

## A ONE-WEEK RETREAT AT A ZEN MONASTERY IN JAPAN: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION

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Zen is a sect of Buddhism that was adopted and embraced by the samurai warrior class in Kamakura era Japan in the thirteenth century. Its philosophy and teachings influenced and constitute much of today's Japanese culture and way of life.<sup>1</sup> Zen is, indeed, a civil religion of Japan, as much as Judeo-Christianity is so much a part of everyday American life.

The teaching of Zen is ineffable. The best way to understand *satori*, or enlightenment, is by directly experiencing it in daily life. According to D. T. Suzuki, "*Satori* must be the outgrowth of one's inner life and not a verbal implantation brought from the outside."<sup>2</sup> Zen should be "personally experienced by each of us in his inner spirit."<sup>3</sup>

In the last several years, I have participated in the retreats of a Roshi (Japanese Zen Master) who makes annual trips to the United States to teach Zen. I practice sitting meditation every day and have read more than 50 books on Zen. This Roshi invited me to attend a *dai sesshin*, a one-week retreat at his monastery in Japan during my sabbatical in the fall semester of 2003.

The Japanese word *sesshin* means collecting thoughts, and it refers to an intensive training period for monks to concentrate only on *zazen* (sitting meditation) in order to attain *satori*. During *sesshin* they are exempt from their everyday chores such as cleaning, laundry, bathing, yard work, or going to town for *takuhatsu* (begging). Throughout the duration of the retreat, the participants are supposed to find and understand their true nature by sitting and seeing themselves in a special, non-ordinary situation.

### Entering the Zen Monastery

I arrived at the Zen monastery, which is a *senmon dōjō* (literally "a specialized training center") of a *honzan* (the head temple of a sect) at 4:45 p.m. on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003. My American friend, Amy, and I were greeted

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<sup>1</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: MJF Books, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism First Series* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), p. 23.

with the shouting of “Doooooray!” by the head monk, who appeared smiling at the entrance to the monastery. He greeted us and showed us the shoe shelf next to the Entrance Hall where we took off our footwear. He then led us to the Roshi’s guestroom in the Main Hall, where there were several foreigners from Europe and North and South America who were to become our colleagues at the Zen retreat. Among them was Chris, one of my Zen friends from the United States, who participated in the same one-week retreat in November of the previous year and shared his experiences with Amy and myself.

The Roshi entered the room and greeted us with a *gassho* (bow with palm-to-palm greeting) and a handshake – he said he wanted to welcome us in a Western way as well. We sat down on the sofas, and the head monk brought some Japanese sweets and whipped powdered green tea called *matcha*. “Welcome to our monastery. You’ve come a long way to Japan. Please, help yourself to the sweets and tea,” the Zen Master said. Just as I was reaching out my tea bowl, he said, “Kinko-san, you take the sweets first and then the tea.” “I know, I know!” I thought. I had taken lessons in Japanese tea ceremony and flower arrangement before in order to increase my eligibility as a Japanese bride, but I had forgotten the manners and etiquette altogether in my 25 years in the U.S. I ate the sweet *yokan* and then sipped green tea. Both the arts of tea ceremony and flower arrangement are related to Zen.

The Roshi briefly explained the logistics of the retreat and asked us if we had any questions. “I wish you all luck in completing the one-week retreat,” he said, and added that it was very important for us to persevere and finish it instead of perhaps giving it up altogether at a midpoint.

