood with a lantern at the prow and incense at the stern. Each has been inscribed with the name of a departed. The soul-ships are taken down to the river or harbor. And as the lanterns are lit, the spirits of the dead enter the flames.

Then the soul-ships are launched. The waters fill with them, as families bid adieu to loved ones. Throughout Japan millions of these tiny craft drift out to sea, flickering in the night. Known as the Tide of Departing Spirits, it is a moving sight. The ancestors are returning to the spirit world. As they float off, their families call out: "Come back next year."

Lafcadio Hearn has described the Tide of Departing Spirits: "Down all the creeks and rivers and canals the phantom fleets go glimmering to the sea; and all the sea sparkles to the horizon with the lights of the dead, and the sea wind is fragrant with incense."*

* Sailors are superstitious about the Tide of Departing Spirits. During it they will neither put out to sea nor enter a harbor. Should a ship get caught up in the Tide, the dead are said to rise

And thus concludes the Festival of the Dead. It is a communal holiday in which all of Japan—even her past generations—participates. Though uniquely Japanese, it has been compared with All-hallow Eve (the ancient holiday from which Halloween derives). On that night the dead were believed to roam the earth and cause mischief. To placate them, offerings were made and jack-o'-lanterns lit. Yet how different in character is the Japanese holiday. Its spirits are grandparents, not anonymous ghosts. They inspire veneration, not fear. And they come in the lazy month of August, rather than gloomy November.

Come not to make trouble, but to enjoy themselves at a family feast!

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from the water, hold out their hands, and call for a bucket. Wise sailors comply with this demand. But aware that the offended spirits intend to sink their ship, they toss them a bucket with no bottom.

The Sacrifice

In a hut on the island of Nao dwelt an old couple, Sobei and O Yone. The sole inhabitants of the island, they lived on the fish they caught and the vegetables they grew. And they lived happily, isolated from the turbulence of the times. (This was during the Hogen Rebellion of the twelfth century.)

One day they were surprised to hear a knock on their door. Standing there was a young man—seventeen or eighteen years old—of noble aspect and royal dress. He introduced himself as Shutoku, the de-throned Emperor, and begged forgiveness for intruding upon them.

Stunned, the couple fell to their knees. Their visitor smiled and motioned for them to rise. And he related what had happened to him.

"After replacing me on the throne," he said, "the new Emperor ordered me banished to a distant place. So a ship brought me to this island and marooned me on the shore. It was assumed that no one lived here, and that sooner or later I would perish.

"At first I considered taking my own life and shortening the agony. I sat on a large rock, staring out to sea and ruing my fate. But I decided to live—for as long as Amaterasu saw fit. Then, wandering along the beach, I spotted your hut. And here I am."

Sobei declared him welcome to anything they had. The ex-Emperor could stay in their hut while they built him a shelter of his own. They would share their food with him, and serve him as best they could.

He thanked them; and after a plain but satisfying meal, the three set to work erecting a shelter on the beach.

The months went by. The young man helped the couple to fish and to farm; prayed with them to the kami of the island; conversed with them over a candle at night. And he came to love them for their simplicity and devotion. He came to love the island, too, with its windy beaches and flock of gulls. During the winter he took sick; and Sobei

and O Yone brought him back to health with herbs they gathered.

Not long after his recovery, he was sitting on that large rock—gazing at the sea and brooding—when he realized he was not alone. A dozen men in armor were standing by the rock, with grim expressions.

"Your Majesty," said their leader, a tall, gray-haired samurai, "I am Furuzuka Iga, and I have come to discharge a painful duty. The new Emperor fears that, though banished to this distant place, you remain a threat to the stability of the nation. He has sent me, therefore, to behead you. Please forgive me, and allow me to perform the terrible deed as quickly as possible."

Unfazed, the recipient of this death sentence climbed off the rock, lay on the sand, and told Iga to proceed.

Iga started to weep. "How brave this ill-fated youth!" he said. "And how unhappy I, his executioner."

But he braced himself; whispered a few words; and with a swift chop, did the deed.

"Return to the ship," he ordered his men. "Sail home with the body, and show the Emperor that his command has been obeyed. My servant and I shall remain here for a time. For I wish to grieve for this noble youth, and pray for

his soul."

When his men had departed, Iga fell to the sand and wept loudly.

Later that day Sobei and O Yone came hobbling along the beach, looking for Shutoku. At the rock where he was wont to sit they found only Iga, still kneeling and weeping.

"Who are you?" asked Sobei. Then he saw the bloodstains in the sand and cried: "Where is our friend?"

Identifying himself as an imperial envoy, Iga revealed what had happened. The couple exploded in fury. They attacked Iga with their canes, though aware that their lives would be forfeit. The samurai was able to subdue them with ease. And he said:

"Hear me. The young man whom you befriended and cared for was not Shutoku. He was my son Taro. When the task of marooning the ex-Emperor fell upon me, I had no choice but to perform my duty. Yet I could not treat a descendant of Amaterasu—a Prince of Heaven to whom I had been pledged—in such a manner. So I asked my son—who bore a resemblance to Shutoku—to don his clothing and pose as him. Taro did so willingly. And I marooned him instead. Abandoned him to his fate!

"But the new Emperor began to worry that Shutoku might have survived, and would return someday to regain his throne. So he ordered me to go back to the island and slay him. Dutifully, I obeyed. I slew my own son. Sundered the thread of life with this accursed sword. Pummel not, but pity such a father.

"So yes, Taro is gone—your friend and my son. But know that Shutoku lives, and will be here shortly. I thank you for what you did for my son, and for the cause of the banished Emperor."

Again he began to weep; and the old couple, left speechless by his tale, joined him. Patches of tears joined the bloodstains in the sand.

A figure was approaching along the shore.

"The ex-Emperor," said Iga.

Shutoku came walking toward them. Though disguised as a servant, he bore himself with an aristocratic mien. As he drew near, his resemblance to Taro became evident.

They bowed to him. Iga presented Sobei and O Yone, explaining what the couple had done for Taro. Shutoku thanked them, then knelt in the sand and prayed for the soul of Taro. The three joined him; and their prayers mingled with the roar of the sea.

The next day Iga rowed himself to the mainland. Shutoku stayed behind. He had decided to remain on the island for the rest of his days.

And remain he did, cared for by the old couple. He would sit on that rock, playing his lute and staring out to sea. And he would pray for the soul of Taro. But in less than a year he was dead, overcome by mournfulness.

In memory of their noble guests, Sobei and O Yone built a shrine. It was located near the rock where both youths had sat brooding.

Years later the poet Saigyo came to the island and prayed for two weeks—while sitting on the rock. It thus became known as Saigyo's Rock.

Hokusai

The son of a mirror-maker, Hokusai (as he would become known) began drawing at the age of five—and never stopped. For nearly a century he knelt at his bench, turning out an estimated *30,000 drawings.* He was the most prolific of artists—a fountain of images—a kind of mirror of the world.

As a youth Hokusai was put to work as a wood engraver, carving out the designs of others. It was a meticulous form of drudgery that fostered discipline. But his drawing ability was recognized; and at the age of eighteen (in 1778) he was apprenticed to Shunsho, one of Edo's leading artists.

Shunsho himself specialized in portraits of actors, for the print industry. But his studio turned out a wide range of designs—wrestlers, courtesans, ancient heroes, landscapes, street-scenes; and Hokusai tried his hand at all of these. He also illustrated novelettes. Showing considerable skill, the apprentice was awarded a brush-name: Shunro.*

For fifteen years he drew for the studio, signing his work Shunro. During this time he acquired a growing reputation —in particular as a book illustrator. He also married and had three children.

Then Master Shunsho died. For a while Hokusai remained with the studio (which was taken over by Shunko). But it no longer commanded his loyalty; and he began to study with other teachers, exposing himself to a variety of styles: academic, Chinese, European. This independence of his—along with a forceful personality—led to tensions at the studio; and finally he was expelled.

Hokusai would come to view his expulsion as a boon; for it allowed him to develop a style of his own. He began now to draw in a lively—even experimental—manner. And he

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* It was traditional for a master to bestow variants of his name upon favored pupils. (Shunsho had been named after *his* teacher, Shunsui.) Thus, Hokusai—dubbed Shunro—found himself working alongside Shunko, Shunjo, and Shunei!

decided to sell the brush-name Shunro (which his reputation made valuable) to another artist, and take a new name: Sori.

Unaffiliated with any studio, he settled into the role (an unusual one) of a freelance artist. Hokusai took whatever commissions came his way—for prints, book illustrations, paintings. There were dry spells: at one point he was reduced to peddling almanacs in the street. But he eventually found himself a niche; and his main source of income became the design of *surimono.*

Surimono were illustrated poems, printed on cards. Aesthetes of the day would write these poems; have them illustrated and printed up; and pass them out to friends. The cards were avidly collected; and the most sought after were those illustrated by Hokusai. So distinctive was his style—known as the Sori Style—that he began to attract both students and imitators.

Successful now, the 36-year-old artist began to receive all sorts of commissions. And he decided it was time for a new brush-name. He chose Hokusai. At first he signed his work "Sori-changing-to-Hokusai." Then he sold the name Sori to one of his students (who also took over the surimono business), and became "Hokusai-formerly-Sori." Finally, his signature was simply "Hokusai."*

During the next decade Hokusai turned out a vast—and varied—body of work. He illustrated poetry albums. For single-sheet prints he drew landscapes, portraits of courtesans, scenes from plays. He did picture books: views of Edo; of Lake Biwa; of the Tokaido highway. He illustrated fans, designed advertisements. Energetic and versatile, Hokusai had become the foremost commercial artist.

He also became a shameless self-promoter, touting himself in public exhibitions. On a busy street Hokusai would set up his bench and demonstrate the art of painting—with a twist. As a crowd gathered, he would paint with his fingers—or with an egg—or with the wrong end of a brush. Or he would dash off an upside-down landscape. But the

* The name means "North Star Studio." It refers to a god (of the Buddhist sect to which he belonged) who was associated with the North Star.

most renowned of his exhibitions was the painting of a 60-foot-high portrait of Daruma, the Buddhist saint.

The stunt took place during a festival in 1804. In the courtyard of a temple, Hokusai—aided by his students—spread out a huge, composite sheet of paper. Then he removed his shoes, hitched up his sleeves, and began to paint—with a broom and caskful of ink. Before a fascinated crowd, Hokusai worked his way down the paper. By the

end of the day a colossal Daruma glared at the sky. The portrait was raised with ropes and pulleys, and displayed on a scaffolding.

Word of the event reached the ear of the Shogun. And Hokusai received an accolade that was unprecedented (for someone of non-aristocratic origins). He was summoned to appear before the Shogun and give an exhibition of his skills. Also summoned was a classical painter named Buncho. He and Hokusai were expected to engage in a contest.

On the appointed day they were led into the presence of the Shogun and his court. Buncho went first, painting a scene in the traditional manner. There were murmurs of

appreciation.

Now it was Hokusai's turn. He had brought with him a rooster in a cage. Bowing to the Shogun, he strode over to a paper panel, tore it down, and painted it blue. Then he smeared the rooster's claws with red paint, and sent the bird running and squawking across the paper. Pointing to the prints left behind, Hokusai declared: "Leaves floating on the river!"

Such exploits increased his fame and brought in commissions. And entering his forties, Hokusai was busier than ever. In particular, he had begun to illustrate *yomi-hon*—the sensationalistic novels that were suddenly the rage. Ostensibly moralistic, these novels featured melodramatic, supernatural, and violent goings-on. There were ghost stories, revenge tales, Chinese legends. No artist could wish for livelier subject matter; and Hokusai rose to the occasion. His drawings were imaginative and dramatic. They contributed to the popularity of yomi-hon; and Hokusai became the chief illustrator of the genre. The leading author was Bakin, with whom he entered into a lengthy collaboration and quarrelsome friendship. (They argued over both artistic and financial matters.) Together they produced some 18 novels.*

By the time the craze for yomi-hon subsided, Hokusai had moved on. Illustrated handbooks *(Easy Guide to Draw-*

* A few sample titles: *Revenge of the Fox, Weird Tales of the Crescent Moon,* and *Raigo the Priest and the Phantom Rat.*

ing, The Dance Self-Taught, Edo Cookery) became a specialty, as did erotic prints.* He did paintings on silk, festival banners, murals, float designs, maps, illustrated cups, a book of kimono patterns. And he was still the showman, doing colossal portraits. On one occasion he painted a giant Hotei, the god of luck, before a crowd at a temple. When it was finished, he showed his versatility—by drawing two sparrows on a grain of rice.

