

Now and Zen

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Dorothee Eshin Takatsu knew nothing about Zen Buddhism when she arrived in Japan in 1982. Now, having been ordained 10 years ago as a priest of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism, she operates a *zazen dojo*, named Horakuan, in an 80-year-old farmhouse in Suzaka, Nagano prefecture.

The transformation began when a Japanese friend introduced German-born Takatsu to an “interesting person” who happened to be a Zen priest.

“I had never met a Zen monk in my life, but I was immediately fascinated by his individualistic personality, which is a very unusual trait to have in Japan,” says Takatsu.

Once back in Germany, she forgot all about Zen Buddhism, except for the “interesting monk”, whom she married after finishing her Master’s degree in Japanese studies.

“I was teaching the German language and culture at a college, and had an ordinary family life, except that I was living in a temple,” she recalls of her life after returning to Japan. The turning point came as she organised the ceremony for her husband to take over the family temple. She became more closely involved in temple activities and met many Rinzai priests.

“These priests were grounded in their personalities and so free in their way of thinking and acting. I thought if temple training forms personalities like this, then it must have some deep meaning,” she says.

Takatsu describes the experience as shattering, yet she wished to develop her own personality in a similar way. She began attending Soto Zen Buddhist meditation, but soon became

frustrated by the lack of instruction.

“You just sit on a cushion and nobody explains anything. I did not know what to do,” states Takatsu. “I was also frustrated with my life overall and with my job at a university at the time. I had reached a deadlock.”

Then she was introduced to another “interesting person”, a Rinzai priest from Kencho-ji temple in Kamakura, the oldest Zen monastery in Japan.

“When the priest came in, the whole atmosphere in the room lightened up; it suddenly became friendly and warm,” she recalls.

Asked to put a question to the priest, who turned out to be number three in the Kencho-ji hierarchy, Takatsu blurted out a seemingly rather rude query: “Why is it that so many monks who undergo the challenging *zazen* training, after years of effort, return to their own temple with seemingly nothing to show for their experiences?”

The priest burst into laughter and told her that she had hit the nail on the head: Yes, there is a fundamental problem in temple training in Japan. Many monks undergo Buddhist training only as a formality in order to get the necessary credentials for taking over the family temple. They are not entering the temple to seek a spiritual experience or to put their experiences into practice later.

Shortly afterward, Takatsu became an ordained Rinzai Zen Buddhist monk under the name Eshin, and began attending *sesshin*, intensive group meditation retreats, at Shogen-ji temple, one of Japan’s strictest Zen temples, in Gifu prefecture. To do this, she quit her university job. This was a difficult decision for a mother of two and family breadwinner, but it was the first big decision that would manifest

her calling as a Zen priest.

Her second such major decision was to buy an old farmhouse and renovate it to use as a base for her Zen practice.

“These two decisions were so right for me that everything afterwards fell into place. Whatever I needed, be it building materials, helpers or money, everything suddenly just came my way,” she says.

Takatsu now leads a *zazen* meditation group that meets regularly and organises several retreats each year. There are also many people, both Japanese and foreigners, who come to her for advice.

“I get the feeling that when people leave [a session], they leave with a lighter heart and a new perspective,” she says. “I want to be there for the community and for the people.”

Is Zen meditation a bit old-fashioned in our fast-paced world?

“On the contrary, one of the main ideas of Zen is to focus on the here and now. Once you are able to do that, you will be very effective in a minimal way. You will just do the right thing in any given situation,” says Takatsu. “The minds of many people nowadays are too full. You have to get rid of all unnecessary thinking to be able to truly realise what is going on in and around you.”

Takatsu adds that anyone who takes time out for some meditation will benefit.

“The continuous practice of meditation will give you a completely different outlook after some time. Your values will change and you will be able to distinguish between what is important and what is not. Once you have figured out what your true purpose and direction is in work and life, everything else will fall into place.” 