

My travels in Japan

By Stefan Chiarantano

@ Stefan Chiarantano 2006

Tables of Contents

Introduction	5
Museums	7
The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo	7
Yamanashi Prefectural Museum	12
Uenohara	22
Tokyo National Museum	22
The Modigliani exhibit at the Bunkamura	23
Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography	26
The Van Gogh Exhibit	27
Shintoism	
Shintoism	28
Visiting a Shinto Shrine (Jinja)	28
The link between Shintoism, Emperor Worship and the Yasukuni Shrine	29
Sakura	29
My visit to the Yasukuni Shrine	30
Kokeshi	32
The Geisha	33
The Silkworm	34
Ikebana	37
The Japanese Tea Ceremony	38
The Japanese art of tea	40
More on the Japanese Tea Ceremony	42
The Japanese cat	42
Mandukya	44
Homelessness in Japan	45
The Japanese moon	48
The Ginger Tree: A review of the screenplay	49
Japanese Ghosts	50
Gaijin Teachers	51

Hamamatsu	52
Ueno	56
Ueno Park	56
My visit to Ueno Park (My first time)	57
Ueno Revisited (My second time)	58
Ueno Toshogu Shrine	61
Hiroshima	61
A personal journey into the atomic bombing of Hiroshima	61
No more Hiroshimas!	62
the girl who folded paper cranes	67
Takao	68
Jimbocho	69
Shadows of the West	70
Walking Along the Sumida River	70
Asakusa	73
Nagano Prefecture	74
Doing the tourist thing in Komagane, Nagano	74
A flock of birds in Komagane	76
Kisangani Re-visited!	77
Rice Fields	80
Moments in K.	81
Travels along the JR Iida line - Part One	82
My Farewell	87
Buddhism	87
The Moon	87
Gassho	88
Namu-Amida Butsu	89
Perfections (Paramitas)	89
Japanese Buddhist Deities	90
Dukkha	91
Jizo figure	92
Jizo figures – Postscript	93

Nichiren Daishonin	95
The Buddha described ways to deal with negative thoughts	96
Sitting Zazen	97
Zuigakuin	99
Mt. Takao	102
Tendai Shu	105
The peak of the white lotus	106
The Goddess of Mt. Fuji	107
bits and pieces	108
Koji	108
Thoughts on Suicide	109
St. Paulo Miki, Japanese Jesuit Martyr	110

Introduction

I'm a citizen of Canada, a multi-cultural and multi-racial society having two official languages. The diversity that Canada is and has become is something I cherish and value. This diversity makes Canada a truly unique country in the world. This brings my attention to the country of Japan where I now live and what I've enjoyed most of all about living and working in Japan is experiencing for all intents and purposes, a homogenous society – one people, one language, a commonly held belief system and traditions which stretch from the past into the present. Japan is very unique too. In the last quarter of the 19th century, perhaps, you might know, things Japanese played an important part in the development of Art Nouveau.

I was thinking about what makes living here such an interesting experience. I think it has to do with the nation's character. I've found the Japanese on a whole emulate certain virtues which set them apart from other nations. They possess a sense of duty, love of nature, courtesy, cleanliness, loyalty and courage to forge ahead. This makes living here very special indeed. I have been blessed with opportunities to live in different parts of Japan which have given opportunities to explore and discover Japan. I have met wonderful people who have enriched my experiences. Many of the stories here appeared on the *thingsasian* website.

Whenever I'm out and about and see myself reflected by chance in the eyes of some of the Japanese I encounter, I'm somewhat amazed at their reaction, usually; it is one of surprise and shock. There's a reference in Kawabata's novel 'Snow Country' that captures how I feel. Shimamura, the protagonist, notices a white Russian woman, a peddler, sitting in the hallway of the inn where he is staying. He thinks to himself, "So you find them even in these mountains." He asks her, "Where are you from?" She responds, "Where am I from? Where am I from?" She puts away her wares and leaves. He goes on to say, "Her skirt, like a dirty sheet wrapped around her, had quite lost the feel of Occidental dress, and had taken on instead something of the air of Japan. She carried her wares on her back in a large Japanese-style kerchief. But for all that, she still wore foreign shoes." I somehow think this way of thinking stems from Japan's

former isolation policy which was imposed on the Japanese people by Yaesu Tokugawa and that the Japanese haven't/hadn't figured out that one day they would be part of the world stage and foreigners would come here in droves. Nevertheless, Japan is definitely worth a visit and/or a long or short-term stay.

I learned something about Japan when I visited the museums in Okaya and Tatsuno that featured Jomon and Yayoi pottery dug up from local archaeological sites. Archaeological evidence indicates Stone Age people live in the Japanese Archipelago many thousands of years ago.

There are many theories as to their origin but the Jomon people are suppose to have come from Siberia to Japan by dugout canoe. Some claim they likely migrated from North Asia or Central Asia and became the Ainu of Japan.

The Jomon people were Mesolithic hunter-gathers. They were also known as "Tree Culture" people because trees were an important part of their lives. Trees were used in building structures, in ceremonial ornaments and for use as daily implements. Now, Jomon means "cord-impressed pattern". It comes from the characteristic markings found on their pottery. It was done by pressing twisted cord against the soft clay before it was dried and fired, creating patterns of dashes on the pottery surface. Jomon ware is the earliest ware in Japan.

Then the Yayoi People came. They began to live in the Japanese islands from around 400-300 BC. It's claimed they intermingled with the Jomon people. It's claimed that the Yayoi migrated from the Korean Peninsula to Northern Kyushu or came from Southeastern Mainland China.

I've found that museums are great places to learn local history.

I was inspired by the comments of a dear friend to compile my stories and blog entries into a book format. My friend suggested my stories besides providing literary snapshots of my travels also provide another way to view the world which, she said, "They open up new possibilities." My stories reflect my interests and are grouped accordingly. So, I would like to take you along my journey of Japan. Here are my stories.

Museums

The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

Located within Ueno Park, it displays Matsukata's French collection that survived the Second World War and was returned to the Japanese people. The French collection was recognised as French property under the terms of the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951). As a goodwill gesture, a total of 365 art works were returned to Japan including 196 paintings, 80 drawings, 26 prints, and 63 sculptures. One of the stipulations of the French government was that a national art museum be established to house and display the art works, and this led to the Japanese government to found the National Museum of Western Art. Many important pieces were returned but others found their way into French museums or were sold.

Kojiro Matsukata (1865-1950) began collecting at the same time as Dr. Albert Barnes. He was a successful entrepreneur and used his fortune to collect European art. He was the third son of Count Masayoshi Matsukata, a Japanese Prime Minister. Kojiro Matsukata graduated with a PhD in Civil Law from Yale University in 1890. He first worked as his father's personal secretary. He then became a senior executive of the Kawasaki Shipping Company eventually becoming its president. In 1922, The New York Herald described him as the 'mysterious Japanese' who had been buying art at extravagant prices.

His motives for collecting European art were philanthropic. He was motivated by the desire to provide Japanese artists with the real thing since many of them were creating oil paintings without having seen an example of the real thing.

Paul Durand-Ruel acted as one of his art dealers as did the London artist Frank Brangwyn. There was also Yashiro Yukio, and Tsuchida Bakusen, a Japanese painter living in Paris. Leonce Benedicte, Director of the Musee de Luxemborg, Paris also located paintings for Matsukata. Kojiro Matzukata also purchased many pictures form the collection of Wilhelm Hansen.

The Great Kanto earthquake of 1923 had dire consequences on the Japanese

economy which consequently affected Kawasaki Shipping Company. He resigned as its president in 1928. His vast collection became part of the Kawasaki assets, with a significant portion being sold and scattered. He had already shipped many works to Japan in 1919 and 1920 but the 100% import duty persuaded him to leave the remainder in London and Paris.

His London collection was reported to have been destroyed in a warehouse fire in Knightsbridge on October 8, 1939. The French collection was seized by the French government as enemy property when Japan entered the war.

The Museum boasts one of the finest collections of Rodin sculptures in the world. The forecourt of the museum is the display area for Rodin's sculptures - The Kiss, Gates of Hell, Burghers of Calais, and The Thinker. Also, on display is Emile-Antoine Bourdelle's Hercules the Archer 1909. Within the museum, The Age of Bronze, Orpheus, Balzac (Last Study) and Man with the Broken Nose are exhibited. Also on view is Jean-Baptiste Carpeau, The Neapolitan Fisherboy.

Works that caught my attention included:

Petrified Forest
Max Ernst

The Loving Cup
Dante Gabriel Rossetti
1867

Madame Jean Renoir
(Catherine Hessling)
Andre Derain
1923

Salome at the Prison
Gustave Moreau
C1873-76

Roses

Vincent Van Gogh

1889

Water Lilies

Claude Monet

Eugene Boudin

Beach of Trouville

1867

The Garden of Gethsemane c1518

Lucas Cranach (The Elder) (1472 ? 1553)

Jesus is praying. His three disciples are asleep. His jailors are entering at the Gate. There are many. An angel is looking down on Jesus. The Angel is holding a chalice.

Joos van Cleve (c 1485 ? - 1540/41)

Triptych: The crucifixion Flanked by the kneeling Donor and His wife.

Christ is crucified on the cross. At his feet to his left are the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and a disciple (John, Peter?) and to the right, are the Roman Soldiers. Above Christ is a depiction of God.

Follower of Joachim Patinir (1485 ? 1524)

Triptych: Rest on the Flight into Egypt

The Madonna is nursing the baby Jesus.

Jacopo del Sellaio (1482 ? 1493)

Votive Altarpiece: The Trinity, the Virgin, St. John and Donors (c1480 ? 85)

The trinity is depicted. Christ is crucified on the cross. The Holy Ghost which is depicted as a dove stands above Christ's head, God the Father is in the background supporting the cross with his hands.

Paolo Veronese (1528-1588)

The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine (c.1547)

The baby Jesus is caressing St. Catherine's cheek and looking into her eyes. He is grasping his mother's veil. St. Catherine is deep in thought and is staring into space. She is touching the chest of baby Jesus with her index and middle fingers. St. Joseph is looking on squatting in the background.

Giorgio Vasari (1511 ? - 1574)

The Garden of Gethsemane (c1570?)

The angel is in the process of blessing Jesus with his right hand which is held in the air. In his left hand, he is holding a golden chalice. Jesus has his arms outstretched. He is kneeling and looking up to heaven. The jailors are led into the garden by Judas, his traitor, and his three disciples are fast asleep.

Joachim Berickelaer (c1534-c1574)

Christ Carrying the Cross (1562)

Christ has slipped. His left hand is supporting the cross draped over his shoulder and his right hand is resting on a rock. A Roman soldier who is standing to the right of the cross is about to whip the Lord. An elderly man has come to Christ's help. He is attempting to lift the cross. Another Roman soldier is standing over Jesus and is about to hit him with his right fist. There is a procession of soldiers and passersby behind Jesus. There are many people standing and watching the procession on both sides. The Virgin Mary has collapsed and is being assisted by three women attendants. A beautiful young woman with her hands in prayer is looking on. Ahead of Jesus are two prisoners with their hands tied behind their backs. They are flanked by Roman soldiers. Jesus is tied around the waist with a rope. He is being pulled by two Roman soldiers. They are flanked by the executioner who is carrying over his shoulders a ladder from which is hanging a basket holding tools such as a hammer. At the top right hand corner of the picture, there is a scene of the crucifixion.

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

Attributed to Simon Varet (1590-1649)

Philip de Champaigne (1602-1674)

Mary Magdalene

Oil on canvas.

Before her on the table is a wooden makeshift cross, a book (the bible?) and a vase with a lid. She has her hands clasped in the prayer position. Her eyes are looking upward.

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

Attributed to Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini (1675-1741)

Ary Scheffer (1795-1858)

Greek women imploring the Virgin for Assistance

1826

1. Christ carried down to the Tomb

1855 Eugene Delacroix

2. The Education of the Virgin (1852)

Eugene Delacroix

Claude Monet (1840-1928)

1 Charing Cross Bridge in London

2 Waterloo Bridge in London

3 Yellow Irises

Fernand Leger

Red Cock and Blue Sky

1953

Do visit The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo. You won't be disappointed.

Postscript

A brief sketch on the Japanese painter, Bakusen Tsuchida

While writing a piece regarding Rojiro Matsukata, I learnt about Bakusen Tsuchida.

Bakusen Tsuchida was born in 1887 on Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture, and died at the age of 49 in 1936. He studied art under the painter and printmaker Seiko Takeuchi in 1904. He went on to study art at the Kyoto Municipal School of Art and graduated in 1911. He then visited Europe in 1912. He returned to Europe in 1921 to 1923 to study European painting. When he returned to Japan, he began to develop his own particular style of painting. He incorporated European ideas into a Japanese approach to picture making. A favourite subject of his works was Maiko, apprentice geisha. A museum in the town of Yahata in Niigata Prefecture was established in his honour.

Yamanashi Prefectural Museum

Great works of art and beautiful gardens move me. They leave me feeling inspired and refreshed. I am awe struck by the aesthetic experience of art and nature and the beauty of human creativity. I experienced both when I visited the Yamanashi Prefectural Museum, Kofu, Yamanashi Prefecture. I visited on Sunday. It was a lovely day. It was warm and sunny. I had no difficulty finding the place. A JR representative directed me to the visitor help desk at the JR station where I was provided with maps and directions to the museum. How wonderful!

The museum (there are two buildings separated by a court) is located in an aesthetically appealing landscaped park which is filled with sculpture, ponds, and Japanese lanterns. The court between the two buildings is home to some incredible sculpture. Here are some of the pieces on display:

Four Piece Reclining Figure 1972-1986

Henry Moore (1898-1986)

Le Monument de Van Gogh 1956

Ossip Zadkine

Claude Lorain 1889

Auguste Rodin 1840-1917

L'epopee

1917

Emile-Antoine Bourdelle (1861-1929)

There's a quaint little garden dedicated to the school of Barbizon called Le jardin de Barbizon. On display is Henry Chapu's piece (1833-1891), Monument de Millet et de Rousseau (Bronze 1884). In the courtyard by the restaurant, there's a sculpture piece by Fernando Botero (1932 -) named Little Bird 1988. Let me tell ya that it ain't little.

There were many people about enjoying the forecourt and its tranquility and the landscaped grounds. Couples were seated on the marble or stone benches holding hands and little children were scurrying about playing with their toys while being supervised by their families. Families lounged on the green grass resting and chatting quietly.

The piece de resistance of the museum are the works of Jean Francois Millet and the the painters from the School of Barbizon.

The galleries are located on the second floor. On the first floor, there is a concert hall. Just before viewing the works of J.F. Millet, a concert began and filled the galleries above with classical music.

In the Jean Francois Millet Gallery, there is a portrait photograph taken of J.F. Millet in 1868 by Gaspard-Felix Nadar on display.

The dedication reads:

a Millet

-vrai peintre-

admiration et sympathie

ferventes

Nadar

avril 68

Here's a description of the photograph. He's standing looking directly at the camera. He's a large man, robust looking with a large girth. He is well-dressed. He is wearing a white shirt, vest, and jacket. His hair is black and he sports

sideburns with a full beard. His hands are in his pocket. He is facing the camera on an angle.

Here is a list of works by Jean Francois Millet on view in the gallery:

Daphnis and Chole

C1845 Oil on Canvas

Daphnis is playing a flute. Chole is holding a fishing rod in her hands which is resting on Daphnis' left knee. The picture is very dark.

Women feeding Chickens

C1853-56 Oil on Canvas

The woman is standing on her doorstep. Using her apron as basket supported with her left hand, she is carrying chicken feed. In her right hand, she is letting the feed drop to the ground. She has a solemn expression. In the background behind the closed gate is a man tilling the land. We get a glimpse of the lovely landscape. There are 9 chickens. Two birds are in the background making haste to the feeding area.

The Gleaners, Summer

1853 Oil on Canvas

Two women are hunched over gleaning the ground. They are holding sheaves of wheat in their left hand. Another is standing with her back bent. In her left hand she is holding sheaves of wheat. In the background, there are 3 men building a haystack. There's a man on top, a man on the side and third on the ground. There's a cart half full of hay. The women are dressed in peasant garb. Their heads are tied with a kerchief.

The Immaculate Conception

1858 Oil on Canvas

She has her arms folded across her chest. Her feet are showing. She is standing on a crescent moon. Her hair is pulled back. She is wearing a veil. There's a halo of stars above her head. She has beautiful peaches and cream skin. Her eyes though looking out are lost in meditative thought. A blue cloak is

draped over her shoulders held together with a beautiful gold clasp. She is radiant. Is she with child? She has a lovely oval face. Who was the model?

Portrait of Pauline-Virginie Ono
C1841-42 Oil on Canvas

She's standing in the center looking out. She's dressed in black. She has fine, straight black hair. The hair is divided in the center part-way. Two locks of hair are draped over her face. Her left ear is showing. In her hands she is holding a white silk handkerchief. She is wearing a necklace. She is striking looking. She has lovely light brown eyes, lovely skin, and a prominent nose. Her lips are full. She reminds me of the Mona Lisa. She is beautifully painted.

The Sower
1850 Oil on Canvas

A youth dressed in peasant garb is sowing a field. In the background to the right there is a farmer tilling the soil with a team of oxen. And to his left, a flock of black birds are flying overhead. He is lost in the work.

Rocks at Greville
1870 Oil on Canvas

Return of the Flock in the Evening
C1857-60 Oil on Canvas

I love the evening sunset in the background. The shepherd is clutching at his cloak. He must feel a chill. He is wearing a hat. He's holding a stick in his right hand. A dog is standing guard over the sheep to his left. The sheep are behind the shepherd.

Winter – Cupid brought from the cold
1864-65 Oil on Canvas

Cupid is naked. He looks cold. His arms are held against his chest with his hands tucked underneath his neck. He is embraced by a lovely maiden. Who is she? An elderly man wearing Roman clothing is extending his cloak to cover Cupid with it. He is wearing a garland of leaves on his head. The maiden has lovely refined features. She is the model for the Immaculate Conception. Her

hair is beautifully groomed. The maiden's skirt is decorated with hearts. All the figures have their eyes cast downward. The maiden is expressing her sympathy for Cupid. Cupid is wearing his quiver of arrows. His quiver is visible. Flecks of snow have fallen on his golden hair. Cupid is standing in snow. They are standing at the door.

Woman Carding Wool

Etching Jean Francois Millet

Behind her stands a Spinning-Jenny. She is seated and carding wool. She seems deep in thought. To her left is a bale of wool. On her right, there's a stool with twisted yarn on top.

Auvergnat Goatherd Spinning 1869 Etching on paper

Women Feeding a Child

1861 Etching

She is gently blowing on a spoon of food. Her baby is nestled in her lap and is supported with her left arm. It's a beautiful etching evoking the love of a mother for her child.

There were many visitors to the museum this afternoon taking in the works of the painters of the School of Barbizon. Many were awe struck by the paintings and would coo with words of appreciation. I left with the impression that J.F. Millet was an accomplished and versatile painter. He could paint landscapes, portraits, peasant scenes, religious works, and figures drawn from Greek mythology. The etchings demonstrate his superb draughtsmanship.

The gallery adjoining the Jean Francois Millet has an impressive collection of artworks from the School of Barbizon and a Claude Lorrain on display. Here's a list of the works:

Claude Lorrain

The Wood-splitters (Landscape with River)

C1637 Oil on Canvas

It has a rustic feel. In the fore-ground there are the wood-splitters. To their right, there are three men talking. In the mid-ground, men are loading a barge while

others are working on the barge. There are men fishing in the river. In the background, there's an idyllic landscape with a castle.

Georges Michel
Landscape with Windmills
C1820-1840 Oil on Canvas

Johan Barthold Jongkind
Moonlight at Dordrecht
C1872 Oil on Canvas
It has these lovely fluid brushstrokes. The moon is reflecting in the canal. The windows of some of the windmills are lit. There's a church spire in the background and barges.

Jules Dupre
C184 Oil on Canvas
In a Forest, Summer Morning

Gustave Courbet
1. The Storm by the Sea 1865 Oil on Canvas
2. The Deer by the Rivulet Oil on Canvas

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot
Grand Farmland c 1860-1865

Pierre-Etienne-Theodore Rousseau
1. Edge of the Forest, near the Gorges D'Apremont 1866 Oil on Canvas
2. Landscape with an Oak Tree
Oil on Canvas (It has this lovely orangey glaze surface suggesting perhaps the twilight of the evening sunset.)

Charles-Francois Daubigny
A Summer Morning by the Oise River
1869 Oil on Canvas
In the fore-ground of the picture to the right are two women washing laundry in the river. To the left in the fore-ground is a procession of ducks. In the

mid-ground are two boats moored in the middle of the river, and in the background on the other side of the river along the banks are buildings.

