The Primordial Forest

by Richard Crume, FSPE

My wife and I recently traveled to Japan to see relatives. While there, we wanted to do some hiking. We discovered a very special trail through a primordial forest—an ancient forest that had not been disturbed by humankind for perhaps thousands of years, maybe longer. The forest was well protected because it was associated with an old Shinto shrine where the priests believed the forest was the home of spirits. The trees in the forest were giant—some of the largest I have ever seen—and the footpath was steep and slippery at times as we scrambled over moss-covered stepping stones and around large boulders. Wild camellias in bloom were everywhere.

We were hiking for an hour or so when we came upon a remarkable site. Carved into the side of a very large boulder, beside a lovely stream, was an ancient image of the Buddha. The image, we later learned, was almost 1,000 years old. No one knows how it got there or who carved it or why.

Although it was a cloudy, drizzly day, for a brief moment, there was a break in the clouds. A ray of sunlight, wavering with the motion of the water, reflected from the stream's surface onto the Buddha's face. It made the Buddha's face look alive; and, for an instant in my mind, I was in his presence. Was it a message to me … from up above?

My imagination was running wild at this point, and I heard a faint and mysterious voice in the wind calling out to me from a distance. What was it? A spirit in the forest or the Buddha himself? I shivered as I heard the voice again. "Come along," it cried out, "come along with me." I listened carefully … "Come along. Let's go!" It was my wife farther up the trail, urging me to keep moving.

This event reminds me of a parable about Ryokan, a Buddhist Zen master who lived a simple life in

a little hut deep in the forest—maybe this same forest—at the foot of a tall mountain. One evening, while Ryokan was away, a thief entered the hut, only to discover there was nothing in it to steal. At that moment, Ryokan returned home and, confronting the thief, said, "You have come a long way to visit me, and you should not return empty-handed. So, please, take the clothes I am wearing as a gift."

The thief was bewildered, but he took the clothes and rushed away.

That evening, Ryokan sat naked, bathed in moonlight, thinking, *Poor fellow, I wish I could give him this beautiful moon*.

Perhaps this story has something to do with countering evil with kindness. Or maybe the moral of the story is this: Why covet your material possessions when you could be sitting naked in the moonlight, instead!? **Ω**