



## CHAPTER ONE

# GOING TO THE MOUNTAIN

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### THE CELESTIAL RAILROAD

It is mid-morning. The four-car electric Kōyasan Express, now nearly an hour into its southward journey from Ōsaka's Namba Station, has reached Kimi Pass in the Izumi Range. As the train exits the last tunnel and begins its descent into the valley of the Kino River, we rise from our crowded bench seat and go to the car's front window. The view from this height is one of the trip's important opportunities. Spread before us are the mountain ridges and river valleys that make up the storied peninsular region known as the Kii Hantō. Somewhere out in that purple haze is the burial cave of the goddess Izanami, co-creator with her brother of the islands of Japan. There also is the route followed two and one-half millennia ago by Japan's first emperor, the legendary Jimmu, grandson of the sun goddess Amaterasu, as he trekked northward through the Kii to found a new nation.<sup>1</sup> Jimmu's guide on that occasion was a three-legged



crow, a gift of the sun. The whole region is filled with ancient shrines and ancient legends. Young Kōbō Daishi retreated into this wilderness when he abandoned his college education in order to seek the transforming power of mountain meditation. At some point during that experience he discovered the high summit valley where he later would establish his greatest temple.

Kōyasan is straight ahead of us now, its dark irregular profile lifting over the fronting foothills just beyond the Kino River. The round bulge at the western end of the ridge is Mount Benten. The more pointed silhouette at the eastern end is Mount Yōryū. Extending between these two summits lies the high level valley, or *kōya*, that gives the overall mountain its name. *Kōya-san*. Such locations were thought in Kōbō Daishi's time to be ideal for spiritual practice and study of the Dharma.

Back in our seats, we continue talking with a woman who has been sitting across from us ever since we left Ōsaka. It is rare to see a Westerner on this train, she tells us. They usually take the later and more comfortable Limited Express. She explains that she has visited Kōyasan at least once each year since she was a small child. She turns her shoulders to show us the faded image of Kōbō Daishi printed on the back of her white pilgrim's smock. This garment is more than twenty years old.

When we arrive I will go first to the forest cemetery to pray at the graves of my mother and my grandparents. Then I will pray at Odaishi-sama's tomb, asking him to protect my husband's business and the health of our children and grandchildren. After lunch I will visit the Karukaya-dō. That is my favorite place on the mountain, despite the crowd of tourists. The story of Ishidōmaru climbing Kōyasan to search for his lost father meant a great deal to me when I lost my own father in the war. Sometimes I imagined that my father had not been killed, but instead had escaped to Kōyasan to live near Odaishi-sama, just like Ishidōmaru's father.

The train crosses the wide but shallow Kinokawa and pauses at the little riverside village of Kamuro. In past centuries Kamuro was a bustling place with inns and teahouses that served foot travelers bound for Kōyasan along the Kyū-Kōya Kaidō ("Old Kōya Path"). But Kamuro no

longer bustles. No one is getting on the train or getting off. Our woman friend points out the window at a sign that pictures a little boy in ancient aristocratic dress. This is Ishidōmaru. The sign advertises a local temple shrine, the Kamuro Karukaya-dō, that is dedicated to the story of Ishidōmaru's search. Ishidōmaru began his climb here in Kamuro, leaving his mother at a local inn because women were not permitted on the holy mountain. When he reached the temple near the summit he met a gentle, sympathetic priest who told him the father he sought had recently died, and pointed to a freshly dug grave as proof. Ishidōmaru sadly descended the mountain, only to discover that in his absence his mother too had died. So, now an orphan, he sorrowfully re-climbed Kōyasan, had his head shaved, and became a disciple of the gentle priest. The two spent their lives together worshiping the Buddha, and never did the older man reveal to Ishidōmaru that he in fact *was* his father.<sup>2</sup> The poignant story may date back as far as the twelfth century.

Our train passes a spread of rice fields just coming into ripeness, then stops at the village of Kudoyama, or "Nine-times Mountain," also on the southern bank of the Kinokawa. The unusual place name is construed locally to be a reference to the number of times Kōbō Daishi descended from Kōyasan to visit his mother here. Her residence presumably was at or near the village's Jison-in temple, Kōyasan's earliest supply depot. A carefully laid out footpath, twenty-one kilometers in length, extends from Jison-in to Kōyasan's summit. This path, still the official pilgrimage route up the mountain, is the one ex-Emperor Shirakawa took.