Narcisse-Virgile DIAZ DE La PENA

1. Old Oak Tree in Fontainebleau

1862 Oil on Canvas

2. Forest of Fontainebleau

1862 Oil on Canvas

There are two women collecting firewood.

Charles-Emile Jacque

The Flock in a Forest

c1860 Oil on panel

Constant Troyon

A Market Day

c1859 Oil on Canvas

In the upper left side, there's a blue sky with a smattering of white clouds. In the top right half side, the sky is clouded over. The sea is in the background to the left of the picture. There's a family (a father, mother and their son) in the fore-ground with their goats and sheep. A horse is tied to a cart. Behind the family, there is a man examining some sheep with another man standing beside him. There's an auction taking place in the background. There's a man in the fore-ground walking on the left side walking toward the auction with his cow in tow.

Constant Troyon

In the Approach of the Tempest

1859 Oil on Canvas

In the fore-ground there is a bull looking out from the picture and behind him is another. In the background behind the bulls, there is a mother and her little blond child (very sweet). She stands ready to catch him should he fall down. The sky is clouded over.

From the Hagiwara, Hideo Collection Room

The collection of Hideo Hagiwara is impressive and highlights his interests. He collected tribal art from Africa and Papua New Guinea. His collection of ceramics and artifacts from China span many periods from the Neolithic Period to the late Qing dynasty period. What interested me was to see the printed images of Seated and Standing Amida-nyorai (Amitabha). The printed images of Seated Amida-nyorai (Amitabha) was found in the inner hollow of Amida-nyorai (Amitabha) owned by Joruri-ji, Kyoto dating from the Heian period. The printed images of Standing Amida-nyorai (Amitabha) found in the Inner Hollow of a Buddhist Statue was found in the inner hollow of a Buddhist statue owned by Jakugo-in, Koyasan, dating from the Kamakura period. The inkstones, water droppers, hikka, brush holders on display spanned many Chinese dynasties. The green-glazed ceramics dating from the Han Dynasty China were very interesting to look at too. There was a pigsty, a money box, a sacrificial table, house, Tower Pavillion, jar, and water jar.

Here are the pieces of artwork that caught my attention in the gallery displaying the works of contemporary and past Japanese artists.

Figura Accoccolata

1974

Emilio Greco 1913 –

Sakamoto, Toturo

Discover

2005 Acrylic on cotton canvas

Mizude, Yohei

My pet

1980 Oil on Canvas

Kuri, Yoji

A cynical Drawer

1978 Acrylic on canvas

Rain 1997

Fujita, Osamu
Photo-etching, etching aquatint

1962 Portrait of Henry Moore
Marini, Marino
(sculpture)

Horiuchi, Paul
Serenity
1978 Collage and acrylic on canvas

Fukuzawa, Yuji
Domain
Wood
Deposit
(Installation)

PACIFIC K100 B-M3
Yanagi, Yukinori
Pacific K100B-M3
1997 Bronze, steel

PACIFIC K00B – M2
Yanagi, Yukinori
Pacific K100B-M3
1997 Bronze, steel

Tanaka, Shieykichi
Still Life 1926 Oil on Canvas
Woman in Furs 1926 Oil on Canvas

Hara, Katsuro
Downtown of Paris
1922-39 Oil on Canvas

Shirataki, Ikunosuke

Versailles

1922 Pencil, watercolor on paper

Cue Garden, London

1923 Pencil, watercolor on paper

Fujita Tsuguharu

(Leonard Foujita)

1. The seven bugles (from the “Apocalypse”)

1959 Ink watercolor on parchment

2. The Four Riders of the Apocalypse (from ‘The Apocalypse’) 1959

3. Heaven and Hell

Hagiwara, Hideo

Self-portrait

1998 Oil on canvas

Hagiwara, Hideo

Genesis

1955 Woodblock print

Flight to Egypt from Life of Christ

1956 Woodblock

Mt. Fuji

Woodblock

Should you find yourself in Kofu, Yamanashi, do pay a visit to the Yamanashi Prefectural Museum. You won't be disappointed. I wasn't!

Uenohara

I lived in Uenohara, Yamanashi for a short while. It's a quiet city that straddles several mountains and runs into the valley below. It has a little museum which I would pass on a daily basis but it never seemed to be open. So, when the lights were on and the door ajar, I thought here's my chance to visit so I went inside. I wasn't disappointed. The museum is located in a western style dwelling. The first floor has been converted into a gallery and the upstairs serves as the living quarters for the family that owns it.

The museum owner waived the fee when she ascertained that I taught at the junior high school up the road. I was touched by her gesture of kindness.

I enjoyed my visit. The collection was varied and interesting. Here are a few pieces that had English descriptions.

1. The Asahigraph Special

Prince Shotoku/Memorial Exhibition Number

The Endless White Clouds by Kochiro Kondo

2. Y. Kodama The Flamenco Dancer

3. Makoto Masuda GRAND CONCO

He's painted an elderly dapper gentleman smoking a cigar while reading the newspaper. A glass of red wine is standing on the table. His beard is white. The frames of his glasses are yellow. He's wearing a hat.

Tokyo National Museum

I visited twice. The first time I visited the Tokyo Museum in Ueno, it was pouring rain and I arrived wet. I spent the day looking at the permanent collections drenched but I didn't mind. It was lovely to see Chojiro's tea bowls. It let me experience history. One visit was not enough to take in the permanent collections. I could spend weeks there studying the collections. There was far

too much to take in, to appreciate, to savour, and to remember, so I returned.

The Toyokan was a personal favourite, one of three buildings that make up the museum. It features arts from other parts of Asia. On display were Buddhist statues from Sui dynasty, Wei dynasty, china, Gandhara, Pakistan, Kushan dynasty 2nd-3rd century and Afghanistan 3rd - 4th century. They were beautiful sculpted from various materials.

Another highlight was seeing Song dynasty tea bowls. Here are a few descriptions:

1. Tenmoku Tea bowl

Black glaze with "hare's fur" striae

Jian Ware

Southern Song dynasty

12th - 13th century

2. Tea Bowl

Konoha-tenmoku

black glaze with leaf

Jizhou ware

Southern Song dynasty

12th - 13th century China

There were also many Korean bronze Buddhas dating from the 7th century. Something I very much enjoyed was sitting in the presence of all the Buddha statues.

The Modigliani exhibit at the Bunkamura

I took in the Modigliani exhibit at the Bunkamura in Shibuya, Tokyo. The show also features the works of Picasso, Fernand Leger, Georges Roualt, and others. The collection of Modigliani sketches, studies, and paintings were originally acquired by Roger Dutilleul.

I'm so glad I went to see it as I found it mesmerizing. The AGO in Toronto

possesses one Modigliani regrettably removed from public viewing. Perhaps, upon the completion of the new expansion, it might be re-exhibited. When the Barnes collection stopped at the AGO years ago, it held several Modiglianis which were a delight to behold. So, to see a body of his work was marvelous.

It's been said that religious icons are a window to heaven, and that the eyes are the windows of the soul. So, it was fascinating to study his works since he mostly sketched or painted the outline of the eye. Sometimes, he would paint or sketch in the iris, pupil, eyelids, and eyebrows. I wonder what he was suggesting. Were the completeness of the eyes reflecting his intimate knowledge of the subject? It's something to ponder.

Alas, this troubled, gifted, unique Italian Jewish artist died young leaving behind a body of work that appeals to many if not most people. Perhaps, many are as fascinated as I still am by his treatment of the eyes.

Postscript

Here's a list of Amedeo Modigliani art pieces that were exhibited at the Bunkamura in Shibuya, Tokyo.

They were:

Buste de jeune femme

1908

Huile sur toile

57 x 55 cm

Etude de tete pour une sculpture

1911

Crayon bleu sur papier teinte

Etude de tete pour une sculpture en 1912

crayon bleu sur papier teinte

Teresa
1915
Gouache sur papier

Profil d'homme
Mine de plomb sur papier

Nu Assis 1917
Mine de plomb sur papier

Jacques Lipchitz et sa femme
1917
Mine de plomb sur papier

Moise Kisling 1916
Huile sur toile

Viking Eggeling 1916
Huile sur toile

Nu assis a la chemise 1917
Huile sur toile
92 x 67, 5 cm

Maternite
1919
130 x 81 cm
Huile sur toile

Petit garçon roux

1919

Huile sur toile

92 x 55 cm

Many of the above works were originally acquired by Roger Dutilleul. They were subsequently donated to French museums by Genevieve et Jean Masurel.

Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography

Recently, I took in a show "things as they are", a World Press Photo retrospective commemorating its 50 anniversary. It was highly provocative and suggestive. Where else can one see under one roof the award winning works of many of the world's top photojournalists? Actually, the photo exhibit shouldn't be in a museum but displayed in public places for all to see. And to remind the world that evil, ignorance, hatred continues to undermine world peace and harmony.

I still haven't digested all those images of dead children, violence, grief, poverty, and misery. They still resonate in my psyche. After spending close to 3 hours taking in the exhibit, I had to leave to get some air.

Man's inhumanity to man is a way to view and understand history. The sub-text of the photos reveals one group oppressing the other; one group victimizing another. Yes, the world has changed but the root causes of misery, poverty, and violence hasn't. The show is a testament to that and much more.

I extend my congratulations to Christian Caujolle who structured the show. The exhibition is arranged into decennia ---1955 - 1964, 1965 - 1974, 1975 - 1984, 1985 - 1994, and 1994 - 2005. The decennia highlight the significant events of the periods and permits analyzation.

The show depicts the works of Japanese photo-journalists who have won the

award. Highlighted is the works of Mr. Yasushi Nagao, Mr. Shomei Tomatsu and Mr. Hiroshi Kubota. Featured in the exhibition are the works of Sebastiao Salgades, Alon Reiniger, Donna Ferrato, Anders Petersen, Mary Ellen Mark, Richard Avedon, and countless others.

If the show comes to your part of the world, do see it. You won't be disappointed.

The Van Gogh Exhibit

The Van Gogh exhibit in Tokyo was a hit. Thousands of Tokyo residents on a daily basis were flocking to see the retrospective of his work. The Japanese adore him and his artwork is found in the permanent collections of many Japanese museums. We were also ardent fans.

Lucky I was going to see the exhibit in the charming company of a very beautiful woman. I met up with my companion in front of the National Museum of Art. Even though we faced the daunting task of getting in line, actually, getting in two line-ups, one to buy our tickets and the other to get into the museum, we didn't have to wait long to get in. Things in Japan run very smoothly and within minutes of arriving we had purchased our tickets and were already making our way into the museum.

The Japanese and I have something in common. It's Western art. We both love it. The exhibit explores the influence Japanese art, in particular ukiyo-e art, had on Van Gogh and his work. He deeply treasured his ukiyo-e prints and painted them in his works. He also painted a picture of a professional Japanese woman, which was on display. The Japanese were so taken with his work. They lingered before his works solemnly gazing at his paintings whispering words of appreciation to their friends and loved ones.

I was particularly fascinated by his self-portraits; there were two versions on display, which was juxtaposed with the one done by Gauguin. It was evident that he was a soul torn apart by the throes of mental illness and was a deeply conflicted individual. My interest in Van Gogh had increased ten fold. I left with a question. How was he able to paint when gripped by the ravishes of mental

illness?

Tokyo is the place to see art. It is filled with dozens and dozens of museums that can occupy any museumgoer for months on end! It has become one of my favourite cities in the world!

Shintoism

Shintoism

Shintoism means "the way of the kami (spirits)". It is the native religion of the Japanese and began in ancient Japan.

According to Shintoism, God has no beginning or end, but is. There is no theology or ethics in Shintoism. There isn't anything intellectual or esoteric to understanding its meaning and significance to daily life.

God is an essence. With reference to nature, this essence is called spirit (Kami). Throughout Japan, there are thousands of Shinto Shrines (Jinja) scattered about. They are dedicated to spirit divinities called Kami. These Kami have various spiritual origins ranging from holy mountains, rocks, rivers, brooks, trees to deified ancestors. They were made according to various ideas and express the Japanese's awe and reverence for nature.

When worshippers visit a Shinto Shrine, they may be doing one of several things. They can be paying their respects, or expressing reverence, or praying for good health, peace, and prosperity.

And the Kami, the essence of God in the natural world, is found in cherry blossoms too.

During Japanese festivals called Matsuri, food and drink are offered to the Kami as a gesture of goodwill.

Visiting a Shinto Shrine (Jinja)

At the entrance of each shrine is a torii. It marks the gateway to the sanctuary (shinden). The torii is made up of two vertical poles supporting two horizontal poles. The poles are made of stone or wood. And if made of wood, they are sometimes painted red.

Before a worshipper approaches the shrine to pray or express reverence, s/he goes through a cleansing ritual. There is a trough of water with dippers called a chozuya. The dippers are used to dip water from the trough to wash the hands and rinse out the mouth.

Here's the protocol.

- 1) Bow lightly before approaching the sanctuary (shinden);
- 2) Ring the bell to call the deity's attention;
- 3) Toss any amount of money you wish into the offertory box. This is an optional step;
- 4) Now bow twice, then clap your hands twice, and then give a final bow;
- 5) Between clapping twice and giving a final bow of reverence, worshippers are free to join their hands in prayer and make a silent wish;
- 6) After making the final bow and leaving the sanctuary, one avoids showing their derriere to the deity.

The link between Shintoism, Emperor Worship and the Yasukuni Shrine

Following the restoration of the Emperor as political leader, emperor worship became the focus for the emerging nation. What followed was the cult of the divinized figure. The Meiji oligarchs made the Meiji Emperor into a God

according to the myths of Kojiki recorded in the 8th century (712 AD). He became divine and was considered the essence of God in the natural world.

He was the living link that attached Japan to her divine antecedents, the Sun Goddess. Thus, Shinto became the state religion from 1868 until 1945. It was claimed that he was a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu-o-mikami. The myth was carried out through the educational system. He became the high priest of Shinto, the focus of all emotions, of loyalty and devoted veneration. To die for the Emperor was considered an honour, and those who did are enshrined as heroes at the Yasukuni shrine.

The Emperor's portrait was worshipped as a holy icon. No one was allowed to lay eyes upon his august person. He was lord and father of the nation which was seen a single family. The people were his worshippers, servants, and obedient children. Following Japan's defeat in the Pacific War of WWII, Emperor Hirohito, as a condition of surrender, repudiated his divine status, and declared himself to be a human being.

Sakura

There are over one hundred cherry tree varieties found in Japan. Many of the cherry trees are of the Somei Yoshino and Yamazakura varieties. Many have blossoms with five petals. Trees with blossoms of more than five petals are called Yaezakura. Most produce lightly pink to pure white blossoms but some produce dark pink or slightly yellow blossoms.

Most cherry tree varieties bloom in spring but there are some that bloom in late autumn and even during the winter months. The Sakura (cherry blossoms) are loved by the Japanese and represent the essence of God in nature and are considered Kami (divine spirit).

Trees figure in Christianity too. There is *The Tree of Life* and the *Tree of the Knowledge of God and Evil* which are mentioned in Genesis. And there is the grove of olives in the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus of Nazareth went to pray. There's also the crown of thorns made from the thorny tamarisk which was

violently placed on the head of Jesus of Nazareth.

My visit to the Yasukuni Shrine

His private visits to the Yasukuni shrine provoke the ire of many Asian countries. Why does Prime Minister Koizumi visit the Yasukuni shrine? I didn't know. As it so happened, I had moved to Shinjuku and was living within walking distance of the shrine. So, one April morning, I made my way there to find out.

In my mind's eye, I had thought the shrine itself would be larger and more imposing than it was. I was struck by its simplicity. I had double checked with one of the security guards on duty. "Sumimasen" I asked. "Yasukuni koko?" I said and gently pointed to its direction with my hand. He nodded his head and uttered a "Hai." He then instructs me on Shinto protocol in Japanese and reminds me to clap twice. I reply with an "Arigato gozaimasu."

The complex is bustling with activity. There are many visitors present. There's a live performance taking place on a makeshift stage. I notice that there are many Japanese seniors in attendance.

I walk towards the shrine. I instinctively sense the reverence of the place. Many are offering their respects. It is a special place. I can see that. I can feel it. It is a place of worship.

After, I visit the war museum. I learn about the Yasukuni shrine. The shrine is where the Japanese revere their own that has died for the nation. The shrine dates from the Meiji period. The registry of souls also dates from the Meiji period.

The fallen become guardian divinities and protect Japan from evil.

I spend many hours working my way through the exhibits on the two floors. Many of the exhibits have been translated into English. There are exhibits on loan from the Imperial Family. I begin to realize that there is a connection between the Imperial Family and the Yasukuni shrine. There is a moving images presentation on Japan's military past which I watch. I take a seat in the back. I notice that many Japanese are weeping silently. The atmosphere is charged with emotion.

I take a break and sit in the lounge area on the second floor to collect my thoughts. I feel weary. I am feeling tired. I feel slightly overwhelmed by it all but I continue on with my visit.

I make a mental note. There's a reference to Nanking. There's a reference to the GHQ occupation policy. There's a reference to the Emperor Showa repudiating his divine status. There's a reference to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Kamikaze exhibit leaves me feeling terribly sad. The photo portraits of the Kamikaze overwhelm me. There is a volume of their correspondence that has been translated into English which I read. Their words leave me feeling numb.

I explore the grounds of the enclosure. There's a sumo pit on the premises and a lovely Japanese garden. My visit to the shrine leaves me with a deeper understanding of Japanese people and Japanese modern history. I come away with the understanding that the Yasukuni shrine, the Imperial Family, and the Sakura (cherry blossoms) shape the identity of the Japanese people. Yes, the shrine houses the names of Japan's convicted war criminals but also those who fought for a modern Japan.

Kokeshi

I love visiting second hand stores and flea markets. It's an opportunity to examine what people have given away and is now up for sale. Many cities and towns now hold regular flea markets and there is a crop of second hand stores springing up in many locations throughout Japan which I can personally attest to. Sometimes, I buy something and when I do, I buy something that appeals to me on some level and/or would make a nice souvenir for a friend and/or family member. I only buy things Japanese and nothing expensive.

This is how I came to discover kokeshi dolls. When I first spotted them, I was intrigued and my interest was piqued. They reminded me of the Ukrainian wooden dolls. Was there a connection? I had to find out.

What are kokeshi? Well, they are handcrafted dolls made of wood. They don't have arms or legs. Their heads and bodies are cylindrical in shape. Actually, I did find a kokeshi doll with arms and legs. Perhaps, this is an exception to the rule. Their faces and bodies are hand painted. Today, they are sold as souvenirs or decorative objects. They have now become collector's items and you can even buy them on e-bay. There is even a kokeshi museum in Japan. While they are made today as souvenirs and sold in many parts of Japan, their original purpose is rooted in sadness.

During the Edo and even early Meiji period and most likely dating from previous eras, kokeshi served as reminders of newborn children who were put down by their very poor families who hadn't the means to look after them. This practice was outlawed in the Meiji period and made a punishable offence. It's hard to believe but infanticide was once practiced in Japan. Some of my Japanese acquaintances have told me that infanticide was a form of family planning. As food was scarce and given that some areas were poverty stricken, the practice arose out of necessity. I won't go into details on how the earlier Japanese went about the business of putting down their infants. There were no other means available to the very poor to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. There are testimonials on public record that provide the gruesome details and one could seek them out should one be so inclined to do so.

The earlier Japanese weren't without feeling and regretted their actions and so the tradition of kokeshi dolls came about. Kokeshi were reminders of the dead children to whom the Japanese offered prayers and asked for forgiveness for terminating their lives.

So, kokeshi come from a tradition of remembering the spirits of children whose lives were cut short because of poverty and lack of food. The earlier made dolls were much cruder in design and are not as fancy as the ones that are now found throughout Japan.

By rummaging through second hand stores and checking out flea markets, I was able to pick up quite a few kokeshi. Some, I have discovered date to the Taisho period and were purchased inexpensively. Now, that's a real bargain!

The Geisha

The Sakura had come into bloom in the early weeks of April and their blossoms brought beauty and colour to Tokyo.

A Japanese acquaintance invited me one evening to see the Sakura that lined the riverbanks of the Asakusa River. Sitting under the Sakura on coverings of blue plastic, were hundreds of partygoers eating, drinking, and making merry. There were numerous stalls selling traditional Japanese foods such as okonomiyaki, takuyaki, and yakisoba and, of course, beer. It was a happy time for all. It was a lovely evening. We stopped along the way to buy some beer. I figured that this was probably one of the very few occasions when one could eat and enjoy a drink while walking in public. Otherwise, it isn't allowed and considered taboo.

