

## SUGIMOTO NO KWANNON

“Kwanzeon, the pure and holy one, who hearing the world-sound, looketh down above the sound of prayer. Her sole desire being to deliver all humanity from its miseries and sorrows, wherever there is a heart groping in the darkness, Kwanzeon will not fail to extend embracing arms.”

A short distance farther along the Kanazawa road leads to another temple of exceeding antiquity and unusually romantic approach. Founded in the year 734 by the priest Gyogi, this dedication is one of the most ancient of the pre-Yoritomo Era in Kamakura, and was in existence for centuries whilst Kamakura was still but the most insignificant fishing hamlet.

Steep mossy steps—thickly bordered with azalea bushes, and here and there old grey stone lanterns,—lead up to a picturesque lychgate, on either side of which stand the mouldering, but still fierce and threatening figures of the *Niō*, or the Two Deva Kings, whose mission is to put to flight all enemies from the sacred spot. Somewhat above this gate a *torii* marks the entrance to a sequestered little grassy plateau gay with flowers, wherein are divers ancient monuments and moss-encrusted tombs. The fern-grown wall of rock is cleft by the cave of Benten, whose floor is formed by a pool of water: according to tradition this cave was once the abode of



Temple of Sugimoto-no-Kwannon, dedicated to the  
Goddess of Mercy.

"Storms and hatred give way at the sound of her name, at the sound of her name demons vanish. By her name one may stand firm in the sky like a sun." (Kwannon Sutra.)

a mighty serpent. At the back a niche is hewn in the rock which formerly enshrined a statue of the goddess, but owing to deterioration due to atmospheric influences the effigy has been removed to the temple above. Benten, the sea-goddess, is always represented as a beautiful woman, and is supposed to have the power of assuming the form of a serpent: she is the patroness of music, the fine arts, and good fortune in general; her shrines are almost invariably in the neighbourhood of water—the sea, a river or pond, in which a snake consecrated to her is supposed to dwell.

Another flight of steps leads up to a plateau in the hill-side, where in the dense shade of its solemn grove stands an old thatched building—generally solitary and deserted, but with its doors hospitably open to any stray worshipper that may be tempted by the beauty of the place to scale the steep and somewhat formidable approach. However for those to whom precipitous steps form no attraction, a more appealing method of ascent will be discovered in a winding path lying to the left, and which gently conducts the pilgrim to the high terrace upon which the temple stands. A beautiful and peaceful spot, lying in the deep green shadows of tall forest trees: the screen of rock enclosing the level is pierced with tiers of caves containing venerable tombs. At the rear, framed in bushes and undergrowth, lies a small still pool of almost circular shape and great depth—indeed the aged guardian of the temple avers that it could not be fathomed, even with a rod the length of eighty people standing with outstretched arms!

The path to the left leads through the woods—past beautiful old lichened tombs, and affords, a panorama of

the neighbourhood, including the distant purple mountains, and in clear weather, the snows of Fuji towering into the blue sky. The steep track leading upwards ascends to the top of the hill, where, in a glade musical with birds, is a venerable monument dedicated to Amaterasu, the Sun-Goddess, who is believed to be the primeval ancestress of the Imperial House of Japan.

Although the temple of Sugimoto is so ancient as to be approaching dilapidation, some most valuable relics of its early days still remain in its possession. The chief object of worship enshrined upon the altar—a large gilt statue of the eleven-faced Kwannon—is a striking work from the chisel of Unkei, and is moreover of historic interest; it was presented to the temple by Yoritomo in the 12th century. It is recorded that this statue was repaired in the *Tempo* Era (1830–1843), and unfortunately lost much of its original charm during the process. A large and beautiful figure of Jizo stands on the left. The saint's head is framed with a golden aureole and he is equipped with his customary symbols, the *shakujō*, or staff, and the *hōshu-no-tama*, or jewel of good luck. This effigy was carved by the priest Eshin and was also the gift of Yoritomo: in former times it was separately enshrined in the *Jizō-dō* (Hall of Jizo) nearby, but was brought to the main temple to replace a statue of Kwannon that has been removed to a shrine in Meguro, a suburb of Tōkyō. The vigorous and striking representation of Bishamon (on the right) is highly esteemed by connoisseurs; it was carved by Takuma, and is considered a fine example of his art. A wheel-like halo studded with flames encircles this fierce divinity, who is trampling underfoot two demons of powerful ap

pearance: here also the workmanship has greatly suffered by later repairs, which were executed in the Era of *Bumpō* (1318-22). Originally a Hindu deity, Bishamon was considered the protector of treasure. In Japan he is one of the seven gods of luck (*Shichi Fukujin*), and in feudal days was worshipped as the patron of good fortune in war. Bishamon is moreover one of the Four Deva Kings, or 'gods of the four directions' and is supposed to guard the north against evil influences. At the back of the temple is arranged a group of deities—the thirty-three *Keshin*, or incarnations of Kwannon (p. 207); these quaint little figures are ascribed to Unkei.

On the extreme right is the statue of Benten that was formerly in the cave below—an interesting figure well worth its rescue. The Fudo that stands nearby is a fine work of art, and is beautifully carved. But the *pièces de resistance* of this temple are enshrined in the *Zushi*, the *sanctum sanctorum* immediately behind the main altar and screened from the vulgar gaze by locked doors. Here are deposited three exceedingly valuable statues of the Eleven-faced Kwannon; two of these ancient works are enrolled upon the list of National Treasures, and are considered of high merit. The right-hand figure dates back some three hundred years before the Kamakura Era: it is said to have been carved by the celebrated priest Jikaku, who died in the year 864, at the age of 71. This pious and gifted functionary was on a pilgrimage to these parts, and by chance made the discovery of a mysterious piece of wood that was floating in the sea and emitted a sort of luminous halo, thereby proving its sacred character: with this trophy the goddess of mercy was fashioned.

