

Chapter 1 Awakening

Day 1: Crossing the Threshold

March 4

“You only lose what you cling to.” —The Buddha

There are four foundational teachings in Buddhism, known as the Four Noble Truths.

These truths are not dogma, but invitations to live with awareness, compassion, and clarity. They are not answers, but practices.

The first is *dukkha*—suffering. Life involves suffering. Not just pain, but a deep, human restlessness. Loss, longing, the ache of change, impermanence woven into everything. I didn’t yet know what *dukkha* would look like on this journey, only that I was already carrying it. I felt I had to walk with this first truth before I could even glimpse the others.

I woke in Tokushima, jet-lagged but buzzing with adrenaline. After nearly twenty-four hours of travel and a restless night at the Toyoko Inn, I had arrived. This quiet city on Shikoku

Island, framed by sea and mountains, was the starting point of the eighty-eight-temple pilgrimage I'd dreamed about for nearly three years. Looking out the hotel window, a quiet certainty settled over me: This was no longer an idea. It was real.

I hadn't come only for temples and trails. Beneath the logistics, flights, gear, and guidebook was a longing I hadn't yet put into words. Grief, yes. Restlessness, too. A hunger for stillness that couldn't be found in ordinary days. I told people I wanted the challenge, culture, and beauty of Japan, all of which was true.

But what I craved most was silence wide enough to hold my hurt. A road long enough to wear it down.

Outside, early sunlight draped the streets in soft gold. I skipped the hotel's free breakfast and walked to the station, my forty-pound pack snug against my back. Locking the door behind me felt symbolic, a final nod to comfort before stepping into the unknown. The morning air was cool and crystalline, laced with the faint scent of seawater and steaming rice. The streets were nearly silent at this hour, save for the occasional swish of a bicycle or a clattering delivery truck. I boarded the 6:11 train to Bando, a short, deliberate ride that cost ¥260 and arrived precisely on time, at 6:29. Japanese trains always do.

Bando Station was barely more than a bench under a roof. A modest sign read

FOLLOW THE GREEN LINE TO TEMPLE #1, 850 METERS

And so it began.

Almost immediately, I received my first *osettai*, an act of kindness freely given to pilgrims. An older man saw my pack and asked if I was walking the pilgrimage. When I nodded,

he beckoned me into a nearby building. It looked like a house, or maybe an office, I couldn't tell. Inside was a cozy jumble of papers, teacups, and baseball memorabilia. He poured me a tiny cup of coffee, gratefully received since I hadn't eaten, and we sat quietly, watching baseball on a small TV balanced atop a pile of magazines. Through gestures and halting English, I learned he had been a high school pitcher, sidelined by a shoulder injury. Despite the language barrier, something easy and warm passed between us, as if kindness had its own fluent grammar.

There was a photo tacked to the wall above the television, faded black-and-white, a teenage boy in a baseball uniform, squinting into the sun. He pointed to it, then to himself, and smiled. I smiled back. We shared a silence not of absence, but of presence.

When the hour neared, I bowed in thanks and stepped back into the crisp morning light, heartened. The coffee warmed my chest. The kindness, even more.

I was really on my way.

That realization carried weight, not just in my legs but in my chest. The tension between standing apart and standing among became a quiet thread running through those early days. I wasn't just undertaking a physical challenge. I was stepping into something ancient, communal, and deeply Japanese. I didn't own the tradition, but I could move through it with respect and reverence. The path wasn't mine, but I could walk it, step by step, breath by breath.

Being a numbers guy, I looked for structure in the unknown. I had, at most, sixty days to walk roughly 750 miles, visiting all eighty-eight official temples on the Shikoku *Henro*. That meant averaging a little over twelve miles per day—not a sprint, but definitely not a stroll. Secretly, I hoped to finish in fifty days, which pushed the average closer to fifteen miles daily. Some days would be short and sweet, others grueling and steep. But having the math gave the

journey shape. It turned an amorphous hope into something I could plan for, even if only loosely.