I had hoped to see a geisha in Japan and this evening I got my chance. There standing beside us was a geisha. A small circle of people surrounded her. She was exquisite looking. She was striking. She was dressed in a silk kimono. Her hair and face was done up in the traditional way. She was petite. Silly I kept glancing over. I thought perhaps I was making a fool of myself by doing so but she was bewitching. It was then while I was glancing over at the geisha that a TV crew interviewing revelers and passersby approached us. They wanted to interview a foreigner about the Sakura and so, I agreed to be interviewed. My acquaintance translated for me. "Where are you from?" They asked. "I'm from Canada." I responded. "What did I think of the Sakura?" They asked. "They are very beautiful and I am very pleased to be able to take part in a traditional Japanese custom, cherry blossom viewing." I responded. "What is your impression of the blossoms themselves?" They asked. "They are pleasing to the eye." I said. They seemed very pleased with my responses, thanked us and moved on to interview others. Suddenly, I found the courage to approach the geisha and kindly asked her if I could take her picture.

She graciously consented and even allowed me to have my picture taken with her. Wow! I couldn't believe it. So, I got my wish and a little more too. Lucky me!

The Silkworm

I am writing about the silkworm. In my travels in Japan, I had seen the remnants of silk farms. When I lived in Maebashi, Gunma, I discovered that it was once a famous silk production center before the Second World War. I have purchased beautiful second hand silk kimonos for friends in thrift shops. But it wasn't until one of my students mentioned recently that she was served silkworm pupae as part of her lunch that got me to find out more about the silkworm.

Did you know that one silkworm cocoon could be unwound into 1,000 meters of silk filament? Silk was first discovered in ancient China. Many legends surround its discovery but credit is attributed to the wife of the Yellow Emperor. Legend has it that she accidentally dropped a cocoon into hot water (tea), fished it out, played with it and in the process discovered that the cocoon would unwind into one long delicate filament. She is also credited with the invention of the silk reel, which joins several fine silk filaments into a thread thick and strong enough for weaving.

There are four stages in a silkworm's lifecycle. The stages are:

1 The egg stage; 2 The silkworm stage; 3 The pupa stage (cocooning); 4 The metamorphosis into a moth.

Silkworms are cultivated in clean environments to prevent the spread of disease. They feed strictly on mulberry leaves. A female silkworm can lay anywhere from 300 to 500 eggs. It takes 20 days for silkworm eggs to hatch. When they hatch, they are the size of an ant and grow to 70 times their original size. It takes them four to five weeks to reach maturity. When they are fully-grown, they stop eating and spin their cocoon. It does this by attaching itself to a twig or a stem by casting a web and then, spins its cocoon, which is the silk filament. It builds its cocoon by swinging its head from side to side in a series of figure-eight movements. The two glands near its lower jaw produces a fluid that hardens into fine silk threads as it comes into contact with the sericin it secretes. The sericin cements the two threads of silk together. It takes about 3 days for a silkworm to spin its cocoon.

They are killed in the pupa stage by placing them in a hot oven. This is done to preserve the cocoon. If the moths were allowed to hatch, they would break the cocoon. The next stage is the reeling of the cocoon filaments into silk thread. This is done by soaking the cocoons into basins of hot water, which dissolves the sericin, the gummy substance that holds the threads together. As a single filament is too fine to be reeled separately, several filaments are threaded together to strengthen the thread. The filaments are drawn together and peeled by pulleys through a tiny porcelain guide. The guide is like the eye of a needle. The melted sericin works to re-glue the several filaments into a single thread, which is wound onto a reel. Once threaded, the silk is removed from the reel and twisted into skeins. This is just the beginning of the process and it doesn't stop until the silk thread is turned into clothing apparel such as kimonos, scarves, ties, dresses, and so on.

As it was a much sought after commodity, silk brought wealth to ancient civilizations and shaped relationships amongst ancient societies.

Japan used raw silk exports to purchase machines and industrial materials to turn itself at the turn of the 19th century into a world power.

Certain key events led to this phenomenon. At the beginning of the 18th century, in order to cut back on its depletion of gold and silver, which was used to pay for its raw silk imports from China, the Tokugawa government began to provide incentives for people to raise silkworms and produce raw silk domestically.

In the late 1860s, Japan ended its period of relative isolation and opened its doors to the world. Yokohama became an international trading port and raw silk was Japan's key export.

The supply of raw silk in the 1860s was threatened by the outbreak of pebrine disease, which decimated crops in the Mediterranean basin, and by the Taiping Rebellion in China, which disrupted the export of Chinese supplies.

Japan entered the global market for raw silk at just the right moment. By the turn

of the century, Japan had become the world's leading exporter of raw silk and in the process turned itself into a powerful nation.

Ikebana

There is a lovely woman at my school whom in her free time and at her own expense displays an Ikebana floral arrangement in the alcove by the entrance to the school auditorium. I had for some time admired the changing floral arrangements and wondered who was responsible for them. There were quite beautiful. One day by chance I found out whom it was and was able to express to her my appreciation and gratitude for having something beautiful to look at whenever I went by the alcove.

As flowers were offered up to the Lord Buddha, the Chinese Buddhist monks of the Tang Dynasty began to practice floral arranging. Floral arranging along with Chinese culture and Buddhism were introduced into Japan in the 6th century. The first school of flower arranging was established by Ikenobo, a former ruling prince of Japan called Ono-no-Imoko, who became a Buddhist monk at the end of his political career.

Ikebana comprises three concepts. They are religious symbolism, preservation of life, and appreciation of beauty. Ikebana follows a basic form consisting primarily of 3 lines. These 3 lines are symbolic with specific relationships to each other. The three lines represent heaven, man, and earth. Heaven is the tallest line which stands above the rest. At the base is earth which is the foundation line. And in between is the man line, reflecting the human existence between the sphere of heaven and the soil of earth.

What I particularly love about Ikebana is the way it uses and arranges flowers. The line designs, unlike Western floral design, allow each branch, leaf, and flower to be fully viewed and appreciated for their individual beauty.

Living in Japan has its rewards which include discovering and learning about its rich cultural traditions such as Ikebana.

The Japanese Tea Ceremony

I got to experience the Japanese tea ceremony on cross-cultural day when my home class held a tea ceremony to honour our two international visitors. It was performed by two of my students who were studying chado. I was fortunate to experience one of Japan's treasured traditions and to learn something of its esoteric meaning.

The Japanese tea ceremony (cha no yu or chado or sado) has its origins in Zen Buddhism dating to the thirteenth century. It blends elements of Japanese philosophy and artistic traditions, and interweaves four principles -- harmony with people and nature (wa), everyone is equal in the tearoom, respect for others (kei), purity of heart and mind (sei), and tranquility (jaku).

Over the centuries, the tea ceremony has evolved into the ritualized preparation and serving of powdered green tea (matcha) to guests in a tearoom by a tea practitioner.

In order for a tea practitioner to practice the art of tea ceremony, he or she must become familiar with kimono and with Japanese traditional arts such as calligraphy, flower arranging, and ceramics in addition to his or her school's particular tea practices. The study of the tea ceremony takes many years to master and can last a lifetime. There are two main schools both having their own prescribed rituals. They are the Omotesenke and Urasenke schools.

Guests play an important role in the ceremony and must have some knowledge and understanding of the tea ceremony and/or are given some instruction beforehand. Guests are expected to follow prescribed gestures and phrases to entering, sitting, exiting, taking the tea and eating of the sweets. In an ideal situation, practitioner and guests are involved in a complex choreography of movements and adhere to strict rules of conduct and behaviour.

The ceremony's intended aims are to focus the self in the moment (an objective of Zen Buddhism) and to cleanse the five senses.

The senses are responsible for providing the brain with information about the

external world. The five senses act to warn us when we're in danger and to inform us about pleasurable things. The senses inform the brain: the brain informs us.

The ceremony cleanses the five senses as follows:

- 1) The sense of sight is cleansed by seeing the hanging scroll (tokonoma) and/or the flower arrangement;
- 2) The sense of hearing is cleansed by the sound of the boiling water to make the tea;
- 3) The sense of taste is cleansed by tasting and drinking the tea;
- 4) The sense of touch is cleansed by holding the tea bowl and feeling the glaze of the pottery; and
- 5) The sense of smell is cleansed by the smell of the tea and from the tatami (straw) flooring of the tearoom.

It has been noted that the tea ceremony can lead to an integrated body-mind experience by balancing both hemispheres of the brain. The left side and right side of the brain have different responsibilities. Functions of the left side of the brain involve analytical thinking, sequential ordering, rational thinking, and verbal skills. Functions resident in the right side of the brain include visual and spatial ability, intuition, and artistic ability.

The left side of the brain is stimulated by the logical sequences of the tea ceremony such as the scooping of powdered green tea from a container, placing it in a ceramic bowl, the ladling of hot water to the bowl, the picking up of a small bamboo whisk, the churning of the mixture to a green froth, the handing of the tea to the guest, and to the way the bowl is picked up and held in the hands of the guest, to its elevation to the lips for drinking and for its return to the host. The left side of the brain is also activated by the factual information about the utensils - the tea bowl (chawan), the bamboo whisk (chasen), and the tea scoop (chashaku).

The right side of the brain is stimulated by the visual-spatial effects of the setting (the environment of the tea room), the awareness of self and others (movements and gestures) and by symbols (the tea room as a place of peace) and feelings evoked by participating in the tea ceremony (tranquility). The right hemisphere of our brain controls most of our emotional expressions and perceptions. Thus, active and cognizant participation in the tea ceremony can lead to an integrated body-mind experience by balancing both hemispheres of the brain.

It was a lovely experience to take part in one of Japan's oldest cultural traditions and to learn of its esoteric meaning. I hope you get a chance to experience it too.

The Japanese art of tea

The Japanese art of tea has its origins in China as does Japan's written language. The custom of drinking a bowl of tea for its medicinal and meditation enhancing benefits was brought back by Japanese monks who had studied Zen in China during the late Kamakura period (1185-1336).

In the 13th century, the Mongol tribes of the North swept down on China destroying much of the Sung Dynasty culture including the tea ceremony. However, the tea ceremony, having been brought to Japan, survived and flourished.

In Japan, in the beginning, the tea ceremony was a monastic tradition. Shuko, a Buddhist monk, changed all that. He is credited with secularizing the way of tea and bringing it out of the realm of the religious domain.

The way of tea was further refined by Shuko's disciple, Jo-o. Then, Jo-o's disciple, Sen-no-Rikya, reformed the rules of the tea ceremony into a codified secular fashion.

By the way, Sen-no-Rikya was ordered to commit suicide by the Taiko Toyomi Hideyoshi.

The essence of the tea ceremony is calmness, harmony and beauty. The mood is contemplative and ceremonial. By its very nature, it precludes the use of gaudy tea ceremony utensils. The earliest tea ceremonies used mostly Chinese wares. During the Sung Dynasty, tea bowls became deeper and wider to aid in the whipping of the powdered tea. And black and blue glazes began to be used on tea bowls to enhance the tea colour - a light green.

As the Japanese particularly admired Chinese bowls, many kilns specialized in this type of potting. Kato Shirozayemon went to China to study the art of potting especially the making of the black-glazed tea bowls (temmoku). Upon his return, he founded kilns at Seto where he began to make similar bowls.

With the secularization of the tea ceremony and its increasing popularity amongst the samurai and aristocratic classes, demand for tea ceremony utensils started to exceed supply. More and more locally made ceramics began to appear and they were also beginning to show a uniquely Japanese aesthetic. Tea bowls were not perfectly round, had a smooth of form or surface or a flat rim.

Then, following Japan's conquest of Korea in the late 16th century by Taiko Toyomi Hideyoshi, Korean potters were brought to Japan. These Korean potters invigorated pottery making in Japan.

During the warring states period too, there was a change in fashion regarding the tea ceremony utensils. Rather than the Sung Dynasty black glazed wares, tea ceremony masters began to favour similarly made and decorated Korean peasant wares.

Chojiro, the son of a Korean potter, was awarded a gold seal (Hojiro) in 1588 engraved with the word, raku by none other than Toyomi Hideyoshi. Raku means enjoyment or felicity.

More on the Japanese Tea Ceremony

It is more than a ritualized ceremony with its articulated gestures and rhythms.

Many consider it an expression of high art. Some have gone on to say that it is a modus operandi to soul discipline since the tea ceremony emphasizes right thinking and right feeling.

The essence of the tea ceremony is calmness of mind, serenity of temper, composure and quietness of demeanor, peace and fellowship.

It starts off with the tea room itself. Shut off from the outside world, it lends itself to directing and focussing one's thoughts away from the world.

The nearly bare interior of the tea room does not overwhelm nor compete for one's attention. The hanging scroll (Kakemono) calls attention more to grace of design than to beauty of colour.

Prior to entering the quiet of the tea room, all assembled must leave their cares and worries outside the entrance.

The Japanese cat

The Japanese cat has captured my attention. I've run across them here and there but they seem quite at home in Komagane. They prance about in gardens, stretch out languidly along the edge of a rice field or scurry along the paths and roads making their way gingerly to their next destination. Sometimes, they notice me and stop in mid-track to have a look at this stranger. I can hear them thinking. I have seen this in little Japanese children who when they notice me for the very first time stare and look and wonder why I look so different from the others. The Komagane cats do the same thing. They are charming and come in a range of colours and shapes and many have the characteristic curlicue tail.

They amuse me and remind me of the cats that lived along the canals near the

day market near my former home in Hsintien, Taipei. They have character and personality and are a delight to watch.

They have an interesting history in Japan, which is shrouded in mystery, legend and folklore. They are said to have come originally from China more than a 1,000 years ago but legend has it that they first arrived around 600 AD when Buddhism was introduced to Japan.

They were the playthings of royalty and nobility but when the silk trade was threatened by a plague of vermin several centuries ago they were set free. Perhaps, that explains their appearance in the streets and farms of Komagane. Buddhist temples to protect sacred documents from being eaten by mice also kept them. Yet, according to Buddhist tradition, they are excluded from nirvana because they were too busy chasing rats to bother with the ceremony commemorating Buddha's passing into nirvana. What a pity! Perhaps, they don't really mind.

A friend tells me that the cat wasn't included in Noah's ark either. However, there is a Shinto shrine, the Gokokuji Temple, in Tokyo dedicated to the cat.

Perhaps, you've seen the maneki neko, the lucky cat otherwise known as the beckoning cat, in shops or shop windows. I have seen them here and back home in Toronto. It sits with its left paw raised and bent as if it was beckoning you near. They are usually made of clay. They are considered a good luck charm and are often presented as gifts at business openings. I had always been curious about the maneki neko and lucky for me that I had the opportunity to learn about its history here in Japan.

My curiosity has been peaked. I plan to pay a visit to Gokokuji Temple on one of my next visits to Tokyo.

Mandukya

One Sunday morning, as I was walking pass the many rice fields in my neighbourhood on my way to 7/11 to pick up some things, I suddenly heard these gentle water rippling sounds coming from one of the rice fields. Curious, I glanced over and was quite surprised to see that the rice field was full of tadpoles. As I approached nearer, my body cast a shadow over a small section of the rice field, and noticed that some of the tadpoles scattered about. I was transfixed and took a moment to watch them. They ranged in size and some were quite fat. I thought if I were a child, I'd jump in and try to catch a few to take home as a pet.

Did you know that frogs have been around for eons and have developed the ability to adapt to their environment? Here they were breeding in the rice fields of Komagane. I had to find out how and why.

I was surprised to learn that rice fields make an ideal breeding ground for frogs. They are able to hibernate in cavities or burrow in the muddy bottoms of rice fields until the weather warms. Rice fields are flooded just before planting and contain just enough water to support eggs and tadpoles. They do not contain fish and other aquatic animals that would prey on frog eggs and tadpoles. Female frogs lay up to several thousand eggs in a large grey jelly in the water. The eggs hatch in 10 to 20 days into tadpoles. When they hatch, the newborn tadpoles squirm out of this grey jelly. If tadpoles have not completed metamorphosis by the time the rice field dries out, they will die. They usually feed on algae but under certain circumstances they can turn cannibalistic and feed on each other.

Like butterflies, frogs have two life stages, the tadpole and the frog stage. When tadpoles are metamorphosing into adult frogs, their body structure and breathing organs change. Frogs, I re-discovered, are so interesting.

In the rice fields where tadpoles become frogs, I contemplate the beauty that nature is.

Homelessness in Japan

I have come across homeless people in my travels in Japan. I have seen the tent communities in Tokyo's Yoyogi Park. The homeless make their homes using sheets of blue plastic, cardboard and bits and pieces of other materials. They are neat and tidy. The communities are very orderly too.

Recognizing the characteristic blue plastic, shimmering in the sunlight, they had made their homes along the concrete shores of the Sumida River in Tokyo.

In Maebashi, there were some homeless people living along the Hiroshi River near a public toilet facility. At Ueno Station in Tokyo, the homeless had set up makeshift housing near the station. At Shinjuku Station one evening, I came upon a small group of men huddling on the steps leading out to the east exit holding pieces of cardboard. No doubt they planned to use it as a floor covering to mitigate the effects of the hard, cold concrete floors of the subway station.

At Takasaki station, some homeless people were living just outside the station. I came upon a dignified looking middle-aged woman sitting in a very large cardboard box. When I saw her head sticking out of the box, my heart skipped a beat. I would see her most times outside the east exit on my way to teach a night class near the station. Perhaps, she wouldn't accept my money and against my better judgment, I offered her some. Gesturing with my hand, she accepted it.

In Shinjuku, there were homeless people living along the main strip in stairways of boarded up buildings located close to my neighbourhood. Whenever, I'd come face-to-face with someone, I offered them some money, which they accepted.

Now, I'm in Hamamatsu. I'm staying around the corner from the Shin Hamamatsu Station. When I leave very early in the morning to catch the red line to take me to work, I see many homeless people sitting on the benches with their belongings. One early morning, I see an elderly man rummage through a garbage bin. They weren't just living at Shin Hamamatsu station but also at Dai Ichi Dori Station. None of the homeless people I saw were ever panhandling.

Canada has homeless people. The streets and parks of downtown Toronto, where I am from, are full of homeless people. Homeless people are found throughout the land.

I have been told that the homeless in Japan are on the streets because of shame and their own accord. They have lost their jobs. They have lost their social positions. They are on the streets because they are too ashamed to admit to their families their changed circumstances. How tragic! Honor and shame values continue to exercise a pivotal role in Japanese life despite its Westernization even though these values have been pushed to the background in the West.

Why is it that the individual must bear the brunt of a society's mishaps and economic failures? No one deserves to be on the streets.

It can happen to anyone. It can happen to you, to a family member or to a dear friend. Marital breakup, domestic violence, child abuse, mental illness, job loss can all contribute to someone falling through the cracks and ending up on the streets.

As someone who has worked with the homeless in Toronto in my career as a social worker, I have seen how government policies can contribute to this problem. The Harris government when it was in power in Ontario in the 90s was directly to blame for the dramatic increase in homeless people in the province. He chopped away at social services and implemented policies that made individuals ineligible for assistance.

Any society that fails to take care of its most vulnerable citizens cannot be called a just society. There are no excuses for homelessness. This problem isn't going to go away. For it to diminish, the root causes of homelessness need to be stamped out.

Many homeless panhandle as a means of generating much needed money. In Japan, I have hardly ever been solicited for money. It happened to me just the one time in Hamamatsu.

In Toronto, homeless people beg and do so in an aggressive and sometimes belligerent manner. They come up to you and get in your face. I have seen this happen on a regular basis. It's offensive but I think it's the only way they think they can get someone's attention. Sometimes, I've seen panhandlers get nasty and turn ugly with passersby who have ignored them. They scream out profanities, wave their hands and throw themselves about.

Some panhandlers on the other hand I've noticed employ a less offensive approach. They try to make eye contact with a passerby hoping to get his or her attention and by doing so; they can size them up for a donation. Eye contact is crucial. They know it. Eye contact forces recognition of the other. They use it to call attention to their plight - "please help me!" Some panhandlers are savvy and can usually figure out whom to hit on for a cash donation: they many even have a sixth sense.

I remember the time when I was in a Madrid café having breakfast with an acquaintance from the hostel, a blind man came in and approached us for money. I offered to buy him breakfast, which he declined. He told me that the patron (the owner) would refuse to serve him and preferred a cash donation instead. On my walks through Madrid, I came upon many panhandlers. Many were Romanian gypsy women begging on church steps. The Madrid subways were always full of homeless people sleeping on cardboard boxes.

On my way to the station to catch the red line to take me to work, a homeless man that makes the station his home wished me good-luck, 'Gambatte'. How kind of him to do so! I was so glad when I ran into him on the street before I was to leave Hamamatsu because I wanted to give him a little money. He was so grateful and was totally taken by surprise! On my way to the JR station, a homeless man asked me for money by making the Japanese gesture for money, which is the Okay gesture, but done horizontally. 'Here you are.' I said.