Legend asserts that when the temple was destroyed by fire in 1189, as rescue was not forthcoming, the statue proved its miraculous nature by leaving the altar on its own account; it was subsequently discovered safe and intact, placidly reposing beneath a large cryptomeria beyond the danger zone! Hence the name of the temple—*Sugi*=cryptomeria, *moto*=base, or beneath. It is further related that another conflagration occurred in the year 1257: on that occasion the residing priest Jōki-Shōnin braved the flames and rescued the statue at the risk of his life, but miraculously escaped uninjured.

The figure in the centre is also a Treasure of the Nation, and was carved by the priest Eshin in the year 985. Eshin was a famous sculptor of ancient times; he was the son of Tada Manjū and an ancestor of the Minamoto family. This statue was executed according to Imperial command and was presented to the temple by the Emperor Kwazan (died 1008). The third Kwannon is the most antique of these valuable relics, but the workmanship is not so skilled, owing no doubt to the more primitive state of art in those far-away days; it was the work of Gyogi—the famous priest of the 8th century and founder of this temple.

The Japanese Madonna Kwannon, goddess of mercy, is one of the most popular divinities, and is said to have refused the rest of *Nirvāna* to save the souls of men. She is generally supposed to possess miraculous powers to deliver mankind from the dangers and perils of this mortal life: she hears the pleadings of the afflicted and assuages their sorrows, being especially considered the refuge of the distressed. Kwannon is an abbreviation of

her real title *Kwanzeon*. *Kwan* means to be possessed of spiritual insight: *Ze* signifies the world or universe: *On* is sound or voice: this deity hearkens to the world-sound and represents the principle of universal loving-kindness.

According to Chinese tradition Kwanzeon was the young daughter of the governor of a town in Setchuan. When she was 18 years of age the maiden repaired for worship to a temple where there were 500 priests: the latter refused to let her return home, detaining her by force. Her father, infuriated by this act of treachery, caused all the priests to be slain and the temple was set on fire, his daughter ostensibly perishing in the general destruction. But the following night she appeared in a vision to her sorrowing parent, saying she had risen from the flames to Paradise and was immortalised as a goddess. From that time she has been venerated by countless multitudes: in Japan she is represented as a beautiful idealization of womanhood, usually enthroned upon the lotus, the sacred emblem of *Nirvâna*.

Another version of this legend—also of Chinese origin relates that the parent of the goddess was enraged because his beautiful young daughter steadfastly refused all offers of marriage, and was firm in her determination to enter religion as a nun. Various methods of compassing her death were attempted and averted by miraculous means: however at last she was suffocated, and her pure soul descended to the underworld. But Enma, dread judge of souls, finding his hell was converted into Paradise by her angelic presence, restored her to the upper world, where she lived for nine years practising good works upon a mysterious island known

as *Fudarakuji*—ostensibly in the vicinity of China—healing the sick and preserving mariners from the perils of tempest and shipwreck. Often this divinity is represented with eleven faces (*Fuichimen Kwannon*) symbolic of shedding sweetness and mercy in all directions; and also with a thousand arms (*Senju Kwannon*), in reality but forty, to embrace the earth and to alleviate the sufferings of all mankind.

In eastern Japan there are thirty-three temples sacred to Kwannon. Pilgrims believe it an act of great merit to visit these in order, and whoever makes the complete round of all the eighty-eight temples dedicated to the goddess of mercy has achieved such a supreme act of merit as to preserve them from hell, and to open the gates of life everlasting! The Sugimoto Kwannon is the first in importance on the round of Eastern Japan, the second being the Iwadono\* Temple of Dzushi; the Anyōin (Kamakura) is the third; while the colossal statue at Hase comes fourth on the list. These pilgrims leave behind a printed slip, or label, as a proof of their visit; multitudes of these will be observed attached to the walls and pillars of the temple.

Another form of the divinity is the *Batō*, or Horse-Headed Kwannon, when she is represented with a horse's head carved upon her head-dress, and is supposed to exercise a protective influence over horses and cattle. Hence,

---

\* This venerable temple is picturesquely situated, hidden away in this hill behind Dzushi: it was also founded by the eminent Gyōgi Bosatsu in the year 720, and belongs to the Sōdō doctrines, the most powerful branch of the Zen sect. Ancient records state that the third *Shōgun* Sanetomo occasionally repaired to the Iwadono Kwannon for worship. This woodland solitude is well worth a visit for its romantic environment; a mountain track at the rear—known for many centuries as the *Funrei michi*, or 'Pilgrim' Road—leads to the Kanazawa highway, a few paces beyond the Sugimoto Kwannon.



offerings to Kwannon are presented by farmers and peasants: adjoining the sanctuary of this temple a somewhat decayed white plaster horse stands in a wooden stable that was undoubtedly deposited for this reason.

The annual festival is observed on Aug. 10th, upon which occasion the doors of the inner repository are opened and the scene assumes a very gay aspect, crowds of devotees assembling to pay their respects to the beloved divinity, "who looketh down above the sound of prayer,"

"Storms and hatred give way at the sound of  
her name,

At the sound of her name demons vanish:

By her name one may stand firm in the sky  
like a sun."

