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The Spiritual Migrants of Sogenji: Notes of Participant Observation in a Rinzai Zen Temple

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Anomie is a cultural pathology that is becoming chronic in the West, characterized by the erosion of values, disintegration and deregulation. Amongst its symptoms we find anxiety, isolation, depression, tribalism, incoherence and loss of meaning. Individuo-globalism is a new ideology that permeates the religious market created by globalisation, encouraging individuals to discover, nurture and express their 'true self'. This new spirituality forms the background for a journey that our 'heroes', a handful of non-Japanese inhabitants of a Japanese Rinzai Zen monastery, have been undertaking for years in search of the philosopher's stone that could cure anomie and its symptoms. At first glance, they seem to have become authentic Buddhist monks. Our research tries to go beyond appearances.

Key Words: anomie, individuo-globalism, religion, Zen Buddhism

Anomie and Individuo-Globalism

Anomie, a Cultural Disease

Etymologically, the word 'anomie' comes from the Greek anomos, composed of a (without) and nomos (law). In sociological literature its origin is attributed to Emile Durkheim. However, Jean Marie Guyau used the original term in 1885, describing anomie as an absence of fixed belief. For Durkheim (2005) it is related to a failure in the regularising function of society, which becomes incapable of limiting individual desires and orienting society towards legitimate goals.

Teymoori, Bastian and Jetten define anomie as

> *a shared perception of a state of society (...) characterized by disintegration, de-regulation and erosion of moral values* (Teymoori *et al*., 2016:1).

At the individual level, anomie is associated with society's failure to meet basic human needs, including: the need for purpose, self-esteem, belonging and connections with others, control and security. The world is perceived as threatening and uncertain, triggering two responses which the literature refers to as 'contraction of the personal self' and 'contraction of the social self'. The former requires a strategy for restoring control, and the solution is often found in authoritarianism. Specifically,

> *by allowing the individual to reconstruct their perception that these needs are or will be met, authoritarian ideologies can protect the individual against the feelings of stress associated with anomie* (Teymoori *et al.*, 2016:9).

The latter implies a withdrawal from the networks of weak links of cooperation and trust within society, leading to the emergence of schisms and the refuge of individual in subgroups. The result is tribalism: individuals seek to fulfil their basic needs in the context of smaller groups, replacing weak ties in fragmented and incoherent societies with strong ties and protection of the subgroup. Tribal subgroups can isolate themselves from society or engage in political and social action to stabilise it.

Webber (1922) discussed the anomic potential of some religions, identifying two types of reactions to the unpredictability of the world:

1. ***Asceticism*** - active control of the world in the interest of a religious idea, assuming an active ethical behaviour.

2. ***Mysticism*** - the contemplative flight from the world, which leads to its total devaluation and rejection and the renunciation of everyday mundane interests- a situation that perfectly fits our research findings.

Fortunately, globalisation expands the range of available treatments for anomic symptoms by creating a religious market, in which individuals are free to choose the most effective products for recovering meaning, value and rules, many times mixing, merging and / or altering them to match their former (ailing) cultural paradigm.

Individuo-Globalism, a Possible Solution

The French sociologist Raphael Liogier (2009) observed the common features of spiritual products that we can find on the religious market. The phenomenon of religious trans-location brought by globalisation in developed societies doesn't simply imply syncretism. Roland Robertson (1992) wrote that globalisation creates a global awareness, a global consciousness and, ultimately, a global culture characterised by a more or less coherent structure of meaning and specific ontological and epistemological assumptions.

If a specific religion wants to gain access to the market, it needs to change and adapt to the ideology of the market, ultimately differing from others only in aesthetics. In other words, the products we can find in this market are mostly different ways of believing in the same things, and not an infinity of different options. Liogier calls this dogmatic structure **individuo-globalism** (Liogier, 2009:136). He sees it as a process of normalisation of new age and alternative culture in post-industrial societies, under the influence of globalisation.

Anthony Giddens (1991) theorises two dimensions of modernity: the extensive one, represented by globalization, and the intensive one, represented by the reflexive construction of the self which is not confined to the religious or spiritual sphere, but permeating traditionally secular domains, such as tourism, sports, health or business. The 'holistic' individual is not, according to Liogier, only a tourist of the spiritual exotic, but a seeker of his 'authentic self' through experiencing the other (who becomes an instrument in his search for the truth).

Individuo-globalism has a dual nature: on the one hand, we encounter an obsession for physical appearance and aesthetics, personal development and well-being, the goal being finding or creating one's true self by using what Michel Foucault (1976) calls 'technologies of the self'- the voluntary actions by which people seek to transform the 'essence' of their being and transform their life into a vessel carrying aesthetic values and reaching for certain stylistic standards; on the other hand, we find a global consciousness, a concern for global problems, (such as ecological issues), sustainable development and humanitarian action. The new ideology is called **spirituality**, a word that slowly replaces 'religion', too polluted by multiple negative connotations, associated with rigid institutions, proselytism, hierarchy, power, sometimes even violence or terrorism. This individuo-globalist spirituality is not limited to New Religious Movements (NRMs) or Oriental religions spreading to the West. It is also influencing established religions and reaches outside the Western cultural sphere, as globalisation creates a flow of cultural products leading to an increasing ideological homogeneity, especially amongst members of the middle class in different parts of the world.

