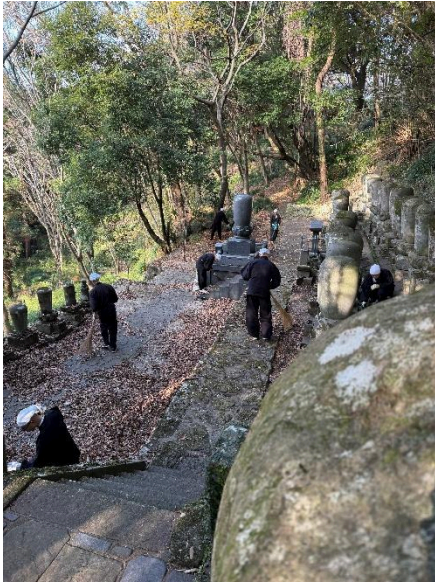


Review of my Ango at the Senmon Sodo Kotaiji, Nagasaki



My time at Senmon Sodo Kotaiji in Nagasaki was extremely challenging in many ways and also extremely liberating on many levels. This time greatly deepened and expanded my practice. It was my first stay in a Japanese training monastery. Previously, I had spent a day at Shogakuji, a Soto Zen temple in the middle of Tokyo with a very long history, led by Reverend Yuko Yamada, the first woman to be allowed to teach at Eiheiji. However, we spent the day practicing with the lay sangha and talking about our practice in the West. Temple life was completely different compared to what I experienced at Kotaiji.

At long last, I was able to practice in an environment where Zen practice has shaped the space, the place, the consciousness, and indeed the whole of life for many centuries. This became particularly apparent one day, when we cleared the graves of the temple founders of autumn leaves, high up on the mountain behind the monastery. First, we had to climb hundreds of steps, past hundreds of graves with statues covered in moss and lichen, mostly Avalokitesvaras and Jizos. Once we reached the top, our task was to clear the old stones of leaves with our traditional brushes.



Afterwards, we had the opportunity to admire the magnificent view of Nagasaki Bay in the full glory of Japanese autumn.



We practiced and slept in the Sodo, which is a replica of Dogen's first Sodo from the 13th century. So while our lodgings were almost medieval, bathrooms were equipped with high-tech Japanese toilets from Toto.



Due to my age and physical condition, I had enormous difficulties participating in the challenging program; the speed and the heavy workload took a toll on me. Fortunately, Reiho-san, our tanto (training leader), was there, and we found a way for me to participate nonetheless. However, this meant that I could no longer sit in the neitan of the sodo but had to sit on a chair in the gaitan (outer area, see picture with fish). During ceremonies, I sat on a chair at the edge of the hatto. I wasn't particularly sad about it, because I couldn't fully relate to the ceremonies, which I considered excessive, and the extremely strict forms associated with them. They are too superficial for me and only relate to the external, like much of what I have come to know in Japanese Soto Zen. Much of it is focused on outward appearance, probably to preserve form, and in my view, too little emphasis is placed on the inner development of the monks, especially on the practice of zazen. Yes, of course, they sit in the morning and evening, but the development of the inner attitude is neglected. Reiho-san told us that he used to do zazen practice with the young monks and taught them the deeper meaning, but the program was canceled due to lack of time and has not been re-introduced since. The reasons for this are complex. I will go into more detail later on.

However, sitting outside and on the edge made me feel excluded from the community. Of course, I wasn't, but the emphasis on the ceremonies meant that my ango brothers were constantly busy practicing and learning them, and I wasn't involved. I was also desperate because I couldn't keep up and had to realize that I had indeed grown old.

Some readers may know about my love for Kannon Bosatsu. In front of the abbot's room for visitors there was a replica of a Kannon statue in a boat, modeled on a statue at Eihei-ji. The statue was all white and beautiful. In the evening, when everyone was already in bed and I was making my rounds after ringing the evening bell and locking up the monastery, I went to her and chanted "Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo" several times. I asked Kannon to help me in my difficult situation.



Kannon was not the only statue that played an important role for me. In the gaitan, I was assigned a place under the ho. This is a huge wooden fish, almost two meters long, with a pearl in its mouth, which serves as mokugyo during oryoki meals in the sodo.



