

Daikon Harvest

by Jiryu Mark Rutschman-Byler

from *Puerto del Sol*
Volume 41, Number 2
2006

A day of no work is a day of no eating.
—Chinese Zen Master Baizhang

In Japan in the winter, we eat daikon. Zen monks in particular eat a whole lot of daikon. It's an enormous tapered white root, technically related to but ridiculously translated as "radish," around a foot long and up to maybe four inches around. It's in our soups, in the side-dishes, in the *takuan* pickles that we crunch with rice and maneuver with chopsticks at the end of a meal to clean out our bowls.

"Tomorrow daikon," the disciplinarian Shungaku-san says to me one day, shoving my shoulder.

"What?"

"Ejo-san, Ankai-san with. Big daikon truck. Big work," Shungaku-san explains in halting English, not condescending to use Japanese even with Westerners who, like me, understand enough to get by. He scowls and wanders away.

I've known Shungaku-san to be both kind and brutal, but this time I can't distinguish a particular mood from his base-line gruffness, and I can't tell if my assignment is punishment, reward, or chance. Whatever his motivation, though, I am honored to be included in the work. I've been at Gendoji Temple for close to a year, but I still get the feeling of being picked last for every team—my liturgical functions are limited, my work is invariably supervised. I understand that I don't have the language skills to take care of the temple like the core of Japanese monks, and I appreciate the wisdom of our abbot's assessment that it is best for us handful of Westerners to just devote ourselves to Zen meditation and not concern ourselves with the cultural complexities of Japanese temple life. Still, I can get to feeling infantilized, oppressed by the lack of confidence in us. To be invited on an outing to which a third Japanese monk could just have easily been assigned, and to be trusted with the hard work the trip implies, is refreshing. *Perhaps I do have a place here, I consider; perhaps I am finally becoming a part of things.*

Honored though I am, the prospect intimidates me: it will be the second time that I will harvest daikon, and I can't quite shake the memory of the first. Strings heavy with daikon drying from that harvest still hang from rafters throughout the courtyard, reminding me. That day the donation was a farmer's sweeping arm gesture: "Here is my daikon field, take what you can," a sort of daikon shopping spree, an all-you-can-pick day of daikon. It was an endless, dreary, cold, and stormy day of muddy, hunched-over labor. There were ten or twelve of us, and we returned to the temple sore and exhausted; I can only imagine how hard we will have it this time, with only three.

A parishioner loans us a flatbed truck for the job—"huge," I think, not realizing the extent to which I've internalized the Japanese size scale, and not pausing to imagine how ridiculously compact it would look next to its counterpart in the US. We get on the road just as

formal breakfast begins, the young monks Ejo-san, Ankai-san, and I having already eaten together in the kitchen, quietly preparing for our big day as the morning chanting still rumbled in the ceremony hall. Although I am heartened by the clear sky, the morning is bitter cold, and promises a stiff-fingered, brutal day for us to pack the enormous truck full of daikon.

We set out driving, shoulder-to-shoulder in the warm cab of the truck, and very soon we stop for cans of hot coffee and convenience store snacks. *We need the energy*, I reflect, sucking down my sweetened milk coffee and crunching a chocolate pretzel. We drive on, chugging along the coast, winding through mountains, snacking, and chatting in our characteristic Gendoji blend of Japanese and English. *Gendogese*, we call it, *Gendogo*.

After about two hours, we come to the city of Miyazu. It is mid-morning, and I expect that we have at last arrived at the farm. Our nice road trip is over, and it is time to get to the fields for our daikon. After some deliberation between Ejo-san and Ankai-san, much of which is lost on me, they park the truck at the train station. We go inside, buy a couple more cans of hot coffee, and ask the vendor for directions to somewhere. She points us on our way.

We drive to a nearby parking lot, then walk to the base of a chair lift. Ejo-san buys three tickets at a booth, and we all ride the lift up the mountain. As we climb, dangling our feet over the precipice below, I turn my head back and watch the city shrink and the ocean grow wider. Being so high is spectacular, but I can't establish its relation to daikon—it seems strange that we have to cut through a tourist attraction to get to the fields, and anyway, how will we get all of the daikon from here into the truck at the foot of the mountain?

Ejo-san tells me that we are at one of the National Scenic Spots of Japan: a land bridge, an elevated sand bar that seals off a bay from the ocean. It is a thin strip of land, covered with trees, that spans a mile or two of bay and connects the opposite shores. From the particular mountainside we are on, the suggestion is to look backwards between one's legs at the land bridge. When I do, the clear ocean water seems like the sky, and the tree-covered sand bar indeed like a "Bridge of the Heavens."

