

The Hidden Path

IGNORING THE DULL ITCH of an inflamed flea bite on his ankle, the boy pressed his body against the cool plaster of the east wall, carefully staying out of sight. Crowds of worshippers had shuffled through the temple grounds until the gate was closed to the public at five o'clock. By now all the priests, including visitors like his grandfather, were supposed to be at the main hall for the evening service. The boy knew this, but just to be sure, he waited for the low rumble of sutra chanting to reach his ears. Pale pink flowering cherries trembled in a light breeze. Noboru did not know how much time he had before someone made his way back here to the hall where the temple's hidden buddha was housed.

This place, Kyoto's oldest temple, was once known as Hachioka-dera, Bee Hills Temple, but that name had faded and most people only knew it by its official name, Kōryūji, a temple belonging to the Shingon Buddhist sect. The compound was spread out with wide gravel paths connecting the venerable wood and plaster buildings and their precious population of sacred images. Among its trove of Buddhist deities, Kōryūji held a *hibutsu*—a “hidden buddha”—in this case a nine-hundred-year-old gilt wooden statue of Guan Yin. For one day a year, the lacquered doors enclosing the treasured image were opened, and worshippers allowed to view the serene visage of “the compassionate one who hears the cries of the world.” Noboru knew there were hidden buddhas tucked away in temples all over Japan because his grandfather, a Shingon priest, was very fond of them. It almost seemed the old man's main interest in life was visiting temples when these *hibutsu* came on display. He knew precisely when and for how long each one was open to view. Two years ago he had started bringing Noboru along on his pilgrimages. Tonight the monks would close the Guan Yin back up in its black-lacquered sanctum for another year. Noboru looked around nervously. The area around the Hidden Buddha Hall was deserted. He heard the

rhythmic sound of men's gravelly voices chanting sutras from the direction of the main building. Inhaling the fresh spring air, he glanced around one last time before ducking into the dark hall imbued with the deeply familiar musty odor of old wood and incense smoke.

Noboru Tokuda had been born in a temple. His father was a Buddhist priest, his mother the daughter of one. Sutras had been the lullabies of infancy and the soundtrack of his entire childhood. But Noboru's nostrils widened now, sensing an odor different from the ordinary temple smell. Not musty at all—ineffable and pure. Familiar, yet new. The delicate fragrance seemed to emanate from the statue of Guan Yin. He crept closer and sat on his knees, tucking his bare calves under his indigo cotton kimono. Hesitantly at first, Noboru formed his hands into the *mudra* gestures his grandfather had showed him earlier that day. The fragrance, rather like sandalwood and rare flowers, intensified. Concentrating deeply, the boy now made out a pale glowing penumbra around the statue. All his senses strained toward it. His grandfather had told him that if he indeed had the ability to comprehend the aura of a hidden buddha he would feel its effects on every sense.

The odor was the first thing he recognized, with no training at all. In fact, until today, he had thought everybody smelled it. This morning was the first time he had he even thought to ask. The old man stared at his grandson.

"You smell it?"

"It smells really good," Noboru replied. "Like incense but not incense. What is it?"

"It's the fragrance of the hidden buddha," said the old priest slowly. "But not everyone can smell it."

The possibility that his own grandchild had the ability filled him with relief and joy—followed by a twinge of trepidation. He must begin training Noboru immediately.

"It's a special talent that you're born with or you're not." Curious, the old man probed, "... besides the fragrance, do you see anything else about this statue? Or hear anything? Any other sensations?" Noboru hung his head. He had never paid close attention.

"No matter," said his grandfather. "Perhaps with practice." He taught the boy the ritual hand gestures of Shingon that were used in worshipping Guan Yin. "We'll continue tomorrow."

But tomorrow this hidden buddha would be closed up again. Excited by

his grandfather's words, Noboru wanted to test himself before the *hibutsu* was hidden away until next April.

And now, alone with the statue, he found he could detect a glow! What about his ears? Was there any sound? He listened intently. A faint hum. Could it be his imagination? As he concentrated on the barely perceptible vibration, his hands dancing the mudra to Guan Yin, he became aware of a soft warmth on his skin. At the same time the hum became more audible—almost a high human voice, but vibrating like a koto string. Nose, eyes, ears, skin, tongue. The five organs of perception. Smell, sight, sound, touch, taste. All had engaged. A sweetness welled up in Noboru's mouth. It reminded him of the dark millet syrup his mother poured over rice dumplings. He felt tears of happiness squeezing the back of his eyes. The sixth element, consciousness, holding the five senses like a string through beads. Noboru, his senses, consciousness, the Guan Yin—melded without distinction.

