



Early One Morning ...

It's 4:30 in the morning, and I'm somewhere around halfway up the 229 steps that lead to Aso Jinja, the main shinto shrine in our area. I'm not here for any religious reason; it's simply that my body clock is still on Vancouver time, and this makes a good destination for an early morning stroll when it is completely impossible to sleep.

When I arrive in Canada after travelling eastbound, I never have much trouble with jet lag, but I find the return trip much more difficult. In Vancouver I am usually met by a gaggle of family members, and thus immediately plunged into conversations, meals, and activities of all sorts. I stumble through the first couple of days, collapsing into bed at the same time as everybody else, and am thus forced into making the switch quite quickly.

When I return home though, there is nobody here to meet me, nor is there a prepared agenda of activities. When my energy flags during the day, there is nobody around for 'support', or to keep me moving, so I end up napping a bit here and there, something that inevitably extends the time it takes to make the transition. (And getting older doesn't help either!)

One solution would be to simply 'sleep it off'. I'm usually very tired after the long trip, so staying in bed right through until the next morning, then starting fresh on the new schedule, should perhaps do it. But that is completely impossible for me, as I have an absolute inability to stay in bed for very long, something I understand that I share with other skinny people. Seven hours or so is about all I can take before I start to get intolerable aches and pains in all my joints, and I am forced to get up, whether or not I may still be tired. (If I am ever hospitalized for anything, I fear that I will be the terror of the nursing staff, being unable to remain in bed for more than a fraction of the day.)

So here I am at the shrine, taking a little breather half-way up the steps. A few years back in these stories, I wrote about a mountain shrine back in the village where my children's mother grew up, and described the wonderful ambiance created by the massive old trees that surrounded it. Here, unfortunately, there is no such special feeling. This shrine is actually quite old, as the Ome area was settled long before Tokyo itself existed, and some pretty impressive stumps dot the slope here and there, testifying that things were different in times gone by, but the trees now 'resident' here are all much younger. I suppose that over the centuries the trees come and go, and I just happen to be here during a 'down cycle'.

There is only the faintest light in the sky, barely enough to make out the steps underfoot. Far below, a small light is mounted on a post, and I see another early riser step into the ring of illumination at the base of the staircase. It seems as though I am to have some company in a couple of minutes. I suppose there are people who come up these steps every morning for a bit of exercise before breakfast. Hopefully nobody will mind that there is a 'newcomer' here today.

But it turns out that we are not to meet. He stands for a moment at the bottom of the steps, claps his hands together, bows a couple of times, then turns and walks off. He has simply been here to make an early morning obeisance to the *kami-sama* of the shrine.

I have to say though, that if I were the shrine god, and I had to choose between a petitioner who clapped and bowed from the base of the steps, and one who made the effort to do the right thing - climb the steps and come to my front door - I think I know which one I would favour!

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