

GOKURAKUJI

A thatched gate and a long paved approach leads to Gokurakuji, or the temple of Paradise; this small building roofed with mouldering thatch being the solitary remnant of the vast and flourishing foundation of past centuries.

Gokurakuji was established by Hōjō Shigetoki (a grandson of the great Tokimasa), who died in 1261, at the age of 64: his residence was in the vicinity of the temple, which derives its name from the *nom de plume* of its founder. Early records state that in 1257 an aged priest formed the project of building the first edifice in this locality; he installed a statue of Amida in a temporary shrine as the chief object of worship—but died before his design could be realised. Two years later Shigetoki—in consultation with the famous priest Ryōkwan—removed an erection from elsewhere to this site. Shigetoki also died soon afterwards, and his beautiful tomb is preserved at the rear of the temple grounds: however the project was carried out on an extensive scale by his sons Nagateki and Naritoki; an imposing fabric was constructed, comprising the large number of about 50 various buildings. Gokurakuji was dedicated to the *Shingon*, or 'True World' tenets, founded by Kōbō Daishi in the 9th century, and whose mystic creed is said to bear more resemblance to Christianity than any other of other of the Buddhist sects: it obtained a great

hold upon the people, and at the present day there are many millions of adherents of the Shingonshū in Japan, with over 12,000 temples.

Ryōkwan, first abbot of Gokurakuji and the most noted philanthropist of his day, was a man of noble character; much is written concerning his abilities, his benevolence and generosity. He lived the self-denying and ascetic life of a saint, being known far and wide for his fatherly protection of the poor and the distressed, and especially as the saviour and refuge of the lowest outcasts of civilization—those afflicted with leprosy. It is recorded that during the twenty years of his administration in this temple, the hospitals of Gokurakuji cured no fewer than 46,800 of these miserable beings, the total number that received treatment amounting to 57,250. In addition to the hospitals within the temple enclosure, this charitable priest established eighteen separate institutions in different parts of Kamakura. Nor were the activities of Ryōkwan confined to his spiritual ministrations and to the alleviation of distress. As an example of his public spirit it is specified that during his long lifetime he erected and repaired 83 temples; constructed 189 bridges, 71 roads, and excavated 33 wells; also establishing numerous public bath-houses, hospitals, and homes for the sick and poor.

Records further narrate that in his 65th year Ryōkwan was commanded by the Regent Tokimune to offer special prayers for the discomfiture of the enemy at the time of the Mongolian invasion: moreover his intercessions were considered of such efficacy that upon some twenty different occasions he conducted the service of prayers for rain in time of drought, and for cessation in time of flood. Another quaint chronicle states that in 1298, at the

age of 82, this humane priest built a hospital for horses in the compound of the temple: he constantly visited the stables and offered special prayers for the recovery of his four-footed friends; while in severe cases he would inscribe texts of scripture upon *Ofuda*, or slips of wood, suspending them round the patients' necks. Shortly before the death of Ryōkwan a severe drought caused great distress. The special services had been repeatedly resorted to, but with no avail: so beside the waterfall (that still exists some distance behind the temple) the aged priest supplicated the gods with greatest fervency to take compassion upon the suffering people, offering his own life as a hostage. During his petition it is stated that a small snake appeared from the bushes, listening attentively to the proceedings: shortly afterwards rain fell in abundance. Ordained priest at the early age of 16 (he entered religion upon the death of his mother), this famous philanthropist and benefactor died in 1303 at the advanced age of 87, having been a member of the priesthood for the long period of seventy-one years, surely a record! It may be here mentioned that serpents and *Ryu*—'dragons' as they are not very happily translated—were considered in an occult and supernatural light. In China the dragon was held as a lofty and sublime manifestation dwelling in celestial regions above the clouds, and this shape was often supposed to be assumed by the gods when they deigned to appear upon the earth. Hence carvings and representations of dragons frequently occur in the decoration of shrines and temples, the goddess Benten being especially associated with a serpent attendant which is supposed to be sacred to her and to minister to her desires.

In March 1275 Gokurakuji was destroyed by fire; however under the direction of Ryōkwan it was rebuilt, and all the former prosperity was restored. But in 1425 another conflagration occurred, and a few years later (1433) a severe earthquake wrought heavy damage: the great temple proved unable to recover from these repeated catastrophes—from that time it gradually declined to the single insignificant building of the present day. The grounds contain five gaunt and hoary cherry-trees of great antiquity which are said to have been planted by Hōjō Tokimune (6th Regent 1270–1284): the blossoms are of a curious and exceptional formation, bearing both single and double flowers combined upon the same stalk; these patriarchal trees are protected by the government, being frequently submitted to official inspection.

Before the temple two ancient stone vessels will be observed, relics of those early days when Gokurakuji was a literal paradise to the afflicted. These receptacles were formerly in the dispensary and are said to have been used as mortars in the preparation of certain drugs and medicines for the benefit of the numerous hospitals and homes. The ancient chart still in possession of the temple shows that in addition to be 49 edifices of this extensive foundation, the auxiliary buildings of the enclosure amounted to more than double that number; including a medical bath-house for patients, schools, and many institutions devoted to the special care of lepers. So famous did the good works of this presiding genius become, that at his death the Emperor Go-Daigo conferred upon him the title of *Bosatsu*—a term implying the highest virtue, and only applied to a saint who has attained to a state of enlightenment one degree below Buddhahood.

