

A Spiritual Journey

By Corinne Bret

Whenever we get the opportunity, my daughter and I like to travel.

This time, I planned a visit to the hospital where she was born, then to Ise Jingu (the Grand Shrine of Ise) and Nara. I wanted to make the celebration of my daughter's 10th birthday an unforgettable experience for her. Actually, this area of the Kansai region has been the source of many memorable experiences for me. Since coming to Japan 25 years ago, I have visited the mystical Ise Jingu many times, and on numerous occasions have enjoyed visiting Kyoto and Nara – places where one is still able to savor the beauty of Japanese culture. These places have a special significance for me, as 11 years ago it is likely that my daughter found shelter within my body when I was in this area.

Even though I was living in Tokyo, I took the trouble to travel to Nagoya and then take a 40-minute train ride to Okazaki City for the birth of my child. The reason I went there was nothing to do with the fact that it was the birthplace of Tokugawa Ieyasu. Of course, I have visited the splendid castle built

for this major figure in Japan's history, the first of the Tokugawa shogunates who in 1590 took up residence in Edo Castle (in present day Tokyo) and established a feudal government there. Rather than the sightseeing, however, the attraction of this place for me was Yoshimura Tadashi, a unique doctor whose Yoshimura Clinic was a 10-minute walk from Okazaki station.

It was seven years since I had last visited Dr. Yoshimura, and in that time my daughter had grown. It was also during this period that the "natural birthing" style that Dr. Yoshimura had lovingly nurtured for 25 years reached its zenith. In fact, Dr. Yoshimura is well informed on Edo culture and 27 years ago brought a *furuya* (Edo-period [1603-1867] farmhouse) from a rural area to a garden here, and rebuilt it as a sort of "therapy house" for pregnant women. Ishihara Ryozo, a close friend of the doctor and a craftsman of tea-houses and other types of Japanese architecture, oversaw this work. It is in that house that expectant mothers who are diagnosed as likely to experience a difficult birth are given a unique type of therapy. This therapy involves doing Edo-style housework in the *furuya*.

While the woman of today enjoys a convenient way of life, blessed as she is with appliances like the refrigerator, washing machine and vacuum cleaner, there are disadvantages as she finds that when she gives birth the muscles that she needs the most have weakened. And it is in relation to this that Dr. Yoshimura discovered that by

doing housework the Edo way, all of the body's muscles become robust. This involves drawing water from a well, splitting wood, starting a fire under a cooking caldron with a long bamboo stick like a flute and other tasks such as sweeping the bamboo floor. At first, all of these chores are hard work and I sympathize with the lot of Edo women, but from about a few days this feeling of drudgery turns into physical pleasure. There is a wonderful discovery of bringing muscles that had been long forgotten back to life. At least this is what I felt when carrying out this regime just before giving birth 11 years ago.

Dr. Yoshimura's avant-garde philosophy on birth has also manifested itself in the establishment of a new "birthing house" in another garden at the back of the clinic. The two-story building looks like a large teahouse, and is made completely out of wood. Of course, one finds the full range of modern conveniences from the telephone to the washing machine inside, but these necessities of modern-day life are cloaked in a traditional Japanese spirit.

Up to three families at a time can experience a "home birth," that is, the old-fashioned way of welcoming a baby into the world, in this "birthing house." Even outside there wafts the pleasant smell of its all-wooden structure. Women can decide, depending on how they feel at the time, whether to give birth in a tranquil and beautiful tatami mat room reminiscent of a tea house, or to have a "water birth" in a large bath made of the Japanese cypress with an alluring fragrance.

On the day of our visit, my daughter and I spent the night in the empty "birthing house." This memorable journey that we had embarked upon was gradually evolving into a spiritual journey due to our encounter with the atmosphere of the "birthing house"

Photo: Ichikawa Fusako



Expectant mothers who are diagnosed as likely to experience a difficult birth are given a unique type of therapy doing Edo-style housework in the *furuya* at Yoshimura Clinic



The round shape of the mountains viewed from the Uji Bridge

filled with a traditional Japanese spirit. And the following day, our journey actually became all the more spiritual.

We entered Ise Jingu at dusk. We did this because there are fewer tourists at this time of day, and because the light of the setting sun makes the shrine even more mystical.

My heart was racing as I arrived, this time together with my daughter, at the *Naiku* (Inner Shrine) after an absence of 11 years. I am not Japanese nor a believer in the Shinto religion. But for some reason, I felt that I had come to worship at Ise Jingu, which is referred to as the “homeland of the soul of the Japanese people.” There is no mistaking that the people of long ago who created this “homeland of the soul” were fully aware that beauty is a universal value. It is the universal beauty that pervades Ise that captivates me, a person of both a different culture and religion. Each time I come here the breathtaking beauty of Ise startles me. Enticed by the thread that is its beauty, my own journey of the soul was about to begin. First of all, time stops...

The entrance to the *Naiku* separates the present from the past, and by crossing over the elegant Uji Bridge, I step into a world that dates back almost

1,500 years. I look around me, surprised by the feeling of traveling the time. Everything I see is just as it was all those 15 centuries ago – the round shape of the mountains, the trees and bushes that outline those mountains, the softly drizzling rain of the present, the moisture that envelops all this nature, the smell of the wet leaves, footsteps echoing off the path, the *torii* gateway over there...