Homelessness is a global issue. Responsibility lies not only with government but also with the general public to mitigate its effects. Let's show compassion!

The Japanese moon

While living in Komagane, I had wonderful views of the moon and enjoyed its beauty. On my evening walks, I would gaze up and admire its luminosity. Growing up, my references of the moon included the imaginary smiling face one could see on the moon's surface, werewolves, the song Blue Moon sung by jazz greats such as Mel Torme, and the Americans putting a man on the moon in 1969.

While living in Japan, I discovered the Japanese have a tradition of celebrating the moon with moon-viewing parties named Tsukimi and would venerate the moon with offerings of food and flowers.

Japan also has many legends and fables about the moon. They say that the shape of the shadow on the moon resembles a rabbit. There's a Buddhist tale of a rabbit voluntarily sacrificing his life to provide food for a hungry and starving Buddha. The Buddha to show his appreciation commemorated the rabbit by putting his face on the moon. Another favourite tale tells of how the craters and shadows on the moon were made by rabbits pounding rice to make mochi. Mochi is a special food made by pounding steamed rice in a pestle and mortar, and can be filled with something sweet like black sesame paste or dusted with icing sugar and is eaten during the New Year festivities.

It also happens to figure in the annual death of a few elderly Japanese seniors. It's quite sticky and can get stuck in the throat causing asphyxiation. A Japanese acquaintance, a firefighter, told me that choking on mochi could easily be avoided by eating nori, prepared seaweed, with it. According to Shintoism, a grain of rice symbolizes a human soul and mochi, which is made up of thousands of rice kernels symbolically, represents millions of souls.

The colour yellow represents the moon in Japan, which happens to be one of my favourite colours.

The Ginger Tree: A review of the screenplay

I love reading screenplays and was very pleased to pick up a copy of the screenplay 'The Ginger Tree' by Christopher Hampton, which was adapted from the novel by Oswald Wynd, in a second hand bookshop.

The story focuses on the life of Mary Mackenzie, a young Scotswoman, who goes out to China at the turn of the century to join her fiancé Richard, a military attaché to the British Government, whom she eventually marries. While he is away observing the Russian-Japanese war of 1904, she has an affair with a Japanese count, Kentaro. She finds herself pregnant. She tries to keep her pregnancy a secret but is found out. Her husband sends her backing. She has shocked the British community. She is intercepted on her journey and whisked away to Japan where a new journey begins for her.

She delivers a healthy baby boy only to have him stolen from under her very nose several months later by a servant. She goes temporarily insane. Despite her efforts to get her son back, she fails. She even appeals to the British ambassador who attended her wedding to Richard in Mukden City. Kentaro has taken the child to be brought up by a suitable adoptive Japanese family. The British ambassador offers her repatriation. When the servant who whisked her baby away returns to pick up her things, Mary discovers her and nearly kills her. She refuses all support from Kentaro and branches off on her own. Her friend, the Baroness Aiko, finds her a job in a clothing department store.

She eventually works her way up to become head of the clothing department and then strikes off on her own, setting up her clothing department store in the Ginza district. She becomes a successful businesswoman. She doesn't sever her ties with Kentaro. When his wife dies, Kentaro offers to marry her but she refuses. He still doesn't tell her where her son is.

The Second World War happens. Kentaro has her repatriated to save her from the internment camps. On the journey to England while the steamer is stationed off Malaysia, she has a brief meeting with her child, now a grown up man, serving in the Japanese Imperial Army. It's a bittersweet ending to a bittersweet life.

I loved reading it. It reminded me of the way things are done in Japan, its treatment of women, the caste system, and Japanese traditions.

Japanese Ghosts

I haven't seen them but I have definitely heard them. After moving into my unit, several months later, I was waking up in the middle of the night by the sounds of a door continuously being slammed against its frame. This went on for months. I didn't think anything of it and thought I just had some noisy neighbours living above me. It wasn't until I was about to vacate the premises that I knew something was up. Everyone in the building had moved out except for me. I realized there was something odd going on when I heard the sound of slamming doors again. "Who was it? Could it be a loose shutter?" I thought. Anyway, as I was moving out within a few days, I put it out of my mind.

One evening, I was talking with my Japanese friend about ghosts. She told me that Japanese ghosts make themselves known by slamming doors. Eureka! I had my answer. I told her that I had been awoken at night by the loud sounds of slamming doors. I told her that I chucked it up to some noisy neighbours living above me. "Perhaps, they want you to teach them English." She said. I laughed. She laughed. I responded, "If they come back, I'll just tell them to go away and sign up for a language course somewhere."

Believe it or not, a month later, they re-appeared at my new place. I was awoken again by the characteristic sounds of slamming doors. I remember getting out of bed, going to the door and politely telling the Japanese ghosts to go away and to please not bother me. "Go away!" I said. "You ain't getting free English lessons from me!" I then went back to bed and tried to get to sleep.

I now tell my Japanese students that I believe in ghosts and that they have visited me. They listen intently hoping I'd provide them with some gruesome details. Instead, I tell them that the ghosts just wanted some free English lessons

but I sent them packing. They have a chuckle. And so do I.

Gaijin Teachers

I read with interest an article by Robert Fulford titled "A Canadian Journalist in Japan". He said that "certain Westerners visiting Japan develop an attitude that's unlike anything I've seen elsewhere in the world: against all reason, against all common sense, foreigners rather resent the presence of other foreigners. To a Westerner walking the streets of Tokyo, other Westerners look like alien intruders - in a dimly understood way, they spoil the picture."

It got me thinking. There was something annoying about many of the gaijin teachers I met in Japan. Let me explain. I knew this fellow who was always telling me how much better things were in Japan in the late 80s when he had come over. He had been wined and dined by his students, was paid handsomely just for being a native speaker, and could set his own hours. Now, he was making 1,500 yen an hour, having to really teach, and had to abide by a working schedule. He was bitter and in a way, he seemed a tragic figure. He had missed out on opportunities and had nothing substantial to show for his years in the country. Although he would have qualified for permanent residence, he didn't even bother applying for it nor was he working on a three-year work visa.

There are the gaijin teachers who because they have been in the country for a few years consider themselves experts on things Japanese. They lord their knowledge over you with a holier than thou attitude. "I have been here for 3 years." "I have been here for 7." "I know better." When in reality they know nothing! They act elitist and are a pain in the butt. Living and working in another country doesn't make one an expert on its laws, customs and its people. It does give you though some insight and understanding. I have learned that the Japanese are complex and cannot be easily pigeonholed.

Then there are the gaijin teachers who continue to work in the country but don't want to be there. I have met them in bars. They complain about the country yet

continue to stay. What a pity! They don't know how good they have it. If they can't stand the heat, then they should get out of the kitchen. Let someone else have the opportunity of teaching in Japan.

Then there are the JETS. They are brought over by the Japanese government at great government expense to work in the school system and are given deferential treatment. They are put on a pedestal. What they need is a good kick in the derriere to put them in their proper place. They go around telling everyone they meet "I'm a JET." It's their mantra. It's their pronouncement to the world that they are special and a cut above all other English teachers.

Finally, I have come across English teachers who overstate their qualifications and experience. Once, I listened with astonishment when an English teacher informed a student that Greece consisted only of islands. I corrected him, and told him and the student that Greece has a mainland. I have seen this type of behaviour before, gaijin teachers feeding the Japanese misinformation.

Mind you, I have come across many wonderful gaijin teachers. However, they tend to be hard to find!

Hamamatsu

My coming to Japan has been a series of journeys. I am now leaving for Hamamatsu to teach for a short period to cover for a teacher who is ill. Riding the train from Komagane to Toyohashi was very enjoyable. The track line runs through quite a few mountain passes. So, you are always coming in and out of the light and catching a glimpse of the surrounding countryside.

As the train approached Toyohashi the mountains receded in the background and from there to Hamamatsu, the flat Japanese coastline was visible.

I discover that Hamamatsu has a wonderful expatriate community. On my first night, I met Brazilians, Koreans, English, Australians, Americans, and Canadians.

The day before I left Komagane I attended the local Matsuri. It was raining but it didn't stop the community from celebrating and enjoying the Matsuri festivities. Parading in the streets, were teams of men carrying various examples of portable shrines but there was one team made up of several female members and there were also several teams made up of young children. They were adorable. March they did in the downpour through the streets of Komagane shouting out Japanese chants. They persevered and showed the Japanese stamina.

I got to taste some very crispy fried grasshoppers that were covered with a sweet syrupy sauce. They happen to be a local delicacy. They were tasty.

At the Komagane station the next day, there was a lovely elderly couple waiting patiently for the train to arrive. When I saw them, I broke out into a smile and greeted them with a konnichiwa; they did likewise.

The weather had cleared up. There was not a cloud in the sky. I could hear bits and pieces of an English song wafting through the air. So, I sat beside this sweet Japanese couple and waited for the train to arrive to take me on my journey.

One evening while relaxing over a latte in ZaZa City Starbucks café, a fairly large Caucasian male walked in. He was dressed in a Yukata, a summer kimono made of cotton. He was huge and looked like a Sumo wrestler. He was prancing about in geta, Japanese sandals, and was talking loudly. A fairly large young woman accompanied him. She, however, was dressed in Western clothes. They were speaking so loud and with the man's clattering about in his geta they attracted much attention.

I have found that for the most part the Japanese usually wear a public persona to the world. Their faces rarely convey emotions but I think this is changing with the young. Today's Japanese youth remind me of the youngsters back home. As I was saying, this couple with their size and clattering about and loud voices drew the attention of many of the patrons inside Starbucks including moi-meme. There was a smart looking Japanese couple seated to my right. I was seated in a corner table across from them. I noticed their reaction. They literally cringed. I could hear them thinking too. They were disgusted. It showed on their faces.

I thought this Western couple showed poor judgment by behaving the way they did. They acted inappropriately by disturbing others.

I suddenly recalled something I had read by the Canadian journalist Robert Fulford. He wrote in his article "A Canadian Journalist in Japan" that "Every foreigner in Japan has a particular role to play, and we Canadians, like other gaijin, must work out the ways we will play it. It is part of the daily spectacle of life in this country. The Japanese and their visitors from abroad are involved in a continuing ritual of interaction feeding each other's fantasies, stimulating each other's curiosity. We engage in mutual scrutiny, gaze and counter-gaze, like rival teams of anthropologists examining each other."

Here was such an example and I thought how dead on his comments were.

On the weekend I visited the museums of Hamamatsu. There are many.

On Saturday morning, I visited the Hamamatsu Musical Instruments Museum. It was a pleasure to see most of the world's instruments housed under one roof.

I copied the inscription that greets visitors as they enter the museum. Here it is:

By its shape and the materials from which it has been produced and from the way it creates sound and the color of tone, a musical instrument and the music it brings forth speak eloquently for the sensibilities and aesthetic sense of the region and people it represents.

I thought how apropos! I spent the entire morning working my way through the exhibits, listening to samples of music, and trying my hand at the hands on display, a display of a cross-section of instruments.

I learned the name of the instrument that a snake charmer uses to charm the cobra. It is called a Pungi.

I came across a Native American Flute and learned about Japan's musical heritage. I also got to see close-up Tibet's musical instruments, the Dung-chen,

Damaru, Rnga, and the Dhyamgro.

On Sunday, I visited Hamamatsu Castle. It's a reconstruction. The original fell into ruin during the Edo period. There are many Japanese visitors present. There are two other foreigners in attendance besides myself.

It is an oppressively hot and humid day. I take time out to cool down. I find a stone bench perched on top of one of the rampart walls. I can hear the cicadas and the din of the city traffic far below. Woods and gardens surround the castle. It is refreshingly cooler here than in the city below. I am seated on a stone bench beside a very small red painted Shinto Shrine. Behind the shrine is a large stone tablet with an inscription in Kanji. I can hear too the squawking of crows "Ha, Ha, Ha." I hear bits and pieces of conversation floating in the wind. It's a hazy day. Mt. Fuji isn't visible.

The castle was rebuilt in 1958. It was the stronghold of the first Tokugawa Shogun.

Following my visit of the museum, I take in the gardens. There are lovely Japanese gardens adjacent to the castle. There are waterfalls, ponds filled with goi, stone lanterns, wooden bridges, a pavilion, pathways, birds, dragonflies, and butterflies galore.

There are also a few homeless men sleeping on the benches and one asleep in the pavilion.

I sit for a while to contemplate the beauty of the Japanese gardens. It's a lovely place to be on a hot and humid day.

In the afternoon, I visit the Hamamatsu Art Museum to see the Adolphe Mucha exhibit. His works are beautiful. He reveres the female form. Of the series of lithographs, Iris is my favourite.

I particularly enjoy the modern silver prints of turn of the century glass negatives. I am intrigued by the modern silver print photograph of Paul Gauguin playing the harmonium in Mucha's studio (1895) and of Paul Gauguin's mistress, Anna la

Javanaise, (1895).

On Monday (it's a holiday), I visit the Hamamatsu Science Museum and enjoy the hands on display.

It's Saturday morning. I have left Hamamatsu. My two weeks in Hamamatsu went by so quickly. I enjoyed living in Hamamatsu albeit from a hotel room. It's a charming city.

Before I leave, I received a lovely card from the children I taught at the hospital. It was so touching. It made my day. The young boy, age 6, in my class wrote the following note, which was translated into English for me. Here it is:

"When you came here, I learned English well. But I forgot them the next day."

How sweet! Having had the chance to teach them was a highlight of my short visit.

Ueno

Ueno Park

I've been visiting Ueno's museums and landmarks which are situated in a beautiful park. The park's wide boulevards, fountains, and majestic trees and shrines give it a grandeur and majesty.

The park is home to countless homeless men some who with their long grey hair and beards, and tattered clothes resemble shamans.

I've spent several days taking in Ueno's museums and visiting the landmarks. I haven't finished yet. I love Ueno's pond covered with gigantic lotus plants. In the past few days, I visited Toshogu, the Jinja of the Shoguns. It's as it was and the stone lanterns lining the path to the Jinja are spectacular. Inside the Toshogu, you'll find artifacts belonging to the Tokugawa Shoguns including Yaesu. It's amazing that his personal belongings have been preserved.

One afternoon, I visited the Sogukudo of Former Tokyo Music School. It's a lovely two-story wooden building which has been restored. On the second floor is the concert hall. When I visited on Monday, October 10th, there was an informal recital given by several Japanese Operatic students singing German arias. Sitting there in this historic building taking in the German arias was absolutely amazing.

While making a tour of the pond, I was approached by a homeless man. He said, "Me homeless," in English while pointing to his nose and then held out his hand. I gave him some change. He then mentioned his friend who was standing behind the Jizo figure and would I give him some money too. I gestured and said, "Call him over." He did, and I gave his friend some money too. I wish I knew more Japanese so that I could converse with them. They seemed so friendly. The one fellow surprised me with his level of English. Ueno Park is the place where high art meets the homeless.

I think my favourite museum so far has to be the Tokyo National Museum. It's Asian and Buddhist treasures are outstanding. I'll write about more about this museum under separate cover.

My visit to Ueno Park (My first time)

I recently visited Ueno Park with a good friend to take in some of its sights and attractions. It a must see for any tourist to Tokyo. This was my first time and my Japanese friend gave me a tour.

We strolled through the park chatting and taking in the lovely park grounds. It was a lovely sunny day and the park was full of people strolling about. There are a lot of things one can do at Ueno Park. There are many museums and even a zoo one can visit. We decided on seeing the Art Deco Show on exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum.

We enjoyed the exhibition spending a few hours taking in the artwork and installations. It was interesting and what intrigued me the most was the Josephine Baker film loop on display. She was captivating on film dancing

topless to an exotic number. It evoked the Paris of the twenties.

We then paid a brief visit to the Kiyomizu Temple. It's a beautiful Shinto temple, a replica of the Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto. As I felt adventurous, so I purchased my fortune and discovered thanks to my friend's translation that it was a good one. I had been told that you leave behind your bad fortune by tying it to a stand dedicated to that purpose and you take the good fortune with you. I was mistaken. My lovely friend told me it was the other way around. She said: "If you take away the good fortune, the Gods would forget it." And so, silly me tied my fortune to the temple stand.

As we were exiting the park on our way to the Ueno market across the street to grab something to eat, we came upon an information booth. Here I learned more about the tragic fate of Japanese nationals kidnapped by the North Koreans. The number of kidnapped are estimated to be in the hundreds and not in the tens as reported by the press. If you didn't know, North Koreans arrive in their submarines off the Niigata coast. They land on shore in the cloak of darkness and kidnap any Japanese nationals they come across who are then taken to North Korea to teach North Koreans the Japanese language. Regrettably, this issue doesn't get much press if any in North America.

The market was teeming with people. There were so many restaurants and food kiosks that it made picking one difficult. We tossed a coin and decided on a sushi restaurant. It was great. I highly recommend a visit to Ueno Park and the Market and more so in the company of others. It's a lovely way to spend a day!

Ueno Revisited (My second time)

I spent another lovely afternoon with my charming friend taking in the sights of Ueno. This time however, we decided to have lunch at Ueno Station. There are so many restaurants to choose from that offer a variety of foods. We decided to have sushi and went to a sushiya (a sushi restaurant) on the upper level ordering the special of the day. It was delicious. Ueno station reminds me of Union Station

back home minus the shops, restaurants, conveniences, and the unrelenting hustle and bustle that seems to characterize large urban train stations in Japan. I loved the airy feeling its high ceilings conveyed and admired too the plaster relief of flowers and vines on the walls.

Following lunch, we made our way to the Shitamachi museum, which is a short hop, skip and jump from the station. The museum is adjacent to Ueno pond. The lovely thing about Shitamachi museum is that you are allowed to touch and handle objects. It's a very tactile experience.

We were asked if we would like the services of an English-speaking guide and gladly, accepted. My questions regarding the kimono rickshaw likely prompted the offer. This was a specially made rickshaw, which instead of having a seating area had a wooden cabinet, its drawers filled with silk kimono. The attendant encouraged me to pull open the drawers to have a look inside. Suddenly, an elderly gentleman miraculously appeared wearing a yukata speaking excellent English. Following self-introductions, he took us on a whirlwind tour of the ground floor. We started off with the craft demonstration. How fortuitous it was for us to catch a craft demonstration of an artisan, it doesn't happen very often our guide told us, making the straps (hana o) for Japanese wooden clogs (geta). There's a life size version of a merchant's shop on the ground floor that specialized in the manufacture and wholesale of geta straps. We then entered a replica of a tiny tenement house that doubled as a sweet/toy shop. On display in the tiny abode on a shelf was a miniature jinja shrine hung with a shimenawa (braids of rice straw rope). I remarked that I had seen the shimenawa tied around an ancient cedar tree and asked whether one wasn't also wrapped around the girth of a champion sumo wrestler. Our guide told me I was correct and was surprised at my knowledge. He said that it indicated a sacred or pure space. Our next stop was the small jinja shrine, which our guide explained was an actual replica, and would be found in most tenements. He let us have a go at Omikuji (a sacred lottery). I was given a box containing numbered sticks to shake, which corresponded to a fortune. The stick falls out of a small hole in the box. My fortune was not bad but friend's was the best you could hope for. She gave me a squeeze and flashed me a big, warm smile.

We then had a quick peak at an old fashion toilet, the communal cooking area for

cooking rice and the common drinking well. We were escorted to the second floor at which time our guide/interpreter left us to ourselves. We gratefully thanked him and made our way through the many exhibits. I loved the life-size façade of the sento (public bath) on display and the huge weight scale on hand. My friend teased me and asked me, "Wouldn't you like to weigh yourself?" I politely declined mentioning that I already knew I was overweight and couldn't see the point in doing so. She gave a laugh. I loved looking at the toiletries housed in the glass displays. I was so glad that I didn't have to shave using old fashion razor blades. What a relief! But what drew my fascination were the black and white photographs on display. They allowed me to travel back in time to a pre-WWII Tokyo. The black and white photograph of the two young smiling Japanese women dressed in the fashion of the twenties taken in Ginza with a tram in the background was charming.

Outside the doors of the museum, the sad eyes of a homeless man prostrated on the dirty wet concrete floor greeted me. I reached into my pockets, pooled my change, and handed it to him, which he accepted. He said, "Thank you" in English, which surprised my friend.

Ueno pond looked ethereal covered in mist on this rainy afternoon. Very few people were out. The pond was covered in a sea of lotus plants and here and there we spied a bird or two. Walking along the perimeter, we passed a few oden shops, and came upon a yanagi tree, a willow tree, which my friend told me was home to ghosts. "Did you say ghosts?" I echoed. I had a sudden premonition of being re-visited by ghosts and quickly punished the thought. I said, "Let's move on."