The schedule of the Zen retreat was as follows:

- 3:00 a.m. *Choka* (Morning Service) Chanting of sutras in the Main Hall
- 3:50 a.m. Chanting of the Heart Sutra in the Meditation Hall (*zendo*)
- 3:55 a.m. *Baito* (Plum Tea) Time
- 4:00 a.m. *Shukuza* (Breakfast)
- 4:15 a.m. *Dokusan* (Private Interview with the Roshi) and  
*Zazen* (Sitting Meditation)
- 5:00 a.m. *Zazen*
- 6:00 a.m. *Zazen*
- 7:00 a.m. - 8:00 a.m. Break (Monks’ Study Hours)
- 8:00 a.m. *Teisho* (Roshi’s Lecture)
- 9:00 a.m. Chanting

9:30 a.m. *Zazen*  
 10:30 a.m. *Saiza* (Lunch)  
 11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. Break (Monk's Study Hours)  
 1:00 p.m. *Sarei* (Tea and Cake)  
 1:05 p.m. *Zazen*  
 2:00 p.m. *Dokusan* (Interview) and *Zazen*  
 3:00 p.m. *Kinhin* (Walking Meditation)  
 3:30 p.m. Chanting  
 4:00 p.m. *Yakuseki* ("Medicinal" Dinner)  
 5:00 p.m. Break  
 6:00 p.m. *Zazen*  
 7:00 p.m. *Zazen*  
 8:00 p.m. *Sarei* (Tea and Cake)  
 8:05 p.m. *Dokusan* and *Zazen*  
 9:00 p.m. *Yaza* (Night Sitting) Lights out at 9 PM  
 10:30 p.m. *Kaichin* (Going to Bed)

The Japanese and foreign male practitioners were given a few rooms in a small house adjacent to the Zen Meditation Hall, where the training monks slept and studied and which we used for meditation. The four female participants were given a small room next to the Main Hall that had several pieces of furniture with teacups for guests of the Zen Master and about two dozen books. The room was crowded, and we had to be meticulous about where to put our luggage to make space for one another's *futon* bedding placed on the *tatami* floor called *kashiwa buton*, in which you make a "taco" of yourself. Pillows were not provided. I went to bed early hoping to get a good night's sleep.

My alarm clock set off at 2:45 a.m. on Sunday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>. I left the room with my toiletries to go to the ladies' room that had only one sink and a cold water faucet. Autumn in this part of Japan can get very cold, especially in the wee hours of the morning! The cold water woke me up.

The women stood in front of the room waiting for the Japanese training monks, lay participants, and foreign men. The monk who was also the monastery's cook rang the bell that hung from the ceiling in the hallway across our "bedroom" with a mallet. In a Zen monastery, there is no need for oral orders since sound-producing instruments such as the ringing of different bells, a wooden panel, a bronze plate, or wooden clappers indicate every event and activity.

I followed the foreign men and entered the Main Hall at 3:00 a.m.

When walking around in a monastery, hands are to be held together right below the chest (*shashu*), and halls are entered with the left foot first and exited with the right foot first. Upon entering the hall, the monks opened all the *shoji* paper doors on the side of the garden, and very cool November air came in making me feel chilly. It was still pitch-black outside.

### Chanting

The chanting began as soon as everyone took a seat on the *tatami* floor. Japan is a hierarchical society, and here at the monastery, this was obvious in the seating arrangements, whether in the Meditation Hall (*zendo*), the Main Hall, or the dining room.<sup>4</sup> The best seats are reserved for the higher ranks, starting with senior monks with positions, then junior monks, lay Japanese men, and foreign men, with women holding the lowest rank – obviously a sexist tradition! The training monks usually formed one or two lines as they sat, depending on the activity – chanting, listening to the Roshi’s lecture, waiting for their private interview, etc.

In the middle of the Main Hall near the *shoji* doors, there is a huge *mokugyo* (wooden instrument) and a gigantic bell, which is big enough to bathe a baby, and also a Buddha statue on the other side of the room with water, flowers, and incense that are offered every day. *Mokugyo* literally means “a wooden fish,” and the sound it creates has an interesting hypnotic effect of making the audience’s mind receptive to what comes next. These instruments accompany the chanting by keeping a rhythm.

According to Suzuki, chanting serves a dual function, “primarily as getting in touch with the thought of the founder, and secondarily as creating spiritual merit.”<sup>5</sup> The monks chanted various sutras remarkably fast. The *Heart Sutra*, for example, was chanted in about 50 seconds, when it usually takes at least one and a half minutes to chant it. Sutra reading is comparable to prayers in other religions.