From Kudoyama Station the single-track line turns sharply away from the Kino River and we begin climbing up the narrowing gorge of the rushing Fudō-dani-gawa. Ahead lie fifteen tunnels and five mountain village stations. The last station, still only half way up Kōyasan, is the Gokuraku-bashi Eki, "Station of the Bridge to Paradise."

Upon exiting from the first brief tunnel we stop at Kōyashita ("Below Kōya") Station in the village of Shiide. Not so long ago Shiide supplied *kago* carriers for pilgrims who wished to be taken up the mountain by litter. The village is little noticed now, but on August 16 substantial crowds gather for the "Dance of the Shiide Demon," an ancient ritual designed to protect the local children from disease and assure the success of the fall harvest.<sup>3</sup>

As the train pushes forward the scenery becomes more dramatic, a constantly changing landscape of forested ridges and steeply terraced persimmon and *mikan* orchards. The wheels screech as we cross trestles and turn in and out of narrow tunnels. The cascading Fudō-dani-gawa recedes steadily deeper into the ravine below. In 1885 the Nankai railroad's founder, Matsumoto Jūtarō, vowed to construct a track capable of carrying pilgrims from the heart of Ōsaka to the summit of Kōyasan. That endeavor took forty-five years to complete.<sup>4</sup>

At last, after thirty more minutes of climbing, we reach Gokuraku-bashi Station. Forested slopes rise abruptly on all sides. Nankai's engineers could push the track no farther. A few meters below the station is the arched, red-painted "Bridge to Paradise," the footbridge for which the station is named. If we wish we can continue on by our own power, climbing to Kōyasan's Fudō Entrance along the paved and graded Fudō-zakka trail. On the way we would see a legendary waterfall and visit the trailside Fudō chapel where Ishidōmaru sought shelter when overtaken by darkness. A vast crowd of other climbers would join us, at least in spirit—centuries of student monks, zealous pilgrims, despondent lovers, soldiers in flight, emissaries from the shōgun, *hijiri* carrying ashes to place near Kōbō Daishi's tomb.

But the cable car offers a less strenuous way to paradise. And we already have our ticket. A clanging bell. We rush through a sheltered passageway and up steps to the second of the linked cars. Only a few empty seats remain. The bell clangs again and the cars slide into motion. Soothing music begins to pour from the public address system. We welcome the music, for the track ahead seems absurdly steep. We understand this to be the steepest cable track in the nation. And the oldest. But no matter, we are ascending smoothly and rapidly. Gokuraku-bashi Station falls farther and farther below us. We notice two small distant figures moving slowly along the Fudō-zakka trail. Foot pilgrims. Next time we may wish to join them.

At the upper terminus, Kōyasan Station, we step out into air that is sharply cooler. We are now at the altitude of the Kōyasan temples, but still must travel a couple kilometers or so through mountain forest to reach the valley's Fudō Entrance. A bus already is waiting for us, also supplied by Matsumoto's Nankai company.<sup>5</sup>

The bus starts off down the narrow, twisting, deeply shaded forest road, tightly following the contour of the mountainside. This road is for the exclusive use of buses that shuttle back and forth between the valley and the cable car terminus. Over the PA system a motherly Japanese voice describes some of the attractions that await us, followed immediately by a much younger female American voice that relates the same information in English. Suddenly the trees separate up ahead, sunlight splashes down, and the two voices call out the first stop: “Nyonindō.” The Hall for Women. We press the bell, grab our backpacks, and, as the bus slows to a stop, step down to the pavement. Our Japanese friend waves through the window at us as the bus continues on through the Fudō Entrance and down the sloping road into the sacred valley. She will remain on the bus until its last stop, number eleven, “Okunoin-mae,” at the far eastern end of Kōyasan. There she will find the shortest path to the “inner temple” and Kōbō Daishi’s tomb. As for ourselves, we are going to spend the next half hour right here, just outside the gate.