The statue's serene full-cheeked face tilted up slightly, resting on one of its three right hands, elbow propped on knee. Another hand held the wish-granting jewel, as if giving it to him. It was already his. Noboru's mouth hung open, his eyes stared, unblinking. He could feel the statue offering him the wheel of the Buddhist law, balanced like a spinning toy on one of her left hands. He would devote his life to the Buddhist Truth. A lotus bud, too, held out. Compassion for the world—for him. His senses overflowed.

He had no idea how long he was suspended in this state, when, suddenly, the golden light wavered. The singing tone died away. The fragrance faded, and with its loss the warmth and sweetness dwindled away. All sensations ebbed into a dark emptiness that sucked Noboru's happiness, understanding, and love with it.

Panicking, he scrambled to his feet. Someone else was in the dim hall. He called out to his grandfather.

"Your grandfather's not here. Nobody's here."

Noboru whirled around, blinded by tears. The low voice belonged to a beautiful young woman. She, too, must have slipped into the building to pray to the statue. Her yellow skirt, fashionably cinched at the waist, seemed to glow in the fading evening light. She turned, glancing back briefly at Noboru before stepping outside.

"Wait!" The boy choked. Something terrible had happened. Even without understanding, he felt it. She was gone. His senses raw, Noboru now became aware of another odor. In front of the altar where the woman

had been standing a lingering scent pricked his nose. It was like nothing he had ever smelled before—sharp, cool, insinuating. He had no words for it, but he would never forget it.

From the direction of the main gate, the great bronze temple bell rang once, sending its deep reverberations rippling through the balmy early evening air. Holding his head in his hands Noboru dropped down on the cool stone floor and wailed.

His grandfather, the head priest, and three disciples discovered him there. The head priest was angry. Someone had rung the great bell without permission. His suspicion immediately fell on the visiting priest's twelve-year-old grandson. Noboru's grandfather was already apologizing. He took the sobbing boy by the arm. The fact that Noboru was hiding in here, terrified, pointed to his guilt. What had gotten into him? But, then, he *was* only twelve...

The head priest was mollified by the older man's repeated bows and apologies. He gave Noboru a pro-forma cuff on the side of his shaved head. At that moment Noboru felt his grandfather stiffen, his bony fingertips digging into his shoulder. He looked up and saw that the old man was staring at the statue of Guan Yin. The head priest noticed nothing. He invited them to join the other monks for their evening meal before the ceremony of returning the *hibutsu* to its tabernacle.

"I need to talk to my grandson," said the older Tokuda. "We will be along. Please don't wait for us."

Figuring the boy was in for a private scolding, the other priests withdrew.

As soon as they were alone, Priest Tokuda squatted down in front of Noboru.

"What happened?"

"The bell..." Noboru began.

"The bell doesn't matter," snapped his grandfather. "The hidden buddha. What happened?"

Noboru told him about the effects on each of his senses. "Do you feel it too, Grandpa?" he asked.

The old priest nodded.

"But then it all went away," said Noboru. "I couldn't feel it any more. Not even the smell."

"I know." The old man's shoulders sagged.

Noboru trembled.

The priest watched the boy's reaction. It was remarkable. With the barest hint of training, the child had applied his abilities and felt the full power of this hidden buddha. Priest Tokuda needed no more proof that Noboru was meant to be his successor.

"I'm going to explain something to you," he said to the bewildered boy. "And I'm going to depend on you for help. Listen carefully. The hidden buddhas exist to protect the world. And over many, many years a few people have had the job of guarding them."

"Is that your job, Grandpa?"

"Yes. And one day it will be yours as well. Tell me, was there anyone else in the building?"

The beautiful young woman. Noboru's senses had been in such an overstimulated state that he couldn't be sure now whether he had really seen her or not. He remembered hearing the temple bell, and then the priests crowding around.

"Someone—or something—is stealing the hidden buddhas' protective power," continued his grandfather. "Over the years, slowly killing them off. It always occurs when the statues are on display. That's when they're vulnerable."

Suddenly it dawned on Noboru why his grandfather wandered from temple to temple, always visiting the hidden buddhas that were briefly on view. He wasn't worshipping them, he was watching over them. And today, one had been destroyed right under his nose. Noboru had been there. This would be his job now too—to protect the hidden buddhas.

But he also realized that he had already failed. His throat tightened. How could he admit this? Definitely, a woman had slipped in to the hall while he was transfixed by the *hibutsu*. But until he understood more, he had better hide this fact. Next time, he vowed to himself, he would know what to do. His grandfather would teach him skills. One day he would find and confront her—he was sure there would be another chance.

