

Tasting Zen: The Tenth East-West Spiritual Exchange, 2005 ***Sister Lucy M Brydon***

The Spiritual Exchanges have been taking place since 1979 when the first group of fifty Japanese Zen monks and nuns came to Europe. This year nine of us were fortunate enough to take part, two Dominicans and seven Benedictines/Cistercians. We went as representatives of the following countries: UK, USA, France, Portugal, Holland, Norway. As a group we learned to build community together and that in itself was a good experience for people who had never met before or only briefly and immediately had to be ready to share everything.

We also varied a great deal in age, religious background, experience of inter-religious dialogue and attitude towards it. It was a very interesting experiment in community-building as we faced strange food (rice every meal, 'miso' soup and pickled everything) and strange customs (e.g. offering food and drink to the departed; communal bathing; the keisaku or stick of encouragement) and a very challenging daily time-table.

Our hosts were the Zen Faculty of the Hanazono University of Kyoto, and the individual monastic communities who welcomed us. The organisation of our visit was impeccable and utterly generous. We were escorted everywhere, and had interpreters at hand to help us out all the time. We were able to experience life in both Rinzai and Soto Zen monasteries, and we paid a day visit to a temple of the Tendai sect, too. Travelling from one place to another we had the chance to see quite a lot of Japan's largest island (two of our group also went to the monastery of Zuio-ji on the island of Shikoku) and to experience the enviable railway system of Japan and the kindness and efficiency of ordinary citizens and workers. We (women) were greatly taken by the smart uniform of taxi drivers and ticket collectors on trains: elegant suits, peaked caps, and white gloves - and by the lace antimacassars in taxis, and the feather dusters the taxi drivers kept in the boot of their cars, and used while awaiting new passengers! Pronouncing our names posed difficulties and "Lucy" soon became "Rusi-san", 'san' being the honorific suffix.

Immediately after our arrival (after a 14 hour flight and a 3 hour coach journey) we went into retreat (Osesshin, the great retreat) at the monastery of Sogen-ji. The trainees were all western here, and only the Roshi (Teacher and Head Priest) was Japanese. It was a gruelling and challenging time-table for us, feeling rather adrift in a strange culture and country, and jet-lagged as well. But we all agreed we would not have missed it for anything. Our day began at 3.15 a.m. (if you wanted coffee first!) and the first session of Choka (chant) at 4.00 a.m. After that it was Zazen (meditation) and chanting for most of the day until 10.00 p.m. We were fortunate to have time off for our own Missa (Mass) which we celebrated in the guest-house, and some free time to rest in the afternoon. By 5.00 p.m. we were again on our cushions for Zazen until 9.00 p.m. with a welcome cup of pickled plum tea and a sweet cake before the final Zazen session which we had outside in a more informal setting. Before leaving we were privileged to have a group meeting with the Roshi and interpreter, something he had not done for the previous exchange groups.

After that, the visits to other monasteries were less formal for us. The nuns' community was Soto Zen and they welcomed us as sisters and included us in their work, chanting and prayer. We were privileged to be present for an important Precept-Taking ceremony presided over by the Abbess, Shundo Aoyama who is a priest with her own temple as well as Abbess of the training monastery we stayed in. We also took part in a Dharma Debate when we shared Christian and Buddhist

teachings on prayer and the interior life, and we took part in other less profound experiences e.g. a calligraphy session, a Buddhist hymn-singing session, and of course preparing meals. We gave a (greatly appreciated) Western-style meal to the community before we left. We managed to fit in an exhilarating day of sight-seeing in Nagoya. The other Soto Zen monastery was a very ancient one, founded by Dogen Zenji himself in the thirteenth century. Situated in a most beautiful valley surrounded by high, wooded mountains it was an idyllic setting amid enormous ancient cedar trees. To get to the Dharma Hall where the 5.00 a.m. chanting took place (after an hour of zazen in the Guest Zendo, on the fourth floor of the guest house), we climbed in single file behind our 'guardian angel' 200 steps, quite an experience in the early morning. At this entirely male monastery, they had 273 trainees and 30 monk-priests to train them. While we were there, they regularly had over 200 guests each night. I felt sorry for the cooks, but they coped brilliantly, and the meals they presented to us Christian monks and nuns (in our separate refectory) were masterpieces of Japanese cuisine, and art - a feast for the eyes as well as the stomach! We were only there three full days but it felt a very full and rounded experience, more like a month!

The final part of our stay was in Kyoto, where we had also touched base after each visit to a monastery. We had a formal Symposium in the presence of Japan's leading Roshis. Members of our group gave a presentation about the monasteries we had stayed in; and there were keynote speeches from the Japanese and European DIM/MID organisers. It all ended with a very moving memorial service for Pope John Paul II, conducted by one of the Roshis, with chanting, prostrations and bells and gongs. This was followed by a concelebrated Mass with the Bishop of Kyoto, after which there was a splendid farewell banquet for all of us and invited guests.

We returned home the following day. Speaking for myself, it was a most amazing experience. I still have not processed and integrated it at any very deep level except perhaps to be aware of the joy of being in Christ. I also had a strong sense that the Zen monks and nuns and ourselves were sharing a journey towards the Real and in the Real. I would be happy to say "in God" about the kind of experience we share even though our approach differs. My overwhelming feeling is of amazement and gratitude for the whole opportunity, for the very different people in our group, together forming community for a month, and for the warm and generous welcome, kindness, compassion and hospitality we received from our Japanese hosts. Explaining the experience to my community and other interested friends has helped to put it in perspective somewhat but I still feel like one of the priests who went in the 1980s, who said it would take him a lifetime to understand what the whole thing really meant.

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