

180 days living on the planet Kotai-ji

Dilettantic views of an crazy old german monk

On September 1st, at the age of 58, I stood in front of the Hatto of the international Sermons Sodo Kotai-ji in old traditional monk's outfit in the blazing japanese summer sun, the sweat is pouring down everywhere, I can hardly breathe, the air is so heavy and waited for an hour or so to be allowed in and wondered, what I would do so often in the next few months: "Why am I doing this to myself!?"



"Why you want come in here, why you don't go home?", Reiho Roshi asks me. *"I want testing the roots of Japanese Soto-Zen!"*, I shout. But the truth was, I didn't knew not exactly. You have to do it, if you want to be a fully authorized Soto Zen teacher, but I wasn't really sure if I wanted to do that. The only thing that was clear was, that I wasn't getting any younger and every year I waited, would make it more difficult. I also had to reset. I no longer wanted to work in my old job and wanted to give up the practice center in the black forest, in order to start over in a new place, closer to the people. I wanted to step down from the lonely wonderful mountains to the valley, back to the people again. Maybe this is one last big adventure in my life, in any case, based on my practice, I knew I had to do it.

Todo-san, who had given me Dempo shortly before, didn't push me to make this step. Except for the choice of temple, he had preferences like me too. Because he completed

his six-month Ango with Hokan Saito Roshi in Zuioji. There they became friends. Saito Roshi is now the abbot of Kotaiji. He was for many years Godo in Eiheiji and stays in the lineage of Hashimoto Roshi. Hashimoto and Sawaki Roshi, these are the names of the two great reformers of Soto Zen in the 20th century. Both appreciate them very much, although they had very different focuses of practice, one on rules and ceremonies, the other exclusively on Shikantaza. They also had a lot of commonalities, but all this is another story. The same goes for Okumura and Saito Roshi, they value each other very much and yet are so different. Saito is considered an expert in Eihei Shingi and traditional monastic life, Okumura Roshi as an expert in Shobogenzo. Both place great value on zazen, but in Kotaiji zazen takes a back seat at the expense of daily practice with body and mind. Todo-san is very happy because he can send his students here. That's why Eisho from Colombia and Jikei from California were able to train during my Ango time. I knew the name Saito Roshi because my old Dharma brother Reiho Roshi, we had the same ordination master, is disciple of Saito Roshi and head of the international department there. So the choice was clear, Kotaiji Sermon Sodo.

Before I start Ango, I read a text by the German former abbot of Antai-ji Muho Roshi, whom I met on my way back from the Zuse ceremony in Osaka: *"Ango is important exactly because it can be a pain in the ass to live with others who go on our nerves, occupy our space and demand our time, have different habits and different views, different outlooks on life etc. They often show us a mirror because life in the monastery forces them to do so, when people in the world would just step out of our way."* At Kodo Sawaki Roshi I read about being "ground together and smashed together in a rock mill" during the Ango. I also practiced as a guest for two weeks in Eiheiji Betsuin, another Sermon Sodo, in 2007 and was aware of the sometimes rude manners.

So even though I had a bit of an idea of what was coming, I was totally shocked at first. Added to this was the incredible summer heat and jet lag. The reality hit me and it took me a long time to recover from this initial state of shock. It was a hard and immediate landing on the planet Kotaiji. Had I been abducted by aliens? Is this real or just a nightmare?

Everything is so different here, all the rules of my usual life were suspended. All of my ideals and beliefs, which I had consciously developed over 58 years, were suspended here. For example, during my 15 months of military service in Germany, until the 1990s, due to the Cold War, military service was compulsory in Germany, I vowed that I would never allow myself to be treated like that again or put myself in such a situation. Now I was here and volunteered and experienced the same drill as in the army. When I asked my question, I was told that yes, we are doing this for something good, for the Dharma... that also seemed familiar to me. Hadn't my military superiors assured me that my commitment to peace would not be in vain ...

