

An American Monk's Japan

by Jiryu Mark Rutschman-Byler

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I've been back in the States for almost a year, but Japan still lingers in me. My year and half of training in temples there continues to inform me, and though I can't say exactly what I "got out of it," I can try, even as I share my concerns about the approach there, to express my deep gratitude for the chance to have experienced it. I could say Japanese Zen taught me how much I love American Zen, just as American Zen continues to point me towards the depth of my respect for the Japanese Way. Each answers my frustrations with the other.

I went to Japan because I wanted to get closer to the source of a tradition to which I was finding myself increasingly connected and devoted. Mixed in with my motivations was, I confess, a periodic feeling that the Zen Center style had translated and adapted the tradition more than was necessary or even responsible. When comparing our approach to that of the early Japanese Buddhists, whom I have heard copied the Chinese style painstakingly, to the extent of importing even Chinese carpenters to build the temples for the first two-hundred years or so, the characteristic American certainly with which we had re-created the tradition seemed careless to me. I looked back towards Japan to see for myself whether we were too quick in assuming that the transmission of Buddhism was complete.

What I found in Japan was at the deepest levels no different from what I had been exposed to at Zen Center—as though the transmission was in fact seamless. The teachings on *shikantaza*, the inner diligence of non-grasping, releasing, and totally accepting all things as Buddha *just as they are*, were fundamentally identical. The context and emphases of the teachings—the forms and energy of the approach—was, however, very different. There was unequivocal monastic dedication, a feeling of being at the pulsing heart of the timeless "Ancient Way"—Zen seemed to be lived not with innovation, but just as the great Ancestors had lived it.

When I first arrived at Bukkokuji, for example, where I was to spend a year of my time in Japan, I met a monk whose hands and ears were deformed from the extreme winter cold of the unheated temple. His swollen, cracked hands and ears embodied for me the intense and total devotion I found there to the formal practice. In Zen classics like *Shobogenzo Zuimonki* we read about detaching from our bodies; flinging ourselves into the pains and rigors of monastic life, in an assembly under a single teacher; pursuing *zazen* exclusively; and living in radical simplicity and by *takuhatsu* begging. When I met this monk whose commitment to temple life had physically damaged him, and who in spite of his seniority was ever a disciple and would never dream of teaching, it struck me that at Bukkokuji those ancient principles were being lived *literally*. I realized that I'd always read another layer into those kinds of teachings, spiritualizing or abstracting them onto a plane where they referred to my inner orientation more than to my physical life. I was refreshed and inspired by the literal understanding—it addressed

my frustrations with Zen Center life, although eventually it became a source of frustration in its own right. I came to question the narrow and narrowing view behind it, and what seemed to me to be the adverse effects it could have in the minds and bodies of practitioners.

The teacher at Bukkokuji, Tangen Harada Roshi, is very much an “ancient” Zen master, and his example inspires the diligence there. He believes with incredible certainty that total, physical dedication to single-minded practice will lead a person to realize the truth, as he feels it has for him. “*If you set out to accomplish it, you will accomplish it; if you don’t set out to accomplish it, you will not accomplish it.*” he would always say, pushing us on to completely abandon ourselves to the practice. For him, if we had truly “set out” to realize the Way, we would not indulge ourselves in any way whatsoever: would never leave the temple grounds for town, never talk amongst ourselves, not read or write. His admonitions, the stories of the insanely rigorous training he underwent as a young monk, and the undeniable intensity and presence evident in every meeting with him, all confirmed and ignited my sense of “Ancient Practice.”

Tangen Roshi has a vicious streak and overwhelming kindness. When I first saw him entering the Buddha Hall for morning service, I was amazed and disarmed by his kindness and joy. In that moment, I understood that the strictness for which he was famous was absolutely in the service of his profound kindness. Even when he used the *kyosaku* stick with great force, shouting tremendously and once even smashing it explosively against the altar, terrifying the seated assembly, it was clear to me that his severity emanated from his kindness. Although I never doubted that in him, as my experience in Japan progressed, I encountered a new frustration—maybe also relevant to us in American Zen—that the form (of severity, in that case) was far easier to embody than the great kindness, and that a practitioner could learn the habits of severity without developing the same foundation in deep kindness.

It was hard to go from American Zen into Japanese Zen—it was like starting from zero. I was treated as though I had never heard a word of the Dharma or sat a minute of *zazen* before and I couldn’t help feeling like it was true. Whatever Zen persona I had cultivated at home was invalid—the Roshi berated me for my poor posture and the other monks, who it seemed to me were always sitting more than me, indulging less, and working harder, either ignored me or offered their candid, scathing assessments of Western Zen and Western Zen teachers. Practice there was in that a great gift: I was a “beginner” again. No matter how much I progressed or learned, when I compared my own diligence and determination to Tangen Roshi and many of the other practitioners there, any pride in my attainments would vanish, and I was left again in the fruitful if uncomfortable discouragement of the perpetual beginner.