Eventually we ride the lift back down to the city and walk to the truck. We drive on far past the city, stop at a lonely gas station for some more cans of coffee, and pull over by some rice paddies to drink them with *okashi*, the rice and sweet bean treats that Ankai-san brought from the temple. It is getting warmer out—a beautiful day is emerging—but I am worried about what the coming hours hold. *Jesus, guys, this is fun and all, but we still have the truck to fill up!* I try to be a good sport in spite of myself, and I pee behind the truck while we all laugh at the tired cultural quip about coffee: how the Japanese suck it down, while expatriate Westerners prefer green tea.

After our snacks, we drive a few more minutes and stop at a farmhouse. We are welcomed at the door by a rough-faced, kind couple, who direct us to their family altar, an elaborate alcove with statues and plaques, all lit up with tiny candles and lamps. Ejo-san has draped his long black formal travel robe and surplice over his monastic work clothes, and, while our hosts sit watching, he officiates a short service which the three of us perform chanting and bowing to the Buddha and the family's ancestors.

Next, tea. We eat sweets and chat about our abbot's health, the weather, and whatnot. The farm couple takes a picture or two, appropriately impressed that I am an American Zen monk practicing at the rigorous Gendoji Temple, and furthermore that I can even speak a little of their language. ("How skilled in Japanese!" generous Japanese invariably say, even at the first mispronounced "Hello" or "Excuse me.") I smile and shake my head—"Not at all, not at all; very bad, very bad"—and drink my tea whole-heartedly, steeling myself for the coming hours of furious daikon harvest that, at this rate, will probably go on into the night.

Finally we go out to their driveway, and the farm husband raises the clanging door of a storage shed. He gestures towards some clean and orderly stacks of daikon: "It's over there," he says.

With the couple's help, we spend about twenty minutes loading the truck in manic, over-drive Japanese monk style. We tie a tarp over the top, say goodbye, and drive to the beach, where

we run around, jumping and playing and squealing like kids. Ankai-san gives us a demonstration of the martial art our abbot forbids him from practicing; Ejo-san "finds" a cigarette on the ground, and we sit together watching the water while he smokes. The waves crash in and we sing *Simon and Garfunkel* hits.

"Jiryu-san wish you 'Homeward Bound'?" Ejo-san asks me sweetly, between puffs, as we finish a particularly moving chorus of the song.

I look out across the ocean—squint to see if I can spot the Farallon Islands or San Francisco's Ocean Beach, but there is only water, rippling into small waves. My mind drops into my belly, the *hara* center where our abbot insists our attention should abide, not just in meditation but always and in all activities. Its depth and stillness wash over me again—this ancient and familiar peace—the borders of my body grow less rigid, regain their natural fluidity.

I remember our abbot's constant teaching: "All beings are Buddha.... All things, your true self," and I remember that it is so. I know why I am in Japan, and though I'm far from home, I have no regrets. I look over at Ejo-san, tap my *hara* belly center with my palm, and answer in my clumsy Japanese, "Yes—want *real* 'Homeward Bound,' here *hara*."

He nods and we are silent. A nauseating wave of homesickness sweeps over me.

Soon our frivolity resurfaces and we banter on until we finally get too hungry, and drive off to a restaurant for noodles. Farther on, we stop at McDonalds for a drive-thru dessert—coffee and apple pies—and chat and sing our way home.

"Jiryu-san, everything that happened today is secret, ok?" Ejo-san says as we near Gendoji, pulling out of a gas station where we've thrown away our coffee cups and apple pie cartons.

"Ok," I say. "It's a secret."

We arrive back at the temple, and the assembly leaps out from evening service to greet us and unload the daikon at classical Japanese temple pace. As we run back and forth from the truck to the kitchen, there are murmurs of praise—everyone is impressed at the load that three guys alone seem to have picked in a day. We try to look tired. An American monk, Nengo-san, looks at me, impressed.

"Wow," he says, "must've been a hell of a hard day!"

"The weather was good," I respond, and it is not untrue but I can say no more.

After the daikon is all unloaded and the crowd has dispersed back into the buildings, my friends Ankai-san and Ejo-san climb back into the truck, to return it with a token crate of daikon to the parishioner who lent it. The cab seems empty with only the two Japanese monks inside.

"Shall I come?" I suggest, leaning on the truck.

"No thanks," Ejo-san says, smiling and starting the engine. "You've done enough."

The truck pulls away, and, standing in the deserted parking lot, I remember that I will only ever be a guest here. My usefulness is sporadic and soon exhausted. The cultural door might crack open, a warm breeze might blow through, but sooner or later it springs shut again, and I am left standing alone in a lot.

I go back to my room and put on my flowing formal robes for dinner. The deep evening bell rings through the temple, through the walls, through my body.