We had a lovely time and ended our outing with the cake and all you can drink set at the Hardrock Café in Ueno Station. Shitamachi museum is worth a visit. I can't wait to visit Ueno again with my lovely friend and discover more of its delights.

A few days later I was inspired to write this haiku. Here it is:

Ueno pond silent
a homeless man lost in thoughts

shrouded in a mist

Ueno Toshogu Shrine

Toshogu means "Shrine of the Sun God of the East". Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542 – 1616) was enshrined in Ueno Toshogu on April 16, 1650 out of convenience to the feudal lords. His soul was originally enshrined at Mt. Kuno, then transferred to Nikko, and then to the Imperial Palace.

There is on exhibit within the shrine the last will and testament of Tokugawa Ieyasu (Calligraphic Scroll, Ink on Paper) and some of his personal clothes (Japanese Jinbaori) with Tokugawa Crest (Kannon).

Hiroshima

A personal journey into the atomic bombing of Hiroshima

This personal essay isn't meant as a means to criticize or put down America. Far from it, I love America. I just want to understand what happened. Living in Japan and coming to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Japanese has confronted me to ask why were the atomic bombs used and were they really necessary to ending the war.

Japanese cities short-listed for the atomic bomb included:

Kyoto

Hiroshima

Yokohama

Kokura

Niigata

On August 6, 1945 at 08:15, a nuclear bomb nicknamed "Little Boy", exploded over the skies of Hiroshima dropped by the US military aircraft, B-29, called the Enola Gay. On August 9, 1945 at 11:02, a nuclear bomb nicknamed the

"Fatman", exploded over Nagasaki. It was dropped by the US military aircraft, B-29, called the "Bockscar". These were the world's first nuclear attacks. Bad weather prevented the "Bockscar" from dropping it on its intended target, Kokura, so Nagasaki became the new target.

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki instantly killed tens of thousands of Japanese and some Koreans. Many were vaporized or were burned to death from the fierce rays. Following the attacks, tens of thousands of Japanese died from radiation poisoning. Both cities were nearly obliterated along with the majority of its citizens. On the other side of the globe, the world had stood by while the Nazi Germans went on perpetuating unspeakable horrors on its victims. Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, Poles, Homosexuals met their fate in the concentration camps where most were gassed and then incinerated in the gas ovens. Their ashes harvested for use as fertilizer. Violence sickens me.

The survivors of the nuclear attacks in the tens of thousands known in Japanese as hibakusha continue to suffer. They have endured the unbearable just as the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps did. I think it's important understand what led up to the nuclear attacks.

The Japanese were blinded by their false feelings of superiority. They took on America. A savage war was raging between the two. America was now winning the fight and knew the war could be won. War is war and the means justify the ends, they say. Was the pre-text to end the war a means to justify the use of the atomic bombs? But then why were two different types of bombs used. The atomic bomb dropped in Hiroshima was made with Uranium 235, an isotope of uranium that has the ability to cause a rapidly expanding chain reaction. The atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki was made with Plutonium 239. On explosion, above the skies of those two cities, both bombs emitted such fierce rays and radiation. The explosions were described as creating small suns having a center temperature of one million degrees centigrade and raising the surface temperature at the hypocenter between 4000 to 5000 degrees Celsius.

Japan did surrender on August 15, 1945. They capitulated not because of the atomic bombings but because the emperor system would be preserved by the

Allied victors. Reflecting on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I've come away with a deeper understanding as to what really happened and perhaps, history will bear that point out. The atomic bombings were a mistake. But what really troubles me now is the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world.

Look at North Korea, India and Pakistan. Countries who have threatened to use nuclear weapons. And now Iran is on the verge of developing an atomic bomb. Where will this all lead to? And it begs the question what our role is in the face of potential nuclear devastation, which may occur at any moment.

No more Hiroshimas!

I wrote about Hiroshima and how the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in the nuclear age and the arms race. I'll now write about my visit to Hiroshima.

The rebuilt city is beautiful. The rivers that run through Hiroshima are beautifully landscaped. Hiroshima has an efficient transportation city which I can attest to and possesses all the amenities found in a modern city, which it is. I stayed at the World Friendship Center to learn more of its mandate and its founder, Barbara Reynolds. Ms. Reynolds was instrumental in calling attention to the plight of the hibashuka and survivors of Hiroshima, and spreading the message of peace throughout the world to prevent another Hiroshima.

Hiroshima has many beautiful things to see and do but the focus of my visit was making a pilgrimage to the A-Dome, the Cenotaph, and Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

On the day of my visit, the museum was jam packed with visitors and tour groups. It was an impressive sight. I took my place in cue and followed the route laid out by the museum. I would emerge hours later with new insights and understanding. The museum has on display a wealth of information documenting Hiroshima's history before and after the bombing, documents regarding the Manhattan project and the development of the Atomic bomb, diagrams and information on nuclear fission, photographs and clips of the bombing and the devastated

wasteland Hiroshima was to become, material witnesses of the bombing including tissue specimens, and so forth.

On display is a letter from Albert Einstein to F.D. Roosevelt dated August 2nd, 1939. What follows below is a copied section of the first page. It reads as follows:

"Dear Sir:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future.

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable - through the work of Joliot in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America - that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future. This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable though much less certain - those extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed."

The letter was actually drafted by Szilard.

-It was Otto Hahn who discovered nuclei fission and Lise Meitner who explained the fission process. Nuclear Fission, the splitting of atomic nuclei, was discovered in Germany in December 1938.

Here's an excerpt from L.R. Groves, Brigadier General, C.E., from the Minutes of the Military Policy Committee May 5, 1943.

5. The point of use of the first bomb was discussed and the general view appeared to be that its best point of use would be on a Japanese fleet concentration in the Harbor of Truk. General Styer suggested Toko but it was pointed out that the bomb should be used where, if it failed to go off, it would land in water of sufficient depth to prevent easy salvage. The Japanese were selected as they would not be so apt to secure knowledge from it as would the Germans.

This committee, composed of military personnel and scientists, held overall responsibility for the A-bomb project.

- "Tube Alloys" was the code name for the British A-bomb development project.

Here's an excerpt from the Diary of Henry Stimson, Secretary of War.

"I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the Air Force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength."

The following are excerpts from the exhibits.

- The atomic bomb had cost 2 billion dollars and mobilized at its peak, over 120,000 people.

- The US began in spring 1945 studying targets for the atomic bomb. To ensure that the effects of the atomic bombing could be accurately observed, potential target cities were required to have an urban area at least three miles in diameter (about 48 km) and air raids in those cities were prohibited. On July 25, 1945, an order was issued calling for the first atomic bomb to be dropped on one of the following cities: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata, and Nagasaki.

- The order naming Hiroshima as the primary target was issued on August 2. One reason is that Hiroshima was the only city thought to have no Allied prisoner-of-war camps. On August 6, the sky over Hiroshima was clear. The city's fate was sealed.

- To investigate changes in heat and air pressure caused by the bomb, scientific measuring instruments were dropped with parachutes from the observation plane.

- Prior to the dropping of the actual A-bomb, Dummy A-bombs were dropped.

- At the instant of detonation, the bomb generated tremendous heat and blast.

Heat from the super-hot fireball raised temperatures on the ground near the hypocenter to 3,000 to 4,000 degrees centigrade, igniting fires throughout the city. The super-high pressure of the epicenter of the explosion generated a shockwave followed by a powerful blast wind that instantly crushed buildings. Within two kilometers of the hypocenter, most buildings were totally collapsed and burned.

-Hiroshima was placed under the governance of the British Commonwealth forces. Occupation policies included a press code established in September 1945 that provided the strict censorship of published and broadcast reporting. Particularly severe censorship of material related to the A-bomb delayed for years full reporting of the damage done. As a result, the Japanese people only very slowly came to understand the devastation that had occurred and the implications of atomic weapons.

-In 1981, Pope John Paul II said, "God's hope is one of peace, not one of pain." And in 1984, Mother Teresa proclaimed, "so that the terrible evil that brought so much suffering to Hiroshima may never happen again, let us pray together and remember - works of love and prayer are works of peace."

-The A-bomb dropped on Hiroshima was about three meters long and weighed about four tons. Called "Thin Man" at first because of its long thin design, when the actual bomb turned out to be shorter, the nickname changed to "Little Boy".

-Because the people of Hiroshima had no way of knowing that an atomic bomb was being dropped, some watched the B29s drop parachutes without running for cover. Just after the parachutes dropped, the atomic bomb exploded.

-The detonation of the atomic bomb created a fireball that blazed like a small sun. More than a million degrees Celsius at its center, the fireball reached a maximum diameter of 280 meters in one second.

-The radioactive material used in the Hiroshima bomb was uranium. Of the approximately 50 kilograms of uranium packed into the bomb, only about one kilogram underwent fission. About 15% of the energy released was in the form of radiation. The radiation released the instant the nuclear fission took place is

called "initial radiation". The large amount of radiation remaining on the surface for some time after the explosion is called "residual radiation".

The horror of the atomic bombing left me speechless. Japanese and non-Japanese hibashuka continue to suffer the after effects of radiation exposure.

The Peace Park that afternoon was thronging with pilgrims paying their respects at the Cenotaph, visiting the many monuments, and taking in the A-Dome, a reminder of the atomic bombing, and now a protected UNESCO site. The evening presented another side to the Peace Park. Amongst the landscaped little enclosed parkettes, the homeless were asleep joined by some travellers with their luggage serving as a pillow. Along the pillars of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, young people were practicing dance steps. Along the river embankments, some young people were making music and singing. The feral cats, whose home the park is, were prancing about hissing and screeching over their territory. And there were many strollers taking in the beautifully lit A-Dome on this warm evening.

Mother Teresa's words proclaimed a message of peace. I pray that love prevails!

the girl who folded paper cranes

This is the story of Sadako Sasaki, a brave twelve-year-old Japanese girl who died on October 25, 1955 at the age of 12.

Ten years earlier, two-year-old Sadako, her mother and older little brother survived the atomic bombing of their city Hiroshima. Her mother thought them lucky however; their lives would forever be changed.

Sadako died from leukemia 10 years later due to exposure to radiation, a side effect of the atomic blast.

Radiation includes alpha rays, beta rays, gamma rays, X-rays, and neutron rays. We cannot see radiation or feel it on our skin, yet it has the power to penetrate and permeate everything and everyone that is near it.

Before she fell ill, Sadako was a healthy, vibrant, active young girl. She was also a star athlete. She loved school, her family and friends.

She was diagnosed with a fatal form of leukemia, given less than a year to live, and subsequently, was hospitalized where she remained until her death on October 25, 1955.

She didn't want to die and wished to live. She remembered a story her mother had told her that if you fold a thousand paper cranes, your wish will come true.

She had a mission. She would fold a thousand paper cranes to make her wish come true. She used not only paper which was scarce to fold paper cranes but even scraps of candy wrappers and gift wrap.

Even when in severe pain and discomfort, she continued to fold paper cranes. Even when she had folded a thousand paper cranes and her wish hadn't come true, she started on her second thousand. She refused to give up. Although her wish was in vain, her life wasn't.

Her school friends wanted to do something for Sadako and all the other children who died because of Pika (in Japan, the Atomic bomb is referred to as Pika Don).

They spearheaded a campaign to raise funds to build a marker to her and all the other children who died from the explosion of the atomic bomb and its aftereffects. The campaign snowballed and took off. They were successful and on May 5, 1958, in Hiroshima Peace Park, a memorial honouring Sadako and all the thousands of other children who perished and died was erected.

The stone memorial has become a symbol of peace throughout the world.

Takao

A few weeks ago, I visited Takao-machi, a suburb of Tokyo, which borders Yamanashi Prefecture. Actually, I meant to go to Hachioji but got off at Takao by mistake. Oh, well! So, here I was and decided to have a peak. Although I've

been to Takao, I've never visited the Takao JR station. My spirits lifted when I noticed a Doutor coffee shop. I'm gonna have a cafe latte so I did. Then, I decided to walk around the train station to have a look at the stores and shops clustered around it. Then, I noticed an orangey looking building in the distance. It looked like a stupa but I wasn't one hundred percent certain so I went to investigate. When I arrived, I came upon a Buddhist complex. The stupa was actually a functioning building in the design of a stupa. The complex was filled with landscaped gardens, ponds filled with goi, and monuments. My colleague informed me that the name of the Buddhist temple is Mikoromo Reido and the Stupa is filled with name plates of workers who died on the job. She also told me the name of the personage cast in bronze at the top of the hill. He was Sugawara no Michizane. He's a historical person dating from the Heian period and is now esteemed for his intellectual ability, worshipped as a god, and that many students who are about to sit an exam pay a visit to his shrine. He resembled Confucius from his dress and manner. Here's what I've learned about Sugawara no Michizane. He was a scholar, poet and politician of the Heian period of Japan. He is known as Tenjin-sama, a kami of scholarship. There are many shrines dedicated to him in Japan but his main shrine is in Saifu, Dazaifu City, Fukuoka Prefecture. The main shrine is built on the spot where he supposedly died. He had been exiled to Saifu when he lost favour at the imperial court. Following his death, it was claimed that his angry spirit brought plague, drought and misfortune to Kyoto. The imperial court then built a Shinto shrine (Kitano Tenmangu) in his honour and restored his titles and office posthumously and struck from record any mention of his exile.

Jimbocho

While exploring the booksellers' area of Tokyo (Jimbocho), I found some old postcards for sale in one of the bookstores. I bought a few. I asked around if someone would be able to translate the old kanji but very few could. Some were able to tell me a little bit of information. There is one postcard that interests me. The calligraphy on it is quite beautiful. The lines are free flowing. On the picture side, there's a photo of H.I.H. the Crown Prince's Palace. The postcard dates from the second year of the Showa era. It was posted in the month of July and was postmarked in Yokohama. I was told that the type of calligraphy on the postcard, a free-style form of calligraphy, dates from the Heian period. How

exciting I thought! The study of calligraphy in Japan is called Shodo. Another interesting piece of information is that the script is written from right to left. In Japan now, characters are read from left to right. Another postcard shows a picture of the military funeral march of Emperor Taisho. About a year and a half ago, I had visited his mausoleum in Taiko. As you probably know, postcards are a window to the past and an entryway to learning about history.

Shadows of the West

While doing some research on Japan's former Emperor Taisho, I discovered that there was a film made in America in 1920 that demonized Asian Americans. The film is called *Shadows of the West*. It demonizes Asian Americans by portraying them in a negative light. Frank Akuri, a Japanese-American, is seen as forcing a sweet young American girl off her ranch and then later kidnapping her for sexual purposes. He is also planning to colonize America for the Japanese and must be stopped at any cost. Things haven't changed much since the 1920s. Such kinds of films get made even today. They demonize prostitutes, the homeless, the mentally ill, migrant workers and so on creating misconceptions and stereotypes that harm people. What underlines the making of such a film is a hatred born out of a mind of ignorance and fear and intolerance of anything different from the norm. The 1920 version of *Shadows of the West* gives visual expression to an imagined threat, the yellow peril.

Some claim that Kaiser Wilhelm II coined this racist term to vent Europe's fear of the rise of Japan as a world power at the turn of the last century. The term yellow peril references the skin colour of East Asians and the hysteria and fear associated with immigration of East Asians to North America in the last half of the 19th century and early 20th century. Whites perceived the immigration of East Asians as a threat to their wages, standard of living and status quo. This fear was reflected in Canada's early immigration policies that brought immigration of East Asians to an almost standstill.

Walking along the Sumida River

I threw caution to the wind and decided to walk along the Sumida River. I'm staying at a hotel near the river and having already done the Sumida River boat cruise I thought I would retrace the route on foot. I'm glad I did because it was an adventure. It was a lovely sunny day and there was a cool breeze in the air. I started from Asakusa and hoped to reach Hinobe by late afternoon. I thought anyway.

If you didn't know, the concrete paths along the Sumida River are home to hundreds of homeless people, and to some, their pets too. My walk afforded me a close up of their housing. Some were living in camping tents but most were constructed from planks of wood, heavy cardboard, sheets of blue plastic canvas, cord, and bits and pieces of this and that. They were neat and orderly and spaced from one another. Many owned carts and dollies which were either tucked underneath their housing or placed to the side. I thought they are perhaps used for scavenging and recycling purposes. On second thought, perhaps, in case of forced eviction, they'd come in handy to move their belongings. Some of the residents were lounging on deck chairs, some sitting in chairs reading, and a few were lying down or asleep in their homes. One could get a glimpse inside as the flap to their entrance was lifted to let in the cool breeze.

A few greeted me with a friendly smile and a hello but most were oblivious to the passersby.

I was surprised to find artwork mounted on the walls and to see an occasional piece of sculpture. Even the wrought iron fencing running along the edge had motifs of seagulls, sumo wrestlers, and kanji characters worked into them.

At the bridge after Asakusa, I spotted a pair of cormorants perched on poles in the river near the bridge.

I soon discovered that the path doesn't run continuously but breaks now and again. So, I found myself doing a side tour. I'd climb up to street level, cross to the other side, and make my way down again. My legs got a good workout.

The vistas of Tokyo from the Sumida River were spectacular. I'd stopped now and then to take them in. Along the way, I chatted with a young Japanese man

practicing the Australian aboriginal instrument the did... whatcamacalit under one of the dozens of cabanas dotting the paths. There was activity along the path. There were joggers, cyclists, and office workers sitting on the benches enjoying their o-bento (boxed lunch). There were even men working to repair a section of the edge of the pavement and some putting up wrought fencing against a section of the wall under a bridge. Now, I wondered what would happen to the homeless person its housing was enclosing, and to the housing on either side of it.

It was incredibly quiet and the silence was broken by the engine of the occasional river cruise boat going up or down the river. You could faintly hear the din of traffic. On one of the side tours when I had to come up to get to the other side, I came across a flock of chickens in a tiny lot of land adjacent to the bridge. There were about a dozen of them clicking away scratching the ground with their feathered feet looking for grub. It was surreal. Could this really be? It was so. I stopped for a moment to check them out. They were attractive birds - multi-coloured with feathers on their feet. They didn't seem afraid of people and some even ventured to have a peck at the stranger glancing at them. There was a protective mesh attached to one side of the railing with an opening to let them in and out. It afforded them some protection and wondered who could be their predators in this concrete jungle. Inside the makeshift coop, there were feed boxes and straw that had been spread out. So, they belonged to someone and I wondered who to.

When I got to Tsukiji Fish Market, I decided to have a peck at the world's largest fish market. I wondered the grounds which you are allowed to do as long as you don't get in the way of the trucks and interfere with the operations. It's a massive complex of buildings and the air was permeated with the smell of fish. The pavement and roads were wet. It was 3 pm by the time I reached the market and hungry. I could see Hinobe in the distance. I checked out a few of the sushi restaurants but they were closing so I decided to look for a place to eat just outside the market and found a Japanese Cuban restaurant of all things. I ordered the tomato curry and wondered whether the Cubans really ate such a thing. Anyway, it was delicious and came with a side salad and a dish of pickles. After enjoying some lunch, I got my second wind and continued the journey.

Along the way, I came across the Hama-rikyu Gardens. This beautiful oasis on the river's edge was once the private domain of the Tokugawa shoguns. It was just getting dusk when I arrived and the guards began to cordon off sections of the park. Nevertheless there was still a lot to see and made my way through the Duck hunting sites in the garden, the Duck grove mound, the 300-year-old Pine tree, the Peony garden, and the Shogun's tea room. I took tea in the Nakajima-no-ochaya. It affords a relaxing view of the landscaped park, ponds, and bridges. It was beautiful and I promised to visit again but a little earlier this time. The water for the ponds is drawn from Tokyo Bay and is filled with a variety of sea fish such as sea bass which by the way were jumping out of the water. It was a delight to watch then. Leaving the park, I saw a few homeless men asleep outside the gate entrance. Would they be allowed to enter if they paid the 300 Yen admission fee?

So, I continued my journey to Hinobe. The path from the park to Hinobe is lined with luxury hotels and beautiful terraces. You can get a glimpse as to how the other half live. By this time, my feet were aching just a little but Hinobe was in view. I made my way inside the terminal and found the lights turned off. Was it closed? I searched for an attendant who told me that the last boat to Asakusa left at 5:50 pm. Shucks! I didn't mind as there was a JR station nearby which would take me to Ueno and from there I could walk back to the hotel.

I'm glad I walked along the Sumida River. It was worth my aching feet!

Asakusa

I explored Asakusa one sunny Saturday morning and took in the sights and attractions. It's a main sightseeing place and is always jam packed with visitors as it was this Saturday morning. It's concentrated with hundreds of restaurants, bars, stores, and most important of all beautiful temples, shrines, and monuments.