#### OUTSIDE THE FUDŌ ENTRANCE: THE WOMEN’S HALL

A welcome silence encloses us, the first real silence we have experienced since rising in darkness at four a.m. in Kobe. Sharp edged sunlight fills our little opening in the forest. The air is damp and spicy. Unlike Kōyasan’s main western entrance, with its massive and intricate Great Gate, this Fudō Entrance is marked only by two large stone lanterns, one on either side of the road. On the lantern post at the right are carved the three Chinese characters for *Kō-ya-san*. On the lantern post at the left are the characters for *Kon-gō-bu-ji* (“Diamond Peak Temple”), the name selected by Kōbō Daishi for the overall monastery. Beyond the entrance we can just make out the wall of the first temple, about fifty meters distant.

In former years the Fudō Entrance (*Fudō-guchi*), although geographically a side gate to Kōyasan, was the busiest entrance to the valley, for it was the terminus of the Fudō-zakka trail, the last segment of the Old Kōya Path that came through Kamuro. Gate keepers were constantly

alert, checking credentials, assigning visitors to the various temples, watching out for women. Before the twentieth century no woman, regardless of age or connection, was permitted to pass through any of Kōyasan's seven entrances.

We can imagine one such woman. She looks down the entrance road into a world she is forbidden to enter. The two strongest yearnings of her religious life, to speak to Kōbō Daishi at his tomb and pray before the Great Sun Buddha in the Great Stūpa, are both thwarted. With soft voice she tells the gate keeper that she has a brother who is a resident of Kōyasan. Might he be permitted to come out to meet her here at the gate? No, he says, that is not possible. She thanks him for not speaking to her in an insulting way, then turns toward the massive bronze statue of Jizō Bodhisattva (Sk. Kshitigarbha) that sits in meditation just outside the gate.<sup>6</sup> Jizō has a shaved head and is dressed as a simple monk. His assignment is to protect all travelers, both in this world and in the next, both male and female. He has a compassionate, dreaming face, almost the face of a woman. She now crosses the road to the Women's Hall, the Nyonindō. She wishes to rest for a time before starting back down the mountain. Perhaps another woman will be waiting there. Perhaps they will share their experiences and drink some tea together.

*Nyonin-kinzei: No Women Allowed!*

From the very beginning the *nyonin-kinzei* prohibition was a common part of Japanese monastery discipline. A woman's presence would be a distraction to celibate males engaged in spiritual study. It also might remind the monks of powerful ties that once bound them to the secular world: to parents who counted on the blessing of grandchildren and on receiving support in their old age, to sweethearts or wives (and sometimes children) who had been left behind as a precondition for entering the religious life.<sup>7</sup> Kōyasan was famous for applying the *nyonin-kinzei* policy with particular severity. Do not attempt to communicate with our men. Do not come to our gates in the hope of obtaining interviews. Your loved ones are dead to you.

According to popular tradition the woman who served as the basic model for Kōyasan's gender exclusion was Kōbō Daishi's own mother.

Near the end of her life Lady Tamayori, then a widow, is described as taking up residence at the foot of the mountain near Jison-in temple, her intention being to devote her remaining years to the care of her son. When Lady Tamayori attempted her first climb, however, Kōbō Daishi intercepted her on the path and forbade her to proceed beyond a point marked by two barrier rocks. When his mother protested, Kōbō Daishi removed his *kesa*, the most sacred article of priestly dress, and placed it across the path. “Mother, if you wish to climb higher you will have to step over my *kesa*. When she attempted to do just that there was an earthquake and a descent of fire balls from the sky. As a ledge of rock slid down to crush his mother, Kōbō Daishi stepped forward, seized the stone, and held it up to shield her against the fire.<sup>8</sup> Clearly both the law of Buddhism and the will of the native gods supported the principle of *nyonin-kinzei*. Lady Tamayori never again attempted to climb the mountain.

Through the centuries, however, Japan’s women kept pressing closer to Kōyasan’s summit, until by the time of the Tokugawa shōgunate they were allowed to proceed all the way to the entrance gates, of which there now were seven. There they might pause and pray, perhaps bid farewell to a spouse or loved one, or leave ashes for later burial near Kōbō Daishi’s tomb. If these women pilgrims were accompanied by a man he would be permitted to pass through the gate to register at a temple. After signing his own name he could write the woman’s name, adding *tono* at the end to indicate her temporary status as an honorary male. In this way she might receive spiritual credit for her journey.<sup>9</sup> If the man elected to remain overnight at Kōyasan, the woman had the option of staying in one of the crude women’s shelters that sprang up outside each entrance gate or of retreating to a traveler’s inn part way down the mountain—perhaps at Kamiya, a small village not far from the Gokuraku-bashi.