And Hokusai was still changing his name whenever the fancy struck him. Sometimes he employed several names at once: a signature for book illustrations, another for prints, another for paintings. At one point he started adding the sobriquet Gakyo-jin—Man Mad About Drawing—to his name. Several years later he amended it to Gakyo-*ro*jin—*Old* Man Mad About Drawing. In his fiftieth year he gave away Hokusai—after being criticized for his design of a theater billboard—and became Taito ("Polar Star"). In his sixtieth year he assumed the name Iitsu, or One Year Old Again (sixty years marking the end of a cycle on the Japanese calendar). And after being struck by lightning and hurled into a rice field (this happened during a pilgrimage), he called himself Raito ("Lightning Star") for a while. His publishers honored this eccentric habit, issuing his work under the moniker of the moment. But they usually included the name Hokusai (which had become highly commercial) in the credit. And it was that name—of the thirty or so he adopted during his lifetime—by which he became known.

But even more than he changed his name, Hokusai changed his address. He is said to have had 93 places of residence. This mobility arose in part from an aversion to housecleaning and its disruptions. When an abode became uncongenial, he simply abandoned it for another. Also, his spendthrift ways often left him short of cash—and desirous of avoiding creditors. (On one occasion he was forced to flee Edo altogether, and return incognito.) But at the root

* Explicit scenes of love-making were a mainstay of the print industry. A titillating diversion, they were also given to newlyweds as a marriage manual.

of his transience was a lack of concern with worldly matters—an obsession with drawing, to the exclusion of all else. A brush-name he occasionally used was Fusenkyo, meaning "untouched by one's surroundings" or "unattached to one's abode." When it was easier to move than to stay put, Hokusai moved—and thought nothing of it. Said his friend Bakin: "When it comes to moving or changing names, I have never met anyone so capricious as this man."

Yet wherever it happened to be, his studio bustled with activity—his own, and that of the artists who came to study with him. For Master Hokusai was pleased to accept students. Though never maintaining a formal studio with apprentices and assistants, he taught his innovative style and techniques to anyone willing to learn (and able to endure his eccentricities and forceful manner). Over the years he took on more than 300 students. (A few of them were accorded brush-names—Hokutai, Hokusu, Hokuba—that derived from his own.) Hokusai's door may have kept shifting its location; but it was always open to aspiring artists. Or to anyone with a commission.*

For the benefit of art students, Hokusai created a text-

* Not everyone was welcome at the studio. A certain Kabuki actor (a noted female impersonator) once showed up to have his portrait done. Appalled by the dust and disorder, he insisted that a rug on which to sit be fetched from his palanquin. Hokusai booted him from the premises.

book. Titled *Manga* ("Sketches"), this multi-volume work was a vast collection of impromptu drawings—an encyclopedia of images. It included human figures in every posture and activity; flora and fauna; houses, bridges, boats; and on and on. Intended as models, these lively sketches are a monument to his artistry. The preface to *Manga* proclaims:

> Hokusai herein presents, ably and truly, all that he has ever glimpsed or imagined.
>
> Everything in the natural world has been included. The Master's brush captures the spirit—the essence—of things, something most artists fail to grasp on account of a lack of intuition and drawing skill.
>
> Hokusai has never had the slightest inclination to sit around sipping tea or sake. He has disdained the usual pleasures of life. For the last half-century he has dedicated himself solely to art.

As he entered his seventies, Hokusai's powers—far from waning—peaked; and he created a remarkable series of picture books. The first of these was *36 Views of Fuji,* which was responsible for making a national symbol of Mt. Fuji. (It also included what has become his best-known image: "The Great Wave.") There followed other sets of landscape prints—of waterfalls, bridges, fishing boats. All were printed in color.

And in 1834 he published his classic *100 Views of Fuji.* Each of these black-and-white drawings depicts a scene of daily life, with Fuji looming in the background. The book contains a personal note:

> Since my sixth year I have had an intense desire to draw. By the age of 50 I had done quite a few drawings. But nothing of what I produced prior to my 70th year was especially good. At 73 I was finally able to apprehend—to a slight degree—the true structure of birds and beasts, fish and insects, and the nature of grass and trees. At 80 I will perhaps show some signs of progress as an artist. At 90, acquire some depth. At 100, become inspired. And when I'm 110,

every line and dot may at last *come alive.* Anyone else surviving that long will see if such be not the case.*

These picture books mark the summit of his career. After them, Hokusai continued to draw, publish, and teach—and to pursue that perfect line and dot. But in his 79th year, he suffered a setback. His house burned to the ground. Forced to flee naked into the street, Hokusai lost everything, including his accumulated drawings and reference material.

But the Master was resilient—and accustomed to finding new quarters. He was soon domiciled and back at his bench. His daughter O-Ei (also an artist) was taking care of him now.

They found themselves living, however, in near poverty. A slump in the publishing industry, and the perception of his style as old-fashioned, resulted in a dearth of commissions. Yet the two managed to get by. During the final decade of his life, Hokusai illustrated a few books (a guide to Nikko, a life of the Buddha, a handbook for carpenters); did murals for temples; and painted scrolls for tokonoma. He was in declining health, but as capable as ever. And as cantankerous. On his wall hung a sign: NO COMPLIMENTS OR GIFTS.

For several years during this period Hokusai practiced a curious ritual. He would get up each morning and draw a lion. This was no ordinary lion but a demon-chaser—a talismanic figure that brought good luck and health. He would discard the drawings. But O-Ei secretly saved them; and the lions—in a variety of postures—have become part of his artistic legacy.

As he neared 90, the Old Man Mad About Drawing was still drawing. But he was not satisfied with the results. One day O-Ei found him weeping at his bench. Hokusai lamented that he was still unable—after a lifetime of effort—to capture the essence of things.

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* Hokusai expected to reach an advanced age, thanks to a longevity elixir that he gulped down daily. It was a mixture of potato whiskey, sugar, and dragon-eye fruit, aged in a sealed jar for two months.

In 1848 he published his final work: *On the Use of Color.* It is an illustrated artist's manual—a compendium of tips and techniques—the secrets of Hokusai!

The following year he became ill and was confined to his bed. Sensing the end, he joked in a letter:

> The King of the Underworld has built himself a retirement cottage, and wants me to come and paint a scroll for its wall. I'll be heading down there soon, I imagine, with my paints and brushes. I shall be renting a small apartment, on the main street of the Underworld. Drop by if you're ever in the area.

Shortly before he died, Hokusai murmured: "If Heaven would grant me just ten more years—five even!—I might truly become an artist."

Spirit of the Sword

A ship had anchored in Amakusa Bay; and captain and crew had retired for the night—when they were awakened by a rumbling sound. Racing on deck, they saw a figure hovering over the waves. It was a maiden dressed in white and surrounded by a mist.

As they gazed in wonder, the maiden said: "I yearn to return to the world." And with a rumble she vanished into the sea.

In the morning the captain went ashore, approached some fishermen, and asked if they had ever seen this apparition. They shook their heads. But they were familiar with the rumbling sound. For some time now, they told him, it had been a nightly occurrence. And ever since its arrival, the fish had fled the bay.

The fishermen discussed the situation. They decided that the figure was a ghost—the soul of some maiden who had

drowned in the bay. Her body was defiling the waters and causing the fish to flee. It had to be removed.

So they summoned the best swimmer in the village, a youth named Sankichi. The fishermen asked him to dive down and retrieve the body. Despite the danger, Sankichi agreed.

The captain took Sankichi out to his ship. The youth stripped down, prayed, and plunged into the sea.

His initial dives were fruitless. Then, gliding along the bottom, he spotted something and swam to it. Wrapped in a silk brocade was a sword. He tucked it under his arm and ascended.

Hoisted onto the ship, Sankichi collapsed with exhaustion. The captain and crew examined the sword. Of rare workmanship, it shone with a dazzling light.

The sword was taken ashore. Villagers crowded around to view it. A priest arrived, examined it, and nodded sagely.

"This is a sacred sword," he said, "that was lost at sea. And no ghost has been disturbing our waters. Rather, the restless spirit of this sword."

A shrine was built as a resting place for the sword. Sankichi was appointed guardian. And the bay was soon filled again with fish.

Foxes

Two kinds of fox are to be found in Japan. One is the common brown fox *(Vulpes vulpes).* This adaptable fellow can live anywhere—in a hole, decayed tree, abandoned building. So he has thrived in settled areas, oblivious to the inroads of civilization. It is not uncommon to glimpse his bushy tail, as he scampers away from a house.*

The other kind of fox has also held his own—against inroads of a subtler nature. Invisible and magical, this species has resisted the onslaught of rationalism. That is to say, a significant portion of the populace still believes in its existence. I am speaking of the phantom fox.

Who is this mysterious creature? In his respectable guise, he is associated with the shrines of Inari. There are nearly 40,000 such shrines (the most famous being the Fushimi in Kyoto). Each has a pair of statues in front of it, depicting a white fox. But this is no ordinary fox. It is a phantom fox—the servant and messenger of Inari.†

Curiously, the servant has replaced the goddess as the focus of the shrine. It is to the fox that prayers are addressed. (He conveys them to Inari.) And suppliants bring fried tofu—the preferred food of the fox—as an offering. (The offering is left by a hole in the wall, through which the invisible fox comes and goes.) They also keep an eye on the statues, whose tail may wag as a favorable omen. And should their prayer be granted, they will return to the shrine and tie a red bib around the neck of a statue—as a

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* The range of the brown fox includes all the major islands except Shikoku, from which the Buddhist saint Kukai is said to have expelled foxes after one tried to trick him.

† Inari is probably the busiest of the kami. She began as a rice goddess—the deity to whom farmers prayed for a bountiful harvest. Later she became popular with merchants, craftsmen, and samurai, who would entreat her for success in their endeavors. Today anyone is apt to pray to Inari, and for almost anything—prosperity, fertility, relief from coughs and colds.

mark of gratitude to the fox.

So if you ask a Japanese about foxes, he will tell you about this aide to Inari. But he may also mention another type of phantom fox—one of a more problematical nature. The *goblin* fox.

Like his cousin at the shrine, the goblin fox is invisible and magical. But there the resemblance ends. The goblin fox is dark, not white. He is associated with houses, not shrines. The real difference, however, is one of character. For the essence of a goblin fox is his propensity for mischief. Even when helping you (should he deign to do so), he will probably get you in trouble!*

Of his perverse ways, the most dramatic involves possession. Like demons in the West, the goblin fox can enter and control a human being. Victims have been known to curl up and yelp like a fox; tear off their clothes and run through the streets; speak in a strange voice. And they develop a craving for fried tofu or *soba* noodles—favorite foods of the goblin fox. Today such persons would be treated by a psychiatrist. In former times a yamabushi was summoned. With his occult skills he exorcised the fox. (One technique was to promise the fox a generous offering of fried tofu—to be left at an Inari shrine upon his withdrawal.)†

But it is mischief of a deceptive, rather than demonic, nature that is most typical of the goblin fox. For he loves to fool the unwary. To that end he often assumes a human

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* For example, a goblin fox might assist you financially by stealing your neighbor's wallet and leaving it in plain view on your doorstep.

† Perhaps the most extreme attempt to deal with a case of fox possession was that of Hideyoshi. When one of his servants exhibited symptoms of possession, the warlord wrote the following letter to Inari: "My Liege. I wish to apprise you of the fact that one of your foxes has taken over a servant of mine, causing grief among us. I would like you to investigate the matter, and determine the reason for this fox's behavior. Should he be found to lack justification, I demand that you censure him immediately and take the knave into custody. Otherwise, I shall order a general destruction of foxes. For details concerning this case, contact the priest Yoshida. Obediently yours, Hideyoshi."

form—particularly that of a seductive female. (Tales abound of men led to ruin by a fox-woman.) Another tactic is to bewitch people and lead them into a dangerous situation. For instance, he might cause someone to mistake the direction of a one-way street. Or consider an incident reported by the priest of the Inari shrine at Wakayama.