In 1261 the temple of Gokurakuji was promoted by the Imperial order to the rank of *Chōkugwanji*—which especially authorised the temple to pray for the welfare of the Imperial family: the tablet conferring this honour in the Emperor Go-Uda's own handwriting being still preserved. The interior of the temple is more attractive than the exterior of the building would suggest. The chief object of veneration—a statue of the Buddha ascribed to Kōshō, second head of the temple—is enclosed within the sanctuary above the main altar, flanked upon either side by large dark figures of ten of the disciples. On the right of the altar is a curious effigy of Fudo (god of wisdom), surrounded by his background of flames: this quaint image is said to have been brought from China by Kōbō-Daishi in the year 807: it was formerly enshrined elsewhere, but on the destruction of that temple in the early days of Meiji it was entrusted to Gokurakuji for safe keeping. However in order to provide this venerable divinity with an independent environment the temple authorities have issued an appeal requesting one hundred thousand benevolent souls to subscribe the small sum of five sen apiece—in which case the amount realised would suffice to construct a separate shrine for its reception: a plan of the proposed small edifice is exhibited upon the statue's base.

On the opposite side stands the old *Jindaiko*, or war-drum, stated to have been used by Nitta Yoshisada—together with the lacquered saddle, ornamented with mother-of-pearl, and heavy iron stirrups used by Nitta's general, Odate Muneuji, in those martial days. Three unusual paintings on silk are suspended at the back of the altar. These are ascribed to the efforts of Ryōkwan,

each picture containing one thousand representations of Amida : upon every successive day the worthy priest is said to have traced a new representation of the deity, consequently nine years were needed for the completion of this laborious task.

Around the walls are exhibited, in a sort of museum, a collection of antiquities that are said to have been retrieved from the various vicissitudes of the temple. Amongst these, items of interest include a well-preserved painting of the *Nehan*, or Death of Buddha—according to the label, the gift of Masako ; a faded and ghostly material that was originally a banner presented by Tokimune ; a letter inscribed by Ryōkwan ; a statue of Buddha that was possessed by Sanetomo (3rd *Shōgun*, 1203), and a remarkable carving ascribed to Kōbō Daishi—the thousand Jizo. This work consists of a central figure of the divinity about one inch in height, surrounded in tiers by what were originally a thousand microscopic images, about the size of a grain of rice : at the present time the ranks of the diminutive saints are reduced to some two or three hundred.

The compartments at the back are occupied by statues. The right and left respectively contain striking effigies of the first and second priests of this temple, the figure of Ryōkwan being especially realistic, a testimony to the upright and noble character of this great man. The central niche enshrines a National Treasure—a fine statue (by Zenkei) of the Buddha with uplifted hands, represented while delivering a discourse ; also a beautiful figure of Monju Bosatsu, holding a sword and scroll. The statue on the right is stated to have been a former possession of Tokiyori (fifth Hōjō Regent, 1246) and

represents the god of healing, Yakushi-Nyorai; this felicitous gift was originally presented by Tokiyori to one of the hospitals of Gokurakuji.

The remaining case contains various other antique objects, amongst others a three-faced Daikoku, the popular god of riches: a curious group with the goddess Benten seated upon a throne surrounded by various quaint figures—this carving is said to have occupied a place in Mochiuji's (4th Ashikaga *Shōgun*—died 1439) private shrine: the tablet originally inscribed with the Emperor Go-Uda's own hand, but from which time has obliterated the characters; also another Imperial gift—'Pictures of Paradise.' This appropriate presentation is studded with myriads of saints and was bestowed upon the temple by the Emperor Go-Fukakusa (accession 1247). Two interesting possessions—preserved elsewhere and produced on request—are the ancient coloured chart depicting all the innumerable buildings originally included in the enclosure of Gokurakuji: also three rolls of manuscript ascribed to Sugawara Michizane, the great literary genius who died in the year 903 and was subsequently deified as *Tenjin* (p. 31). Originally ten rolls of these essays were in existence, of which some have disappeared, the residue being in possession elsewhere. The handwriting is exquisite, miniature and wonderfully distinct: although the width of the manuscript is less than three inches, each line contains twenty-five characters, the rolls being of a uniform length of some 36 feet.

Gokurakuji possesses, even in the present degenerate days, quite an extensive area of land, a large extent of which is under cultivation; peaches, pears, and grapes are grown for the market—some 300,000 peaches being

produced annually. The small shrine on the right of the temple is dedicated to Kōbō Daishi, and contains a lacquered statue of the saint.

The path intersecting the peach-orchard culminates in a thicket of tall cedars, with a fine old *icho* guarding the entrance. In the midst of this solitary green space stands a truly regal monument, the tomb of Ryōkwan, the benefactor of all who needed help, and who so effectively laid the spiritual foundations of Gokurakuji. According to the cicerone's proud assertion, this tomb enjoys the distinction of being the largest in Eastern Japan. Its graceful shape and majestic proportions seem emphasised by the remoteness of this sombre grove: the mighty stones bear neither Sanskrit character nor any sort of inscription traced upon their rugged surfaces: the sole ornament being the film woven by Nature of heavy moss—so rich of hue it seems to glow and radiate the intense green kindled by the few sunbeams that pierce the sheltering veil of the surrounding foliage. The beautiful old tomb on the left of this enclosure symbolises the resting place of Hōjō Shigetoki, who established the temple upon its present site.





Tomb of Ryōkwan, First Lord Abbot of Gokurakuji—
died 1303 aged 87—with Monument (on left)
to Hōjo Shigetoki founder of the
temple, died 1259.

“The shadowy courts of sleep.”