Day 2: Walking Through the Rain

March 5

"Even the obstacle is the path." —Zen teaching

Just as I was about to leave *Anrakuji* in the morning, the rain began, soft at first, then steady. I could hear it tapping on the roof tiles and dripping from the eaves as I suited up in my rain gear. When I finally stepped out, the world was washed in silver. The cool air carried the scent of wet earth, moss, and distant smoke. Everything felt hushed, softened by the steady rain.

I was grateful for everything *Anrakuji* had provided the night before—shelter, dry space, protection from wind, a sense of spiritual welcome—but there was no lingering. The road called. I cinched my hood, adjusted my pack, and began the day's walk toward *Jūrakuji* (Temple 7). Rainwater pooled in the uneven dips of the narrow roads. Even with Gor-Tex trail shoes and gaiters to deflect the rain off the tops of my shoes, my feet were soaked by the first kilometer.

Every step squelched. My Drymax socks were quickly saturated. But I didn't resent it, choosing to view the discomfort not as an obstacle, but as part of the texture of the day. A reminder that every step, wet or dry, belonged to the pilgrimage itself.

Mist hung low over the rice fields, their stubbled beds barely visible beyond the veil of moisture. Trees blurred into one another like brushstrokes on wet paper. I felt as though I were walking inside a dream, not lost exactly, but suspended. Time slowed. Landmarks emerged suddenly and slipped away without fanfare.

Hunger arrived quietly at first, then demanded attention. I hadn't eaten since last night's *onigiri* and juice, and the physical labor of carrying a heavy pack in the rain was draining me fast. Still, I didn't rush. I was already slipping into the rhythm of the road, where time moved differently and needs came and went like weather, rising, passing, returning.

At *Jūrakuji*, I moved slowly through the rituals of washing my hands, lighting incense, bowing, and chanting the Heart Sutra in Japanese as I read the words in my guidebook. I fumbled the verses, but there was no shame in that. The rhythm of the chant, with its cadences and unfamiliar syllables, was enough to pull me inward. The temple grounds were quiet except for the rain hitting stone, wood, and leaves in countless tones.

For the next ninety minutes, I sloshed my way toward *Kumataniji* (Temple 8). The trail was slick with rain, and puddles formed in the low places of the path. At first, the terrain was mercifully flat, allowing my legs to loosen and my breath to find a rhythm. But as I would come to learn repeatedly on this pilgrimage, every temple seemed to demand a climb, a final act of effort before arrival. No matter how far you'd already come, the last stretch was always uphill.

There were no shops in sight, no vending machines humming in the mist. My stomach gnawed at itself. The hunger had grown from a mild pang into something sharper. Why hadn't I packed more food? Why had I assumed I could find something along the way? These were small miscalculations, but they felt heavy now. My jacket and hood were no match for the increasingly

hostile rain. Water had worked its way down my collar, soaking my back and shoulders. The pack clung to me like a soggy second skin. My legs grew heavy, each step a negotiation. But somewhere in the heart of all that discomfort, a strange calm arose. I stopped fighting the misery and let it walk beside me. It was no longer the enemy. It was just part of the journey.

By the time I left *Kumataniji* and began the descent toward *Hōrinji* (Temple 9), my energy had thinned.

And then, just before reaching the temple, I spotted a flicker of yellow light in the gray morning. A roadside store, little more than a shack, tucked beneath overhanging trees. Its fogged windows glowed with a soft, inviting light. Crates of vegetables were stacked outside, the rain darkening their surfaces. An elderly man stood beneath the eaves, rearranging the produce. When he saw me, he didn't speak. He simply smiled and disappeared inside. Moments later, he returned carrying two steaming sweet potatoes and a cup of hot tea.

I received them with both hands and a deep bow. The heat soaked into my palms and traveled up my arms, thawing something in me. I stood under the shelter of the roof, the rain drumming steadily above, taking slow, grateful bites. The sweet potatoes were soft and earthy, their warmth filling my chest. The tea was slightly bitter, grounding. More than nourishment, it was an act of grace. It wasn't just food, it was presence. Recognition. Welcome.

In that quiet moment, I was no longer just a stranger trudging through the rain. I was a *henro* being seen.

At *Hōrinji*, I met a couple from Seattle, Nobu and Tatsue, fellow *henro*, dressed in rain jackets and grinning despite the weather. We shared a few easy laughs. It felt good to speak

English, to connect with people who understood both the language and the strange joy of choosing to walk hundreds of miles through unpredictable terrain.

They pointed me to an udon shop just outside the temple gate. After completing my rituals, I followed their recommendation.

At the shop, I simply pointed at what others were eating and nodded. I still have no exact idea what I ordered. And yet, it arrived. It was good. The broth was hot and rich, the noodles soft but springy, the scallions sharp and green. I didn't rush. Each bite felt earned. I sat in the warm, steamy air, rain streaking the window beside me, and let the food replenish something deeper than hunger.

I was beginning to learn what it meant to be illiterate. In the big cities like Tokyo and Osaka, many signs are also in English. But out here, on Shikoku's quiet roads and village lanes, English disappears. The *kanji* might as well be watermarks. I had probably passed dozens of signs offering food or shelter and never known it.

There's a kind of surrender in that. A letting go of control. A willingness to be unsure, to trust the kindness of strangers, to admit you don't know, and to keep walking anyway.

Illiteracy, I was learning, wasn't just about language. It was about moving through a world where you're not in charge, where you listen with your eyes, speak with gestures, and receive whatever comes.

Sometimes, what arrives is exactly what you need.

Outside, the rain kept falling.