A visitor was driving up the mountain to the shrine—when an oncoming car appeared, headed directly toward him. He swerved and managed to miss it. But the next day, as he came down the mountain—that same oncoming car! This time it was too late to swerve. He braced for a collision—there was a thud—*and the car vanished.* Pulling over, he found the body of a fox in the road. In an attempt to send him plunging off the road, the fox had assumed an illusory form.

A favorite trick of the fox is to leave a gift or payment that becomes worthless. The story is told of a well-dressed man (with a suspicious bulge under his coat), who entered a popular soba shop and consumed bowl after bowl of noodles. He paid and left. In the morning his money was found to have turned into wood shavings. (The bulge, of course, had been his tail.)

No wonder "foxy" in Japanese signifies deceitful or wicked!

Where do these goblin foxes live? Some inhabit wild, solitary places (where they are thought to be a source of mysterious lights). But the majority attach themselves to a human household, whose responsibility it becomes to feed them. For the host family this is a risky association—one it may come to regret having acquiesced to. For while foxes may attract prosperity (if well-treated), they are easily offended—in which case they attract adversity. Another drawback to having foxes is the expense. A fox rarely moves in alone. Instead, he brings with him his relatives—74 of them, it is believed—all of whom must be fed.*

A further drawback to having foxes is that a family may

* A family with foxes does not eat until its foxes have done so. When the rice is ready, the cook taps on and uncovers the pot. This is a signal for the foxes to rise invisibly from beneath the house and consume their portion.

be shunned by its neighbors. Their prosperity is deemed ill-gained—indecently acquired—tainted by a supernatural origin. And shunned or not, the family will have difficulty in marrying off its daughters, who would bring foxes with them into their new household.*

So goblin foxes can be a problem. They can make you crazy, eat your rice, alienate your neighbors. Assuming human form, they wreak particular havoc: seducing or cheating the unwary. A fox in disguise, though, is detectable. If a charming stranger rouses your suspicions, lead him to a body of water. His true form will be reflected. Or bring in a dog: unaffected by the illusion, it will bark at a fox. Or take a look at any cash the person has given you: it may already have turned to dross.

It is best to keep foxes at arm's length. Unless, of course, they are the good kind—the white servants of Inari. And even then be wary. The following incident was reported by Lafcadio Hearn, in his *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (1894). It involves the proprietor of a tofu shop in the town where Hearn was living.

> A man in wretched attire used to come to his shop every evening to buy a cho of tofu, which he devoured on the spot with the haste of one long famished. Every evening for weeks he came, and never spoke; but the landlord saw one evening the tip of a bushy white tail protruding from beneath the stranger's rags. The sight aroused strange surmises and weird hopes. From that night he began to treat the mysterious visitor with obsequious kindness. But another month passed before the latter spoke. Then what he said was about as follows:—
>
> "Though I seem to you a man, I am not a man; and I took upon myself human form only for the purpose of visiting you. I come from Taka-machi, where my temple is, at which you often visit. And being desirous to reward your piety and goodness of heart, I have come to-night to save

* To be shunned is a serious matter in Japan, where belonging to the group is a prime concern. An American might simply shrug it off. With our traditions of independence and individualism, we might *welcome* being shunned—i.e., being left alone by our neighbors.

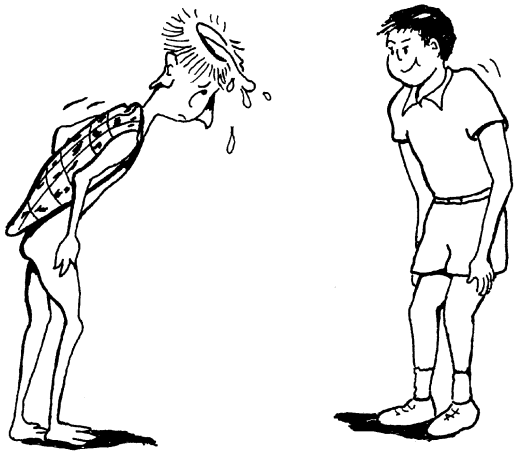
you from a great danger. For by the power which I possess I know that to-morrow this street will burn, and all the houses in it shall be utterly destroyed except yours. To save it, I am going to make a charm. But in order that I may do this, you must open your godown (*kura*) that I may enter, and allow no one to watch me; for should living eye look upon me there, the charm will not avail."

The shopkeeper, with fervent words of gratitude, opened his storehouse, and reverently admitted the seeming Inari, and gave orders that none of his household or servants should keep watch. And these orders were so well obeyed that all the stores within the storehouse, and all the valuables of the family, were removed without hindrance during the night. Next day the kura was found to be empty. And there was no fire.

The proprietor had been conned—by a rascally human. Foxes have no monopoly, it would seem, on mischief and deceit!

Bowing

The *kappa* is a goblin that resides in ponds and rivers. He likes to grab onto swimmers and drown them. Occasionally he comes ashore and challenges people to a fight. In that case he may be defeated by a simple ruse. It involves the hollow in his head, which must remain filled with water. Simply bow to the kappa. Returning your bow, he spills the water and becomes enfeebled. And he *will* return your bow. For nothing is more ingrained in the inhabitants of Japan—goblins included—than bowing.



Central to the etiquette of the nation, bowing has many functions. Essentially, it is a form of greeting—the equivalent of our handshake. But it may also serve to express respect, apology, acquiescence. One bows in almost every social situation. Friends meet with a bow. Teachers exchange bows with their classes. And at shrines, worshipers bow to the kami. Not to bow at the proper time—and in the proper fashion—would be a major lapse.*

A proper bow is determined by the occasion, and by the social status of those involved. There are three types of bow:

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* In feudal times such a lapse could be fatal. Failure to bow to a passing samurai was punishable by instant execution.

light, medium, and deep. The light bow is the basic greeting or farewell. Bending at the waist, you incline your head about 20 degrees. Men hold their hands at their sides; women, on their knees. The head remains down for a second or so.

The medium bow is about twice as deep and twice as long. It may be used to express gratitude or sorrow. But its main function is as a gesture of respect—to an important personage, or to anyone senior to you. A worker greets his boss with a medium bow. The boss responds with a slightly lesser bow—indicative of the importance of status in the business world. In a situation involving strangers, the bowing may be preceded by an exchange of business cards. These are discreetly glanced at, that the parties may determine their relative status and bow accordingly.

The deep bow—a virtual right angle—is rarely seen. It is reserved for extreme cases of apology or supplication. In former times it was the posture of obeisance to the Emperor (who is today accorded a medium bow), the Shogun, and other exalted personages.

So a Japanese will bow frequently in the course of a day—at work, in public places, even on the telephone! In the case of *salarymen*—who must continually bow to fellow employees—the practice has led to a health problem. As a result of their constant bending, salarymen are prone to lumbago.

If you visit Japan, learn the protocols of bowing. It is not as complicated as it sounds. Just bow to whomever you meet. Pay attention to the depth of your bow, and to its duration. For an ordinary greeting, both parties should bow for the same length of time. Should you raise your head and discover his to be still inclined, duck back down.

The handshake has made inroads in Japan. So be prepared for a combined bow and shake.

And one final tip. In close-up situations, bow *slightly to the left*—to prevent knocking heads.*

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* This applies only in Japan and England. Elsewhere in the world, bow to the right.

Godzilla

Japan's cinema is one of its glories. Such masterpieces as *Yojimbo, The Seven Samurai, Autumn Leaves, Ugetsu,* and *Sancho the Bailiff* have received widespread acclaim. Yet none of these critical successes can rival—in popularity—a series of monster movies that came out of Toho Studios (and that are still being made). I am referring, of course, to the Godzilla cycle.

The first of these films, made in 1954, was titled *Gojira* —or, in the English-language version, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters.* The protagonist is a giant reptile who breathes fire. Moviegoers were taken with the malevolent glare of the creature; and the film was a hit.

Since then, numerous sequels have appeared. With their lively special effects, most of these have done well at the box office. Yet none can compare with the original. For *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* is a powerful work of art. The characters have a grim intensity. The musical score is exciting and evocative. The black-and-white photography has a stark, documentary feel. For all its B-movie crudeness, the film creates a mood that is somber and serious.

The story of that first Godzilla film goes as follows:

An unknown force has been sinking ships near the island of Odo. Investigators arrive at the island. They find its inhabitants in a state of anxiety.

The islanders insist that a local monster—Godzilla—is responsible for the sinkings. Asleep for centuries in his underwater lair, he has awoke and must be appeased. Their ancestors, they murmur, used to tie a maiden to a raft and send her out as a sacrifice.

The investigators shake their heads at these superstitious beliefs. But the islanders know what they know. And though unwilling to sacrifice a maiden, they don masks and costumes that have not been used in generations and perform a ceremonial dance—a ritual to ward off Godzilla.

Alas, it fails. That night a storm arrives; and with it, Godzilla. Roaring and stomping about in the dark, he destroys a village.

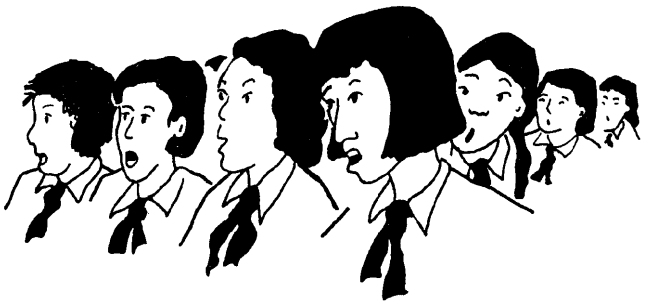
Still skeptical, the investigators blame the destruction on the storm—until they catch a glimpse of the creature lumbering along the shore. Tokyo is informed of the menace; and the government moves into action. Troops are mobilized. And scientists are told to locate and destroy Godzilla.

Among the scientists is Dr. Serizawa. He has developed an "oxygen-destroyer" that might be effective against the creature. But Serizawa has misgivings about unleashing so destructive a weapon, and refuses to do so.

Godzilla emerges now from Tokyo Bay. He waddles ashore and begins to wreck havoc. In a spectacular fashion, he destroys portions of the capital. He struts about—breathes fire—smashes buildings. The population flees in terror; the armed forces are helpless.

It is an unforgettable sequence. But the high point of the film is a scene that follows.

The entire nation has been called upon to pray for deliverance. And we watch as hundreds of schoolgirls—row after row of them—*chant a prayer.* The beauty of the chant, the innocence and intensity of the girls, the uniformity of their dress—these seem like something out of a national epic, not a monster movie. It is a compelling moment.



Finally, Dr. Serizawa relents and unleashes his weapon. Godzilla surfaces for one last roar, then sinks beneath the waves. The monster has been slain.

But a year later he (or a cousin who resembles him,

Godzilla having been seen to perish) was back—in *Gigantis, the Fire Monster.** The sequel pits him against Angilas, another prehistoric monster who has turned up. They engage in an ongoing tussle, during which Osaka Castle (a major tourist attraction) is destroyed. Judiciously, Godzilla is not killed off at the end of the film. Instead, he gets buried under ice—ready to be resurrected, should another sequel be made.

And resurrected he was, in *King Kong vs. Godzilla.* The first of the series to be filmed in color, this 1962 production is short on plot, but packed with special effects. The climactic moment comes when Kong is airlifted (by balloons) to Mt. Fuji. There he battles it out with Godzilla.

Godzilla was a star now; and sequels began to appear regularly. But as the cycle progressed, the character of the creature underwent a significant change. His features softened; his gyrations were occasionally comic…and he became a hero! He turned now to fighting other monsters, not the armed forces of Japan. No longer the bane of the nation, he became her champion. True, he still obliterated buildings —either inadvertently (during fights with monsters) or petulantly (during tantrums). But mainly he saved Japan from one giant creature after another—from Gobara, Rodan, Gigan, Mechagodzilla (built by spacemen inside Mt. Fuji), Titanosaurus, three-headed King Ghidorah, Megalon. Sometimes he was joined in this public service by good monsters (such as King Seesar), or rehabilitated bad monsters (Rodan and Mothra). At other times he had to go it alone. As a result of his change of heart, he assumed the role of Japan's mascot—its protective pet. In *Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster*, the new attitude towards him is clearly discernable. As Godzilla walks off, having defeated the Smog Monster, a child calls out: "Godzilla, thanks a lot!"