During that time, I studied the Eihei Shingi to internalize Dogen's view of monastic rules and, above all, looked for the part that deals with excessive ceremonies. I did not find it. What I did find, however, was the poem that Dogen quotes in the Tenzo Kyokun:

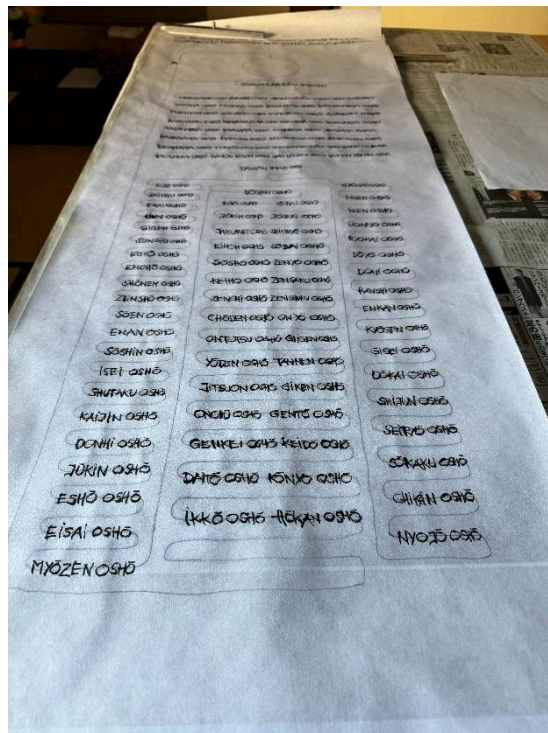
and Krishnamurti. That's why I'm very sensitive to these issues. I believe Japan can learn a lot from us in this regard.

This is also a major difference from Sanshin lineage. We do not correct people straightforwardly, because true learning comes solely from within, through continuous practice.

I cooked my way into the monks' hearts. Katsuki Moriyasu-san, the jack-of-all-trades, also known as "Superman," liked my food so much that he gave me an engraved knife. It bears the kanjis for the three minds —Sanshin.

One day, I was standing in the kitchen and had an epiphany. While peeling, cutting, and pitting the persimmons, I suddenly realized what the "pearl" that I described earlier actually meant. We can talk about this in person if you like.

My most memorable experience was the Jukai-e I took, and writing, or rather calligraphy, the ketsumyaku.



It is a very old tradition that when you enter a monastery as a monk, you take jukai with the abbot. It seems that nowadays, only Eiheiji, Sojoji, and Kotaiji carry on this custom. Writing the bloodline with a brush on rice paper was a great challenge. Calligraphy is always a hard exercise for me, but in this environment, I was quickly able to find confidence in the brush and paper, even in my own shortcomings. It turned out to be a wonderful practice that lasted for two days. Afterwards, we prepared two rooms for the ritual, just as it was done in Dogen's time. We covered them with a

special red fabric, every wall right up to the ceiling, which was a lot of work. The ceremony itself was the most mystical experience I have ever had, far beyond the limits of our thinking. It is often said that Dogen was not an esotericist, but that is not true. As a monk of the Tendai school, he experienced and internalized all the ancient esoteric initiations, see Keizan Jokin, "Denkoroku, Eihei Dogen" page 255. Dogen himself talked little about it.

During my time at senmon sodo, it became clear to me why Todo-san shaped our lineage the way he did, with an emphasis on zazen, intense study, simplified rituals, and the style of correction. In the sodo, especially when it comes to studies, little value is placed on one's own experience; it is more about memorization and rehearsing the ceremonies. The shuso in Kotaiji is not obliged to give lectures, like in our lineage; he is mainly responsible for the ceremonies, and there is a long ceremony almost every day, because there is always some ancestor to honor or an important period of the Ango (such as the official beginning) to commemorate.

The whole situation is paradoxical to begin with, as the monastery is not only a teaching monastery but also a commercial enterprise. Kotaiji has many associated families, known as dankas, and regular memorial services are held for them, including home visits and funerals, sometimes up to 10-15 per day. This is the main source of income, and there is also a kindergarten on the premises.

Furthermore, as we all know, it is not a given that people will sit on a cushion and realize that zazen is the solution.

All in all, it is a difficult undertaking, and I think Kotaiji has found a good balance in this regard, but most of the young monks who go there come from temple families, and their main focus is to master the ceremonies and to obtain the certificates so that they can take over their parents' business. This is a very different situation compared to the one of us Westerners.

Unfortunately, my physical symptoms got worse and worse, and at the Japanese hospital, I was diagnosed with a herniated disc. After talking to the tanto, the abbot, and Hoko, I decided to only do half of the angos and focus on my recovery. Fortunately, the herniated disc is not too serious, and I don't need surgery, at least not yet. But I have a lengthy program of exercises and physical therapy ahead of me for the next few years.