The chanting of the sutras went on and on until 3:45 a.m., when we exited the Main Hall (with our right foot first) and went to the Meditation Hall that we entered with the left foot first. My legs had been quite numb, and it was difficult to walk normally in the corridors on cold wooden floors. Rubber slippers are used on the stone floor between the wooden corridor

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<sup>4</sup> Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk* (New York; Grove Press, 1934), p.77.

and the Meditation Hall. At the entrance to the Meditation Hall, one makes *gassho* before the Buddha statue and walks to the assigned seat, a cushion. The rubber slippers are left together on the stone floor in front of the seat on the *tatami* mat. Zen prefers preciseness in everything.

### Eating

After everyone is seated, *baito* (plum tea) is served. We have to stand up and fetch the teacup from the shelf located on top of the windows, then sit down and place the cup on the right hand side of the cushion. After the head person puts his cup on the wooden railing in front of him, the next person follows, and then the next, and so on. It almost looks like synchronized swimming. The monk, serving the tea that is made of a small piece of pickled plum and hot water holds the kettle in his hand. The two people sitting next to him put out the cups together and the monk pours the tea into them swiftly. When the last person is served, we make *gassho* and drink it. It is very sour and is supposed to wake you up.

I really enjoyed eating the simple vegetarian cuisine, which consists mostly of rice, *miso* (soy bean paste) soup, cooked vegetables, and pickles, along with sweets for *sarei* (tea and cake time). Eating is considered part of Zen training, and only ten minutes are allocated for all of us to eat. Seating in the Dining Hall is also done according to rank, and we sit on our knees or cross-legged in front of the low wooden table on the *tatami* mats.

A few sutras are chanted before the meal as the highest-ranking monk opens his *jihatsu* (meal kit) brought from the shelf in the Meditation Hall. *Jihatsu* consists of five plastic or japanned (lacquered) wooden bowls that are of different sizes stuck together for each individual's use. The same bowls are used for every meal. The bowls are wrapped in a cloth napkin along with chopsticks. The highest-ranking monk opens his *jihatsu*, unfolds his chopsticks, and places the bowls on the table as he keeps chanting the sutras, and everyone follows suit.

Three monk/waiters served each meal. Serving food, a manual labor, is part of their Zen practice, and they sweat profusely from their forehead as they work at their task. They are not supposed to make any noise or spill food as they serve the food. They must concentrate on the task at hand, but they occasionally failed, and the head monk scolded them rather severely. It reminded me of a military command and the type of discipline and punishment used in that context.

Each meal is served in the order of rank, and the lowest rank has

much less time to eat than the higher ranked people, a risk for developing stomach pain and digestive problems. Eating takes place in silence to appreciate every single bit of food that is given. I found it very difficult to eat *daikon* (radish pickles) quietly, though. I needed to pay attention to every bite. "Silence!" the head monk would yell when he heard someone making some noise.

*Udon* noodles are the exception to this rule. You can slurp the noodles from the broth in the large *jihatsu* bowl to your heart's content. The monks made really loud noises as they slurped the noodles. This is called *udon kuyo*, or "blessing the noodles." Noodles were given for lunch in the Dining Hall on the first day, but were also served on a few nights at 8 p.m. as a night-snack in the Meditation Hall. I genuinely enjoyed the taste of *al dente* noodles, the broth, and the condiments of chopped green onions, tempura bits, sesame seeds, and grated ginger. I also enjoyed making noise.

