

## Have temple - Let's fun

An over-templed Elizabeth Oliver finds a lack of concern for animal welfare in Buddhist circles.

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I can clearly remember my first Sunday in Japan. Some friends of my host family kindly offered to take me sightseeing in Kyoto, “visit a few temples,” they called it. I suppose all part of what’s now called ‘the Japan experience’. What I didn’t know at the time was that there is a certain type of Japanese who is a temple freak. Like mountain freaks who set off to climb all the mountains in sight, temple freaks set out to see as many temples as they can in one day. Even now, after many years I still can’t forget the aching feet and the overwhelming desire to sit down and have a cup of tea. By the end of the day I had lost count of the number of temples we had seen let alone which ones or what was special about them. Japanese have phenomenal stamina compared to other mortals when it comes to sightseeing, witness the number of tours which take in a world capital a day. Temple phobia remained with me a long time after.

Country temples have a charm the famous ones have more or less lost. They are smaller and less pretentious, also one can walk around in solitude without having to elbow through groups of students or be

deafened by loud-speaker announcements. You don't have to pay to get in either. Dropped in one the other day about a dog. The priestess apparently could no longer take care of it. There was no indication from the road that there was a temple there at all. It was well hidden and set in an immaculately kept garden. Even the dead heads of flowers were neatly staked. Tools and miscellaneous equipment for daily life which in an average house would be cluttering up the place were neatly arranged with care. When the front door slid open a tiny porcelain figure with fingers pressed together in greeting, bowed. Obviously a life of prayer and tending a garden is beneficial to health as she looked less than half her 87 years, and had the complexion of a peach. Her problems it seemed had started with the coming of another priestess who was supposed to take some of the load from her. It wasn't long before this younger woman started asserting her authority and bossing her around. The dog, she said was smelly, shed hair and anyway she wasn't going to walk it. She even mentioned disposing of it at the dog pound (*hokensho*). So much for Buddhist respect of "all living things".

We went to see the dog which was kept in an enclosure in the garden. Clearly the old priestess took as much care of the dog as she did her garden. It had a spacious kennel, fresh water, was well-brushed and overjoyed to see her. She said, her voice quivering, "I'll really miss her. You see, even from the temple I keep an eye on her and when I'm out here in the garden, we always talk to one another." It would have been heartless of anyone to take this friend of hers away. It would I felt have been a death knell, depriving her of her one remaining companion. The dog too would suffer just as much. The problem it seemed was the walks. If we could find someone to help with these then both the dog and the aging priestess could live on.

Nearby was the main temple. More opulent and spacious. A man in a loincloth and T-shirt with a slogan saying "Let's fun", was swinging a hefty beam against a bronze bell. We entered the temple sanctum, an

immaculately swept floor with space for a hundred pairs of shoes. Seasonal flowers drooped artistically out of pots around the entrance. The raised *keyaki* floor leading to the main tatami room shone like a mirror. The man who'd been tolling the prayer bell reappeared from inside changed into a priest's attire and offered us a cup of green tea before he spoke. "Yes", he said, he'd like to help in some way, in fact he was a dog lover himself. "We'd love to see your dogs", we replied.

He led us round the side of the temple, and the further we went the more the rubbish accumulated, until by the time we reached the dog enclosure we were knee-deep in rotting futons. What had been built as a pretty ideal place for dogs, roofed, raised platform for sleeping and space to romp had become a rubbish dump. The dogs had easily gnawed through the wire link fence and torn the mosquito netting put up to protect them and were now tied on short frustrating chains in typical Japanese dog-keeping fashion. Not only the dogs but it appeared people also lived in the same area as there was some sort of cottage (*hanare*) there as well, blocked by years of rusting cans and sake bottles. Dog's excrement was covered by a new futon from time to time on which they peed and ripped apart. How anyone could pass through that tip everyday and not do something about it was hard to believe. But the priest just gave an apologetic grin. Witnessing all this mess meant our problems had doubled rather than diminished. A week plus the installation of new dog-proof wire and dozens of gomi-filled bags later, the dogs could finally run free in a clean enclosure. How long it will stay like that remains to be seen. During the week of putting the dog house in order, they had one of those ceremonies to mark an anniversary of someone's death. All dressed in black but drinking and eating themselves under the table. I wondered, as I spied them sitting in that spotlessly clean reception room how they would react if they saw the filth a stone's throw away.

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major tax dodgers. A friend's father is priest at a temple set in the midst of an urban conglomeration. All the family members are roped in as cheap labour to help. The building is over three hundred years old which in Britain would mean it would have a standing preservation order slapped on it. Not here. Tearing down your old temple and putting up a spanking new one is a symbol of success in Buddhist circles, unless you've got one that has passed the thousand year mark. Friend's temple is the only old one left in the area so father is now desperately trying to raise the fortune it will take to rebuild it. It all goes to show how outward appearances are what really count to a lot of Japanese, those who supposedly have piously forsaken worldly greed to follow a spiritual path, included.

*Consult the KTO Directory Welfare section for phone numbers and more information on animal welfare.*