"I'm not sure...I don't think there was anyone..." he faltered. Then, "Does the head priest know what's happened to this *hibutsu*?"

His grandfather jerked his head. "He knows nothing. None of them do. It's very rare, you understand—the sensations you have."

"What about my father?"

The old man shook his head. "He's a good priest, but he doesn't feel a

thing.” That had been a major disappointment. But it didn’t matter now.

“Whatever is destroying the hidden buddhas sucks out their power so all that’s left is the husk. The dead image. Most people can’t tell, of course. The statue looks the same. Most of the hidden buddhas now are empty shells. I only watch over the live ones.”

Noboru was still upset. He shivered. What, exactly, were the hidden buddhas protecting us from, he wanted to ask. He winced remembering that afternoon’s experience of being uplifted to a plane of complete joy and then dropped into a dark void.

“Come on.” His grandfather took him by the hand. “Let’s get something to eat before it’s all gone.”

“But the hidden buddha?” Noboru turned to look at the image of Guan Yin.

“There’s nothing we can do about this one. It’s dead.”

In the garden of career choices that sprang up in postwar Japan, modern-minded sons of Buddhist priests often chose to become businessmen rather than shave their heads. But it was obvious to everyone that Noboru Tokuda would follow his father and grandfather’s calling. On school holidays, he traveled with his grandfather, viewing *hibutsu*, learning about Shingon. No one, of course, knew exactly what the older man was methodically transferring to his quietly serious grandson—or indeed that anything was being transferred at all. For his part, Noboru intuitively grasped the necessity of hiding the secret knowledge he was given.

Uninterested in sports, Noboru nevertheless had an athletic grace. His naturally Fuji-arched eyebrows were balanced by a square jaw that saved his face from being pretty. Throughout his teenage years, girls were attracted to him—and he enjoyed girls. He realized that he was not aroused by them, but he maintained a keen appreciation for the various ways in which they were beautiful. He could hear the hopes and desires hidden underneath the surface of their words, and so girls were inclined to share their confidences. When he appeared at graduation with the shaved head of a Shingon initiate, they all sighed. How old-fashioned.

By the time Noboru was twenty he knew all the gestures of mudra, and the sacred syllables of the mantras. He studied the life of Kūkai, Shingon’s founder. But Noboru was also learning other things from his grandfather that his fellow acolytes had no idea were part of Kūkai’s legacy. Every time

a hidden buddha came on view he was given a chance to test his ability to sense its aura. His senses were trained to the point where he could read a *hibutsu* even when it wasn't on display, from behind the closed doors of its tabernacle. Allowing all his senses to vibrate in harmony with a hidden buddha became, for Noboru, the most blissful experiences of his life.

One morning in the middle of October, while looking into the nebula of dissolved bean paste of his breakfast soup, Noboru's grandfather was seized by the conviction that it was time for the young man's confirmation. The ritual he had to perform would be an initiation as well as the last test—the sign of whether Noboru was indeed meant to be his successor or not. If the youth passed—and he couldn't even know he was being tested—old priest Tokuda would then explain the final details of the enormous responsibility he would transfer to his young shoulders. Finishing the miso soup in one long gulp, he set the bowl down and told Noboru they would go to Mt. Kōya that weekend.

Kōyasan was the heart of Shingon—the mountain where, over a thousand years ago its founder, Kūkai, built an enormous temple complex and where he now rested in an Inner Sanctum, venerated by thousands of worshippers. Noboru had been there often, but he sensed today would be different from previous pilgrimages. The two shaven heads, one bristled white, one shadowed blue-black, joined the crowds bowing their respects at the Hall of Lanterns in front of Kūkai's mausoleum. In the late afternoon, as most people headed toward the parking lots, the two Tokudas hiked past the golden buildings and splendid tombs, farther into Kōyasan's cedar-forested slopes. Just before dusk they reached an old, seemingly abandoned temple at the end of an overgrown path.

Noboru felt slightly giddy breathing the rank, mildewed air inside. He waited while the old man felt his way around the back of the dark altar, looking for the mandala he would need. The older Tokuda had not seen it since his own initiation, when his teacher, Priest Zuichō, had declared that, of his seven acolytes, Tokuda was to be heir. Now he stroked his fingers gently across the joinery, feeling for an almost imperceptible latch. There. He reached inside the well-hidden compartment and touched the smooth paulownia-wood box holding the scroll of the Womb Mandala that had been used by Zuichō, and his master before him. It had been recopied every four hundred years, always an exact copy, stretching back over a thousand years to the one Kūkai himself had painted.