Rice gruel, which is mostly hot water with a few dozen grains of rice at the bottom, was served for breakfast every day, and was given as three servings in three rounds. We had to offer *saba*, or a few grains of rice, to the hungry ghosts by leaving a few grains on the table. You "drink" the first round. In the second serving, you add a pickled plum and eat it. The third serving, just like the first one, is drunk. It took me a few days to do this right. Chris said that the best thing to do when you do not know what to do in the monastery is the principle of "Monkey See, Monkey Do." Simply observe what others are doing and imitate them. I had read the layperson's manual that Chris had given me on our flight to Japan but found that reading it to understand conceptually and translating the knowledge into action can be two entirely different things.

After every meal, *jihatsu* is washed with tea that a monk/waiter pours into the largest bowl. The tips of the chopsticks are washed first, and then wiped with a cloth napkin and left on the table temporarily. The tea is poured in the second largest bowl that is cleaned with the fingers and finally poured into the smallest bowl and then it is drunk mixed with the leftover taste of the food. There is no use of detergent or water to clean the utensils. How ecological! In a Zen monastery nothing gets wasted: all the vegetable parts are utilized in cooking, and no water is ever used to clean the bowls and utensils. The head monk claps the wooden clappers when the meal is over, signaling that it is time to move on to the next activity, whether a chore or meditation

**Meditating**

We did not bathe for one week during the retreat. I brought dozens of disposable body wipes and baby wipes for my personal hygiene. I used them in the ladies' room every day in the evening, and we took turns. I brought lots of changes of clothes as well.

Meditating for ten hours a day was not really my forte. The meditation hours were dispersed throughout the day. We were not sitting ten hours straight per se. Feeling pain in the legs from the very start is quite common. I was told that learning to accept and overcome pain is the first test in Zen, and I really had to learn how to cope with pain as I sat.

*Kyosaku*, or *keisaku*, is a warning stick carried by the supervising monk during *zazen* in the Meditation Hall. He walks around checking on everyone's posture and concentration. When a monk slacks off in his concentration – for example, he falls asleep during *zazen* – four beatings of *kyosaku* are given on each of his shoulders. The sound of this warning stick is awful.

As I listened to the beatings of the stick and their echoes due to the acoustic effects of the very high ceiling and the stone floor, I thought it was nothing but violence, an abuse and a violation of human rights. The supervising monks broke the sticks into two pieces as they struck the junior monks. This happened at least a few times during the retreat. I had great sympathy for the beaten monks. "They must be hurting so bad!" I thought.

As for the lay practitioners, the supervising monks use the warning stick only when they deliberately ask for it. They spank them a total of four times, and rather mildly compared to the eight beatings the training monks received. My female colleagues asked for the warning stick on the first day. I was wondering about their reaction, but they seemed just fine afterwards.

On the next day, when the pain in my calves and legs became so bad that I could not concentrate any longer, I had the nerve to try *kyosaku* for the first time. You make *gassho* and bow to the supervising monk when he comes in front of you. He will make *gashho* and bow to you. The right hand goes under the chest and the left hand on the wooden railing as one leans to the left to have the right shoulder struck with the warning stick. The supervising monk strike there twice. Then, one leans to the right, and he strikes the left shoulder another two times.

It was painful at first, but I forgot the pain in my legs, and my concentration became much better than before. My shoulders had been hurting from so much typing and filing that had taken place two weeks before, and they were tense and stiff. After taking the *kyosaku*, I felt very

relaxed and my shoulders did not hurt anymore. The monk must have hit the acupuncture pressure points to release my pain. I asked for the warning stick as often as twice during a one-hour sitting period in order to deal with the pain in my legs and lower back.

Starting on the fifth day, I experienced an excruciatingly bad pain as I did *zazen*. My back, fortunately, was okay, but my lower back, buttocks, and legs were in severe pain, as I had never experienced before in my entire life. I thought that if someone had pulled my legs, they would have come right away from my body. They did not feel like they belonged to my body anymore. I knew that they were there, but they remained mostly numb and asleep. The pain was so severe that my soul was saying, "I want to get out of this body!" I could not concentrate much after the pain began, and also, I could feel my blood moving through my legs, calves, and feet. It was a very weird sensation, one that I had never experienced before.

