

Tenrikyo – Ritual and Reason

by Li Miao Lovett

The Oyasato temple gleamed like a giant honeycomb in the afternoon sun. Inside the complex, practitioners scurried around polishing the wooden floor with their bare hands. They crawled through the sanctuary on all fours sweeping, sweeping for hours on end. And when one finished for the day, another worker bee would comb over the same spotless surfaces in the single-minded devotion preached by the founder of the Tenrikyo religion, Miki Nakayama.

I watched in fascination, but with the reserve of a foreigner who was not about to seek the truth on her hands and knees. The temple had a palatial interior, with four worship halls surrounding an inner sanctuary. Here the great symbol of Truth, the Kanrodai, emerged from the floor as a wooden hexagonal pillar. It struck me as unimposing, yet commanded a reverence that rivaled the aura surrounding the Christian cross or statues of the Buddha in his myriad forms. Standing at the entrance to the main temple of Tenrikyo, I could not fathom the revelations inspired by a beam of wood. Had these devotees confused the map with the terrain?

I had come to Japan as a spiritual seeker, with the curiosity of youth and an openness to new teachings. My sales work had become

increasingly senseless, and as I became more disenchanted, I was drawn to Eastern practices that engaged the inquiring mind and questioned our material reality. I wanted to glean kernels of truth from the trappings that inevitably surround all religions. Religious ritual seemed to dull the mind, while dogma could destroy its rational senses altogether.

The Tenrikyo religion at once attracted and repelled me. Like a rich stew, it blended the flavors of Buddhism, Shintoism, and Christianity in seeming contradiction. God was a parental Being who could see all, discern the good from bad, and save His children. Ah, the patriarchal tones rang all too familiar. But the mind-bending, mystical aspects of Tenrikyo also revealed that God and creation were one in truth. Only the dust in our minds kept us from seeing things as they truly are. And so, the cleaning of the temple was in essence the clearing of one's mind.

Several days into my stay in Tenri city, I went on a whirlwind of temple-hopping around Nara, a city known for its fertile agricultural fields and lush green mountains. Arriving by train at Nara-Koen Park, I became surrounded by a horde of tourists, schoolchildren, and roadside vendors selling corn cobs, disposable cameras, and biscuits for feeding the deer. Down every tree-lined lane, deer ambled about fearlessly, nuzzling young children for food and posing for pictures beneath outstretched hands. The significance of the deer seemed lost on the crowds as money, cameras and biscuits were briskly exchanged. The transaction seemed to be a ritual in itself, a kind of homage to the god of commerce. Nevertheless, these well-fed deer

were sacred creatures because a powerful kami, or spirit, had arrived here long ago with divine messages on the back of a white deer.

I pressed my way toward Todaiji temple, which housed the largest gilded bronze Buddha in the world. The Buddha sat with palms in a mudra of compassion, surrounded by an entourage of realized beings perched on golden walls behind his tremendous head. And tremendous it was – the length of the ear alone dwarfed a grown man’s height, while each kindly finger could squash a human torso with its sheer weight. Other imposing statues flanked the Buddha; these were fierce guardian figures with bloodthirsty eyes that kept me at bay. Yet their demonic glances could not stop swarms of children on field trips from darting about merrily around their legs, squealing in delight as they played games of hide and seek.

Far from the mind-taming ritual I’d witnessed at the Oyasato temple, I found my attempts to seek meaning lost in this orgy of tourism. Childhood glee and capitalism had literally overrun a sacred place of worship. But something compelled me to go back. I returned a few days later on my own, but to my dismay, the light spring rain had not quelled the crowds. Indeed, the schoolchildren continued arriving full force in busloads, so I turned and fled to the nearby hills. A trail snaked along the side of the mountain through a canopy of blooming trees and passed by a spring-fed grotto. I walked briskly, gulping the rain-cleansed air and feeling trickles of moisture through the swirling leaves. Here I found solace, and at the edge of the grotto, my heart swelled with gratitude. At last, my spirit seemed to soar above the mental chatter and the din of the distant crowds.

Crowds frightened me. Crowds muscled their way toward temples and tourist attractions. They gathered, perhaps ten thousand strong, some in wheelchairs, others with canes, in front of the Oyasato temple amidst festive banners that had little connection with the truth I was seeking. Back at home, crowds cheered at large conventions for sales goals and corporate slogans I didn't believe in. And somehow, in the desire to break free from blind obedience, I found myself in an ancient culture that rested on the pillars of conformity and tradition.

A relatively young religion, Tenrikyo has three million followers worldwide who are inspired by the teachings of Miki Nakayama. The founder, also known as Oyasama, was a virtuous housewife who received a divine revelation in 1836 that led her to spread the faith despite constant poverty and persecution.

My study program in Tenrikyo was an abbreviated version of the three-month period that devotees, many of whom were elderly, spent attending lectures and living in community. For two weeks, I showed up every morning at the lecture hall, where I would choose a headset and English audiotape before joining a group of thirty students in one of several rooms presided over by an austere teacher. While the teacher read solemnly from the texts in Japanese, I listened to the English translations. All around, others with headsets heard the teachings in Chinese, French, German, Spanish, and other languages. The Besseki lectures, as they were called, never changed. The Japanese teacher in my chosen room could be a little thinner one day, or more gruff in his speech the next, but the same British voice would float out of my headphones.