After about a year at Bukkokuji, I went to Hōkyōji, an ancient temple set in a dramatic mountain location near Eihei-ji (Dōgen-Zenji’s home temple), to practice under the precise, demanding and sincere guidance of Shinkai Tanaka Roshi. Practice at Hōkyōji was more mainstream Sōtō Zen than at Bukkokuji, and was for me a deeper immersion in Japanese culture. While the Bukkokuji community averaged about half Westerners, at Hōkyōji there were two to four Westerners in a community of about twenty. The daily life at Hōkyōji was a continuous ritual, a “living mantra” as a good friend of mine beautifully put it. We slept in the *sōdō* (meditation hall), on the same spot we sat *zazen*; we practiced elaborate ritualized face and foot washing; we participated in frequent ceremonies far more complex and choreographed than even the highest Zen Center events; and we followed a super-formal *Eihei Shingi* version of *oryōki*. Nowhere have I experienced more strongly the Zen that is entirely a *body* practice.

It was accordingly a *hard on the body* practice, and the pace there was mind-boggling and relentless. I was constantly exhausted—though it sometimes took the form of giddy exhilaration—and I remember that the demands on even the day *before Rohatsu Sesshin* were rigorous enough to leave me falling-down tired. “Where I come from, we *rest* before *sesshin*!” I thought, exasperated.

But at Hōkyōji, exhaustion is a tool. The practice paradigm there, and throughout Japanese Zen, is that by being run ragged through lack of sleep and intense busy-ness, abandoning personal time and private space, and submitting to the whims of those higher up in the all-pervading hierarchy, a practitioner's egocentricity is broken down. I glimpsed this functioning—some freedom from the perceived “needs” and indulgent preferences of the self—even as I sometimes resented and still question the excesses and underlying assumptions of the approach. The frustration I'd had with my suspicions of the laxity of the “break and comp-day obsessed” American Zen now met an equal frustration with the relentless, ascetic style that seemed to equate nourishing rest with self-indulgence, as though under the unspoken motto: *If it isn't painful, it isn't practice.*

Japanese Zen for me, like American Zen, was a life of ambivalence and paradox. Frustrated though I was with my exhaustion and the austerities of the life there, my heart was also turning deeply towards practice, and the purity and beauty of the Way was vast and incontrovertible.

It's easy in the million frustrations
of this life
to overlook the beauty,
stunning stark simplicity.
The joy of straw
mats & gongs, iced mornings,
rustling robes and shuffling feet.
Great freedom, and great wonder.
Great annoyance—another 4&9 rest day,
cutting *daikon* greens all afternoon.

The last months in Japan for me were looking for “affinity,” what the Japanese call “*go-en*,” and I'm still driven by the theme. Maybe everything I think or feel about a place can come under “affinity”—and any idea I have about a temple or a style being “good” or “bad” for practice is nothing like a “truth,” but is finally just a function of my karmic affinities. So, while I think I have been sorting through Japanese and American Zen, looking for the real Way and the right Way, perhaps I've just been scrolling through my own mind, uncovering my own predispositions.

In any case, I will say at least that the pendulum in me is swinging now back towards the more open American style of Zen Center, and I am grateful to be back in its language of practice. I have at times believed that formal practice takes care of everything—an impulse to which Japanese Zen is well suited—and, although in a real sense it does, it seems to me that as my intention is to become a mature person, I should work on maturing all aspects of my being. To imagine that formal zazen would resolve all that I need to resolve (if I could just do enough of it, or do it properly) seems a narrow view. This leads me to appreciate the broad and inclusive perspective that Zen Center takes of practice. Whether or not it is orthodox Zen, it seems more natural and beneficial than trying to imitate or conform to a strictly Japanese style. Some aspects of Zen Center that once frustrated me in their divergence from tradition I now see as vital re-presentations of a practice being translated to our culture.

But Japan still haunts and inspires me: I still see the rainy streets and brotherhood of *takuhatsu* begging days, ringing our bells on narrow paths through rice paddies, and holding out our bowls at village and town doorways. I still shiver at the beauty of the teacups rippling down the table during morning tea, as each monk waits respectfully just an instant for his senior to drink first. I was transformed by experiencing the depth of the Zen tradition in Japan, and to commune with the intense powers and people within that ancient energy. It helps me still to understand my place as an American priest, and to clarify my own vision of American Zen.

My hope for we heirs of Japanese Zen is that, whether or not we finally choose to follow in its ancient forms, we all study, honor, and respect the Japanese roots of our tradition.