All joking aside, I learned a lot of good things in military service despite all the negative things, the same thing that Muho describes, you come together with young men from all backgrounds, live in a small space, are exposed to constant physical and psychological challenges and learn to endure them, you learn order and cleanliness hold. You learn to form a group and overcome goals and challenges together in this group, you make friends and you learn to assert yourself in the face of arbitrary authority and to deal with it. I already knew all that, why do it again at 58 years old?

Later I was told that this Ango training was of course developed for the boys and I was spared over time after I made friends and became part of the group. I never wanted to let myself be treated like that again, never wanted to watch others being humiliated in front

of me. For me, a master-student relationship is on an equal footing, as I learned from Okumura Roshi.

In addition, all other laws of everyday life were suspended, as Master Dogen demanded in Eihei-ji, the monk should live a completely different life with different ideals than the life of the homo economicus. And indeed we did this. Before every action one recites gathas, small verses that are supposed to make this action the highest. You change your clothes endlessly, sometimes just for a few minutes in Jiketto and Okesa, only to change into Samu-e after a few minutes, then again...Kodo Sawaki probably said, that priests change clothes more often than a geisha.

Stand by modus, you spend a lot of time waiting, important all Daishus wait together, no one knows exactly why, but very important everyone is there and waiting. Later I learned that the Daishus are supposed to act like one Daishu.

Actions such as eating or washing in the morning are made very complicated and prolonged by certain utensils. Nobody on planet earth would eat or wash like that. In addition, Kotai-ji is a completely normal Danka temple, as you probably know, the Japanese state decided in the middle of the 19th century that every family had to belong to one of the temples and that in the future Zen would be exclusively responsible for funerals and ancestor worship. For this purpose, the deceased are usually ordained posthumously and memorial ceremonies are held annually. The ancestor cult is very archaic and the veneration of parents and ancestors, as in Chinese Confucianism, is still very important for Japan today. Company. So the ceremonies take place like on an assembly line, especially on weekends, and for us little ones it was always showtime! At very large Danka ceremonies there was a lot of excitement and pressure, because a lot of money was involved. For me, as a European who broke away from the Catholic Church because of similar rituals, this was very difficult at the beginning. But this is how the temple earns its living in addition to the many donations and so the temple is able to pay the teachers, but also us Daishus, a small wage, so I received at least around \$240 per month.

The training in Sermon-Sodo is incessant, there is no privacy, it is merciless because it does not take into account your age, your practice, your status. You are only with young Japanese people, some of whom are 19 years old, who are only here to get confirmation that they can take over their family temple. When you enter the temple you are the last in the line of Daishus. You are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Everyone is constantly telling you off about little things and giving you instructions. But that's not the bad thing that's hard. At the beginning it is very difficult because the pace is fast, you don't have time to learn, you don't understand anything because everything is explained in Japanese. And when you understand it, everything will change again. No matter how hard you try, you have no chance of being good. In an interview on NHK (Japanese state television) I answered the question of what I would learn here: *"Maybe I'll learn that despite my long practice, I'm not as advanced or good as I always thought. Everyday I make hundreds of mistakes. I'm often more slowly than the others, because my body always hurts, I often do not understand, because I can not speak Japanese, I learn more slowly, because I'm an old, crazy and slowly German monk. Maybe I*

learn to take responsibility for all the hundred mistakes I make every day. There is no excuse, I make these mistakes. I am the person responsible (perpetrator) and I am not the victim because I am old or German. I am here voluntarily, I want to be here and therefore I am responsible. There is no excuse and no blame. Just do it and regret it. "Hai (Yes), it's my mistake! "

At the beginning this regret burns incredibly in the heart, it hurts to apologize, later you can regret it quite calmly.

After four months of Ango, a lot changed for me; I had internalized the basics of the ceremony and of life in Kotai-ji. I had made many friends among the Daishus and also among the teachers. The Daishus helped me as much as they could, they were considerate of me and every now and then they gave me time for a power nap that I needed. Because they knew I would make up for this time off with other things later. I had become an important part of the Daishus. For one I had the role of an uncle, for the other, that of a father, for another, that of a grandfather. I was "The crazy old German monk". I did what I could to fit into the Daishu team. My positive influences were my humor, I always tried to be cheerful, we laughed a lot; my composure even in very stressful situations because, as I said, I knew these types of systems. I also showed a lot of compassion and understanding. I also didn't take part in the stepping from top to bottom, because since my Zui ceremony and after I was now quite high up in the Daishu hierarchy, in summary I helped to form a team. We had become a Daishu, as desired. And we were the best Ango team in a long time, they said, which in turn meant that the pressure from the teachers eased.

