

Chapter 4: Leading to Nirvana

Day 38: Climbing to the Top

April 10

“As you start to walk on the way, the way appears.” —Rumi

The fourth Noble Truth is *Magga*, The Path. Its way is the Eightfold Path: Right Understanding, Right Intent, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

The morning began in a hush. In the shelter beneath the pines, a soft mist clung to our breath as Norihito, Yoanna, and I shared breakfast, each of us wrapped in quiet thought, nursing warm drinks and the stiffness of yesterday’s miles. No one said much. The rhythm of pilgrimage has a way of softening the urgency of conversation. We three, strangers just days before, now moved like longtime companions, familiar with the rituals of each other’s mornings. Yoanna had a small stash of dried fruit and nuts. Norihito passed me a hardboiled egg, offering it with a wordless nod. I’d purchased coffee in a can for each of us out of the vending machine nearby.

Mist veiled the trees as we began the long ascent to *Sankakuji*. The climb rose steadily, winding along narrow paths laced with roots and last autumn's leaves. It was a stretch that asked for silence, steep enough to demand focus, beautiful enough to inspire awe. Yoanna led the way, her frame light and agile. Norihito walked just behind me, his staff tapping rhythmically on the roadway. The morning haze blurred the edges of things, giving the landscape an almost dreamlike quality. In those quiet hours, it felt as if we were walking through memory.

At *Sankakuji*, we wandered slowly across the temple grounds. The morning light, now stronger, slanted through the trees and lit the prayer flags that lined the temple steps. Their colors had faded from the sun and rain, but still they danced gently in the breeze, messengers of countless prayers carried skyward over the years. We quietly explored the grounds, letting the silence of the place do its work. I lit a stick of incense and watched the smoke rise in slow spirals, a visible echo of the breath I was just now learning to release, a moment of Right Mindfulness amid stone, sky, and silence. For a moment, standing there with these two fellow pilgrims, I felt a kind of shared arrival, an understanding that while each of us had come from different corners of the world, we had all arrived at the same still point, together.

Later, as we sat resting on a stone bench near the temple's edge, Norihito and Yoanna shared a cigarette. I watched them from a short distance, standing beneath a pine tree whose needles shimmered in the sunlight. The smoke curled into the air, rising between them like incense. I don't smoke, but I've come to see that everyone on this path has their own rituals. For them, it was a pause in the day, a moment to mark the climb and the stillness that followed, a quiet form of Right Speech, where nothing needed to be said to be understood. The path is wide enough for all kinds of habits.

Norihito chose to linger at *Sankakuji*, his tired feet and quiet spirit seeking one more hour of peace. Yoanna and I pressed on, following the trail as it bent along a ridge that opened suddenly onto a valley view. There, improbably perched at the edge of the path, was a single bistro table with two chairs. It looked as if it had been plucked from a sidewalk café in Paris and placed here, as if by magic, for the weary. We sat without speaking. The view stretched far below, tiered rice paddies, farmhouses with tile roofs, plum trees in blossom. The scene needed no commentary. That moment of shared silence was more intimate than conversation.

Eventually, we parted. Yoanna picked up her pace, her pack bouncing slightly with each step, and disappeared down the trail. Companions appear and vanish like breath on glass, sometimes without warning, sometimes with a smile and a wave. Always with the sense that they'll be carried forward in memory, even if their footsteps no longer fall beside yours.

As I resumed walking alone, I found myself thinking of Caitlin. She and Yoanna are about the same age. That comparison bubbled up unbidden, a father's mind never fully straying far from his children. I thought about the choices Caitlin made, the resolve it took to follow her own path. She could have attended the University of Wisconsin for free, but instead she chose Bryn Mawr, a tiny all-women's college just outside Philadelphia. It was smaller than her high school, but she knew that she wanted a place that would nourish both her intellect and her spirit. She double-majored in math and dance, a pairing that, in hindsight, now seems poetic. Structure and fluidity. Logic and grace.

She met Chad during a summer math program in North Carolina. After a year back home in Madison, she moved to Chicago to be with Chad and pursue her MBA at Kellogg School of Business. Then came a wedding, Seattle, a job with Microsoft, a child. Now she's taken leave to

care for Jonah, her firstborn. Another journey, another mountain. A different kind of climb, but no less demanding. Watching Yoanna hike ahead, I saw not only a fellow *henro* but an echo of my daughter, a reminder that every generation carves its own path, following inner maps we parents can't always read.

The final stretch of the day's walk, up to *Unpenji*, was the most grueling of the entire pilgrimage so far. Over sixteen miles of trail and more than fifty-seven hundred feet of elevation gain. The last two thousand feet came quickly, the mountain rising like a wall, unyielding and immense, as if testing whether I had truly understood the meaning of Right Effort. This was no gentle incline, it was a crucible. The kind of climb that doesn't just ask for strength but insists on surrender.