But numbers could only take me so far. They couldn't measure the weight of silence I'd carry, or the agony of doubt on lonely stretches. They couldn't predict the cold splash of joy in a stranger's gift, or the sacred hush of a moss-covered temple at dusk. For those, I'd have to rely on something softer: memory, emotion, presence. Some things aren't countable. They're only lived.

Still, the stats fascinated me. Each year, around one hundred and fifty thousand people make this pilgrimage in some form. But only about two percent walk the whole thing on foot. That narrows it quickly. Of those walkers, just 3.5 percent are non-Japanese, roughly a hundred people a year. And of those, only a quarter are American. Maybe twenty-five of us.

When I first read those numbers, I felt two competing things: solitude and solidarity. Solitude, because I realized how few people, especially foreigners, attempted the full pilgrimage on foot. And solidarity, because even in that rarity, others had done it before. Not many. But enough to know it could be done. Enough to know I wasn't entirely alone.

Being part of such a narrow slice of pilgrims, a fraction of a fraction of a fraction, made the path feel even more sacred. Not because of exclusivity, but because of intimacy. There was room to listen more closely, to notice more deeply. And while I wasn't seeking to prove anything, I was hoping to be changed.

The math gave me clarity. The walking would offer meaning. And somewhere between those two, between precision and mystery, I hoped to find what the pilgrimage was quietly waiting to teach me.

Ryōzenji (Temple 1) was less than a kilometer away, but the walk felt momentous. This wasn't a commute; it was a crossing. The temple grounds were hushed, incense curling in the early light. I paused at the gate, flooded with the nervous anticipation of a student on the first day of school, unsure of what to do, but certain it mattered.

At the temple shop, I bought my gear: an *oizuru*, the unpretentious white vest that marked me as a pilgrim; a *wagesa*, a narrow stole traditionally worn by lay practitioners; a *sugegasa*, the wide conical sedge hat meant to shield both from sun and ego. I also picked up incense; *osamefuda*, small name slips I would leave at each temple; and the *nokyochō*, a book in which each temple's calligrapher would inscribe a stamp, bearing witness to my passage. Lastly, I purchased a *zudabukuro*, a small white bag to hold these sacred tools.

I passed on the wooden staff. Tradition held that it symbolized Kūkai, the founder of the pilgrimage, walking beside you. But for now, I preferred my own hiking poles. I wasn't rejecting the symbolism, I just needed something that felt grounded in the practicalities of my body, my knees, my rhythm. The staff could come later, if it needed to.

The *sugegasa* sat lightly on my head, but it carried a surprising gravity. With its broad brim and black calligraphy brushed across the top, *dōgyō ninin* ("two traveling together"), it made me visible in a way I hadn't expected. I wasn't just someone walking now; I was a *henro*. I had entered the stream of something old, something bigger than me. I had stepped into a story that spanned centuries and landscapes and countless other footsteps. It was humbling. And it was real.

As I paid, the shopkeeper reached beneath the counter and pressed something into my hand, a small bracelet made of smooth wooden beads, strung on elastic. Another *osettai*. There

was no price, no explanation. Just the warm press of her palm into mine, and a quiet nod. I bowed in return and slipped the bracelet onto my wrist.

I wore it every day after that. It became a quiet companion, its rhythm of beads against my skin a small, grounding presence. Not flashy, not decorative, just a reminder. Of impermanence. Of generosity. Of the invisible threads that link us, even briefly, across language and custom and time.

Standing just outside the temple, now clothed in the white of a pilgrim, I felt a soft shift inside me, like the first notes of a song I hadn't realized I'd come to hear. I wasn't just beginning a walk. I was entering a rite, a season of shedding and remembering. And with every item I carried, visible or not, I carried something of intention, reverence, and hope.

I entered the temple gates and moved through the rituals: cleansing my hands and mouth, ringing the bell, offering incense and coins, then chanting the Heart Sutra which I read from my guidebook. I moved slowly, a little self-conscious, still uncertain in my gestures. But no one looked twice. There was a quiet permission here, to be a beginner, to learn by doing, to let worship grow through repetition.