Inevitably a degree of sisterhood built up among these excluded women, and soon a path was worn along the summit ridge that connected the seven women’s shelters. This encircling path, known as the *Kōya-nana-guchi-nyonin-michi* (“Women’s Path to the Seven Entrances to Kōyasan”), is still maintained and provides the mountain with one of its more attractive day hikes. Signs identify the original site (*ato*) of each shelter. From several locations along the path a hiker can look down into portions of the valley, see the upper roof and spire of the Great Stūpa (Daitō) and hear the throb of the ancient Daitō bell.

The first significant initiative to allow women to pass through Kōyasan's gates came in 1872 when the new Meiji government in Tōkyō ruled that all of the nation's "sacred mountains" must be opened to pilgrims of both sexes. About a month after this edict, in a still more drastic move, the government decriminalized priestly marriage and the eating of meat, two of the most fundamental Buddhist clerical vows. Monks also henceforth might let their hair grow and wear secular clothing when not performing religious duties. The government's motive for taking these measures was in part to demonstrate to the nation and to the world that Japan was modernizing its social policies. The rulings also were an expression of the early Meiji hostility to the Buddhist establishment. Kōyasan, however, largely ignored these edicts. For the next thirty-four years its application of *nyonin-kinzei* did not change, at least not officially.

Then in 1906 the exclusion was lifted. By that time a generation of Kōyasan's priests had observed their fellow Shingon clergy "down below" enjoying the privilege of marrying and having children. Some wished this opportunity for themselves. A few already had wives and children, although secretly, and desired that these unions be made public and the banned wives and children brought to live on the mountain.<sup>10</sup> An eldest son could then be trained for the priesthood with the expectation that he eventually would take over the father's temple, a practice that was becoming the norm elsewhere. On the other hand, many of Kōyasan's priests were scandalized by the prospect of such laxity. Even today there are Shingon priests who believe the lifting of the ban on marriage forever destroyed an essential element of priestly discipline and culture.<sup>11</sup> "Our priests worry about their children's education," one priest told us. "They worry about their automobiles. Some take up golf. How are these men different from other men?" But the debate now is largely theoretical. Women have entered the valley to stay—as wives, daughters, mothers, teachers, temple employees, business clerks and managers, as university students, as students in the seminary for priests. And as pilgrims and visitors.

Today more than one million women, young and old, from every station of life, pass annually through the gates of Kōyasan. The discomforts and sorrows of *nyonin-kinzei* are matters of the past. But they are not entirely forgotten. An aid to memory is the Nyonindō itself, the Women's Hall that stands just outside the Fudō Entrance. It is the only



women's shelter that still survives, although, strictly speaking, it no longer serves as a shelter. It is closed at night. During daylight hours, however, women come here to remember and to pray.

### *The Women's Hall*

The Nyonindō, most recently rebuilt in 1871, is a traditional wooden Buddhist hall with a large shingled roof that sweeps up slightly at the eaves. Across the age-darkened facade are twelve sliding doors, two of which are now open. We enter without removing our shoes, for the hall's stone floor is made for the rough use of travelers. Once inside we perceive immediately that this is a place for supplication and prayer. Displayed side by side behind racks of flickering votive candles are the sculptures of three divine figures. Each image is in shadow, but the one at the center, a small Great Sun Buddha, is covered with gold and therefore glows brightly in the candlelight. This sculpture of Dainichi Nyorai (Sk. Mahāvairocana Tathāgata) is the Nyonindō's primary object of worship. In fact, in esoteric Buddhism he is the ultimate recipient of every possible act of worship, now and forever. Dainichi sits with his hands resting open in his lap, the right hand placed on top of the left. This "concentration" *mudrā* is most appropriate for a Women's Hall, for it expresses among other things the "female" energy that gives birth to the phenomenal world and oversees it with compassion. We won't feel the full significance of this image until we visit Dainichi's primary shrine, the Great Stūpa.