And when he did knock down buildings, it was to deliver a message. As the narrator intones at the end of *Godzilla, 1985:* "Nature has a way somehow of reminding Man of just how small he is. She occasionally throws up terrifying

* Due to a problem with the rights to the name, Godzilla had to be called Gigantis in the English-language version of the second film.

offspring of our pride or carelessness, to remind us how puny we really are, in the face of a tornado, an earthquake, or a Godzilla."

The sequels to *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (21 of them thus far) are full of monster battles and special effects that have grown increasingly sophisticated. What these films lack is the subtle artistry of the original—its somber atmosphere and mythic resonance. Only occasionally does any poetic or legendary material creep in.

One such moment, though, does come to mind. In *Godzilla vs. Mechagodzilla,* the mechanical monster has gotten the best of Godzilla. Only King Seesar can save the day. But Seesar is hibernating in a cave; and only a descendant of the Azumi royal family can awaken him. She shows up and—in a scene reminiscent of the chanting schoolgirls—revives him with an ancient hymn.

Such scenes are prize passages in what has become a national saga—a B-movie epic—a ritual of crisis and redemption. The Godzilla cycle!

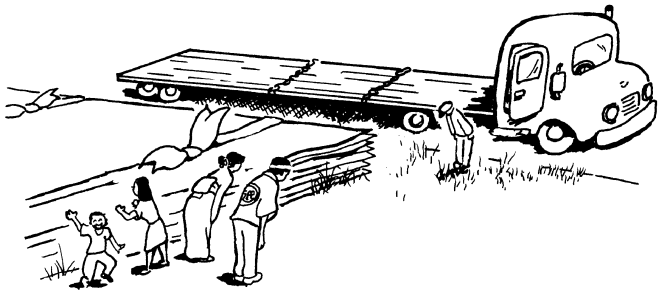
How to Fold a Paper House

You may have heard that the Japanese live (or used to live) in paper houses. That is not strictly true. In a traditional house, paper panels divided the interior into rooms. They also served as translucent outer walls. But the basic framework of a house was wood. Its roof was tile. And wood panels shuttered the house at night. No one lived in a "paper house."

Today, most Japanese live in apartment buildings—Western-style concrete towers. But some are returning to their roots. They have been rediscovering the traditional house. And with advances in origami, it is now possible to live in a house made *totally of paper.*

The advantages of such a house? Paper is inexpensive and easy to repair. It is cool in the summer. And it has a fragility that puts you in touch with nature—that allows sunlight to filter in, along with the sounds of crickets, wind and rain.

Using the techniques of origami, a family can fold its own paper house—in less than a day! All that's needed is a site and pile of paper. Here's how it's done:



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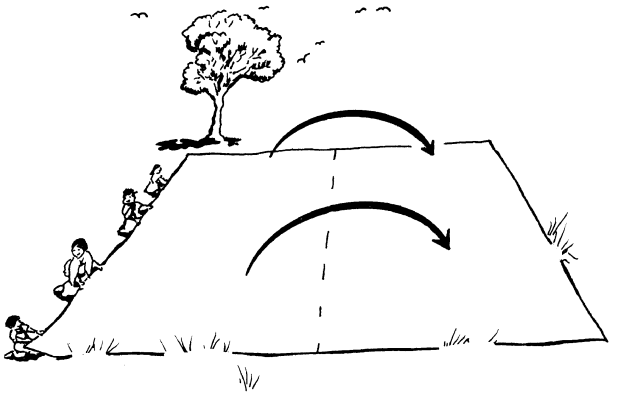

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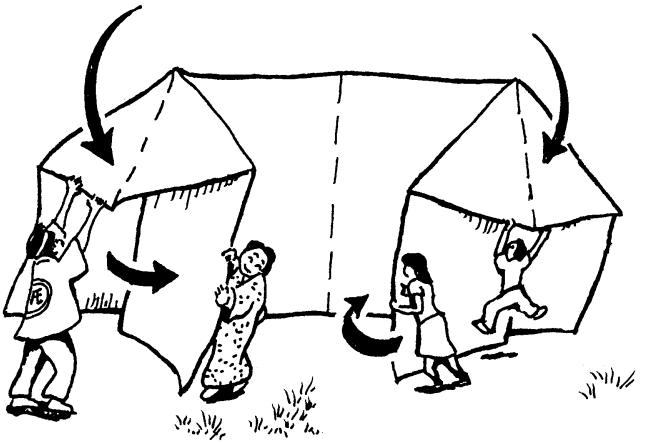

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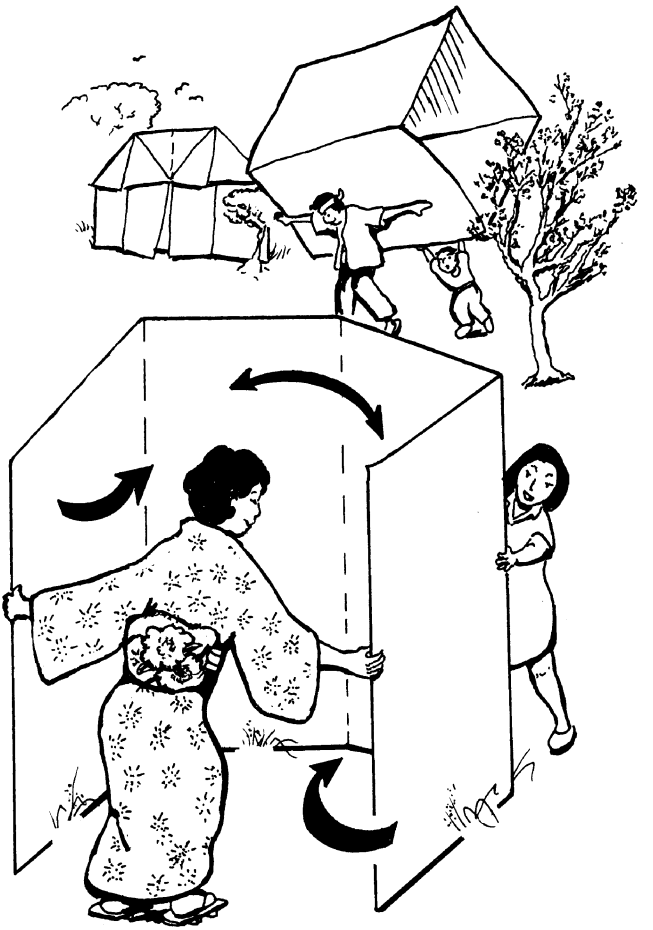

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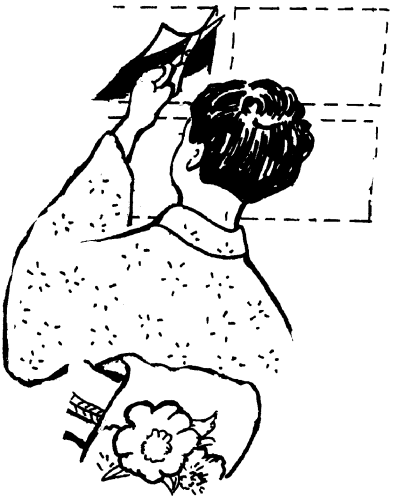

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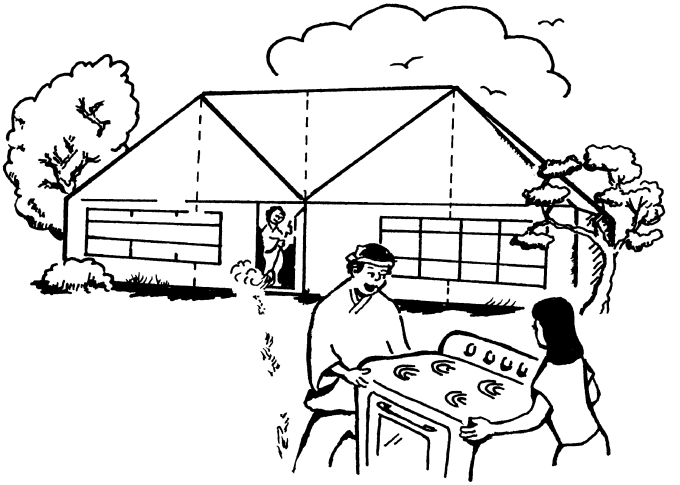

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A Boon from Benten

Baishu, a young scholar of Kyoto, was given to wandering about the city. One day he came upon a shrine to Benten, the goddess of good fortune. As he stood before the shrine, the wind blew a slip of paper against his shoe. Baishu picked it up and discovered a love poem, written in a delicate, feminine hand.

He took the poem home, read it again and again…and fell in love with its author.

Returning to the shrine, he prayed to Benten. "Help me locate the maiden who wrote this poem," he pleaded. And he vowed to spend a seven-day vigil at the shrine.

On the last night of his vigil, the door to the shrine opened. A priest emerged and approached Baishu. He tied a ritual cord about the scholar's waist, waved his hands, and murmured an incantation.

Sensing a presence, Baishu turned to find a young woman standing beside him. Her face was half-hidden by a fan. She glowed in the moonlight.

Immediately, he knew who she was: the maiden with whom he had fallen in love. Bowing to the priest, he thanked him for bringing them together.

"Thank Benten," said the priest, bidding them adieu and going back into the shrine.

They walked through the moonlit streets, conversing and looking at one another. Baishu was thrilled by her beauty. Her melodious voice filled him with joy. When they reached his house, she said: "Benten has married us." And they passed inside as man and wife.

As the weeks went by, Baishu's love for his new wife deepened. She was a painter as well as a poet, he discovered. And her domestic skills—flower arrangement, embroidery, cooking—brought cheer to their modest dwelling. Curiously, she never mentioned her family, nor where she was from. But what of it? shrugged Baishu. The goddess of good fortune had brought them together; and nothing else mattered.

One thing, though, he found exceedingly odd: *no one else seemed to be aware of his wife.* It was as if she were invisible to the neighbors. Yet so much in love was Baishu that he ignored this puzzling fact.

Now Baishu continued to take walks about the city. And one afternoon, while ambling along, he saw someone motioning to him from a doorway. "Please come in!" called the man.

Seeing no reason not to, Baishu entered the house. The man introduced himself as a merchant, and apologized for the abruptness of the invitation. He had a servant bring in tea. Then, in excited tones, he revealed the reason for inviting Baishu into his home.

He had an accomplished daughter, explained the merchant, for whom he had resolved to find a suitable husband. So he had assembled a few poems she had written, and sent them—with an offering—to a shrine of Benten.

"I begged the goddess to find a proper companion for this daughter of mine."

Soon thereafter, the goddess had appeared to him in a dream. She had announced that a husband had been located, and would arrive in a few weeks. He had dismissed this appearance of Benten as a mere dream, confessed the merchant. But then, last night, the goddess had visited him again. This time she had described the prospective husband in detail, and had told the merchant to keep an eye out for him. For he was to arrive the next day.

"And you are he!" cried the merchant. "Right down to the shabby blue robe I was told to watch for!"

He insisted that Baishu meet his daughter, who was waiting in the next room. Reluctantly, Baishu rose and followed after the merchant. He could not bring himself to tell the poor fellow that he already had a wife. Stepping through the doorway, he feared it was going to be an awkward situation.

Imagine his amazement when a familiar voice greeted him, and a familiar face peeked from behind the fan. *For the merchant's daughter was none other than his wife.* She gave him a knowing smile.

It was his beloved. Yet she seemed more—what was it?—

tangible now. And he realized that hitherto Benten had granted him only her soul. Their union was about to be completed.

Baishu married the daughter in a traditional ceremony. When he brought her home, the neighbors flocked to meet her. Aware of her now, and impressed with her beauty and abilities, they congratulated the scholar on his good fortune.