I appreciate the work of Reiho Roshi, who made it possible for us foreigners to practice here. I admired the practice of Hokan Saito Roshi, who literally always ran ahead (he actually always trotted slowly through the corridors) and tirelessly ran the monastery at full speed, he was the absolute expert when it came to rules and ceremonies and he nothing escaped. All this despite being 81 years old. And there was Godo Roshi (I don't even know his real name), the luminary of singing and esoteric rituals, who turned every ancestral ceremony into a magical ritual. His time as Ino in Eihei-ji is considered legendary, I just called him the 'shaman'. He has Parkinson's and was always there, he was the first and last at Samu, despite his frailty and pain. His voice was still powerful, his breathing incredibly long.

When I asked in Mondo what I should bring with me to Europe, Saito Roshi replied: "*The practice with body and mind.*" This practice here was indeed impressive and I would like to bring it to Europe as a dilettante. And there was the Tenzo and his assistant, who had learned for more than 10 years in Eihei-ji or Zuio-ji and how to prepare almost every meal fresh, always cooked according to the Tenzo Kyokun, all flavors and basic colors always included, never boring and always very yummy. Thanks to the good food, I lost 19kg without ever going hungry; on the contrary, every meal was a joy.



Despite all the joy that I was finally able to leave the monastery after 180 days, (and it were exact 180 days, because I start counting the days after Zuise, not one day more!) I was also very sad; these people had grown close to my heart and we had become Dharma friends. Only with your great help, forbearance - *"please take care Gyoriki, Rest a little bit, you are 58 years old!"* and motivation was I able to do it: *"Gambare (try hard) Gyoriki, you can do it!"* Only my body was really happy because it could never get used to living on the ground.

One question plagued me throughout my stay in Kotai-ji: They say that one should bring the spirit of zazen into everyday actions. Practice with all your heart, with body and mind. This can then be equated with Zazen. Zazen = acting with body and mind. Is that really possible? Is that true? For me, Zazen is something unique and something beyond that. I experience the zazen spirit as something different than when I hit the mokugyo. I have no doubt that this practice of performing actions with the head and body is an important practice. I know that Master Dogen, for example, wrote a lot and in detail in the Tenzo Kyokun about how the Tenzo should perform its actions. But is this practice with all your heart and zazen really the same? For example, I experience this zazen spirit differently after a few days of Nehan Sesshin. There is silence, calm, a flow, something new, big, something vastly different - I can't possibly describe it. They say here that after a few days of Sesshin you become dull, so you have to get back into the everyday spirit, into the ceremony, into cooking, as quickly as possible. Master Dogen says that Zazen has a predominantly unconscious part.

But there could be a concern (anxious) about the great unconscious. From too great an influence of the unconscious? A fear of remaining in zazen? I think Master Dogen is very influenced by the Confucian spirit and speaks very positively about it. Could it be an attempt to bring Zazen and Confucian attitudes together? What I experience here is that

the Japanese monks really like to work with body and mind and put a lot of energy into carrying out the perfect ceremony or perfect meal. But almost everyone doesn't like zazen at all, how does that work? The tenzo hier is fantastic, but never practice Zazen. They use zazen to sleep, to rest. Nevertheless, they can often carry out everyday activities better than I, who tries to practice a lot of zazen.

In Zazen you surrender to Buddha, you become Buddha, you are protected by Buddha. There is something big, unspeakable that touches me again and again in Zazen, especially in longer sesshins.

I find it difficult to express what concerns me, but at the end of Ango I asked Todo-san this question:

Okumura Roshi's answer: „**I think zazen is the basis of our every-day activities, but every-day activities even if we do them mindfully, cannot be the same with zazen.**“

P.S.: By the way, as I later found out, it's like being on another planet for the young Japanese monks too!