The carving to the left of Dainichi is so dark in hue and set so far back in the shadows that at first we see only a pair of staring eyes. But gradually the figure of a man emerges. He is sitting stiffly upright in a rocky cave. His face is gaunt. He wears a pointed beard. His body is thin to the point of emaciation. The right hand grips a ringed walking staff. The left hand holds a single-pointed *vajra* or *dokko*. This intense figure is En-no-Gyōja (En-the-Ascetic), a seventh-century Buddhist mountain mystic who is believed to have opened hundreds of Japan's mountains to the Dharma, including Kōyasan itself. Legend tells us that En's wilderness austerities were so successful that they gained him the power to subject demons to his bidding and to fly. His presence in the Nyonindō reminds us that Kōyasan is a place consecrated to the mountain intoxicated.

En's connection with the needs of women is not obvious, but we do know of his famous attachment to his mother, who conceived him after swallowing a *dokko* in a dream. Like Kōbō Daishi, En prevented his mother from entering the terrain of the mountains where he practiced his austerities. He did, however, again like Kōbō Daishi, frequently descend to visit her. According to one legend En ended his career by his placing his mother in a Buddhist alms bowl and flying off to China with her, where they still enjoy an immortal existence together.<sup>12</sup>

But En is only a sideshow here. Sitting to the right of Dainichi Buddha is the queen of the Nyonindō, the goddess Benten (also known as Benzaiten or Daibenzaiten). Benten, who evolved from the Indian river goddess Sarasvatī, is one of the most potent figures in the Japanese esoteric pantheon.<sup>13</sup> She easily is Kōyasan's most powerful woman. In her most beautifully aggressive manifestation she appears with furrowed brow and eight arms, each arm displaying a distinctive symbol of conquest and benefit (a sword, arrow, *vajra*, eight-spoked wheel, etc.). This is the form we later will see in Kōyasan's Golden Hall. There Benten serves as the primary muse of Shākyamuni's enlightenment. Here in the Women's Hall we find her in her less intimidating two-armed form. She is dressed in the robes of a Heian-era noblewoman. She is seated and is playing a short-necked lute. This lute, known in Japan as a *biwa*, reminds us that Benten is a goddess of music. She equally is a goddess of wealth, of beauty, of eloquence, of learning, of science, of intuitive insight. Her intellect is profound. One story has her inventing Sanskrit, the sacred language of the gods.

The most fundamental of Benten's many powers, however, is her mastery of water, the "ground and mother-body of all life." As such Benten is the deity of "flowing things," of all that nourishes and is compassionate. She is an embodiment of the ideal female, is the "best of mothers." The forested mountain that rises immediately to the south of the Nyonindō, and which provides Kōyasan with its primary source of water, is named Mount Benten (Bentendake). On its summit, just a twenty minute climb along the Women's Path, is Kōyasan's most important Benten shrine. Legend says the shrine was initiated by Kōbō Daishi when he buried a set of prayer beads there as a device to attract the goddess.<sup>14</sup> Benten has six other shrines in the valley. Altogether the seven shrines form a protective, snake-shaped loop about the mountain's most

important temple halls. Water-producing snakes are a definitive manifestation of the goddess.<sup>15</sup>

When we first stepped inside the Nyonindō a woman and a young man already were standing in front of Benten. They are still there, heads bowed, chanting softly and rapidly. We have seen these two worshipers before, not here in the Nyonindō but down along the Fudō-zakka trail near the Kiyome (Purification) Waterfall. On that occasion they were crouching in front of a mossy embankment chanting just as they are now. Later, when we looked for the object of their devotion we discovered a small wooden shrine about the size of a cigar box beneath a falling trickle of water. Inside the shrine was a tightly coiled ceramic white snake with the head of a bearded man. The two had placed before this snake an offering of a single hen's egg.

Which reminds us now to take notice of the golden tiara on the Benten sculpture's head. Behind the arc of the tiara is a miniature *torii*, or Shintō gate. And within this gate coils the miniature body of a white snake with the head of an elderly bearded man. This man-snake is an esoteric form of Benten known as *Uga-jin*.<sup>16</sup> Kōbō Daishi is said once to have carved just such an image, but with the head modeled after the wife of Emperor Junna, a woman who became a nun and one of his disciples.<sup>17</sup>

And now we notice one more thing on the altar. Someone has placed a small *ihai*, or memorial tablet, directly in front of Benten. On it is written this accusatory prayer in Japanese: "For consoling the anguished spirits of foreign women, now dead, who were forced to serve the Japanese military as comfort women in China, the Philippines, Burma, and the Dutch East Indies." Goddess Benten, assuage the grief of your suffering sisters!