Moon

The Japanese have a thing about the moon. They admire its pale, restrained beauty—its serenity—its subtle light. They like the mystic glow it casts upon a landscape. They cherish its inexplicable pull upon their hearts.

To honor it, an observance called Moon Viewing Night *(tsukimi)* is held in September. On the evening of the full moon, a family gathers on its veranda. Offerings to the moon—fruit and flowers—are placed on an altar. As the silver ball rises, the family members gaze upon it in reverence. They recite poems and sip sake. And they partake of a special meal. It features foods that are moon-shaped, such as steamed dumplings. (If the sky is cloudy, the meal may include poached eggs, whose shape suggests a moon obscured by clouds.)

Countless poets have lavished praise upon the moon. One was Ryokan, a Zen monk of saintly disposition. One night Ryokan returned to his hut, to find that his few possessions—quilt, meditation pillow, rice pot—had been stolen. He sat down and wrote a haiku:

> A thief has cleaned me out!…but never mind.
> In the window, the moon he left behind.

Going There

Passing before the moon, a jumbo jet
On its way…but not there yet.

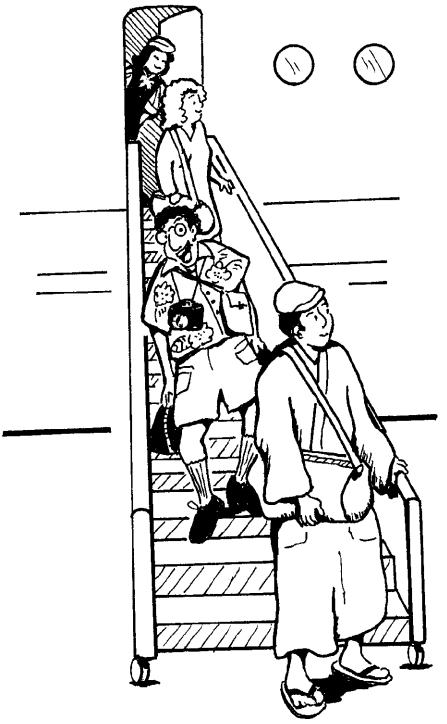
That nightly flight is bound for Tokyo International Airport. Among its passengers are tourists, eager and expectant.

One of those tourists could be you.

Would you like to explore an exotic land?

Is your passport in order?

All right then. Let's go to Japan!



Where to Stay

As you tour Japan, a variety of accommodations will be available. Which should you chose? A major factor, of course, will be the cost. But equally important will be the *type of experience* you want. Are comfort and convenience your prime concern? Or would you like to get in touch with the uniqueness—the richness—the soul of another country? Do you wish to insulate yourself from the local culture, or embrace it?

Here are the alternatives.

•

Western-style hotel

Modern hotels abound in Japan. They are not cheap; but you'll get first-class service and the usual amenities. You'll also get familiar surroundings. In your suite at the Washington (a major chain in Japan), you'll wake up in a soft bed …and for a moment not recall that you're abroad. In the American-style restaurant downstairs, you'll breakfast on scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee…and nearly forget that you're thousands of miles from home.

But is that really what you want? Is that why you came so many miles? Surely not.*

•

Capsule hotel

Though located near train stations, capsule hotels are not intended for travelers. Rather, they serve commuters

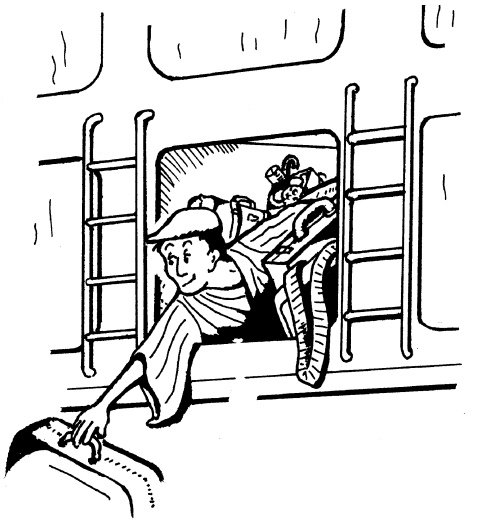
* Actually, a reason to visit Japan would be to experience a *classic* Western hotel. Remember those temples of luxury, with their ornate lobbies, marble staircases, and antique furnishings? They have largely vanished in the U.S.—torn down or remodeled into something less pompous. But a number of them were built in Japan and still exist—maintained in their original condition.

who have been working late (or carousing in bars) and need a place to stay overnight.

What is a capsule hotel? It is a kind of dormitory, with banks of receptacles—the capsules—in which to sleep. There are also lockers and showers. Each guest is given a *yukata* (sleeping robe), bar of soap, and towel, and assigned to a capsule. Slightly larger than a coffin, it comes fully equipped—bedding, television, lamp—and is air-conditioned. You climb in, close the curtain, stretch out, watch the news, fall asleep.

It's not the Majestic. But it is an inexpensive place to spend the night.

Guests are asked not to eat, drink, or smoke in the capsules.



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Love hotel

Love hotels specialize in renting rooms (by the hour or night) to young couples. Desiring an amorous adventure, the couple heads for the entertainment district of the city; and they seek out one of these shrines to Cupid.

They will have no difficulty in spotting it. The hotel's name—an English import such as Dreamland or Eden—is emblazoned in neon. And the building has a fairy-

land facade. Everything is handled discreetly. The couple approaches a slot by the door, pays an unseen cashier, and slips inside.

The room to which they have been assigned is as fantastical as the hotel's facade. It has been decorated as a love lair, with plush carpeting, artistic lighting, and sensual colors. The bed is heart-shaped; the bath is baroque. Erotic movies are available on the television. The couple grin at one another and settle in.

But would a tourist want to stay at a love hotel? Yes—when he can't find a room elsewhere. During festivals, the regular hotels get booked up. But love hotels always have vacancies, and at reasonable rates.

●

Minshuku

A *minshuku* is a private home that takes in travelers—a sort of bed-and-breakfast. You will be the paying guest of a family. They will provide you with a room, futon, meals, conversation, company—and a glimpse into Japanese life. All at a bargain price.

No maid service is provided. (You put away your own futon.) And you may have to share the room with another traveler. But for homelike surroundings—warmth and hospitality—check into a minshuku.

Ryokan

Ryokan are the old-fashioned inns of Japan. They are to be found throughout the country, and often at scenic locales: overlooking the sea, clinging to a mountainside, beside a hot spring. Some are centuries old. If you want a taste of tradition, this is where to stay. Ryokan can be expensive. But your stay will be memorable—for you will connect with the antique soul of Japan.

Try to find an older ryokan that has escaped remodeling. You will arrive at a low, wooden building that has been artfully landscaped. The *nakai-san* ("chambermaid in kimono") greets you at the entrance. She explains the shoe etiquette, and takes you to your room—the Cherry Blossom Suite, perhaps. (The rooms have names, not numbers.) With a gracious smile, she slides open the door and leads you inside.

The suite is a traditional Japanese interior, overlooking a garden. It is partitioned by paper panels. Fragrant tatami mats cover the floor. In the tokonoma is a scroll, and a vase with a freshly-cut sprig.*

As you take this in, the nakai-san serves you a cup of tea and plate of sweets. She points out your yukata, and tells you how to get to the bath.

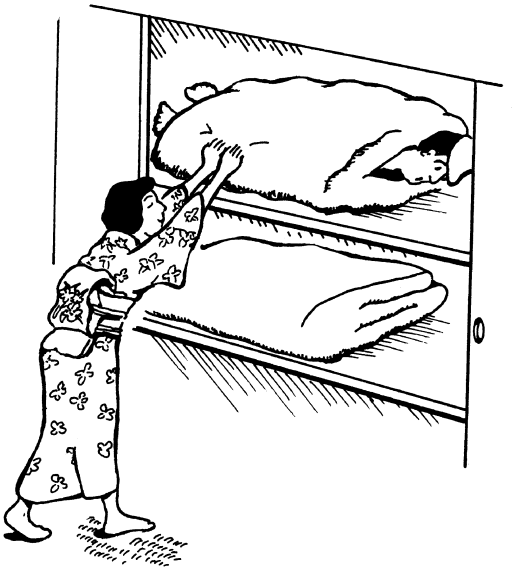
Dinner is served in your room. It is traditional Japanese

* The tokonoma ("alcove of honor") is for works of art. Don't stow your luggage in it.

fare and features local specialties. There are dozens of exotic items, served in an elegant miscellany of china. Seated on a cushion before a low table, you dig in with chopsticks and devour this feast. Afterwards, you stroll in the garden.

Everything is traditional in a ryokan—including the sleeping arrangements. As bedtime approaches, the nakai-san lays out your futon and covers. And you are soon enjoying a deep slumber.

But don't forget—a futon is not left out during the day. The nakai-san will show up in the morning, intent on folding it up and putting it away in a closet. So don't oversleep.



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Shukubo

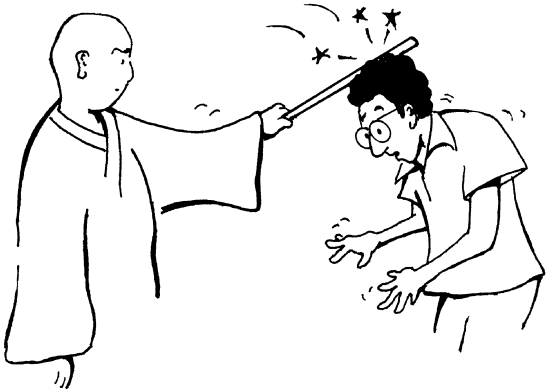
As you travel about, consider staying at a temple or shrine. They have lodgings—known as *shukubo*—to accommodate pilgrims; and many now take in tourists as well.

It's a great opportunity. You'll get an inside view of temple life; a look at classical art and architecture; and picturesque surroundings. And you'll be helping the temple to raise funds. But remember—these are functioning temples,

not tourist sites. *Be respectful.*

And expect to participate in the daily life of the place. You will share vegetarian meals with the monks. You will be asked to help clean the grounds or to join in the morning chant. And your living quarters will be Spartan. But what better way to learn about—and appreciate—an ancient way of life.

One word of caution. If it's a Zen temple, don't approach a monk and ask him: "What is Zen?" He may bop you on the head.



Sightseeing

The following are a few places you might want to visit.

•

The Inner Shrine of Ise

Deep in a forest is the Inner Shrine of Ise. The seat of Amaterasu, it is the most sacred site in the land.

The shrine dates back to 670, and has an archaic look. It is thought to have been modeled on an ancient type of storehouse. The roof is thatched, the walls are unadorned. Instead of the Chinese-style ornamentation of later shrines, one finds here an austerity that is uniquely Japanese.

But a remarkable fact about this antiquity is that *every twenty years it is torn down.* The dwelling place of the goddess is dismantled; and its timbers are sent to subsidiary shrines (who use them for repairs and talismans).

And where does Amaterasu go? To an *exact duplicate* of the shrine, built alongside it. Before tearing down the old shrine, the priests hold a ceremony in which the goddess is transferred. Then, for twenty years, she inhabits the new structure—until it, in turn, is replaced.

This has been going on for thirteen centuries.

Why is it done? For reasons of ritual purity—a prime concern of Shinto. The shrine becomes impure and must be renewed. Once standard practice with shrines, the tradition has been maintained solely at Ise.

Only priests (and imperial envoys) may pass beyond the protective fences and enter the shrine. That is often disappointing to visitors, who, having heard of the architectural sublimity of the shrine, find themselves able to view only the roof. Yet a visitor *can* experience the essence of Ise—which lies in its setting. Just look about. The shrine is at one with the surrounding forest. Its wooden beams harmonize with the tall cedars. An aura of sanctity pervades the entire locale.

Ise is associated with a pivotal moment in Japanese history. During the Mongolian invasion, the Emperor sent an envoy to the shrine. The envoy prayed to Amaterasu for aid. On that very day, clouds gathered over the armada—darkened—blotted out the sun. A rising wind became a typhoon, and destroyed the Mongolian fleet.