At the *nōkyōjo*, the small office where pilgrims' journeys are ceremonially recorded, I placed my *nōkyōchō* before the attendant and received my first stamp. Three large red ink seals followed by bold black brushstrokes of *kanji* marked the page. My stamp book was no longer blank. The pilgrimage had officially begun.

But something else had begun too. Standing at the gate, guidebook in hand, I felt something inside loosen, like the moment a boat pushes off from shore and you realize the ground beneath you is no longer solid.

The guidebook, already dog-eared, felt like a lifeline. With routes, distances, elevation, and lodging, it offered structure to a journey I sensed would defy it. I traced the map with my finger as I walked out of *Ryōzenji*'s gate, pretending it would keep me from getting lost.

But this pilgrimage wouldn't unfold by map alone. There was another map I didn't yet know how to read, one etched in memory and emotion, in longing and wonder. That other map, the one of memory and emotion, was already unfolding beneath my feet. Unlike the printed pages in my hand, that map would redraw itself as I walk. I sensed that already.

I stopped at my first *konbini*, a 7-Eleven, for some breakfast. I stepped into a world of fluorescent light, neatly organized shelves, and quiet efficiency. I wandered the aisles slowly, grateful for the abundance of options. I picked out two *onigiri*, one with salmon, one with pickled plum, a yogurt drink, and a hot can of coffee from the warming case near the register. The clerk bowed as I paid. Outside, I found a quiet spot beside the building, sat on a low wall, and unwrapped my breakfast. It was modest, satisfying, and just the right meal to begin the day.

Gokurakuji (Temple 2) was just down the road. The climb was modest, but my legs already burned under the pack's weight. Still, I pressed on, lifted by waves of encouragement from strangers and the first blush of cherry blossoms. Their petals drifted in the breeze like pale confetti, celebratory and serene.

The city faded. Concrete gave way to winding paths and forested hills. The first real incline wasn't steep, but I felt every step. Sweat gathered under my pack. I'd trained for this, but pilgrimage miles are never the same as training miles. My shoes struck the ground with new gravity.

I paused at a roadside *Jizō* statue, tucked into a mossy alcove. A red bib tied around its neck, two fresh oranges at its base. I bowed, not from obligation, but instinct. Something was already shifting. The stillness there felt like a kind of listening.

Fruit stands lined the road, *mikan* oranges stacked beside rusted tin cans, ¥100 a bag, honor system. I bought two and ate them as I walked. Their citrusy brightness jolted me back to the present, to the crunch of gravel beneath my shoes, to the sun warming my arms.

One home had a tiny bistro table out front, seven dwarf figurines arranged in a row. Snow White, apparently, was still sleeping. By late morning, my pace had slowed to something between a purposeful stride and a wandering meander. I had nowhere else to be. Each step became its own destination. Somewhere between effort and stillness, I found rhythm. My body ached, but I no longer resisted it. I let the ache walk beside me.

Konsenji (Temple 3) stood behind a grove of trees, its gate framed by wooden beams darkened by time and rain. Moss clung to the stone steps. Wind moved gently through the canopy. The temple felt older, quieter, and more withdrawn than the first two, as if it had settled more deeply into the land.

Before entering, I paused to call home. I stood off to the side, near a weathered wall. Betsy's voice crackled faintly through the phone. The signal was weak, but her laughter broke through like sunlight through clouds. I told her about the train, the tiny coffee, the statues of dwarfs in the station garden. She laughed again, warm and familiar, and just like that, the distance shrank.

In that moment, everything became real: the temples and roads, the rituals and steps. But more than that, a deeper truth settled in: I was out here, walking. And I wasn't alone.

After we hung up, I stood quietly for a while. The breeze stirred the pine branches overhead. I looked up at the temple gate, took a breath, and stepped forward again.

Dainichiji (Temple 4) was wrapped in scaffolding, its main hall under repair. Less majestic, perhaps, but the kindness along the way stood out even more. It struck me then: Even sacred spaces are impermanent. Even places meant for devotion need mending.