Three women have entered the hall. They are wearing white pilgrim smocks and clearly have been traveling together. We guess they are mother, daughter, and granddaughter. The eldest goes to the small office at the east end of the hall and asks Reverend Nakata to enter the Nyonindō's seal in the book she is carrying (the hall's seal features the name of its *honzon*, Dainichi). Such seals provide a souvenir record of visits to pilgrimage destinations. The other two women have lit candles and are beginning to pray.

We look around the hall. Obviously it no longer serves as an overnight shelter. There is hardly a place to sit. But the Nyonindō

remains a center for women's concerns. A recent visitor has left a pile of pamphlets that protest the suppression of women in Japan's political life. Among several books stacked on a shelf is Ariyoshi Sawako's *Kinokawa*, a novel that describes four Japanese women—mother, daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter—who struggle with the dramatic social changes of the first half of the twentieth century. One prized element of continuity in the women's lives are visits made during pregnancy to the shrine of Kōbō Daishi's mother at Jison-in. At the novel's close the great-granddaughter chooses not to marry and have children, a decision reenforced by the death of an ancient white snake that had been living in the family storehouse.<sup>18</sup> We find a loose page of sheet music on the shelf with the books. The song's lyrics describe a woman making a pilgrimage to Kōyasan in the hope of finding liberation from the pain of a lost love.<sup>19</sup> She crosses the Kinokawa, the "river of farewell," then climbs the sacred mountain, praying all the while that her agony will end. But the pilgrimage brings no relief. In the last stanza she enters the Women's Hall and calls out in despair, "I love him still!" The title is "Nyonin-michi." Women's Path.

There are several pictures on the wall. One is a painting of a woman leading a child to Kōbō Daishi's tomb. Another is a faded photograph of Akuno Shizuka. Shizuka-san is thought to have been the first person, either male or female, to have been born within the precinct of Kōyasan. In 1896, well before the official admission of women, her mother secretly entered the valley to visit her husband, a forest worker, and unexpectedly gave birth.<sup>20</sup>

It is time to leave. We go to the office to exchange greetings with Reverend Nakata Ryūō, the friendly host of the Nyonindō. He is head priest of a small Shingon temple down in the mountain village of Nosegawa, but with only thirty local families to support his temple he must find further employment. So he comes up the mountain each morning to welcome visitors to the Nyonindō, to provide them with information and other services, including selling them a variety of talismans and amulets (*o-fuda* and *o-mamori*). He has been known to offer us coffee and cookies, and on one occasion a bag of forest mushrooms.

We step outside into the patch of sunlight. Near the Nyonindō, to our left as we exit, is a glassed-in shrine dedicated to the Jizō of traffic safety. This shrine was a gift from a Korean enthusiast named Kin. For

many years Kin visited Kōyasan regularly, even building a small residence for himself part way down the Fudō-zaka trail near the hall of the Purification Fudō Myō-ō and the Purification Waterfall.

To our right is a second, more important, shrine. It is dedicated to a woman named Kosugi who is said to have provided the funds that built the first women's hall at this spot. Kosugi's story is a tale of personal tragedy and uncomplaining persistence. After suffering unspeakable abuse from a cruel father and treacherous stepmother, she set off on foot from the northern province of Echigo with an infant son tied on her back. Her half-delirious hope was to find protection for her child at the distant Kōyasan monastery. The infant boy died during the journey, however. So upon reaching the Fudō Entrance Kosugi surrendered the only two things of value she had left in the world—her baby's hair, for burial near Kōbō Daishi's tomb, and a small pouch of gold, the baby's birth gift, for the building of a shelter for women outside the Fudō gate. A sign at the shrine says only, "[Kosugi's] life was very unfortunate, but Kōbō Daishi saved her." Rev. Nakata has a pamphlet for those who wish to learn more.<sup>21</sup>

Our time outside the gate is ended. We are heading into the sacred valley.