Sacred relics are kept in the shrine. Among them is the mirror that Amaterasu gave to her grandson, the founder of Japan.*

●

Great Buddha of Nara

In 743 a smallpox epidemic was devastating Nara, the original capital of Japan. Prayers to the kami had gone unheeded. In desperation Emperor Shomu called upon monks of the new Buddhist faith to intervene. They prayed…and the epidemic ceased.

The Emperor ordered that, as an act of homage, a giant statue of the Buddha be erected. He also sent an emissary to Ise. Would such an act be acceptable, he wanted to know, to Amaterasu?

The reply was favorable. Amaterasu had revealed (according to her priests) that she and the *cosmic aspect* of the Buddha were one. This oracle (or priestly maneuver) allowed the two faiths to co-exist.

The Great Buddha of Nara (not to be confused with the Great Buddha of Kamakara, who spoke with the Whale) took nine years to complete. 52-feet-high, it was cast from bronze and covered with gold. Thousands of craftsmen and laborers were involved in the project. Also constructed was a temple—the Todaiji—in which to house the statue.

Twelve centuries later, the Great Buddha of Nara is still drawing pilgrims. They come also to see the Todaiji. It is

* Amaterasu's mirror, sword, and necklace constitute the Three Sacred Treasures—the imperial regalia of Japan. The sword is kept at the Shrine of Atsuta. The necklace—whose transfer to a new Emperor marks his accession—is kept in a special room in the palace.

the largest wooden building in the world, and contains the largest bell in Japan. The Todaiji is an architectural marvel. One is struck by its size—and by its air of lightness.

●

Bridge of Heaven

In Miyazu Bay is a sandbar called the Ama-no-hashidate, or Bridge of Heaven. It is two miles long and framed by scenic coastline. The pine trees that cling to it have been molded by the wind into fantastical shapes.

It is said that Izanagi and Izanami stood here while creating the Japanese islands.

A popular custom has arisen. Visitors stand on platforms along the shore. They bow low and view the sandbar between their legs. Seen upside down, it appears to span the sky like a bridge.

The Bridge of Heaven ranks as one of the Three Classic Views.*

* The others are Miyajima ("Shrine Island"), approached via a giant torii set in the water, and Matsushima Bay (where Basho was at a loss for words).

Sado Island

Sado is a one-hour crossing by hydrofoil from Niigata. The island is a patchwork of farms, with fishing villages clinging to the coast. There are no large towns; and the population is sparse.

Some unique folkways have been preserved on Sado (for the tourist trade, at least). The men thump on "demon drums." The women float about in tubs and gather seaweed. Folded hats and blue kimonos are worn. And Bun'ya —an ancient form of puppet theater—is today found only on Sado.

In feudal times the remote island was used as a place of exile. Among those banished here were Emperor Juntoku; Emperor Godaigo; Nichiren, a religious reformer; and Zeami, the founder of Noh drama. The Emperors brought with them their entire households, including chefs and musicians.

Then gold was discovered on the island. To provide workers for the mine, the government set up a prison colony. It was shut down long ago; and tourists wend their way now through the tunnels. They stop to watch mechanical figures that reenact the grim labors of old.

Sado is known for its melancholy folk songs. They are thought to have originated with those court musicians.

The crested ibis has survived here.

●

Nikko

A popular adage goes: "Never say *kekko* [magnificent] until you've seen Nikko."

Nikko is a small town, two hours from Tokyo. It owes its fame to the Toshogu Shrine, the most sumptuous collection of art and architecture in Japan.

Set on a mountainside and surrounded by ancient cedars, Toshogu consists of 22 buildings. Each is richly decorated on the outside, and even more so on the inside. 15,000 craftsmen—sculptors, painters, woodcarvers, goldsmiths

—labored for twenty years on this blockbuster of a shrine. The cost was astronomical.

Two famous sculptures are located here: the Sleeping Cat (known to every child in Japan), and the original Three Monkeys (see no evil, hear no evil, say no evil). You might also want to check out the Gate Where One Tarries All Day, so named for its elaborate detail. But the centerpiece—and raison d'être—of Toshogu Shrine is a mausoleum. Buried here is Ieyasu, a shogun who arranged to have himself deified upon death. His pomp and majesty were intended to survive him—and they have.

Nikko is a stunning experience. Splendor after splendor. Don't miss it.

But when you return to your room at the inn, pause at the tokonoma…and ponder that single flower in its vase. Just to regain your equilibrium. Your sense of restraint.

●

Himeji Castle

During the Time of Warring States, every warlord had his castle. Twelve of these structures have survived. The rest were either destroyed in warfare, or—during the Meiji era—deemed relics of feudal times and pulled down.

A castle was constructed of wood (with a plaster covering to protect against fire), and mounted on a stone rampart. Its defenses were intricate and ingenious. First came a moat. As they plunged through the water, attacking soldiers were showered with bullets and arrows from guard towers.

At that point the attackers had a choice. They could call it quits and go home; draw back and besiege the castle; or try smashing through its fortified gate. If successful in smashing, they would find themselves in a *masugata.* This was an enclosure in which the attacking forces had to make a right turn—losing the force of their charge—and deal with another gate. Meanwhile, they were being showered with bullets and arrows. It was a kind of ambush.

If they persisted and were able to penetrate the second gate, a series of mazelike passages and fortified courts await-

ed them. And if these fell, there was still the *tenshu.*

The tenshu—a fortified and provisioned tower—was the stronghold of the castle. It was studded with loopholes, for the guns (introduced by Portuguese traders) that were changing the face of warfare. It also had chutes from which rocks could be dropped. And on its roof were a pair of tiger-fish—charms against fire.

So a castle was artfully designed to withstand attacks. But it was artistically designed as well. Its graceful gables and eaves were similar to those of temples and palaces. And at the top of the tenshu an elegant *moon-viewing chamber* was often installed. Whether out of vanity or aesthetic sensibility, the warlords insisted upon beauty in their castles.

Of the surviving castles, Himeji—built by Hideyoshi—is the most impressive. Its elaborate defenses are intact; and the place has a storybook air. On account of its soaring white towers, Himeji has been nicknamed the White Egret Castle.

Zeniarai Benten

Be sure to visit this shrine to Benten, goddess of good fortune. It is located in the ancient capital of Kamakura, in a cave by a spring.

Try washing your currency in the spring. It is believed that money washed here will bring a 100% profit. (Don't try this with travelers checks—the ink of your signature will run.)

●

Temple of Kwannon

Also in Kamakura is the Temple of Kwannon. A short walk from the Bronze Buddha, it houses another giant statue—of Kwannon, goddess of mercy. Over a thousand years old, this statue was carved from half a camphor tree. Its origin is the subject of a legend.

A priest named Tokudo (the story goes) was walking through a valley one night, when he noticed a strange radiance. Approaching it, he discovered a fallen camphor tree. The radiance—and a sweet fragrance—arose from this tree. The wood was sacred, he realized, and should be carved into an image of Kwannon.

He began to pray. And an elderly couple appeared before him. They told him to keep praying. And splitting the tree in half, they set about carving a pair of giant statues.

After three days the work was complete. Tokudo bowed to the couple and asked who they were. They replied that they were kami. And they rose into the sky and disappeared.

Informed of the miracle, the Emperor dispatched a high-ranking priest to the site. The priest blessed the statues. Then he ordered that one of them be cast into the sea. Wherever it came ashore, he declared, at that place would humanity be redeemed of sin.

The statue was flung from a cliff into the sea. It drifted along the coast. That night it entered the harbor of Kamakura.

Awakened by a light, the townsfolk found a radiant

Kwannon floating near their boats. They hauled the statue ashore, and built a temple in which to house it.

In the 1890s Lafcadio Hearn visited the Temple of Kwannon. He describes being shown the statue (the radiance—but not the power—of which had faded):

> Then the old priest lights a lantern, and leads the way, through a low doorway on the left of the altar, into the interior of the temple, into some very lofty darkness. I follow him cautiously awhile, discerning nothing whatever but the flicker of the lantern; then we halt before something which gleams. A moment, and my eyes, becoming more accustomed to the darkness, begin to distinguish outlines; the gleaming object defines itself gradually as a Foot, an immense golden Foot, and I perceive the hem of a golden robe undulating over the instep. Now the other foot appears; the figure is certainly standing. I can perceive that we are in a narrow but also very lofty chamber, and that out of some mysterious blackness overhead ropes are dangling down into the circle of lantern-light illuminating the golden feet. The priest lights two more lanterns, and suspends them upon hooks attached to a pair of pendent ropes about a yard apart; then he pulls up both together slowly. More of the golden robe is revealed as the lanterns ascend, swinging on their way; then the outlines of two mighty knees; then the curving of columnar thighs under chiseled drapery, and, as with the still waving ascent of the lanterns the golden Vision towers ever higher through the gloom, expectation intensifies. There is no sound but the sound of the invisible pulleys overhead, which squeak like bats. Now above the golden girdle, the suggestion of a bosom. Then the glowing of a golden hand uplifted in benediction. Then another golden hand holding a lotus. And at last a Face, golden, smiling with eternal youth and infinite tenderness, the face of Kwannon.
>
> So revealed out of the consecrated darkness, this ideal of divine feminity—creation of a forgotten art and time—is more than impressive. I can scarcely call the emotion which it produces admiration; it is rather reverence.
>
> But the lanterns, which paused awhile at the level of the beautiful face, now ascend still higher, with a fresh squeaking of pulleys. And lo! the tiara of the divinity appears, with strangest symbolism. It is a pyramid of heads, of faces—

charming faces of maidens, miniature faces of Kwannon herself.

For this is the Kwannon of the Eleven Faces—Jiu-ichi-men-Kwannon.

Iga-Ueno

Fifteen miles from Nara is the town of Iga-Ueno. Its main attraction is the house in which Basho was born. There is also a tea arbor in which he lived for a while. And a Basho museum.

The town has another historic association: the ninja. They had one of their headquarters here. So after communing with Basho, head over to the Ninja Mansion for a tour.

And you might want to stop at the Kumihimo Center. *Kumihimo* are the braids on kimonos, swords, and scrolls. Most of them are crafted in Iga-Ueno.

Finally, Ueno Castle is still standing. So the town is worth a visit.

Should you arrive on October 25, you'll notice demons prancing about in the street. It's a festival in honor of Tenjin. The rest of the year, the masks and costumes may be viewed in their storeroom.

●

Mt. Fuji

In July and August millions of Japanese arrive at Fuji. They have traveled by automobile, bus, or train. Some are wearing the white robe and conical hat of a pilgrim; the rest, hiking garb. They have come to climb the mountain. It is both a religious occasion and a holiday trek.*

Leading to the summit are six trails.† Each has ten sta-

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* Pilgrimages to the summit of Fuji became popular during the Edo era (1603–1867). Men came from around the country. As they climbed, they rang bells and chanted: "May our senses be pure and the weather fair." Women (until a century ago) were banned from Fuji—the reason being given that Sengen might become jealous. For those unable or not permitted to make the pilgrimage, a number of miniature Fujis were constructed in Edo. One of these rock piles has survived, in the courtyard of a temple in the Asakusa district.

† "There are many paths up Mt. Fuji," goes a proverb—referring to the multiple routes to Truth.

tions—rest areas with sleeping huts, food, and drink. Standard practice is to motor to a fifth station and begin there—about a five-hour hike. There is also a footpath known as "the boundary between heaven and earth," circling the mountain about a mile below the summit.

Tourists are welcome to join in. Bring along a sweater for the summit. Wear a sturdy pair of shoes—you'll be walking on volcanic rubble. And buy a Fuji-stick (sold at stands). It will help you to negotiate the slope. And at each station it will be branded, to provide a memento of your progress.

Adventuresome? Climb at night. Besides avoiding the heat, you'll reach the summit in time for sunrise. A Fuji sunrise is spectacular. You'll see why the mountain has been called the home of the gods. Spread below are clouds, farmland, and towns. Mountains, coastline, and sea. A panorama that *comes alive* as Amaterasu rises from the sea.

The prospect of the sight will spur you on. So will the shouts of *"Gambatte!"* ("Press on!") from your fellow climbers. For even at night you will be part of a line snaking its way up the trail. This communality is a key part of the experience. A people is climbing its sacred mountain.