As he carefully unrolled the painting, Tokuda was flooded with memories of his venerable teacher. Zuichō had lived through the hard days of the late nineteenth century when the Meiji government, turning against imported tradition, had done its best to rip Buddhism from the fabric of Japanese life. For centuries, to be a monk was to be a vegetarian. Suddenly, bureaucrats told them to eat meat. They were discouraged from wearing clerical robes, and even celibacy was frowned on. “Get married if you want,” priests were told. Zuichō remained steadfastly single, but his students all took wives. Tokuda’s generation was the first in which Shingon priests had families in the temples.

Decades later, statues that had been buried away to keep them safe from the anti-Buddhist pogrom were dug up, temples were rebuilt, and Buddhism reclaimed its place in society—but things were never quite the same. None of his predecessors seemed to have had any problem finding a successor, but Priest Tokuda had reached a point of desperation. There had never been a hereditary connection in the long line of guardians. Succession was decided by ability alone—master to disciple, not father to son. This dearth of candidates was another disquieting sign. Even ordinary priests were starting to have trouble finding successors these days. Who would uphold the Law of the Dharma if priests all became salarymen? Tokuda’s sole hope now rested on his beloved grandson.

When a *hibutsu* lost its power, inevitably catastrophe of some sort followed—war, flooding, fires, famine. The Great Fire of Meireki, which destroyed most of the city of Edo in 1657, killing a hundred thousand people, occurred just after the Amida *hibutsu* of Zenkōji temple went dark. The gruesome disaster catalog was part of the secret transmission Tokuda would need to teach his successor. The loss of a live *hibutsu* was the worst thing that could happen to the holder of the secret transmission. As it was, many guardians lived through their tenure never experiencing that trauma at all.

In the late nineteenth century, however, his own teacher Zuichō alone suffered the sudden demise of a dozen *hibutsu*—an unprecedented number. At least it was until Tokuda himself lost twenty-eight—including Kōryūji temple’s Guan Yin. That one had been devastating—he felt the perpetrator must have been close by, and yet managed to slip through his fingers. He had been distracted by the sight of his young grandson sobbing on the temple floor.

It was clear that something dire was happening to the hidden buddhas,

and the rate was accelerating. Tokuda's career as their guardian had been more frustrating than his master's, and it seemed likely that it would only get worse. The old man's fingers trembled at the thought of the burden he would transfer to his grandson. He would try to help Noboru as long as he could—assuming, of course, that the youth passed tonight's test.

In the waning light, he spread the large square mandala painting on the wide dais in front of the altar, and had Noboru sit facing it. Then he blindfolded him and placed a twig of woody anise in his hand. This much Noboru expected. The ritual was central to Shingon ordination. It echoed that performed by Kūkai himself when he received the teaching from his master in China. Master Huiguo had instructed the visiting Japanese acolyte to cast the twig onto the mandala. Kūkai tossed, and his twig flew true to center, landing on Dainichi, the cosmic Buddha. By this, Huiguo knew Kūkai would be his heir and he anointed him master of the teachings of Shingon.

Always, initiates prayed their twig would land in the center, on the cosmic Buddha, in an auspicious echo of Kūkai. Yet hundreds of other buddhas and bodhisattvas, painted different colors, in a variety of poses, peopled the mandala. One of these was the muscular, fanged warrior Fudō. Nobody prayed for their twig to land on the picture of Fudō. Yet, Noboru's twig had to. He didn't know it, but that would be the final sign. If he were meant to be the successor, the protector of the secret of the hidden buddhas, his twig would come to rest on the terrifying, sword-wielding Fudō.

Following his grandfa-



ther's instructions Noboru arranged the offerings, chanted the mantras, lit the ceremonial fire, and, aiming his twig in the direction of Dainichi, he tossed the anise a little too forcefully onto the mandala. He heard the old man suck in his breath. The twig had bounced off the center and skittered to the lower right. In the silence that followed, Noboru hesitantly untied the blindfold and saw that the twig lay squarely across the image of Fudō. He felt a stab of keen disappointment. Whatever this test was, he was sure he had failed. He saw an expression of elation as well as fear flit across his grandfather's face. That night everything was revealed. The mantle of protector of the *hibutsu* settled on the forty-first guardian of the unbroken line—twenty-one-year-old Noboru Tokuda.

In the tradition of esoteric Buddhism, Shingon is full of secrets. But the knowledge Noboru was given was unusual, even so. It had never been written down. The list of *hibutsu* was an oral tradition passed from one guardian to his successor, accreting layers of information with each generation. Not only the names of the previous guardians, but any hidden buddha that had lost its aura or been destroyed by war, fire, earthquake, or flood was also embedded in the litany that Noboru had to memorize.