Pain is considered a necessary part of attaining enlightenment, but how much pain you can endure is a totally different question. I am not a masochist. I bought ten small, disposable, adhesive heating pads in a convenience store near the monastery and used one or two at a time to relieve pain in my lower back and legs. I knew I should not have done this, but the warm heat helped me with the circulation of my blood and relieved much of the pain. I gave extra pads to two young Japanese laymen who told me that they had been suffering from pain in the back, buttocks, and legs, as well. They really appreciated my kindness.

The heating pads helped somehow, but we still had to tolerate a lot of pain. The situation seemed like death. My spirit was screaming from pain, and wanted to detach itself from my aching body. All I could think about was a way to become free from the agonizing aching body, which did not feel like mine any longer. There was no other way but to sit, cope with the pain, and wait for time to pass. The pain was so bad that the distinction between my mind and body got blurry. When the bell rang, indicating the end of the meditation, I was so thankful and appreciative. Now I was free to walk, get out of the hall, use the bathroom, etc.

The week passed rather quickly. During the first few days, I needed to orient myself to a new "lifestyle," which made me contemplate its relation to an alternative way of life that seeks convenience and efficiency above everything else. I started to enjoy the next few days, especially the food. It was interesting to note that my five senses became more powerful and enhanced as time went by. For example, the national election was going on at the time of the retreat and several candidates came over to the



neighborhood in campaign cars blasting their messages from the loud speakers, and I could hear them approach the monastery from very far away.

### **Aftermath**

One night I caught a glimpse of the full moon on my way from the Main Hall to the Meditation Hall, and the silver moon glittered like the sun. It was very bright and beautiful. I saw the huge bell right outside the toilet from the window and was mesmerized by the beauty of the green color of the bronze bell mixed with the bright orange color of the sunrise. The colors were very vivid. I could smell the night-snack noodles being brought into the Meditation Hall from the kitchen, and sometimes I could smell what the cook was cooking for the meal.

My tongue also got more sensitive, and I could pick up subtle tastes in food. For example, I could taste every single ingredient in the cream puff that was served at *sarei*. I started to have a different perspective on whatever existed in the universe, and it seemed to have resulted from a transformation of my consciousness. Birds sang differently at various times. The rays of the sun changed as time went by. Trees make different sounds when there is wind. These are all obvious facts about the universe, but I had never paid attention to them before.

Life after the retreat has definitely been different. I appreciate people and things around me a lot more. For example, I am thankful for my meals, thinking of the people who are involved in making it – farmers, truckers, wholesalers, retailers, cashiers, etc. Many people support me in my life, and I am truly allowed to live by virtue of the powerful forces of the universe. Now, when I am teaching at the university, I am appreciative of my students who helped make me a professor by paying tuition, which becomes my salary. I am provided with just about everything I need in my life. My concentration is also much better. I thoroughly put myself into whatever I am doing at the time and focus, forgetting that there is an “I” that exists who is doing the chore. I become one with the job and do not think about anything else. I am effective and a productive actor in whatever I do.

According to D. T. Suzuki, Zen meditation helps “to make wisdom grow from personal, spiritual experience”<sup>6</sup> and to acquire “a new point of

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<sup>6</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen* (New York: Grove, 1961), p. 81.

view in which life assumes a fresher, deeper, and more satisfying aspect.”<sup>7</sup> This new point of view concerning life and the universe is the essence of *satori*.<sup>8</sup> The one-week retreat was an eye-opening experience for me. It was a world apart from my everyday life experiences.

I felt like I had slipped into thirteenth-century Japan, and I did not miss modern efficiency and conveniences too much. While adjusting to the monastic lifestyle, I found was able to overcome physical pain. The long hours of meditation brought me a new world through the transformation of consciousness that continues to enhance my five senses and increases appreciation, understanding, and compassion.

If someone were to ask me if I would want to do it again, I would say, “Yes!”

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 233.