I entered from the entrance just off Umamichi Dori.

The main temple, the Senso-ji (Asakusa Kannon Temple) was flooded with

tourists taking flash photographs, making homage or just having a look. When I left taking a side exit, I came upon a beautiful large bronze Buddha, sitting on a lotus leaf with his hands in the meditation position. When I heard chanting emanating from Senso-ji and resonating through the temple complex, I returned. I found a place to stand and took in the Buddhist service. Behind the glass and lattice work divider, sat a group of worshipers and a body of monks. The monks were chanting. Their robes ranged from the austere to the luxurious some wearing silk brocade. There was a young novice keeping tempo with the drum.

Then, I visited the Hexagonal Temple and the many stone Buddhas and Jizo figures found within the complex. I then came to Awasima-Do, entered, and sat for a while. The silence was broken by a child's cry and the chatter of passersby. Here's a description of Awasima-Do that I copied from the plaque outside the temple.

Awasima-do was built in the late 17th century to worship a god called Sukurahikonano-mikoto who is enshrined at Koda Shrine in Wakayama prefecture. This god is famous as a guardian of women. Especially during "needle memorials" when women express gratitude by bringing used sewing needles and sticking them into Tofu (bean curd) the shrine attracts a lot of people.

As I was strolling through the streets, I came upon a series of pewter tanuki enclosed in alcoves. There were many of them. There was a tanuki holding a rattle, another had his left hand outstretched, one was holding a book against his chest, one was holding a fan, one was dressed in a kimono, one was holding prayer beads in his left hand, another was holding a staff with two enclosed rings at the top of it, and one was wearing a bib. One had wings, and then there was a couple. The husband had on a tie and the wife an apron. And there was one holding a sign with Kanji written on it. The rickshaws were stopping in front of them and encouraging their customers to rub their bellies.

Asakusa is a charming place to visit and no doubt I shall return.

Nagano Prefecture

Doing the tourist thing in Komagane, Nagano

Today I did the tourist thing. I have written this piece from the Shibuta Kyukei Cafe Studio. It is located beside the Komagane Kogen Art Museum. It's a lovely café overlooking the town of Komagane and has an artist studio attached. The artist's wife, the manager of the café, was kind enough to let me have a peak at her husband's studio. He paints the male body on a large scale.

There remains just a little more than two weeks before my teaching contract runs out. I have decided to take in some of the cultural and historical sights of Komagane before I move on.

This morning I cycled to a locally famous Shinto Shrine. It is called Bijyogamori. Bijyoga means beautiful girl and mori means many trees. It is also called Omikemori. I have been told that Omike means God of Eating. I stayed a while exploring the temple grounds and walked through the grove that encircles the temple. There is a cedar tree on site that dates to 858 AD. It is huge. It is immense. It is awesome. It draws your attention. A fence protects it. The Japanese believe that God resides in cedar trees.

Before visiting the Komagane Kogen Art Museum, I re-visited the Kosenji Temple to take some photographs. On my last visit, I had forgotten to bring along my camera. Also, I wanted to have another look at the temple. It dates from 860 AD. I'm glad I did come back because I discovered that it has a lovely Japanese garden and a small museum.

"Do you want to see the garden?" asked a female attendant. "Sure" I answered. "It's 500 Yen." She said. "Here you are" I responded. She escorted me inside. The museum was fascinating. There was a life size replica of Hayataro, the wolf dog. If this really was his size, he was huge. Actually, there was a namesake, a German shepherd, housed in a pen in the museum courtyard. He didn't pay any attention to any of the goings on around him. He was sprawled out in his cage, eyes shut, and chilling.

There were only two other guests in attendance taking in the gardens and the museum. There were many altars with statues of Buddha and Buddhist deities.

The garden was breathtaking. The pond was crystal clear, full of purple irises and goi. Some of which I was told were over 30 years old. There was a waterfall. Azalea bushes hugged the edges of the pond. In the background, there was the cedar grove. It was lovely! So, I stayed a little while taking in the beauty of the Japanese garden.

As I was leaving the Komagane Kogen Art Museum, it had started to rain. It was pouring heavily. As I was without an umbrella or a raincoat, I decided to just wait it out in the lobby. When out of the blue, the cashier/attendant presented me with a plastic umbrella. How kind and thoughtful she was to consider my situation! Actually, this is what makes the Japanese so special in my books. When I left the cafe/studio, it had stopped raining so I could return the plastic umbrella to the attendant with an arigato gosaimasta.

I enjoyed my visit to the Komagane Kogen Art Museum. It's a lovely museum. The exhibit of coloured photographs of Binaries, India left me with a lasting impression in particular the one photograph of two dogs devouring a dead body with a crow in the foreground and the Ganges River in the background. They had on permanent exhibit works by one of my favourite Japanese artists, Yayoi Kusama.

While I was sitting in the cafe writing and drinking a cup of tea, the sounds emanating from the temple bell as the numerous visitors to Kosenji were striking it continuously kept me company.

A flock of birds in Komagane

On my way to the store yesterday in the late afternoon to do some shopping, I took a short cut through the park. It's a lovely park with a lovely playground for children. It has all the amenities that would amuse children such as a swing, a sandbox, and a place to run and is adorned with several bronze statues. I thought I'd sit awhile and collect my thoughts and soon realized there were no benches to be had except for the ones in the children's area. It suddenly dawned on me that I've noticed an absence of public benches in Japan. Back home, there are park and public benches galore. We have them at bus stops, in civic areas, in bookstores, in shopping malls, and so on. Perhaps, sitting down in

public is just a western thing, I thought. So, I continued on.

On my way home later, it was now early evening, I heard these awful screeching sounds coming on and off, and wondered what they were. So, I decided to investigate.

As I got closer to the sounds, the night sky was covered with flocks of sparrows flying here and there. In my broken Japanese, I chatted with some of the residents of the neighborhood as to the goings on. For the past few nights, city officials have been out trying to scare off the thousands of sparrows who have made their home on a tree lined street in front of the civic center and public library buildings. The local residents had complained to city officials that they couldn't get a night's sleep because of the sparrows constant squawking into the wee hours of the night. It reminded me of the flocks of geese back home that have appropriated public parks and lakeside beach areas.

As the evening wore on, the screeching was having less of an effect in scaring off the birds. Fewer and fewer birds took to flight. I figured these birds are smart and are catching on to the rouse and no matter how much scarring off the city officials decide do baring cutting down the trees, these birds are here to stay.

Actually, I heard them a few weeks ago one evening on my walk home. They were in the trees chirping away but many were perched on the electrical wires sitting side by side very politely and in the twilight of the dusk, they looked beautiful.

Komagane Re-visited!

It has been about eight weeks since I have returned to the beautiful town of Komagane located in Nagano prefecture. Komagane straddles the central and southern Alps. The scenery is breathtaking and the air clean and crisp. When I was given the opportunity to return to teach in this spectacular place, I jumped at the chance. When I left Japan last summer, I had the feeling that my sojourn had come to an end. How wrong I was and how pleasantly surprised to find myself on an airplane coming back. It felt like I had just won the lottery or been given a second chance at life. I found it was easy to settle back into a routine since I was

given the same apartment to live in. It felt like I was coming home. What a lovely feeling it was!

Some things have changed though. In one of my pieces, I wrote about the flock of birds that had taken up residence along a main road. I am sorry to report that the trees have been trimmed of their branches. They now look like stumps. Poor things! How sad it must be to have limbs shorn! And where did those poor birds flock to I wonder?

The frogs have re-surfaced in the rice fields. I hear them every evening croaking and while some may find the noise annoying, I, on the other hand, find it comforting. I prefer the croaking to the din of traffic any day. The night skies are full of bright twinkling stars and I often sit on my balcony in the late evening admiring their beauty.

I was able to discover more of Komagane's attractions. A visit to the Kappa museum in the valley was a delight. These ugly creatures intrigue me. Here's a description. They have webbed feet and hands, are the size of a small male child, have a depression, a cavity, on their heads that is filled with a strength-giving fluid, have a snout, a shell on their backs, are greenish-yellow in colour, and smell like fish. They are water dwellers and inhabit rivers, ponds, and lakes. They are adept on land and water and are incredibly strong. Legend has it that they drag their victims into the water, drown them and then proceed to suck out their victim's entrails or blood through their victim's anuses. How ghastly! What a way to go! Legend has it that they attack horses, cattle, and humans and have a particular fondness for the flesh of young children.

They are considered malevolent and mischievous but have been known to do good deeds if subdued and do so, in exchange for their freedom or if helped when facing mortal peril. Legend has it that they have been known to impart the art of bone setting and are reputed to keep their promises. They delight in challenging humans to single combat so beware, if you happen to meet one who happens to be in the mood for a toss. Remember to bow very deeply. The Kappa should follow suit, thereby spilling the contents from the top of his head, which gives them their strength, making it become feeble and forcing it to hastily retreat to its water abode. But if it doesn't, then you'd better prepare yourself for combat,

and hope in hell that you win the wrestling bout.

On display were dozens and dozens of Kappa in a variety of poses. The Salary man Kappa was charming. The outdoor Kappa garden was magical as they were arranged in a variety of poses and groupings.

A friend took the opportunity to visit me one weekend, which gave me another opportunity to visit Kozen-ji Temple. The weeping Sakura were in bloom and framed the temple grounds making Kozen-ji look spectacular. As I had been here before, I was able to point out to my friend the luminous moss, another fascinating feature of Kozen-ji Temple. We visited the museum next door and had coffee in the café adjacent to the museum. The patroness remembered me from my last visit a year ago. Perhaps, I made an impression or I was supposing that it's not easy to forget a very large, overweight man with graying hair who had taken an interest in her establishment.

A few weeks ago I visited Yomeishu, which is located near the school where I teach. Yomeishu is a fabulous medicinal drink made from rice alcohol, and herbs and flowers found growing in the surrounding mountains. It turned out to be a lovely day and my students and I enjoyed our outdoor lesson. Although we were offered a sample taste of the elixir, strict orders prevented us from consuming any alcohol during class hours. But we were able to purchase some bottles to take back with us to be consumed during off hours.

One lovely Saturday afternoon coming home from shopping I chanced upon some of the neighborhood children fishing for frogs in the rice fields. We have become acquainted. They love to practice the little English they know with me and I enjoy teaching them some Basic English greetings and words. Jokingly, I said to them, "Are they for eating?" in Japanese at which they made such grimaces and body contortions that I laughed myself silly. "No!" they screamed in Japanese in unison. They were caught to take to school for show and tell. They let me have a go but I came up empty. I stood back and watched them to do it. They were quite adept and had devised a foolproof method for capturing them. They would quickly run their nets along the embankment of the rice field which made the frogs hiding along it to jump in the flooded rice field at which time they were quickly scooped up and neatly deposited in their little portable aquarium.

How I envied them! Their youth, vitality and innocence were captivating.

On my return, I had popped into a number of shops where I had previously shopped and was greeted with warm greetings and friendly smiles. The joy of being back hasn't diminished and my affection for this lovely place deepens daily!

Rice Fields

I lived in a small town filled with rice fields. They were mostly rectangular in shape. The town has various lookout points and from these spots the rice fields resembled little seas of verdant green. The rice plants on their own aren't beautiful to look at and resemble a grass but when planted in neat rows they resemble these little seas of green.

The rice fields have a scent and give off a fragrance of rice, which is quite a nice. Within a month of planting, most of the plants had grown to at least 2 feet in height.

What I particularly loved watching is to see the wind blowing through the rice fields creating rippling waves of green. The plants would dance and sway to the wind. They were beautiful to behold. And they remind me of nature's beneficent quality. I also loved watching birds wade through the rice fields looking for tadpoles, frogs, and water borne insects to eat. They would never trample the plants but gently maneuver around them. It was funny seeing them walking about as they would lift up their legs up above the water level and put them down again. They would remind me of sumo wrestlers. The rice embankments are mowed down on a regular basis and the weeds burned to ash. I've been told that if they don't do so then insects would harbour there waiting to get at the rice kernels. The rice plants had all been planted in perfect straight lines. Even the Japanese sense of order is transplanted to the rice fields. The planting is no longer done by hand except for filling in the fields where the machine can't do it.

I have written that rice fields are home to frogs and have discovered that they are home to fire flies too. I saw them over a period of a few weeks blinking here and there in the rice fields near my home. And just before harvesting, they were

home to hundreds of dragon flies.

I looked at the rice fields near where I live and was surprised to see the rice plants sprouting rice kernels.

In late September, the farmers harvested the rice from their fields near my apartment. The air was filled with the fragrance of rice. I took a moment to watch the harvester cut the rice plants quite low. The rice plants were then sucked into the harvester which separates the rice kernels from the plants. The harvester then spits out a mulch. The rice fields are now gone.

Just before the harvesting I saw a few of the feral cats that live in the neighbourhood playing in the rice fields which had large indentations. As the rice plants are top heavy and as the rain weakens the stem, the rice plants toppled on each other creating these indentations. They looked so bemusing and were surprised when I noticed them.

Moments in K.

I was surprised to find that some of the flocks of birds have returned. What it tells me is that nature will always find a way to come back. It's amazing how hundreds of them manage to live together in one shorn tree. Their chirping done on mass by the hundreds has an alien sounding quality to it. It's quite surreal. My reaction was WOW!

The other day while cycling along the tracks I came upon an elderly farmer and his wife harvesting tomatoes from their field. I approached them asking if I could buy a few. The farmer just handed me a bag full and wouldn't accept any money. I was flabbergasted and thanked them profusely. I offered them the cool drink I had just bought to quench my thirst from cycling in the hot afternoon sun. That they accepted. I was pleased.

Several weeks ago fire flies appeared in the rice fields. I spotted them on my way home one evening blinking here and there in the darkness. They

immediately brought me back to my childhood. I watched them with content as they blinked about in the rice fields.

A few days ago I saw a swallow hunt for frogs. It would rustle about in the embankments hoping its victim would jump on the side of the road instead into the rice field. The swallow was lucky. A tiny green frog jump on the side of the road and it was quickly gobbled down by the swallow!

One late afternoon on my walk to the shopping mall I came upon a snake that had coiled itself near the center of the road. I tried to shoo it back in the bush with my shoe but it wouldn't budge. So, I made a makeshift paper stick and flung it into the grass. It shook its head and just lay there in the grass by the side of the road. At least I thought it would be safe from passing cars.

The town is filled with miniature dogs. A few nights ago, I made the acquaintance of two very friendly miniature poodles, a mother and son. They were chocolate brown and immaculately groomed. They'd bark at anyone passing their field of vision. So, I stopped and chatted with their owner and got acquainted with them. Pretty soon, they were licking my hand and jumping up my leg.

The night before, I came across a miniature shiba. She was very sweet. Her name was Sakura and she carried herself with such pomp and ceremony!

Travels along the JR Iida line - Part One

I visit Matsumoto to see the castle. It's less than a 2-hour train ride, which includes a half hour stop over in Okaya. I visit the Tourist Information desk at Matsumoto JR Train Station. A lovely young woman who speaks excellent English hands me a map but not before she highlights things to see in the city. She tells me to follow the signs to Matsumoto Castle.

Along the way, I strike up a conversation with a Ghanaian, now a Japanese resident, who runs a casual wear store in Matsumoto. He tells me about life in Matsumoto and recommends the Old Rock, a local watering hole, to grab something to eat and drink. I thank him and make my way to the castle. It's hot and sweat begins to trickle down my forehead. I plod on. The castle comes into

view and I take in its majestic beauty. Now, a national treasure, it wasn't considered so under the Meiji period, when it was slated for demolition with an eye to salvaging its iron fittings. Luckily, it was saved and has become a national treasure. It has been lovingly restored.

I pay the admission fee and cue in line to enter the castle. Visitors are asked to remove their shoes before entering and are handed a plastic bag to put them in. Luckily, I'm wearing clogs, which I can easily slip off but I'm wearing nylon socks and find myself slipping on the steep steps. I grip the railing for support. The castle is full of visitors. I thought it would be hot and stuffy inside but find it cool. Ten minutes later I come out and breathe a sign of relief. Castles, I find, aren't my thing but nevertheless I found it interesting.

I head over to Nakamachi and Nawate Streets, which boast houses dating from the Edo period. Both streets are quite picturesque and many of the houses have been converted into shops, boutiques, restaurants, and studios. I also visit the neighbourhood Shinto Shrine, Yohashira Jinja, too. I check out the Old Rock but it's closed. I roam about taking in the city while looking for a place to lunch. I come across a Balinese restaurant and go in thanks to the friendly persuading of the manager. He recommends the luncheon special, which I order. The service and food are both excellent.

I check out the bookstore in Parco located on the basement level and come away with a purchase, something to read on the train home. I look forward to the ride home and getting a good night's sleep.

Monday, June 19, 2006

I take the train to Ina to meet a friend for lunch. It's a short train ride away. Passengers are few and far between. The 2-car train arrives and I wait for a few passengers to disembark before boarding. The train carriage is practically empty and I have a choice of seats. Fifteen minutes later I arrive in Ina. It's a beautiful sunny day. My friend is waiting and we dash off for lunch. We head to Sato's, a famous local restaurant, specializing in dishes made with a special savory sauce, which takes a week to prepare. We order the pork chop plate. It arrives and we eat away. The meat is tender and the sauce divine. Before my friend dashes off,

he tells me that there isn't much to do in Ina.

But I'm here and what the heck I might as well find out for myself. I roam Ina's main strip. It's hot and sweat begins to trickle down my forehead. There's a small museum located in the Town's Cultural Hall but it's closed. Too bad! There's a window exhibit of kimono attesting to the city's past history as a silk producer. But all is not lost. I find a Vodaphone shop and buy a pre-paid card. I'm all set for the next time I run out of pre-paid phone minutes. The shop attendant is kind and very friendly. She recommends I walk back to the center of town to catch the train. She says, "Shimojima is 30 minutes away on foot. Inashi is 15 minutes." So, I trek back and wait for the train to take me home.

Tuesday

I go to Tatsuno to visit the Tatsuno Museum of Art to see the works of Kigen Nakagawa who introduced fauvism to Japan in the 1920s. It was a bit of a hike getting to the museum, which I found is located on the outskirts of the city. Map in hand courtesy of the friendly Tatsuno JR staff I make my way to the museum. The JR attendant tells me it's a 30-minute walk. It's early afternoon and Tatsuno is very quiet. There's little traffic and very few people are out and about. I follow my Japanese map and make my way stopping here and there to check with anyone I run across whether I'm heading in the right direction. I am it seems. The sun is beating down on me and I feel the sweat dripping from my forehead. I've been walking now for 30 minutes. I think I'm nearly there. But all I see ahead is a grouping of antennae and woods on a hill.

I come across an elderly Japanese man gardening in his yard and I kindly ask him if the museum is ahead. "Yes" he says in Japanese. He tells me to follow the middle road. I can now see that the road forks ahead. I thank him and push on. I take a slight detour and check out the arena and ballpark at the top of the hill. I cut through the park and end up back on the middle road. I know it's ahead and just keep walking when suddenly the elderly gentleman appears in his car. He tells me to hop in and drives me to the museum. I thank him profusely. As he leaves, I bow to show my respect and wait until he drives off before heading inside. There are several tour buses parked in the lot. The museum is bustling with elderly Japanese tourists. They have just finished their tour and have

collected in the foyer ready to depart. I buy my ticket. It's nice and cool inside. The elderly Japanese tourists leave and find that I'm the only visitor about. I have the place to myself. I long to see Nakagawa's paintings of the Ina Valley but alas only one is on view. The gallery is devoted mainly to the paintings he did in France. They are charming and remind me of Japan's interest in things Western. A highlight of the visit is the observation deck on the top floor of the museum that overlooks the flat, fertile Ina valley lying between the Central and Southern Alps. I sit and take in the panoramic views. The valley is laid out, as far I can see, in tidy verdant green rice fields.

Wednesday, June 20, 2006

I visit Iida by car with a Japanese mate. The drive through Nakagawa village perched on a hill is spectacular. We stop off for coffee at a famous coffee house in Iida, the Celebre Cafe. We have the special, which is a deal, and is something similar to the eggs and bacon breakfast back home except in Japan portion sizes are smaller. The ambience is of a bygone era. We take a table by the window on the ground floor near the counter. It's a converted house filled with artwork, bric-a-brac, and odds and ends. It's nevertheless charming and the service and food both excellent.

Our first stop is the Iida zoo to see the tanuki (raccoon dog). I've read about them and Japanese folklore is filled with stories about their mischievous deeds. They are cute. There are even a few albino tanuki and a North American raccoon on display. They do look alike but the tanuki is much smaller in size and I think cuter. It's a tiny zoo. Another feature is the pen of wild Japanese monkeys.