“Among all humankind, there is no one who is evil. It is only a bit of dust stuck on.” Years of Catholic guilt could be wiped away with a single stroke.

“The body is a thing lent by God. If we use it for our willful ends, it clouds the truth.” Well, maybe more than a single stroke.

Tuned in to the same channel, to that soporific British voice each morning, I found myself struggling to find the meaning in these teachings. But the power of ritual once again overwhelmed my fresh pursuit of truth. The tempo of the recordings was mechanically altered to match the pace of the live lecture, so sentences came out distorted, sometimes slowed to an ominous tone, other times sped up to my amusement.

“Indeed-Tenri-O-no-mikoto-Oyasama-and-Jima-are-one-in-truth,” raced through my head like the sounds of the Shinkansen, the bullet train, speeding away.

“THEEE OH-RI-GIN OF ILL-NESS IS THEEE MI-I-IND.” I wondered if Moses felt as bewildered when he first heard the thundering voice of Yahweh echoing through the clouds.

In the teachings of Oyasama, as in Buddhist and Christian tradition, a seeker’s greatest aspiration was to surrender to a greater power. But the rituals didn’t help me to quiet the mind. Instead, my voices of judgment got into a shouting match with the audiotapes. *They’re scraping their knees and worshipping an idol. They preach modesty but the temple must be worth a mint. They claim miracles yet I’ve never seen anyone walk out of their wheelchair.*

Central to the tenets of Tenrikyo is the idea that illness arises from a mind clouded by the dusts of anger, greed, arrogance,

selfishness, and so on. When a student completed the lecture series, at the end of two weeks or three months, she would receive the Sazuke. In an elaborate ceremony, an elder teacher conferred the power to heal others on the seeker.

This ceremony, of course, involved much ritual. On the day I received the Sazuke, four elderly ladies from the three-month program spent the entire morning dressing – or rather, cocooning me – in a kimono, to their great satisfaction. Armed with layers of silk and cotton, the women wrapped me in garment after garment, adjusting the ties, pulling at loose ends, then starting all over when something seemed out of kilter. I stood patiently as they nipped, tucked and gossiped for four hours.

Receiving the Sazuke was an auspicious event. I stood with several other students in the grand central hall of the Oyasato temple, waiting patiently as a small entourage of practitioners, relatives, and friends filed in. The pillar of the Kandorai seemed strangely sentient, as if it were a giant stalk on which rested an all-knowing, divine eye. As the ceremony began, the ceremonious silk and cotton gowns swishing about in busy preparation came to a standstill. A hush descended in the room, and all eyes rested on the elder who recited blessings and bestowed the power of healing on each graduate. When it was my turn, I hobbled up to the teacher in my kimono cocoon and wooden clogs to receive his blessing.

As constricted as my garments were, I felt lighter and somehow free. Perhaps it was that moment when I made contact with the elder's kind eyes, wizard-like in their gaze. Or perhaps it was the devoted attention of the four ladies who had dressed me to precision,

wrapping me in the kimono like swaddling cloths, making me one of them.

I had been an onlooker all this time, as the rituals of temple sweeping and daily life swirled around me. And now, I had become part of the fabric of this community, connected to the others through this ritual of blessing. The power of ritual, no longer strange and alienating, now cut through the mental noise to embrace me.

The next day, I was soaking in the communal bath with the other women when one of the elderly ladies slipped and fell on its smooth surface. Everyone laughed when I appeared swiftly at her side, eager to help but so newly initiated in the ways of Tenrikyo. I took my role seriously. Performing the ritual of the Sazuke for her, I recited the healing prayers and made the gestures of the hand dance over her body. Later that day, another lady, Nita, requested that I perform the Sazuke for the pain in her lower back and legs. I felt a twinge of resistance. This was a real ailment, and surely, I could not be a true healer after only two weeks of study, much of it filled with questioning and uncertainty. Nita was one of the older ladies who had showered attention and good will on me. Her eyes implored me to help; I couldn't say no.

In the communal room that the older ladies shared, Nita lay down on a tatami mat. Her legs quivered slightly, and I could see the toil of many years etched into her skin, almond pale and only slightly wrinkled. Her companion, a round lady with friendly eyes, moved her fingers over Nita's body in the graceful gestures of the hand dance. I recited the prayers with complete devotion to the task at hand. I wished healing for her, and there was nothing else I wanted more in

that moment. Tears welled up in her friend's eyes, and the drops fell in steady rhythm on the woman's body. When we finished, we lingered for a moment in the silence. Nita's life, and mine, and that of all others seeking peace and well-being were intricately tied in this simple ritual of caring.

I began to understand the importance of ritual in the Japanese culture. It was the practice, the act of devotion, that mattered. Carried through generations, these rituals were not a mindless yoke but a time-honored doorway to the unknown. To the Western mind, truth had to be sought out and scrutinized. That afternoon, I no longer felt the need to seek.

The day before I left Tenri, I took one last walk in the hills near my dormitory. I had gotten into the habit of meandering through the woods and fields after the Besseki lectures. My path led past a small patch of leeks, with robust green stalks blooming wildly against the landscape of the city. In the next field, an elderly woman crouched on her haunches, weeding in a row of cornstalks. Her deft fingers circled around each stalk to pull at the weeds in a swift motion. Over and over, she circled and pulled as if doing a hand dance. At last, she paused to push up her straw hat and wipe the dust from her brow.