At the summit you will find the crater (remember, Fuji is a volcano). There is also a shrine to Sengen; a noodle shop (have a bowl, to fortify yourself against the cold); a souvenir

shop and post office.

A quick way down is the Gotemba Trail. Much of it is volcanic sand, which has inspired the custom of *sunabashi.* Sand-sliding!

●

Okinoshima

In ancient times a major sea lane went by the island of Okinoshima. So the god of waterways made his home here. Only his priests could step foot on the island.

Sailors brought offerings to the god—objects such as jewelry or suits of armor. The priests would leave these amid the rocks.

Due to the sacredness of Okinoshima, the objects went untouched over the centuries. They have now been recovered by archeologists, and are on display at Munakata Shrine—a mainland shrine associated with the island.

Bathing

Few pleasures can compare with that of *o-furo*—the Japanese bath. Just look at someone immersed in one. His half-shut eyes—distant expression—contented murmur—say it all. He is somewhere else…and in no hurry to get back.

An imperial edict once ordered all Japanese to bathe regularly. The edict is no longer necessary. Throughout the land and at all levels of society, o-furo has become a cherished tradition.

It is also a complex tradition—at once hedonistic, therapeutic, and spiritual. Hedonistic, because the goal is pleasure. Therapeutic, because the benefits are lasting. And spiritual, because the roots of o-furo lie in Shinto. Those purification rituals fostered a national mania for bathing.

Most Japanese bathe at home, in large, comfortable tubs. (A family may bathe in hierarchical order, starting with the father, or as a group.) But for those who lack a tub—or who enjoy the sociability—there are public baths called *sento.* A sento has the congenial atmosphere of a neighborhood tavern. In its steamy environs, the regulars gather daily to bathe, chat, and relax.

During your stay in Japan, you must experience a communal bath. Adventurous? Seek out a sento. Though surprised to see a foreigner wander in, the regulars will welcome you.*

Or simply stay at an old-fashioned inn. Its baths will be communal—part of the traditional lifestyle that has been preserved at inns. And you will be *expected* to bathe. Here's the procedure:

Don your yukata (it will be laid out on a tray in your

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* Don't wander into a *soapland* by mistake. Soaplands are establishments in which scantily-clad women provide bubble baths, massages, and other services. They were formerly called *toruko-buro*—Turkish baths—but were required to change their name after protests from the Turkish government.

room); grab soap and towel; and head for the bath. Look for the door marked 男 (male) or 女 (female).*

Leave your yukata in a locker and enter the bath hall. You will behold a pool or sizeable tub, in whose steaming waters sit your fellow bathers. But don't get in yet.

You'll see a wall with faucets, basins, and stools. *Go there and wash with soap.* You MUST do this. It is mandatory. One does NOT wash in the bath. To do so would elicit stares of disbelief.

So don't wash in the bath—that's not what it's for. Wash *before* getting in. Sit on a stool, scrub with soap, rinse yourself.†

Now you may enter the bath. One more warning. As you walk about, it is customary to carry your towel in such a way as to cover your private parts. (This probably goes back to the days of mixed bathing.)

Get into the water. You'll find it unbearably hot. But try to suppress that screech of dismay. It is not in good form, and will only serve to draw unwanted attention to yourself. In any case, you'll soon get used to the temperature.

Now soak. Relax. Enjoy the sense of well-being—the *pure pleasure*—that is the essence of o-furo. If you wish, converse with those near you. Or drift into a stupor.

When you are profoundly renewed, return to your room. Dinner will be waiting.

You have experienced o-furo. You have undergone that cleansing of body and soul with which the Japanese conclude their day. (For as evening approaches, there are few who do not seek out the watery embrace—the solace—the glory of a tub.) You have been initiated.

And you are ready—in your exploration of bathing customs—for a visit to an *on-sen.*

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* Separate baths are the rule nowadays. Mixed bathing used to be customary, but has become limited to small towns and certain resorts.

† This is so ingrained in Japanese that they have been known—when traveling abroad—to commit an egregious error of their own. Before getting into a Western-style tub, they soap themselves and pour water over their head—thereby flooding the floor.

On-sen are the hot springs that abound in Japan. Thousands of these steaming pools gush up from the depths of the earth. The same volcanic activity that causes destruction also produces thermal waters—as if to make amends.

For the waters are believed to have curative powers—to offer relief from a long list of ailments. And since on-sen tend to be located in the mountains or by the sea, people travel to them for both cures and vacations. This has led to the rise of resorts.

The resorts vary in character. The more lavish feature indoor pools, built over the spring and furnished with tropical plants, grottoes, waterslides. To supplement the waters, guests are provided with copious amounts of food and drink. A center for such excess is the resort town of Beppu (which could almost be in Florida). You can buy postcard views of its garish attractions, including the "Hells" (bubbling pools of mud stocked with crocodiles). If the urge is uncontrollable, visit Beppu.

But tasteful, traditional spas are just as plentiful. With their modest hotels and rustic lodges, these places draw a more sober clientele: seekers of a cure or a communion with nature. Their location is usually scenic and unspoiled. And their open-air pools offer a direct exposure to the splendors of nature.

One such place is the Bokido Cave, or the Cave that Makes One Forget About Returning Home. This isolated cavern contains a hot spring and overlooks the sea. You soak in thermal waters…emit moans of pleasure that echo from the walls…gaze out at the sea. The sense of well-being is

overwhelming.

The Bokido Cave is located on a peninsula in Kinki province. It can be reached by train. Go there and bathe in waters of forgetfulness.

But remember…you may not come back.

Dos and Don'ts

As a *gaijin*—a foreigner—you will be noticeable while in Japan. You will stand out. Everything about you—your looks, accent, mannerisms, movements, confusion in public places—will serve to label you as a stranger. And you will be regarded as an oddity. When you walk down the street, people will stare at you—as if at a penguin waddling by. And while the Japanese will strive to make you feel at home in their country, they will be aware *at all times* of the unbridgeable gap between your ways and theirs.

Yet that gap can be narrowed—or at least rendered less conspicuous. You *can* succeed in attracting less attention. How? By learning a few simple dos and don'ts, in regard to personal behavior.

I have assembled a list of these dos and don'ts. If you plan to visit Japan, I urge you to master them. They could spare you much embarrassment and discomfiture.

Let's start with the dos.

•

Do slurp your noodle soup

Noodles are a popular light meal in Japan. The main types are wheat *(udon)* and buckwheat *(soba).* They are served in a tasty broth.

Your bowl of noodles will be placed in front of you. Raise it and dig in. The noodles are eaten with chopsticks. The broth is drunk directly from the bowl.

But contrary to Western etiquette, the broth is not merely drunk—it is *slurped.* As noisily as possible! An expression of satisfaction, the sounds will be taken as a compliment by your host. Their absence, on the other hand, could plunge him into despair.*

* Slurping is also customary during the Tea Ceremony. As you take your final sip, slurp loudly. This communicates to the host that you have concluded—and enjoyed—your portion of tea.

Do use both hands when presenting your business card

Business cards *(meishi)* are routinely exchanged in Japan —in a prescribed manner. The two men face one another and withdraw their card holders (kept in an inside jacket pocket). The individual with the lower status offers his card first. As a mark of respect, it must be presented *with both hands.* To use only one hand would be taken as rude.

The exchanged cards are read. Then both men bow. Such factors as the other's age and job title determine the depths of their bows.

Don't forget to bow slightly to one side, so as not to bump heads.

●

Do drive on the left side of the road

When Japan decided to modernize, she borrowed eclectically from the West. Her legal code was based on that of Germany. Her educational system was structured like that of the U.S., but administered like that of France. In each case, a judgement was made as to the best available model.

In the realm of transport, it was decided to adopt the British custom of driving on the left. Why? Perhaps the island-dwelling Japanese saw themselves as kindred spirits to the British—equally insular, equally eccentric.

Whatever the reason, just do it. *Drive on the left while in Japan.* Don't be out of step on this one!

●

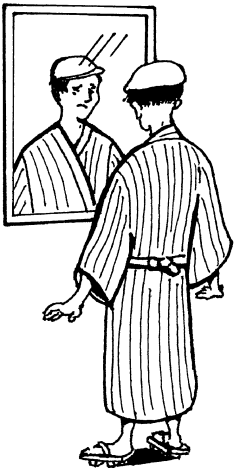
Do drape the left side of your yukata over the right

One of the great pleasures of Japan is the yukata. An informal type of kimono, this loose, comfortable garment is worn about the house. Think of it as a combination bathrobe, casual wear, and pajamas. It is perfect for lounging after a bath, taking an evening stroll, meditating in the garden. The yukata is also worn at hot springs, health clubs,

and ryokan. In short, whenever you want to relax.

Donning a yukata is easy. Just slip into it as you would into a bathrobe. But an important point: *be sure to drape the left side over the right.* The reverse—the right side over the left—is reserved for corpses being laid out for funeral.

I know you're eager to start relaxing. But pay attention and get this detail right.



●

Do take your shoes off before entering a Japanese home

For reasons of ritual purity and aesthetic sensibility, Japanese remove their shoes upon entering a private home. The idea is to prevent dirt from being tracked in off the street. You MUST observe this custom—it is de rigueur. Here's how it works:

Entering a house, you'll find yourself in the *genkan* ("vestibule"). Step out of your shoes and into the house proper—without letting your stocking feet touch the floor of the genkan.

Just inside will be a pair of wool or cotton slippers. Don them. They are to be worn in hallways, on stairs, and in the kitchen. You may now proceed into the house.

But when you arrive at a room whose floor is covered with mats, come to a halt. *Remove the slippers* and enter in

your stocking feet. Matted rooms are the living areas of the house. And since people sit and dine on them, the mats are kept scrupulously clean.

(If the room is carpeted, removal of slippers may not be necessary. Check with your host.)

Got it so far? But wait, there's more.

When you leave a matted room, redon your slippers. Keep them on for any hallway, stairway, or kitchen.

But if you go to the lavatory, awaiting you on the threshold will be a pair of slippers—a special, *plastic* pair. These are for use in the lavatory. Remove your regular slippers and don these.

So if you're going from the living room to the lavatory, you must do the following:

a) don your slippers as you leave the living room
b) keep them on as you pass through the kitchen
c) switch to plastic pair at the lavatory
d) redon your slippers for passing through the kitchen
e) remove them as you reenter the living room.

I know this sounds complicated. But the entire procedure will soon become second-nature…and even start to make aesthetic sense.

In any case, you MUST learn to do it. The protocols of footwear are fundamental to the Japanese way of life.

And now the don'ts.

●

Don't ask for a substitute beverage at the Tea Ceremony

You may NOT request iced tea, decaf, coffee, diet soda, mineral water, or anything else! Tradition demands that each guest be served the same thing: green tea that has been prepared—in the ancient manner—from a powder. Accept this tradition.

The tea hut is not a snack bar.

●

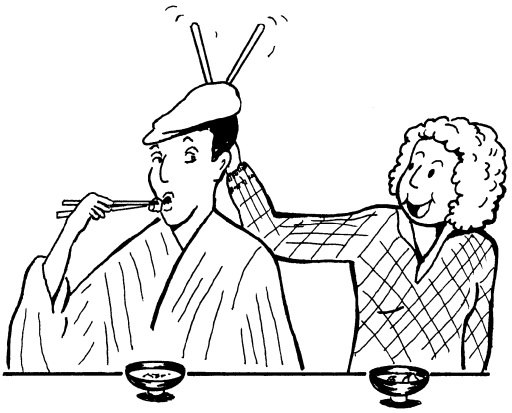
Don't do any of the following with chopsticks

1) spear food with a single chopstick

2) leave chopsticks sticking upright in a bowl of rice (this is done only when offering rice to the spirits of the dead)

3) lay them directly on the table (instead, take the package they came in and fold it into a makeshift rest)

4) hold them behind someone's head to simulate horns (such antics are acceptable only if a large quantity of sake has been drunk by all)



Don't pour soy sauce on your rice

The illustrator of this book did so, and was gently chided by his host. It was explained to him that a bowlful of rice is complete—is noble in its unadorned state.

●

Don't use soap in a public bath

A major gaffe.