The next stop is Motosenkoji, a Buddhist temple, older than Kozenji and dates back to the early part of the 6th century. For the moment, we are the only visitors in attendance. I have learned the routine and begin the cleansing ritual before entering the temple. The temple exudes peace and calmness. We visit the museum, a part of the temple, which is filled with Buddhist treasures and artifacts. The Japanese thangka depicting scenes of hell and heaven are fascinating. I ask if the black and white poster of Motosenkoji is for sale. It isn't but I'm gifted one by a kind, elderly Japanese monk who also presents me with an omikuji (a sacred lottery). I thank the monk and his colleagues. The fortune

happens to be an excellent one and I tie it to the gate so it can be remembered.

We stop off and grab some lunch before heading back. On the way home, we stop off in Oshika. Oshika is sandwiched in between the southern Japanese Alps. It's a breathtaking place. Everyone should visit. Its majestic beauty overwhelms me that I find I am at a loss for words. I contemplate the beauty that is before me. Driving is my friend's hobby. He also drives a motorcycle. He handles the treacherous road, the only one going into and out of Oshika, with confidence and skill. The ride slightly reminded me of my trip to Delphi, Greece on a Chat bus four years ago. The road winding along the mountains, going in and out of mountain tunnels, and looking out to incredible vistas. Oshika is reputed to be of the few authenticated places where the Heike fled following their defeat at the hands of the Genji nearly 800 hundred years ago. The small villages are carved out of the mountain slopes. We go to the top of the mountain to visit an ancient Jinja shrine and Kabuki theatre. I savour the quiet and the solitude. My visit to Oshika is definitely a highlight of my day trips. My friend calls it the end of the world and perhaps, 800 hundreds ago, it was. We leave Oshika and take another route to get back home and on the way out see a wild Japanese monkey, which surprises my friend and me.

Thursday

I rest and get caught up with chores and correspondence.

Friday, June 23, 2006

I visit Okaya on the Iida line. My visit to Okaya includes a visit to Okaya Silk Museum and Art and Archaeological Museum and the Irufu Doga Museum. The Art and Archaeological Museum has on display clay and stone pottery dating from the Jomon Period (circa 10,000 B.C. - C 300 B.C.) through the Kotun Period (circa 300-600 A.D.) found in the Okaya area. By the way, The Tatsuno Museum of Art also displays artifacts dating from the Jomon period. I found myself the only visitor and have the two museums to myself. They are located within the same building but on different floors. Although the Silk Museum isn't elaborate as the Silk Museum in Komagane, it houses a treasure trove of machinery and literature relating to the Okaya silk industry. The Black and White

photographs bring alive the labour intensive practice that silk producing is. One photograph in particular intrigued me. It was a black and white photograph taken in 19th century France showing a Japanese merchant amidst a large French family, French silk manufacturers.

Between my visits, I popped into the Nakamura Cafe and Patisserie and enjoy a freshly brewed cup of coffee and a slice of gateaux. The works of Takeo Takei, a local resident of Okaya, are on display at the Irufu Doga Museum. His brightly coloured drawings are amazing and a delight. I find myself enjoying them tremendously. I particularly love his stain glass panels on display on the third floor featuring Japanese motifs. There is also a gallery on the second floor dedicated to the works of American illustrator Maurice Sendak.

I roam about in Okaya and also visit a lovely Shinto Shrine near the train station. It was quiet and there was hardly anyone about. A friend tells me that the towns and cities are empty of the young who have all fled to the big cities seeking work, education, and opportunity. Perhaps, he's right. Following lunch in one of the department store restaurants, I head home. I've enjoyed Okay.

I have come away with a deeper knowledge and appreciation of Japanese people, culture and religion and look forward to my next outings along the Iida JR line.

My Farewell

I will miss the Alps. I will miss their majestic beauty. A colleague came by and saw me off. He drove me around to say my good-byes to the many friends I had made in the town. I was sad to go.

Buddhism

The Moon

Did you know that the light of the moon is actually a reflection of light from the

sun?

I love the imagery of sunlight reflecting off the moon reflecting on water. Japan has the custom of moon viewing (o-tsukimi) which according to the old lunar calendar falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth month (15th of August) referred to in Japanese as ju-go-ya (the night of the 15th). It is said that the moon shines most brilliantly against the clear skies on this day. The custom of appreciating the moon originated in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-901) and was brought to Japan by the Japanese who had sought learning in China.

It is customary to offer rice dumplings, flowers and pampas grasses to the full moon and to pray for the realization of one's wishes. The offerings are placed on a table by the window to the full moon. I then discovered that the Buddha was born, attained enlightenment, and left his earthly incarnation under the Full Moon of Taurus but returns at this time each year to bring new light to the world.

And the attainment of enlightenment is something like the reflection of the moon on water.

The moon does not get wet, nor is the water disturbed. And just as the moon does not cleave the water apart, so enlightenment does not tear man apart. ... Just as water offers no resistance to the moon in heaven, so man offers no obstacle to the full penetration of enlightenment.

When a man gains enlightenment, it is like the moon reflecting on water: the moon does not become wet, nor is the water ruffled. Just as enlightenment does not hinder man, the moon does not hinder the water.

Gassho

One of the most important acts in Buddhism is the Gassho. It is fundamental to all Buddhist sects and used in Buddhist practice.

It's a hand gesture, in Sanskrit, a mudra. Here are the steps on how it's done. Place your two palms together in a prayer position in front of your chest. The fingers are kept straight and the palms are pressing against one another. There

is no space between the fingers. The eyes are focussed on the tips of the middle fingers which are about the same level as the top of the nose.

It is used to show reverence and respect.

Namu-Amida-Butsu

I've just finished reading the novel "The Buddha Tree" by Fumio Niwa, translated by Kenneth Strong, which I enjoyed tremendously. I'd recommend it to anyone who is interested in learning how Buddhism fits into the social fabric of Japanese life. It gave me some insight into the True Pure Land Sect of Japanese Buddhism and the mantra Namu Amida Butsu.

What does "Namu Amida Butsu" mean? It means several things. It means praise to the Buddha Amida as well as invoking his compassion. The name consists of six syllables in Japanese pronunciation: na-mu-a-mi-da-but(su). The letter u is not vocalized. Namu is namas (or namo) in Sanskrit and means adoration or salutation. The mantra chanted to Amida Butsu is used primarily by the True Pure Land Sect. It is also chanted to invoke spiritual peace of mind by invoking the grace of Amida Butsu.

Perfections (Paramitas)

A bodhisattva is someone who has taken on the sole task of meeting the needs of others regardless of the difficulty involved. What are the signs of a bodhisattva?

Here's a list of perfections (paramitas in Sanskrit) that a bodhisattva must cultivate in order to attain Buddhahood. Here they are:

- 1) Generosity (Dana paramita in Sanskrit) - Selfless and impartial generosity;
- 2) Discipline (Shila paramita in Sanskrit) - Observance of the ethical regimen;
- 3) Patience (Kshanti paramita in Sanskrit) - Patient endurance of difficulties;

- 4) Energy (Virya paramita in Sanskrit) - Zealous energy in perseverance;
- 5) Meditation (Dhyana paramita in Sanskrit) Mindful absorption in meditation;
- 6) Wisdom (Prajna paramita in Sanskrit) - Wisdom of transcendent light;
- 7) Right method;
- 8) Vows;
- 9) Manifestation of 10 powers;
- 10) True understanding of all laws (dharma in Sanskrit).

Now, if you come across someone who meets the above conditions, presto, abracadabra, you've met a real bodhisattva!

Japanese Buddhist Deities

Here's a short primer on Japanese Buddhist deities. According to Japanese Buddhism, Japanese Buddhist deities are grouped in the following four categories. Here they are:

- 1) NYORAI: Buddha;
- 2) BOSATSU: Bodhisattva;
- 3) MYO-O: Vidyaraja;
- 4) TENBU: Deva.

Re: 1) Buddha is a Sanskrit term for praise. The Sanskrit term for Buddha is Tathagata which is translated as "NYORAI" in Japanese. The "NYORAI" are depicted with special hand gestures (mudra).

Re: 2) Bodhi refers to wisdom and sattva refers to hero in Sanskrit which is translated as "BOSATSU" in Japanese. Bosatsu are sentient beings who have reached the final stage of transmigration and enlightenment. They can become a Buddha but remain on earth to alleviate suffering and help others.

Re: 3) Myo-O refers to wisdom kings. The Sanskrit term is vidyaraaja. They are Hindu deities adopted in the pantheon of Japanese Buddhism. They serve and protect the NYRORAI.

Re: 4) The Sanskrit term deva is translated as 'ten' in Japanese. They are also Hindu deities and include non-human entities who have converted to Buddhism due to adopting the teachings of the historical Buddha. They also protect the NYORAI and BOSATSU. They are also protectors of the Buddhist law, dharma in Sanskrit.

Dukkha

Dukkha is a fundamental tenet of Buddhist doctrine relating to the Four Noble Truths.

Vinayapitaka stated that birth, old age, and disease is dukkha. Dukkha is also association from what is not dear and separation from what is dear, and not getting what one wants. These are classified as the five aggregates of grasping the dukkha.

Now, there are three levels of dukkha:

1 There is dukkha-dukkhata which manifests itself in physical and mental illnesses and disease.

2 Secondly, there is Vapirinama-dukkha which translates as suffering through transformation. This refers to the awareness that one's happiness is highly

contingent and dependent on factors beyond one's control. Happiness is fleeting and given that change is the only constant in life, one's happiness can change at any given moment.

3 Finally, there is Sankhara-dukkha. This is existential incompleteness due to spiritual ignorance. This relates to one's limited capacity to grasp spiritual enlightenment.

Elements of eternal truths can be found in all world religions. There are elements of eternal truths found in Zoroastrianism. Because of the law of cause and effect, which we are all subject to, we are accountable and responsible for our choices. We can choose good or evil. The choice is ours to make. And one is the cause of all the good and evil that happens in one's moral universe. The consequences of a good mind will follow you just like the consequences of an evil mind. Zoroastrians believe that we are inherently good, endowed with the divine, and that it is our choices, actions and deeds that can be good or evil. Zoroastrianism stresses good thoughts, words and deeds and doing right because it is the right thing to do. Evil is fought by spreading goodness. The purpose of the one's existence is doing good. Christianity echoes elements of Zoroastrianism. Individuals in the religious sense are free to choose without interference from God. Buddhism also echoes elements of Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion, a religion that pre-dates Buddhism by more than 1,000 years. Buddhism is a non-theistic tradition. According to the First of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, existence is suffering. Our lives are coloured with unrest, instability and uncertainty. Desire and aversion binds us to the wheel of samsara, the wheel of suffering. Buddhism stresses the need to cultivate the ability to see things and understand them as they really are that life is an endless cycle of desire and aversion.

The Jizo figure

On my travels in Japan, I have seen them in Buddhist temples and cemeteries. Perhaps, you have too. They are also placed alongside roads. They invoke in me a sense of sadness and I had to find out why.

Sometimes, they are dressed with small red caps and bibs. What are they? They

are Jizo figures.

They are small statues made of granite stone and are childlike in appearance. They are depicted with a shaven head, dressed in a monk's simple robe, and are usually shown in a standing position. However, I know of some cast in bronze in the sitting position and placed alongside the six major Japanese highways to protect travellers.

Jizo is a Buddhist deity introduced into Japan during the Heian period. He is considered a Bodhisattva or in Japanese a Bosatsu. Although Bodhisattvas have reached the final stage of transmigration and enlightenment, a Bodhisattva remains on earth to help and save people. According to Japanese Buddhist tradition, he is associated with protecting and helping children, women, and travellers. But now it appears he is associated with helping never born children find peace and solace. Never born children are children who are aborted due to a spontaneous miscarriage or a termination, and/or who die at birth, stillborn.

According to Japanese Buddhist tradition, parents have a moral obligation to help their never born children pass over otherwise these never born children will remain in a state of limbo. There is a Buddhist ceremony which assists in the peaceful resettlement of never born children. They aren't able to do it on their own. They need help to cross the river separating the living from the dead. This ceremony helps them do it.

How many parents avail themselves of this Buddhist service, I can't tell you. But there isn't anything similar to this in the West to help never born children pass over. But here, the Japanese have found a way to deal with the tragedy of never born children and perhaps, deal with the painful decision of terminating a pregnancy or losing a child.

I've mentioned that I've often seen Jizo figures adorned with red caps and bibs which I later learned are mostly likely donated by the bereaved mothers. Sometimes, toys and flowers are placed with them. At least, Japanese women have a way to deal with and express their grief and Jizo figures in a way, symbolically represent that these never born children are not completely forgotten.

Abortion in North America is such a contentious issue politically and morally. On the one hand, women have reproductive rights and the right to terminate a pregnancy. On the other hand, the unborn child has the right to life, and many hold the sanctity of life from conception. Yet, abortion goes on here and there. Regardless of ideology, pregnancies are terminated and women mainly deal with the repercussions both medically and psychologically of their decisions. I think many are deeply troubled by their decisions. Once, it's done, it's done. There is no turning back the clock. Based on my experience with women who have had abortions, it colours their lives but at least here these never born children are not forgotten. They can be grieved and mourned. There is recognition of their short existence and a means to help them pass over. Perhaps, North America can take a lesson from this practice and help women heal from a terminated pregnancy or lost of a child.

Jizo figures – Postscript

Jizo figures were beheaded by rebelling peasants during the Shimabara Rebellion that took place during the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1637-1638.

It was the Shimabara Rebellion that enforced the ban on the Christian religion in Japan. The Shogunate suspected Catholics and Portuguese traders were involved in the rebellion. As a result, the Portuguese were ousted from the country.

Although many of the rioters were Christian, it wasn't necessarily a Christian inspired uprising.

Many of the peasants had nothing to lose by rebelling against a tyrannical local government which imposed heavy taxation and obligations on its local citizens. If they didn't comply, they were persecuted and punished. And the worst of it all was that the women were singled out for the punishments.

Nichiren Daishonin (1222 - 1282)

He founded a sect of Buddhism in Japan in 1262. He is otherwise referred to as the Lotus of the Sun. Legend has it that his mother became pregnant when she dreamt of sunshine on a lotus. It's been said that he invoked the divine wind, the kamikaze, in 1274 to blow the Mongol invasion to pieces.

The mantra of the Nichiren sect is Namu myoho renge-Kyo. It means veneration of the sutra of the Lotus of the good law. It was said that he was an extraordinary individual. I wonder how he divined the kamikaze. It's something I must find out.

Nichiren Daishonin is considered the True Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. The historical Buddha in the final years of his life revealed the truth in the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren Daishonin determined that the Lotus Sutra to be the only correct teaching for the Latter Day of the Law, beginning with his advent. The first 1000 years after Shakyamuni's passing is called the Former Day of the Law (Shoho), the second 1000-year-period is called the Middle Day of the Law (Zoho), and the period following is called the Latter Day of the Law (Mappo). Nichiren Daishonin stated that all human beings have the potential to attain the enlightened state of Buddhahood and that all of life's phenomena are manifestations of the eternal true entity of life, the Buddha nature.

True Buddhism is about awakening one's potential, one's Buddha nature and manifesting wisdom and power to overcome adversity. There are three aspects to True Buddhism. They are faith, practice, and study. Faith is the belief and conviction in the Gohonzon. The practice is chanting Nam Myoho Renge Kyo and reciting twice daily portions of the Lotus Sutra. Study involves the deepening of one's faith and understanding of the teachings.

Nam Myoho Renge Kyo translates as Devotion to the Mystic Law of the Lotus

Sutra. The Lotus Sutra is called the Mystic Law of Cause and Effect because it contains both the cause and effect of attaining Buddhahood. Renge means Lotus Flower. The Lotus Flower produces its flowers and seeds simultaneously which symbolically represents the simultaneity of cause and effect. The cause is to chant Nam Myoho Renge Kyo and the effect is attaining enlightenment. Nichiren Daishonin chanted Nam Myoho Renge Kyo for the first time on April 28, 1253. In True Buddhism, Nichiren Daishonin is Nam Myoho Renge Kyo. An important tenet of True Buddhism is to fuse with the life of the True Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin. Fusion actualizes one's Buddhahood. Nichiren inscribed his enlightened life as the object of worship, known as Dai-Gohonzon, on October 12, 1279. It is through the chanting that one fuses one's life with the True Buddha. It is in this state of fusion that the powers of the Buddha and the Law permeate one's existence thereby purifying one's minds, extinguishing one's evil karma, and planting seeds of wisdom, compassion, and virtue in one's life.

The Buddha described ways to deal with evil thoughts.

Here they are:

- 1 Focus on something positive. Turn to thoughts connected with something positive or skillful or something beautiful.
- 2 Examine/scrutinize the drawbacks of such negative thoughts and the subsequent damage and shame to oneself they'd bring on if acted on.
- 3 Ignore them. Don't pay any attention to them. They will dissolve or dissipate.
- 4 Trace back the process of thought construction.
- 5 If one's evil thoughts which are connected with desire, aversion or delusion still persist, one should with his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth beat down, constrain, and crush his mind with his awareness.

Here's something to contemplate. According to Buddhist doctrine, a single

though of anger or hatred is equivalent to a state of being a ghost or hell-being. And a single thought of compassion, joy, kindness and even-mindedness is equivalent to a state of being a Bosatsu (Bodhisattva) or Nyorai (Buddha).

The Buddha emphasized the importance of making individual effort in order to achieve spiritual goals.

Sitting Zazen

If you are interested in personal growth and development, perhaps, you might consider giving zazen a try.

It doesn't cost anything to do. You can do it anywhere. You don't need a guru or have to join a temple or belong to a religious affiliation.

What you need is time and a commitment to the practice and a willingness to be open to the process as it unfolds.

It can help you gain some measure of control over your life, help you understand who you are, and what makes you tick. I am supposing this is of interest to you. It also provides a means to gain some detachment from the world around you.

It's been said that sitting zazen can lead people to the state of enlightenment. I don't know how many people in the world have enlightenment as their goal but the practice of zazen can help people function and cope with the world around them.

Sitting zazen is a practice of Zen Buddhism. Zen teaching, introduced in Japan during the Kamakura period, was brought to Japan by a Japanese monk who had studied Buddhism in China.

Sitting zazen is a way of seeing and looking and a take on life. It can help you look at things in a new and fresh way.

An important concept of sitting zazen is a beginner's mind. What is a beginner's

mind? It is an open mind, a mind unburdened by habits, prejudices, pre-conceived ideas and beliefs, and free of anxiety.

A beginner's mind is open to possibilities, new ways of seeing, and is situated in the moment. It observes and sees things as they are and is awake to what is happening before it.

A beginner's mind is cultivated by sitting zazen. Because it is in the sitting we can notice the busyness of our minds and develop an awareness of our thoughts that parade daily through our mind.

While sitting zazen, focused breathing is practiced, which is a means of quieting the mind and gaining awareness.

First, relax your diaphragm. Then, focus on your breathing. Breathe in. Breathe out. Focussing on the breathe helps to get in touch with the present moment. Awareness begins to set in. For example, I'm focussing on my breathe. I am sitting in my apartment on the living room floor. I can hear the din of traffic coming into the apartment. I can hear the ticking of the wall clock and dripping of the sink faucet. What happens is you to start to see things as they are.

In sitting zazen, one doesn't block out, cling to, or react to any of the thoughts or feelings that come into mind.

The aim is to let your thoughts and feelings just be. The goal is to be mindful of them and to develop an awareness of them.

The ultimate goal is to accept and surrender to them as they are.

Self-awareness is a tool for personal growth and development. Perhaps, you might give sitting zazen a try. Good-luck to you!

Zuigakuin

It was a cloudy morning when I set out to visit Zuigakuin on Mt Takigo in Hatsukari. I'm now staying in Uenohara which is perched on a mountain. The JR station is located in the valley below on the other side of the Chuo expressway. I walked to the station below. Along the way birds of prey were circling above the mountain tops. There were very few people about. I passed a young girl walking her dog and a father pushing his child in a stroller. The ramps that connect the city to the JR station below provide wonderful vantage points to take in the surrounding scenery and beauty of the mountains. I stopped now and then to take in the greenery. The leaves were a deep green and some were turning colour.

Hatsukari is about 30 minutes away on the Chuo line from Uenohara. I'm visiting Zuigakuin, a Zen temple and retreat house. I haven't called ahead to announce my arrival nor do I have a map as to how to get there from Hatsukari JR station. All I know is that the temple is about an hour and a half walk on foot from the station. I soon discovered that Zuikaguin is perched on top of Mt. Takigo, 700 meters above the JR station.