As I neared *Kirihataji* (Temple 10) a car slowed beside me. The window rolled down, and a hand extended a small bundle wrapped neatly in plastic: crackers, hard candies, some *onigiri* tucked inside. Another unexpected *osettai*. We exchanged bows. No words were needed. I tucked the offering into my bag, heart lightened. These small gifts had become more than food. They were gestures of recognition, as if the island itself kept whispering: *You are not alone. Keep going.*

Every temple had its steps, and *Kirihataji* was no exception. I've always had trouble with stairs. I'm no Fred Astaire, but I can follow a rhythm without bruising my partner's toes. I've raced motorcycles and skied down mountains at reckless speeds without crashing. But a simple flight of stairs? That's another matter. Somehow, I can miss a step going up and coming down. It's a long-standing joke in my family. On this pilgrimage, though, with a full pack shifting my balance and slick moss underfoot, a misstep could have real consequences.

The climb to *Kirihataji* wasn't just a few steps, it was a trial. Three hundred and thirty-three stone stairs rose steeply into the mist, carved into the hillside like a spine. They looked as though they disappeared into the clouds, into another realm entirely.

At the base, an older man bowed to me, then gestured toward my backpack. He pointed to himself and held out his arms. I hesitated, unsure. He bowed again and said softly, "*Osettai*." I nodded, bowed back, and handed him the pack, grateful for the gesture and the trust it required on both sides.

Even without the burden, the climb was slow and deliberate. My thighs protested with each step. I paused often, not out of fatigue, but reverence. The air was dense with moisture and

memory. Rain-darkened trees rose like ancient sentinels. The stone glistened. Moss clung to the edges of each stair, soft and alive. Fallen petals stuck to bark like offerings.

There was a hush to the forest, not silence exactly, but a stillness so deep it asked for your full attention. Each breath I took carried the scent of pine and damp earth. I felt as though I was walking upward into something more than altitude, into the threshold between worlds, where effort meets grace, where exhaustion and awe share the same breath.

I climbed slowly. Carefully. Gratefully. And with each step, I felt more present, more rooted. By the time I reached the top, the temple emerged from the mist, a reward for both body and spirit.

And somewhere below, my pack waited.

After *Kirihataji*, the road unwound into open countryside. The sun was beginning its slow descent behind the distant hills, casting long amber shadows across the fields. I passed rows of spring vegetables, neat rows of onions, greens, and daikon, before the path veered off the main road and led me to the outskirts of a small town. There, just beyond a bend and nestled among bamboo and pine, stood a *henro* hut.

It was a modest wooden structure raised slightly off the ground and supported by short legs, like a child's treehouse just beginning to grow up. Unlike the bell tower I'd slept in last night, this abode had four walls, a flat roof, and a sliding glass door that closed out the night. Inside, a tatami floor offered a clean, flat place wide enough for three people to sleep shoulder to shoulder. Name slips, evidence of previous pilgrims, lined the inner walls like paper prayers, tracing the memory of those who'd come before.

My legs trembled as I stepped inside. My stomach was hollow again, gnawed by the familiar edge of exhaustion. I took off my pack and sat heavily, feeling the day's distance in every part of me. The thought of retracing my steps back into town to look for food felt impossible. The need to rest overrode everything.

But the food issue was no longer just a nuisance. It was becoming consequential. Skipped meals affected energy, recovery, even morale. I knew I had to start thinking ahead, marking *konbinis* and grocery stores the same way I marked temples and huts. Still, at that moment, all I could do was breathe and try not to let the hunger turn to frustration.

Instead of searching for a store, I turned to something that offered a different kind of nourishment. There was an *onsen*, a Japanese hot spring, next door to the hut, and I made my way there. Steam rose from the roof like incense offered to the sky. I peeled off damp layers, surrendering my aching body to the mineral-rich waters. The heat wrapped around me, seeping into joints and muscles that had been clenched since sunrise. I let my body float in the silence of the bath, my eyes closed, my limbs limp. The tension I carried wasn't only in my legs or shoulders; it was something deeper, something I'd been gripping unconsciously for days, maybe years. Here, for just a few minutes, I let it go.

When I returned to the hut, night had fallen. The rain had started up again, soft, steady, and oddly welcome. Inside, I found I wasn't alone. Two other pilgrims had arrived. One was Peter, a tall, lean man from Holland with kind eyes and a gentle presence. The other was a young Japanese cyclist, his panniers still caked in road mud. He didn't speak English, but his smile needed no translation. We bowed in greeting, quietly making space for one another.

Peter and I fell into easy conversation. When he heard I hadn't eaten, he offered without hesitation to go into town to find food for both of us. I protested, embarrassed, but he waved it off, "I still have legs," he said with a wink, and disappeared into the night with an umbrella and a map.

That small gesture felt enormous. I sat on the tatami floor, listening to the rain, stunned by the grace of it. Already, I was learning that food here wasn't just nourishment. It was mercy. It was community. It was presence. Planning mattered, but kindness—unexpected, unearned—mattered more.

Peter returned with bento boxes and two warm cans of coffee. We sat cross-legged in the dim glow of our headlamps, sharing what we had. The cyclist nodded in thanks, offering a piece of his *onigiri* in return. The three of us moved around each other with quiet appreciation, sorting gear, laying out mats, unrolling sleeping bags. We spoke little. We didn't need to. There was communion in the shared space, in the shared road.

The rain whispered on the roof above us, steady and soothing. The scent of wet cedar rose from the hut walls, earthy and clean. Outside, the wind moved through the trees in long, sweeping breaths. Inside, three pilgrims breathed in sync. I lay back on the floor, fed and washed and dry, and listened.

Not comfort, exactly.

But something like it.

A kind of peace.

A kind of presence.

And once again,

held.