My breath grew shallow. My steps slowed. The forest, once spacious and companionable, closed in around me. The trees leaned in like quiet sentinels, ancient and watchful, holding their silence as I passed. My hiking poles thudded dully against the rock-strewn path, the rhythm broken by the occasional misstep or pause to catch my breath. Pain spread from my feet to my hips and shoulders; not sharp, but insistent, a deep ache that reminded me I was still moving, still alive. Strangely, the discomfort didn't feel like an enemy. It felt like proof. Proof that I was engaged, fully and honestly, in the effort. That I hadn't bypassed anything. That I had chosen the mountain, and the mountain had answered.

Somewhere near the steeper stretch, I came upon a women's bicycle leaning gently against a tree. It had a blue basket that matched the pale sky-colored frame. There was no one around. No signs of recent activity. This was no mountain bike. It didn't belong here, not logically, not physically. And yet, there it was. I stood for a moment, puzzled and oddly moved.

Who had brought it here? Why had they left it? Was it abandoned? Or waiting? I walked on, carrying the mystery with me like a pebble in my pocket.

When I finally reached the summit, I didn't cheer. There was no fist pump, no shouts of triumph. Just a long, slow exhale. A letting go. The air was different at the top: thinner, cooler, laced with the scent of moss and pine. It brushed across my cheeks, not dramatic, just honest, like the mountain saying, *You made it*. I dropped my pack and looked out. The views stretched past the clouds, across distant ridges layered in fading blues and greens, each peak softening into the horizon like a memory.

Unpenji, the highest of all the eighty-eight temples, felt suspended between worlds. The temple grounds were quiet, still in a way that made sound feel out of place. The statues here seemed more worn, their features blurred by wind and rain and time, as though the mountain had been slowly reclaiming them. Or perhaps the opposite: that they had been here so long they were becoming the mountain itself.

I lit incense. Bowed. Whispered the Heart Sutra with a cracked voice. There was no audience. No one to impress. Just me and the wind and the long, long road behind. I felt no epiphany, no flash of enlightenment. Only a quiet presence. A knowing that I had met the mountain honestly. That I had not turned away.

And in that, something had changed.

Yoanna was still there when I arrived. We exchanged a few words, tired but content. She was eager to continue and hoped to reach *Daikōji* before nightfall. As she prepared to leave, she told me she'd seen three snakes on the trail today. I'd seen one myself, a silent figure near a mossy stone. It didn't move, just watched me pass. Snakes have a long history in myth and

symbol, rebirth, transformation, danger, wisdom. I wasn't sure what to make of it, but it reminded me that nature has its own language, its own signs.

After Yoanna left, I wandered the temple grounds, savoring the solitude. Scattered throughout were sculptures of eggplants, an unexpected and whimsical sight at the highest temple on the pilgrimage. I was told that if I sat on the large one and made a wish, it might come true. I didn't test the legend, but the gesture itself felt lighthearted, even joyful, after the long climb.

Near the path leading down the mountain, I came upon a remarkable gathering of *Arhats*, five hundred stone statues representing the Buddha's earliest disciples. Each one had a distinct face: expressive, humorous, even mischievous. Some appeared serene, others bewildered or amused, as if frozen mid-thought or caught in a private joke.

Tradition says that if you find the *Arhat* who most resembles you, it might offer some kind of insight or reflection. I'm not sure I found mine, but a few made me laugh out loud, a rare and welcome release on this often solemn road. These faces, weathered but vivid, carved from stone yet alive with personality, reminded me that enlightenment doesn't always wear a serious face. Sometimes, it smiles. Sometimes, it even chuckles.

Norihito arrived after 5:00 p.m., so he'll stay tomorrow to complete his prayers. But tonight, we're sharing a room at Unpenji. It's cold—no heat, no insulation, only the whisper of wind slipping through the window frames. Outside, the mountain wind howls like something ancient and unsettled, but inside, there is peace. We shared a meal and drank tea, our conversation slow and spare. Words come more softly now. We've said most of what needed saying; the rest can live quietly between us.

The map of this journey was beginning to fold back in on itself. I could feel the arc rounding gently toward its close. And yet, it didn't feel like an ending. It felt like continuation, like something just beginning, even as it drew to a close. Like breath, like seasons, like the unbroken rhythm of footfall after footfall on a long, winding road.

That night, I slept high above the world, warmed not by fire, but by fatigue, companionship, and the quiet knowledge that I had come far. Tomorrow, the descent would begin. But for now, I would rest.