When we have walked a short distance up the shingle path, my daughter discovers the Isuzu River. She stands transfixed at the river’s edge. I wonder if she is attracted just like me by the transparency of the river. It has an impressive clearness, described about 50 years ago by the French poet Paul Claudel as one half small stones, while in the other half there flows a wondrous brilliance. “Look!” My daughter has discovered fish with a red and

white pattern. The water of the Isuzu River is so clear that the patterns of the fish are quite visible. Suddenly I say to my daughter, “This fish is probably a god.” She nods her head in agreement. In such a place it is perfectly natural to be enraptured by a sacred feeling that comes before religion, and to express that feeling spontaneously. Shinto, which has the literal meaning of “way of the gods,” holds that gods, or “*kami*,” reside within plants and animals, and all living beings and things. As I gaze at the clear waters of the Isuzu River, I have the feeling that deep in the recesses of my mind, reflected in the water’s surface, I can hear the sacred sound of “*kami*.”

The visit my daughter and I made to Ise Jingu began with the Isuzu River, which purified our minds. Passing under the *torii* gateway, which emits the sweet smell of the Japanese cypress, we walk through a forest of trees so high it seems they could touch the sky. “It’s quite likely that it is here that you came into my tummy.” My daughter shows no surprise at these strange words, a soliloquy. I recall a deeply moving experience in this exact spot in the forest 11 years ago. “The gods probably use these tall trees as an elevator to descend to the ground, to touch the bodies and souls of the people who pass by.” By this stage, after this imagination, there was no need to



The transparency of the Isuzu River

tell my daughter about how the love that had been concealed between her father and I most likely manifested itself. I wonder whether it is the soul that moves the body or the body that moves the soul. It seems that even scholars do not know how much fantasy lies directly behind so-called reality? As I think about this I want to make this spot a place for fantasy, the true food of the human soul.

Stone steps, formed as if grown from the belly of the earth, beckon to us. Arriving at the top, the Kotaijingu (the Main Sanctuary) simply, yet mystically, appears before us. It is here that Amaterasu Omikami is worshipped. Lying somewhere is the mirror that symbolizes this goddess. However, just as we cannot see a human soul, this supreme treasure has never been seen by a single person. The journey of the traveler's body ends here after putting both hands together to say a momentary prayer in front of fluttering pieces of white cloth. But what happens to the soul? The soul of the traveller released in front of this white cloth begins a journey of its own. This is what I felt 11 years ago. Borne by the fluttering of the white cloth my imagination was spirited off to an invisible world. Very freely. Very gently. Very pleasantly.

Now, I wonder what a child's mind conjures up in front of this peaceful and beautiful landscape. My daughter stands motionless in front of the white cloth with her hands together.

The only way to take a look at the unique features of the architecture of the Kotaijingu is to peer over the high fence that runs along the back. From here we get a clear view of the beautiful roof. A product of the ultimate in human imagination, the roof is an amalgamation of supreme modesty and supreme elegance. The gold covering along its edge is dazzling. The buildings of Ise Jingu are rebuilt every 20 years. Their perpetuity is different



Amaterasu Omikami is worshipped at the Kotaijingu (the Main Sanctuary)

from that of the solid pyramids of Egypt. According to the words of a craftsman, it is by rebuilding at this kind of interval that craftsmen are trained. In my view, this kind of pragmatism required for making things is indeed one feature of Japanese culture.

It is at this point that I must tell my daughter of the beauty of the shrines we have found during a walk in the forest. "Look. The colors and aesthetic detail of the buildings are exactly the same as those of the trees. One gets the feeling that it was nature herself who created these buildings. The people of long ago lent nature a hand. Became the hand of nature..." This story belonged to the misty setting. I am certain that Ise Jingu delights in the gently falling rain that makes the beauty of nature stand out so.

The sky was extremely clear the next day. At about nine in the morning we arrived in Asuka, home of the *Man'yoshu*, a collection of ancient Japanese poetry compiled around the end of the eighth century, and a place crowded with ancient history. We rented two bicycles at a bike rental shop in front of the station and spent the whole day through until evening riding from ancient burial mounds to the mysterious stones, not to mention Asuka Temple. I was very impressed by the Ishibutai Burial Mound (the Stone Burial Mound). According to the pam-

phlet, it is the greatest of Japan's stone burial mounds, where stones have been piled one atop the other. I was impressed by the size and shape of the stones. I had the feeling that these stones, which formed the shape of a person lying down, were taking me back even further than the time travel I had experienced at Ise Jingu. I felt the stones vibrating and they took me to a mysterious space. While I was savoring this time travel, my daughter was showing more interest in her bicycle of the present than in the attractions of ancient times.

However, since this was her journey, the next day I adjusted myself to my daughter's pace and spent a leisurely day sightseeing in Nara. For all that, I skillfully manipulated her curiosity, which consisted solely in being interested in feeding the deer which live easily in the temple grounds, by ensuring that at the very least I dragged her to the great statue of Buddha and the figure of *Asura*. We finally visited the large Buddha inside Todaiji Temple, a world heritage, and the elegant wooden statue of *Asura* in the gallery of National Treasure at Kofukuji Temple, another world heritage. My daughter was naturally impressed. But until returning to Tokyo, she spent her very last moments feeding the deer that roam freely through the parks in the town. It was here, in front of the cheeky yet adorable deer who show no interest in anything but food, that this spiritual journey of mother and child returned to the reality of the present. **UJI**

Corinne Bret is a journalist who has worked for French and Japanese magazines. She has also written books in both French and Japanese — her major works include Kabuki. She has actively participated in various symposiums and forums and has appeared on TV and radio programs.