The JR attendant gave me my starting point and told me to ask someone when I got to that point. Then, a Japanese couple approached asking if they could be of some assistance. They were very kind and drove me to this point. They asked if I was planning to stay there. "No, I'm just visiting." I said. From there, I inquired at a garage and was told to follow the road beside it. So, I did and walked on. It was so quiet and the air was crisp and fresh. I could hear the gushing of water from the river running beside the road. I was sweating profusely. Sweat was dripping my forehead and flies hovered around my head. I could distinguish different birds' sounds coming from the neighbouring woods. I was feeling a little nervous. Perhaps, I thought I should have called ahead. I continued on with my doubts.

When the road forked up ahead, I was lucky to come upon an elderly Japanese woman who gently pointed the road to follow.

When I came to a marker which read Zuigakuin 2 kilometers ahead, I thought great. Then I came upon another marker which read Zuigakuin 1 kilometer ahead. I thought I'm nearly there. Along the way, I passed a small Shinto Shrine. Its Torii was fashioned out of logs of wood.

When I reached the two tall marble gate posts, one on either side of the road, to the entrance of the temple, I was excited. When I neared the temple which I could see through the woods, I heard the sound of a car approaching and pulled over to the side to let the car pass. The driver stopped and rolled down the passenger window. It was Moriyama Roshi, the Zen master. By this time, I was sweating profusely and out of breath. I said, "Hello. I'm visiting the Zen temple but don't have an appointment. I hope it's okay." He got out of the car and introduced himself. He got back in and then asked if I wanted a ride up. My aching feet told me to say yes, so I did.

He escorted me inside and told me to take a rest inside a lovely tatami room which overlooked the surrounding nature. On the walls of the tatami room hung photographs of Moriyama Roshi, his disciples, and students. There was a shelf with literature, some of his books, and Zen material. He asked me how much time I had and I said "a little" since I didn't want to intrude on his daily routine.

We spoke in English which was a relief since my Japanese is very poor.

He gave me a tour of the center. We first visited the Zendo, the meditation hall which was very spacious and airy. The high ceilings gave it a majestic feel. Blue cushions were laid out on elevated wooden benches running along the walls. It was divided into two sections, one for lay practitioners and one for monks and nuns to sit zazen. A beautiful carved clapper in the shape of a fish hung from the ceiling. At the entrance to the Zendo were a drum, and a very small Kane hanging from the ceiling. A statue of Manjushree, the Buddha of Wisdom was centered in the section reserved for monks and nuns. Then, we visited the Hondo where Buddhist chanting takes place. It's a spacious room with tatami flooring. There's an altar with a statue of Buddha flanked on both sides with

statues of Bodhisattvas. to the Buddha's left, stands Fugen Bosatsu (Bodhisattva) in Sanskrit Samantabhadra the Bodhisattva of Practice (Praxis), (a symbol of Practice), to the Buddha's right, Monju Bosatsu, the Guardian of Buddhist, Voice of Law, in Sanskrit Manjushree or Manjushree.

The chants are taken from the Zoto Zen Sutras by Kokuzozan Daimanji. The three jewels, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, are chanted three times. Here's an excerpt from one of the chants:

Makahannya Haramitta Shingyo

Avalokitsvara Bodhisattva, doing deep prajna paramita
clearly saw the emptiness of all the five 0 conditions
Thus completely relieving misfortune and pain
O Shariputra form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form;

After that, we visited the living quarters and the kitchen. The Hondo, living quarters, and kitchen are fashioned out of a 200-year-old farmhouse that he has lovingly restored. The house is without electricity. Water is drawn from a neighbouring stream and filtered. Water for bathing is heated in a steel drum. Gas burners are used to cook simple, vegetarian fare. He served me green tea.

The center welcomes novices, lay practitioners, and guests who want to get away from it all and experience communal living in a Zen environment.

Moriyama-san's lineage goes back to Dogen, the founder of Zen Buddhism in Japan. Moriyama-san spent 6 years in Brazil. Dogen found enlightenment in China and brought back his knowledge, the transmission of light, to Japan over 700 years ago during the Kamakura period. Dogen established a temple in Eiheji, Eiheji Temple is in Fukui Ken. Dogen's master was Tendo Nyojo. Dogen Zenji was born in 1200 and died in 1253.

Before leaving, I paid another visit to the Hondo to leave a donation to show my appreciation and for being graciously welcomed without an appointment. I left with the knowledge that I had come across an enlightened being, an arhot, whose presence I won't forget.

The descent to the station was invigorating and the quiet filled me with a sense of peace. As I was getting closer to the JR station, I encountered two groups of hikers whose loud animated conversations jolted me back to reality.

The JR attendant asked me if I made it okay, I replied "Daijobu des", which means okay. He smiled. While I waited for the train to arrive, I contemplated the beauty of Zen.

Mt. Takao

My visit to Mt. Takao allowed me to experience Buddhism within a pleasing natural environment albeit if it was thronging with the masses. Living near Mt. Takao, I decided to visit on culture day, a national holiday in Japan. It was a sunny day and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. I expected crowds and there were. I learned that residents of Tokyo flock to Mt. Takao, a mountain retreat in the outskirts of Tokyo, to get away from the hustle and bustle of the big city.

When I boarded the subway at Takao Keio Station, it was crowded. I barely made it inside and was squished against the doors. Beside me was a young mother and her baby son whom I hadn't noticed until his sweet eyes found mine. He was very cute and unlike most young Japanese children who tend to cry or scream at the sight of my presence, he didn't. I was relieved and he'd smile at my jabberings. His young mother too.

Luckily I didn't have to wait long in line to board the chair lift to take me up the mountain. While waiting to get on the chair lift, just below in the square in front of Kiyotaki Station, a marching band began to play music which led me to think of the Sally Ann of all things. The chair lift gave me a fright. The chairs lacked seat belts and the benches were narrow and far too narrow for my large touche. So, I held on to the bars for dear life. It's times like these that I think I should slim down but I don't believe in diets. There were two sometimes three Japanese persons sitting comfortably on the chairs while I took up most of the chair myself. Here was another occasion when I stuck out like a sore thumb. What's a large man

gonna do, eh? My thoughts of slimming down quickly faded as I took in the nature going up and noticed the many coloured chair lifts. There were signs everywhere and public announcements in English asking passengers not to litter or smoke. Would anyone be so stupid to do either? I shouldn't ask such silly questions. Not once did I let go of the bars. Just one jerk would send me crashing to ground which lay only a feet below. Perhaps, I needn't have worried but I was relieved when I got to the top.

There are many paths to choose from. I picked the one that would take me through Yakoin, a Buddhist temple, and to the very top of the mountain. The path to the temple is lined with red lanterns and bronze statues of Bodhisattvas. The path was thronging with people mostly going in one direction. It was cool and the air fresh. Food vendors and restaurants lined the path and even a monkey zoo. I loved the views of Tokyo that lay beyond the mountain tops and taking in the surrounding greenery some turning colour.

As I neared the Temple complex, I climbed up a set of stairs, 108 of them. I counted. This would be the first of many sets of stairs that I would climb. According to Buddhism, 108 is an auspicious number. The Buddhist rosary has 108 beads. There are 108 symbols of the Buddha. There are 108 feelings/desires/passions which delude humans and blind (bind) them to the wheel of Samsara (suffering). On New Year's Eve, Buddhist temples bells are rung 108 times (Joya no Kane). The resonating symbolically cleanses and releases people from the 108 worldly sins. The 108 steps represent the 108 desires. By climbing all 108 steps one can erase those desires. Each bead of the Buddhist rosary represents one of the 108 desires. By offering 108 prayers one is released from the 108 attachments. Here's the breakdown:

There are six senses sight (eyes), sound (ears) smell (nose), taste (mouth), touch (body) and thought (mind). (6)

There are three kinds of sentiments, like, dislike, and indifference for the above. (3 times 6 = 18)

There are 2 conditions of the heart, pure and impure for the above. (2 times 18 = 36)

There are 3 aspects of time, past, present and future, for the above. (3 times 36 = 108 desires)

I visited Yakoin then the temple above Yakoin, Momiji, which looked very Chinese in style decorated with dragons in vibrant rich colours. Yakoin dates from the Nara period. On display were three kakebotoke (hanging icons). These are images on flat bronze surfaces.

When I got to the top, I had a quick peak and turned around. It was thronging with people and there was no place to sit or stand. On my way down from the top, the Chinese looking temple was the stage for some cultural events. So, I stopped and took in the performance. The first was a dragon dance. It was fascinating to watch and somehow I had the sense that the dance was connected to its conversion to Buddhism. At one point, the dragon made his way into the audience. People were shrieking and trying to get near to give it a touch, pat, caress or maybe a squeeze. "Would it bring them good luck?" I wondered. He then returned to the stage and picked up a scroll with his mouth, thrown to him by a member of the troupe, which he then unrolled. Then, everyone clapped and cheered. I wish I knew what it said. Then, there followed a dance by another young man dressed as the fox (inari) god. He was dressed up in a white fox costume and wore a fox mask. Toward the end of his performance he threw goodies to the crowds. Everyone shouted "over here, over here" in Japanese.

I visited Yakoin again and explored the complex. There was a smaller temple nearby surrounded by 88 statues of Buddha on pedestal columns. There were all alike. I overheard a gaijin say in a piercing loud voice, "There's another one in Osaka." There were surrounded by Jizo and a few larger Buddhist statues on pedestals too.

As I understand it, these 88 Buddha statues represent the 88 temples in the Shikoku pilgrimage. They allow one to make the rounds here, letting one stop at each one to offer a coin and a prayer. There's a box that lets you exchange a hundred yen coin for a bag of one hundred one yen coins. How very thoughtful I thought. Also, for a hundred yen, you can buy a rock and inscribe it with your name and leave it at the temple. There were families picnicking on the lips of the

smaller temples nearby and then someone began to ring the temple bell which flooded the complex with its vibrations.

The ride down the chair lift was more spectacular than the ride going on. I was overwhelmed by the beauty before me. When leaving the station, the line to the chair lift stretched way into the distance and the square was jam packed with people. Lucky it ain't me waiting I thought.

I would have liked to have had lunch near the station but alas all the restaurants were packed to capacity with dozens of people waiting outside to get in. So, I skipped lunch and headed on home. Would I visit again? Yes, I would but not on a national holiday.

Tendai Shu

I visited the lovely town of Tsuyama, Okayama nestled within the local mountain range. While there, a colleague gave me a personal tour of Tendai Shu, a temple of the Tendai sect of Buddhism.

The Tendai sect of Buddhism emerged during the Heian Period (794 - 1185). Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century.

The temple features a very large and tall statue of Kannon Bosatsu, perhaps 15 meters tall, carved from wood. She is the 11-headed Kannon, the one who sees and hears all. She is guarded by four guarding deities. They are Tamoten who guards the North direction, Zochoten who guards the South direction, Komokuten who guards the West direction, and Jikokuten who guards the East direction. These guardian deities are known as Shitennou and are Buddhist mythological deities. Shitennou means the four kings of the sky. 'Shi' means four, 'ten' means heaven/sky, and 'nou' means king in Japanese. Each of the four deities is lord over a cardinal direction. They guard over Kannon Bosatus, the "God of the Center".

We visited the Temple in the twilight of evening. It had been a hot and sunny day and by this time the weather had cooled down. However, I was still perspiring and to make things worst I was being pestered by mosquitoes, one of them even

managed to bite me above my left eyelid.

The Tendai sect chants the mantra "Namu Amida Butsu". It is believed that by changing mantras, maintaining mudras (hand gestures), and performing meditations, one can discern that the sense experiences are the teachings of Buddha, know that one is inherently an enlightened being, and attain enlightenment within this life.

My host encouraged me to strike the Kane, a bowl-shaped bronze gong, used during chanting. I struck it with a padded club using both hands. Its pure sound echoed through the temple. I thought if only people were as pure as the sound it emitted. I was then encouraged to strike the mokugyo. This is an instrument made of hollowed wood in the shape of a fish which is used during sutra chanting too, to keep tempo. And like the Kane, I struck it with a padded club. And finally I was encouraged to hit a wooden clapper in the shape of a fish which is used to call people to prayer or to a general meeting.

Afterwards, we had a quick look at the Temple grounds.

I'm grateful to my host for taking time out of his busy schedule to give a guided tour of Temple Shu. I left with a deeper sense of Buddhist practices and a joy to experience something uniquely Japanese.

The peak of the white lotus

One of the things I enjoy about living in Yamanashi Prefecture is being able to see Mt. Fuji. My school is on top of a mountain. On a clear day like today I have a view from my desk of Mt. Fuji's peak. It has been like this all week.

Mt. Fuji is the highest mountain in Japan. I refer to it when I teach superlatives. It is a well-know symbol inside and outside of Japan. There is a literary reference that refers to Mt. Fuji's peak as the peak of the white lotus. That's how I see it now. It was once called Fuyo-ho (the Lotus Peak).

Mt. Fuji is also known as Fuji-san, the san meaning mountain in Japanese. It last erupted in 1707 and is now considered dormant. It's unique in that it has an

attractive cone shape. It has been a site of pilgrimage since the Nara period. Women were forbidden to climb Mt. Fuji until the ban was lifted during the Meiji era. Fuji-san is a source of myths and legends. It is home to the Goddess of Fuji. She is reported to have thrown off her mountain any pilgrims of impure heart.

There is a famous forest that lies at the base of Fuji-san. It is called Aokigahara. It has a sinister reputation and legends have it that it is haunted by monsters, ghosts, and goblins. Each year dozens of people commit suicide in Aokigahara. Today, the forest is haunted by the spirits of those who killed themselves there. The author Wataru Tsurumui calls Aokigahara, "the perfect place to die" in his book, *The Perfect Suicide Manual*. Aokigahara is now referred to as the suicide forest. The appeal, I understand, lies in dying at the foot of the sacred mountain. Aokigahara is a dense and thick forest that inside it no sounds can be heard other than those made by the forest itself. It has been said that the trees themselves are filled with a malevolent energy accumulated from centuries of suicides. It's been reported by the press that unscrupulous individuals scavenge the forest looking for dead bodies to rob of their valuables.

Japan has one of the highest rates of suicide among the world's industrialized nations. Japan has had more than 30,000 suicides a year since 1998. Every day approximately 100 people take their own lives. The sheer volume of suicides speaks to the government's inadequate suicide-prevention measures such as a toll free telephone helpline. There are many causes leading to suicide such as despair, mental health issues, financial problems, and illness. Regrettably, the phenomenon of suicide destroys a society's social fabric. I wish governmental officials saw it that way!

The Goddess of Mt. Fuji

I came across a story regarding the Goddess of Mt. Fuji. The Goddess of Mt. Fuji appeared as a beautiful maiden to a boy named Yosoji in search of healing waters from a stream at the base of Mt. Fuji.

The healing waters would cure his mother of smallpox. While looking for the stream, he met a maiden who guided him to it. He brought back water for his mother and other villagers. His mother and the other villagers were eventually cured and were grateful to Yosoji but he knew the credit lay with the beautiful

maiden. When he returned again, after having made several visits, to the stream, he found that it had dried up. He wept because he realised that he had fallen in love with the maiden. Then, she appeared. He was unable to ascertain her name. She did not give it. Suddenly, she was engulfed in a cloud and was carried to the very top of Mt. Fuji. Yosoji then suddenly realised that he had fallen in love with the Goddess of Mt. Fuji and that she had helped him. As a token of her love for Yosoji, she drops a branch of small pink blossoms.

bits and pieces

Koji

A key ingredient that is used to make sake, miso and shoyu (soy sauce) is mold spores, *aspergillus oryzae*.

In the making of miso, the mold is added to the steamed soy beans and then, incubated. The mold begins to propagate creating several enzymes which break up the hard to digest soy proteins, starches and fats into easily absorbed amino acids, simple sugars, and fatty acids.

Miso is a thick paste made from fermented soybeans, sea salt and koji.

When koji is added to steamed rice and incubated, it breaks the starches in the rice into sugars. The mash, koji, can then be fermented with the addition of yeast cells into sake.

Shoyu is a dark brown liquid that is also made from soy beans that have undergone a fermentation process. Soy sauce's main ingredients include wheat, soybeans, and sea salt. The wheat is roasted and crushed and mixed with soybeans that have been steamed until softened. Mold culture is added to the mixture which is then cultured for several days to form koji, a mash. Sea salt is

dissolved in water. The koji is combined with the salt and water solution to form moromi which is then fermented in tanks. It is then filtered, refined, and pasteurized.

Tofu is made from soy milk, which is made by soaking soy beans in water, which are then pureed. Heat is added and the liquid subsequently filtered.

Thoughts on Suicide

I've been thinking about suicide ideation and suicide and its myriad forms of expression in diverse societies.

Living in Japan, I've discovered bushido – the way of the samurai which glorifies death. Japan's history is dotted with loyal samurai committing seppuku and surrendering their lives out of a sense of loyalty to their masters, examples include the 47 ronin, and General Togo who choose to end his life following the death of his beloved Emperor Meiji.

Who can deny that a suicidal thought hasn't crossed his/her mind? However, it's the tiny minority that acts upon their ideas. As suicide is prevalent amongst most societies, this tells me that there is something fundamentally wrong with most societies if not all of them, which allows its own to commit suicide.

Many consider suicide an act of self-destruction, a means to an end, and a way to end a life filled with despair and wrought with difficulties. It isn't difficult to imagine someone so possessed with despair and loss of all hope that s/he chooses to end his/her life. Perhaps, despair coupled with a confused mind is the main cause to drive some people to commit suicide. But apparently societies are blind to the plight of their own, ignoring the suffering of some of its citizens, the suffering being a natural warning. Any society that allows its own to commit suicide, permitting acts of self-destruction with any frequency is unjust, in my opinion.

In Afghanistan, many educated married women are choosing self-immolation which is an act of suicide by fire, as a way out of a desperate, impossible family

life situation. They don't see a solution to their plight, so they self-immolate by pouring petrol over themselves and setting themselves on fire to die a horrible death.

In India, sati (widow-burning) continues to occur. For all intents and purposes, it is still an act of self-destruction, suicide, no matter the religious or societal context and regardless of the fact that many consider it an act of self-sacrifice. Sati is a Sanskrit word meaning faithful wife. It was later appropriated and applied to women who immolated themselves, going with or going after their deceased spouse. I understand that the pain is greatest at the beginning, before the flame burns the nerves. After that the burned skin does not hurt. Most of the victims die from suffocation since the blaze damages the respiratory tract, the lungs.

I'm calling attention to suicide with a view to enlighten and suggest that perhaps societies should examine themselves from the perspective of the victim.

St. Paulo Miki, Japanese Jesuit Martyr

I've learned about the heroic story of one of the 26 Catholic martyrs who were executed by order of the Taiko Toyomi Hideyoshi on February 5, 1597 on Tateyama Hill in Nagasaki. His name was Paulo Miki, the son of a Christian samurai, Handayu Miki. He was one of the very first graduates of the Portuguese Jesuit College established in Azuchi.

While preaching in Osaka, he was arrested. 24 Catholics were arrested and made a scapegoat against Christian proselytizing. They included six foreign Franciscans and 18 Japanese Catholics which included Paulo Miki and two other Japanese Jesuit priests. Two faithful Christians joined them on the march to martyrdom.

They were publicly paraded around Fushimi and Osaka in a bull cart. They had their left ear cut off. From Osaka on January 10, 1597 they were made to walk to their martyrdom in Nagasaki. All the while, Paulo Miki never let up his faith. He gladly accepted his fate. He continued to praise the Lord and preached on the

way to his martyrdom. I wonder how many of us today are prepared to lay down our lives for our faith.

Here are some of his recorded words:

"Lord, we ask that you give us the joy of a martyr's crown."

"Listen, all of you! What should a person live for and what should he die for? For riches? For treasures? For position? Those things will pass away. Listen, all of you. Should we not live and die for the God who made us? Instead of following our desires, should we not live and die obeying the holy will of God? It is He who is the true salvation and the true way. He does not reject and who come to Him, so come, repent your sins and enter into His precious salvation."

They were denied the Sacrament of Reconciliation, were fastened to crosses on Tateyama Hill and stabbed in the chest with spears. Thousands of the faithful witnessed the public crucifixions. When their crime was read out, Paulo Miki responded "We are going to be killed because we do believe in the teaching of God, and we preached it. But according to the teaching of God, we cordially, forgive all the officials."

The ashes of the 26 Japanese Catholic Martyrs are enshrined at the Memorial Institute of 26 Martyrs. The 26 Japanese martyrs were made blessed in 1627, ten years before the Shimabara Rebellion of 1637-38, and canonized saint in 1862 by Pope Pius X. The site of their crucifixion was proclaimed an official pilgrimage site by Pope Pius XII in 1950. It is a place to remember their faith.