●

Don't mistake lockers at the train station for a capsule hotel

These coin-operated receptacles are for stowing away your luggage—not for spending the night.

Robots

No visit to Japan would be complete without a look at its technological marvels. And perhaps the most amazing of these are the robots.

The first Japanese robot was fourteen inches tall, wore a robe, and moved about on wheels. His function was to serve tea. You wound him up and placed a cup of tea on his tray. And off he went. Head bobbing, he rolled up to a guest—halting as the cup was removed. Replacement of the cup caused him to turn around and roll back.

The tea-server was built in the 1600s by a clockmaker named Takeda. He exhibited it and similar automata in the pleasure district of Osaka. Later generations of his family, and other craftsmen, built more of these devices. But the art was eventually forgotten; and automata disappeared from Japan (save for a handful preserved on festival floats).

But today they are back—a new and dynamic breed of them. Their return had its roots in the comic books called *manga.* During the 50s robot heroes began to appear in manga stories. Several—Mighty Atom, Iron Man, Doraemon (a robot cat)—became popular, and were featured in films and marketed as toys. The affection inspired by these fictional robots predisposed the Japanese to welcome (rather than mistrust) the real thing when it arrived.

And arrive it did, as factories began to automate in the 70s. Though originating in the U.S., the industrial robot found its true home in Japan—a nation that was booming economically but experiencing labor shortages. Robots became a familiar sight on assembly lines, helping to weld cars or assemble radios. They were the most versatile of workers. Robot carts delivered materials. Robot inspectors checked for quality. Robot cleaners moved about the floor. Like the Japanese themselves, they were hardworking and dedicated.

The majority of robots were manufactured by a company called FANUC. As FANUC expanded, so did the role of robots. No longer were they restricted to factory jobs. Robots entered the building trades, making concrete slabs.

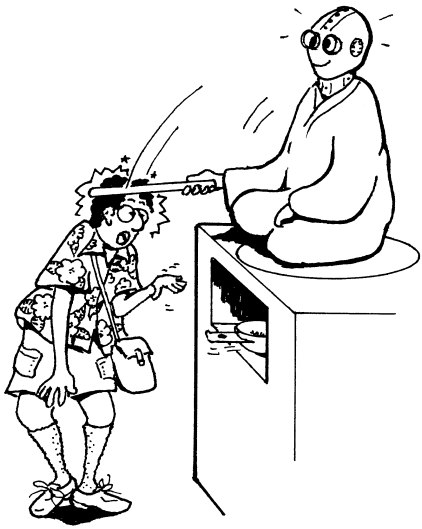
They inspected utility pipes—by rolling along inside them! And a huge, eight-legged robot went to work in Tokyo Bay, preparing the seabed for construction.

Nor were robots confined to blue-collar jobs. Several found employment at science museums, greeting the public. One became the receptionist at a video-game company. Another achieved recognition in the arts: playing piano with an orchestra (and performing on one occasion for the Emperor).

But their great success has been as sushi makers. In hundreds of restaurants, sushi robots stamp out the rice patties and dab the horseradish. (The fish is added by humans.) A sushi robot can work three times as fast as a chef. And the patties are of the highest quality—perfectly shaped and textured.

Japan is now the home of the largest and most diverse robot population in the world. Industrial robots play a major role in the economy. Sophisticated toy robots are found in virtually every household. And robot vendors—state-of-the-art vending machines, with synthetic voices and other abilities—have become a familiar part of the urban landscape.

What's next? Anything is possible. Perhaps FANUC will come up with a robot Zen Master. He would sit and ponder the Void. And he would dispense wisdom. You'd deposit a coin in his begging bowl. And lo—a wise saying, or koan, or explanation of Zen.



Q & A

Let's conclude with some questions and answers.

•

Why are temple bells rung 108 times on New Year's Day?

Japanese Buddhism recognizes 108 sins or wicked desires. Each ring is meant to banish one of these, that people may begin the year with a clean slate.

•

What is the Insect Hearing Festival?

Many Japanese keep a cricket, grasshopper, or cicada as a musical pet. It is housed in a bamboo cage, and fed slices of cucumber or eggplant. At night it sings.

Toward the end of summer the Insect Hearing Festival is held. In the evening, caged insects are brought to shrines and parks. After a ceremony they are released. And an orchestral din fills the air, as the insects rejoice in their return to Nature.

•

Who is the Kokuzo?

He is the Emperor's deputy at the Shrine of Izumo. The holder of this office was once a powerful and venerated figure—a kind of pope. The story is told of a worshiper who wished to give a gift to the Kokuzo. He commissioned a tailor to make an elegant robe. When the tailor presented him with the bill, he gasped—the amount was ridiculous! "Why so much?" he cried. The tailor replied: "Now that I have made a robe for the Venerable Kokuzo, I cannot in the future make a robe for anyone else. So I must charge you enough to support me for the rest of my days."

You mentioned a festival in honor of Tenjin. Who is Tenjin?

Tenjin is the god of learning. He was originally a scholar named Sugawara Michizane, who was deified after his death. Students pray to him for success in exams, and make pilgrimages to his shrine.

●

What is the fortunetelling bird?

A trained bird is sometimes found among the amusements at festivals. It is kept in a cage beside a miniature shrine. When the cage is opened, the bird hops over to the shrine. It pulls a string and rings a bell (as if to attract the attention of the kami). Then it hops up the stairs, enters the shrine, and emerges with a slip of paper in its bill. On the paper is your fortune.

●

Is it true that an employee of the Library of Congress was given to the Emperor and Empress of Japan as a gift?

Possibly. Here is what the *Gazette*—the newsletter of the Library of Congress—reported in its June 17, 1994 issue:

During their visit to the U.S., the Emperor and Empress stopped by the Library. They were shown the Great Hall and introduced to dignitaries. Their Majesties were then presented with a facsimile of Hiroshige's sketchbooks, and "other gifts, including a specially bound copy of *Treasures of the Library of Congress* by Charles Goodrum and the Public Affairs Office's Helen Dalrymple."

The syntax gives rise to an ambiguity. Did the gifts include Helen Dalrymple? Or was she merely co-author of the book?

●

What is Noh drama?

Noh is the classical theater of Japan. It is characterized by

masks, poetical language, and slow-motion dancing. A Noh play seeks primarily to communicate an emotional experience. A flute and drums provide music. From a chorus arise strange cries.

Noh can be difficult for a foreigner to appreciate or comprehend. Moreover, a performance lasts about six hours. It is permissible to take a break. 出口 is the sign for exit.

●

Is there an *etiquette* warning on cigarette packages in Japan?

Printed on some packages is the admonition: "Observe good smoking manners."

But a sterner injunction has been issued by wives to their husbands. (Most smokers are male.) They have been telling them to take those offensive fumes outside. This has given rise to the term "firefly people"—referring to the men who smoke on balconies at night.

●

Is it true that Hokusai would walk through the streets chanting Buddhist prayers?

Yes—but he did so to avoid having to make idle conversation.

●

What is the Baku?

The Baku is a supernatural creature that prowls the night—looking for *bad dreams* to eat. People used to keep a picture of the Baku near their beds. It was supposed to prevent nightmares and unlucky dreams.

Belief in the Baku has declined. But there remains a popular expression. When a bizarre dream is recounted, someone may say: "That's one not even the Baku would eat."

Lafcadio Hearn wrote a fable called "The Eater of Dreams." In it he awakens from a nightmare; and the Baku comes through his window. "Have you anything for me

to eat?" the creature asks. He describes his nightmare—in which he attacked a monstrous version of himself with an ax—and cries out:

> "Devour, O Baku! Devour the dream!"
>
> "Nay!" made answer the Baku. "I never eat lucky dreams. That is a very lucky dream,—a most fortunate dream… The axe—yes! the Axe of the Excellent Law, by which the monster of Self is utterly destroyed! The best kind of a dream! My friend, *I* believe in the teaching of the Buddha."
>
> And the Baku went out of the window. I looked after him;—and I beheld him fleeing over the miles of moonlit roofs,—passing, from house-top to house-top, with amazing soundless leaps,—like a great cat.

●

Who was Lafcadio Hearn?

Hearn was a journalist who came to Japan in 1889 to write a series of articles. He stayed for the rest of his life, having become enamored of the country.

He was drawn to its traditional culture—to "the people of Old Japan…honest to a fault, innocent of the further world, loyal to the ancient traditions and the ancient gods." Hearn married a Japanese woman, adopted Japanese dress, became a Japanese citizen. And from his travels and research, he wrote eloquently of a feudal world that was rapidly vanishing. His books were once widely read in America; they are now crumbling on library shelves.

To the ways and spirit of Old Japan, there is no better guide than Lafcadio Hearn.

I have heard that the Japanese celebrate Christmas? Can this be?

A secularized version of it has become popular in recent years. The focus is on gift-giving. Department stores—with festive decorations and roaming Santas—are jammed with shoppers. And on *Kirisumasu* eve, families gather to sing carols, enjoy a chicken dinner, and exchange gifts. They are only dimly aware that the holiday has a religious significance in the West.

●

Is it true that a teakettle once performed in Japanese vaudeville?

Apparently so. The story is told of a kettle belonging to Morinji temple in Joshiu province. One day the monks put it on the fire—and were astonished to see it sprout the head, tail, and legs of a badger! The transformed kettle began to race about the room. The monks chased after it. When they caught it, the kettle returned to its normal shape.

It was obviously possessed by a *tanuki,* or goblin badger. Wishing to be rid of such a kettle—it could only cause trouble—the monks took it into town and gave it away to a junk dealer.

That night the junk dealer was awoke by a sound. The kettle—having again sprouted the head, tail, and legs of a badger—was dashing about. The junk dealer stared in astonishment. But unlike the monks, he saw an *opportunity.*

He taught the badger-kettle to dance and to walk a tightrope. Then he went on tour with it. People flocked to see it perform; and for years the junk dealer was provided with a living. Upon retiring, he returned the kettle to Morinji temple—where it was preserved as a treasure.

●

What were the floating wine cups?

They were a feature of banquets held by idle aristocrats in Kyoto. The guests were seated in intervals along a

stream. Down the stream floated cups of wine. As a cup came by, the guest lifted it from the water, took a sip, and recited a poem. Then he floated it on to the next guest.

●

Is it really possible for Westerners—caught up as we are in rationalism and analytical thought—to attain any degree of Zen consciousness?

Absolutely. Just empty your mind.

●

Does Japan have mysterious lights and flames?

Japan *abounds* in them. According to F. Hadland Davis, a British antiquarian of the last century:

> There are many varieties of fire apparitions in Japan. There is the ghost-fire, demon-light, fox-flame, flash-pillar, badger-blaze, dragon-torch, and lamp of Buddha. In addition supernatural fire is said to emanate from certain birds, such as the blue heron.…There are also fire-wheels, or messengers from Hades, sea-fires, besides the flames that spring from the cemetery.

●

Do the Japanese have the equivalent of a bar-mitzvah?

They do in the Oki islands. During the Festival of the Dead, the islanders build boats of straw. The boats are for

the departing spirits—and for anyone who has recently come of age. Dressed in red, solemn-faced youths climb aboard; and the boats are towed out to sea. Just before the fragile craft sink, the youths are pulled out.

When they join in the dancing that night, it will no longer be as children.

●

How many haiku masters does it take to change a light bulb?

The drone of crickets, a distant bark.
His contented murmur. Sitting in the dark.

●

One last question. How would you sum up the essence of the Japanese spirit?

With this passage from F. Hadland Davis:

> There is a Japanese phrase, *mono no aware wo shiru* ("the Ah-ness of things"), which seems to describe most accurately the whole significance of Japanese poetry.…Nearly all Japan's people, from the peasant to the Mikado himself, are poets. They write poetry because they live poetry every day of their lives—that is to say, before Japan dreamed of wearing a bowler hat and frock-coat, or became a wholesale buyer of everything Western. They live poetry, always that poetry steeped in an intimate communion with Nature. And when in July the Festival of the Dead takes place, there comes a great company of poet souls to see Nippon's blossom again, to wander down old familiar gardens, through red *torii,* or to lean upon a stone lantern, and drink in the glory of a summer day, which is sweeter to them than life beyond the grave.

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