There was something oddly comforting about that, this visible acknowledgment that nothing escapes the need for care, not even a temple built for eternity. The wooden beams, the tiled roofs, the hand-carved ornaments—each bore the wear of time, wind, and weather. And here were human hands, tending to what time had undone. I stood for a moment in the shadow of the scaffolding and thought about all the inner structures, beliefs, identities, and certainties I had built over the years, and how many of them had eroded or collapsed, sometimes without my noticing.

The temple's repair wasn't a failure of the sacred; it was a testament to its resilience. Sacredness doesn't lie in permanence. It lies in the willingness to return, rebuild, and renew what's been worn down. Pilgrimage, I was beginning to learn, wasn't about reaching something fixed and flawless. It was about walking with what falters, within and without, and honoring it anyway.

Just past *Dainichiji*, I received another *osettai*: sweet crackers and a warm cup of tea, handed to me with both palms and a quiet bow. The tea was almost too hot to sip, but I stood in the sun, slowly sipping, letting the warmth seep into my fingers and throat. In that small exchange, time expanded. I didn't rush. There was nowhere else to be but exactly where I was. In the distance, a plume of smoke rose into the sky. I was walking straight toward it.

Jizōji (Temple 5) was alive with ceremony. A fire ritual was underway, *goma*, I would later learn. Thick smoke curled into the sky as monks in saffron robes chanted rhythmically, tossing slender wooden slats into the flames. Each piece bore inscriptions, prayers, intentions, and names, and one by one, they were offered to the fire. It was elemental, ancient. The crackling wood, the scent of incense and pine, the smoke spiraling upward in great gray tendrils—it all felt both immediate and eternal.

I stood quietly at the edge of the gathering, letting the moment settle into my bones. Watching the wood catch, burn, and disappear, I thought again about impermanence, not as abstract philosophy, but as something visible and alive. Even prayers become ash.

And maybe that's the point. The power isn't in preserving the slats forever but in the act of offering them. In the letting go. In watching something once held burn clean, leaving behind only what cannot be consumed. There was beauty in the transience, meaning in the disappearance. Like the temples, like the body, like every footstep along the path, it would not last. And yet, while it burned, it mattered.

A few kilometers later, I passed a Lawson's convenience store and picked up food for later. The road to *Anrakuji* (Temple 6) wound through fields and quiet lanes. Rice paddies shimmered in the late sun, mirror-flat and empty. A heron rose into the sky with sudden grace. I passed more *Jizō* statues, sometimes barely visible behind roadside weeds, other times brightly dressed with pinwheels and paper cranes.

At *Anrakuji*, I asked if I could sleep in the bell tower, an austere shelter sometimes offered to pilgrims. At first, they thought I meant the paid lodging, but once I clarified, someone smiled and gestured kindly: *this way*.

I was just beginning to understand what it meant to live with uncertainty. Not in theory, but in the body. Each day I would ask: *Where will I find food? Where will I sleep? Will anyone help me?* I told myself to trust the road. But trust is hard when you're hungry, aching, and unsure.

The tower was bare: a great bronze bell with a wooden clapper, and a stretch of concrete just wide enough for my pack and mat. I unrolled my gear slowly, gratefully, the scent of old wood and incense rising like memory. There was a sacredness in its simplicity. The bell above me hung motionless, like a moon keeping watch.

As twilight settled over the rooftops, I sat outside and unwrapped my *onigiri* while sipping from a bottle of juice. The whoosh of passing cars was the only sound. My legs throbbed. My shoulders burned. And something inside me, something long buried, began to stir.

It wasn't a grand epiphany. More like a tuning fork, vibrating gently somewhere deep with a frequency I hadn't known to listen for.

I had stepped into *dukkha*, not the word, but the lived truth of it. More than suffering, it was the slow unraveling of being human: the exhaustion, the longing, the grasping for comfort in a world that never stops changing. I hadn't come to escape this. I had come to walk with it.

And in that small act, eating in silence, aching alone beneath a bell that had not rung, I felt something shift. A quiet opening. A willingness to stay.

The bell above me was still.

But something inside me had sounded.

Not loud. But clear.

I lay down under its silent shadow.

Eighty-two temples to go.