

To A Nobleman in Kyoto

By Kukai

You ask me why I entered the mountain deep and cold,
Awesome, surrounded by steep peaks and grotesque rocks,
A place that is painful to climb and difficult to descend,
Wherein reside the gods of the mountain and the spirits of trees.

Have you not seen, O have you not seen,
The peach and plum blossoms in the royal garden?
They must be in full bloom, pink and fragrant,
Now opening in the April showers, now falling in the spring gales;
Flying high and low, all over the garden the petals scatter.
Some sprigs may be plucked by the strolling spring maidens,
And the flying petals plucked by the fluttering spring orioles.

Have you not seen, O have you not seen,
The water gushing up in the divine spring of the garden?
No sooner does it arise than it flows away forever:
Thousands of shining lines flow as they come forth,
Flowing, flowing, flowing into an unfathomable abyss.
Turning, whirling again, they flow on forever,
And no one knows where they will stop.

Have you not seen, O have you not seen,
That billions that have lived in China, in Japan?
None have been immortal, from time immemorial:
Ancient sage kings or tyrants, good subjects or bad,
Fair ladies or homely - who could enjoy eternal youth?
Noble men and lowly alike, without exception, die away;
They have all died, reduced to dust and ashes;
The singing halls and dancing stages have become the abode of foxes.
Transient as dreams, bubbles or lightning, all are perpetual travellers.

Have you not seen, O have you not seen,
This has been man's fate; how can you alone live forever?
Thinking of this, my heart always feels torn;
You, too, are like the sun going down in the western mountains,
Or a living corpse whose span of life is nearly over.
Futile would be my stay in the capital;
Away, away, I must go, I must not stay there.
Release me, for I shall be master of the great void,
A child of Shingon must not stay there.

I have never tired of watching the pine trees and rocks at Mount Koya;
The limpid stream of the mountain is the source of my inexhaustible joy.
Discard pride in earthly gains;
Do not be scorched in the burning house, the triple world!
Discipline in the woods alone lets us soon enter the eternal Realm.