During the early years of his training, Noboru often thought of the Guan Yin of Kōryūji. The figure of a beautiful woman with a cool steely smell seemed to mock him. Anger welled up, yet he still could not bring himself to reveal to his grandfather this failure hidden in his heart.

On the night of his initiation he was told how the hidden buddhas were put in place as a spiritual bulwark to keep the world from slipping further into the state of *mappō*—the degenerate final age that would culminate in the end of the world. A network of ritually infused *hibutsu* had kept the world safe for over a millennium. Yet, gradually over the centuries, and speeding up at an alarming rate, they were being deactivated, always when they were open to public view. When the last *hibutsu* had been seen by this destructive eye, the world would collapse on itself. *Mappō* would have reached its conclusion.

It was now quite dark, and the candles old priest Tokuda had lit had burned down to sputtering nubs. For a while they sat in silence.

“And then what?” Noboru asked.

One didn't need special powers of observation to see that the world was exhibiting signs of *mappō*. Nature disgorged earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and floods. Within this tragic tangle of misery, mankind

goaded human suffering with war, nuclear attack, genocide, and global pollution. *Mappō* was an old idea, enshrined in the cosmology of Buddhist thought. Noboru had no trouble believing it was real. The signs were clear enough. The auras of the *hibutsu* were real enough to him as well. The revelation for Noboru now was the idea that *mappō* and the hidden buddhas were intimately connected.

Noboru waited for his grandfather to tell him what the end of *mappō* would mean, but the old man seemed not to have heard his question. Instead, he handed him the flashlight he'd fished from his knapsack. Noboru shone the beam on the mandala while the old man rolled it up and put it back in its box.

"Here," he placed Noboru's hand on the cabinet behind the altar. "Feel this. It's the latch. When you choose your successor, you will have to open it." To himself, he wondered how many *hibutsu* would be left a generation from now. He thought about how best to answer Noboru's question.

"After *mappō*?" he finally said. "The world ends. Miroku, the Buddha of the future, is supposed to come. But, nobody knows what that means. It would be better not to find out, I think. Kūkai tried to save *this* world. The hidden buddhas were his plan for doing that. We are part of the plan."

Noboru decided he had to reveal his shame—the fact that he saw a woman in the hall at Kōryūji yet did not stop her. But first, he needed to know, "Grandfather, who is killing the *hibutsu*?"

On this precise point, the secret transmission had nothing to say. The job of the guardian had been simply to watch over the hidden buddhas and keep track. What caused a *hibutsu* to lose its power? Kūkai never said. His followers concluded that a person was responsible. Not an ordinary person, naturally, but a strong will that had embodied itself, reincarnating its way through multiple lifetimes, keeping a tally. Buddhist theology contains the idea of *akunin*, persons so irredeemably evil they can never reach enlightenment, no matter how many lifetimes they plow through. With the sharp increase of incidents in the nineteenth century, the elder Tokuda's master, Zuichō, came to believe that a particularly lethal sort of *akunin* was roaming the land, purposefully hastening the process of *mappō* by sucking the protective auras of the hidden buddhas. But he also thought that if this evil *akunin* could be caught in the act, the *hibutsu* might be saved. Consequently, he was always traveling, trying to attend every showing of the images he knew to be active. Watching.

“My teacher assumed this seer was evil, you see,” said the older Tokuda.

“How could it *not* be evil?” Noboru asked. “If it’s trying to bring the world to an end?”

His grandfather sighed.

“It’s possible. But it’s also possible it doesn’t realize what it’s doing. Perhaps it’s caught in the clutches of some destiny it doesn’t understand either—just like the rest of us. Reincarnation is not necessarily self-knowledge. Whatever is reincarnated, it’s not thoughts, or even intentions. We are, all of us, a continuation of our ancestors’ flesh, but I don’t believe we reincarnate our ancestors’ sins—or anyone else’s. Our sins are our own.”

“But destroying the hidden buddhas? Letting the world die? Isn’t that a sin?” Noboru persisted. What about the beautiful woman he had encountered? Was she evil? Or just a woman? Once again he decided against mentioning her.

“Whoever or whatever is responsible—it must almost certainly be suffering, too,” his grandfather replied.

They had gathered up their things and stepped onto the veranda covered in an encrusted layer of dead leaves. Outside, the light of a rising autumn moon, nearly full, cast shadows through the trees.

“It could be that the best way to conquer it is with compassion,” he said.

Those words sank into Noboru’s mind along with the content of the secret transmission.