Unlike traditional religions, it integrates scientific and psychological discourse, sometimes through psycho-physical practices borrowed from various 'Eastern' cultural traditions, such as yoga, martial arts, qi gong, meditation, etc. The stated purpose of these practices is expressed through formulas such as 'self-cultivation', 'discovery of the true self', etc., constructing in the mind of Western spiritual seekers a framework of ontological individualism, coloured by a spirituality consisting of penetrating deeper and deeper into one's unique interiority, finding, nurturing and expressing one's authentic self (Palmer & Sieger, 2017), far from the Buddhist cosmology and ontology, in which the 'self' is nothing more than an illusion that must be overcome, and generally atypical of Eastern cultures, where the goals of spiritual practices are linked to the harmonisation of social forces and universal energies.

This paper seeks to understand whether the Western Zen Buddhism practitioners at the Sogenji Temple show symptoms of anomie, if that is in fact what drove them half way around the world to Japan and, finally, if the individuo-globalistic 'therapy' they undergo there is effective (not at transforming them into authentic Zen Buddhist monks, but at helping them rebuild a structure of meaning, a set of goals or simply to distract them by pushing them to focus on the present moment).

Field Notes from a Zen monastery

The Sogenji Zen Rinzai Temple

The 'Sogenji' Japanese Rinzai Zen temple is located on the outskirts of Okayama, a city of nearly one million people and capital of the prefecture carrying the same name. Although located just 20 minutes by bus from the city centre, having passed the *tori* (entrance gate), nothing reminds the visitor of the proximity of modern civilisation. A road of a few hundred meters leads from the main road to the temple, and the anachronistic landscape is completed by the picturesque Japanese houses on either side of it. Behind the artificial lake, opposite the temple buildings, there is a wooded hill (which the locals generously call 'mountain') surrounded on all sides by residential areas.

Sogenji consists of several buildings located in an idyllic ambience typical of Zen temples, which harmonises perfectly with the natural environment. The most important ones are the *zendo*, where the meditation sessions take place and the younger monks and newcomers such as myself sleep; the main building, where *sutra* singing sessions take place every morning and evening, as well as various religious ceremonies of a public nature, including the Sunday *zazen* (zen meditation) session, open to the public; the kitchen, connected to the dining room; the women's bedroom, the abbot's rooms and those inhabited by various monks with seniority or administrative function; the library, also used as a space for recreation and spending the little free time available. The various annexes are related to the lucrative activities within the temple. The typically Japanese artificial pond, populated by colourful carps is a fitting place for spontaneous meditation, not coincidentally located next to the small cemetery. Visitors have access to most areas, however they are usually content to just walk around the lake and make a short prayer in the main building, followed by a donation in one of the many boxes strategically positioned for this purpose.

The abbot of the monastery founded over 300 years ago is Shodo Harada Roshi, who is known as a writer, a disciple of Mumon Yamada, the former head of the Myoshin branch of the Rinzai sect. Traveling to the United States, he founded the Tahoma Zen Monastery in 1995 on Whidbey Island, Washington, where the practice is identical to that of Sogenji, and the Enso House Hospice.

Figure 1: Japanese Style Garden of Sogenji Temple (Naka-ku, Okayama City, Okayama Pref, JPN)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sogenji_Temple_022.JPG

Temple Life

Life in the temple takes place at a very fast pace, typical of Rinzai Zen:

Waking up (*kaijo*) always happens at 3.40, announced loudly by one of the monks (a responsibility assigned by rotation). It is followed by a short period of personal grooming, putting on the traditional Japanese clothes I was so accustomed to from kendo practice: a *gi* (a men's kimono top) and a *hakama* (a type of large trousers, rather complicated to put on). The Rinzai sect has always been considered more attractive for people from the Samurai class, due to the tougher, more alert and somewhat military regime. I was informed that in medieval times it was called 'Zen for Samurai', while Soto was 'Zen for commoners'.

The first activity of the day is the singing of the *sutras* (*choka*), which lasts from between an hour and an hour and a half. *Sutras* are Buddhist texts that are 'sung' rhythmically, in syllables, difficult to understand even for native speakers. There is, as in the Christian liturgy, a certain order, as well as special *sutras* that are sung only on certain days. Western monks cannot understand the *sutras*, much less interpret them, but due to long practice, they are able to recite the most common ones without the help of books. The speed and rhythm with which the *sutras* are read requires an extremely high but fluid concentration, because any loss of attention or any delay on one of the syllables can lead to loss of rhythm and confusion. Each participant has a precise role in this ritual.

Choka is followed by a *zazen* session, which takes place in the *zendo*. This is a type of meditation that occupies a crucial role in Zen practice, although it was not initially a part of it, being adopted only after the number of monks in monasteries increased so much that some organising became necessary. You are seated (on *zafu*-hard pillows), with the legs crossed in the lotus position (or semi-lotus, depending on flexibility), a straight back, hands together in a circle and the eyes only half-open. In Rinzai this is carried out while facing the inside of the *zendo* (in *Soto* you face the wall).

Before my first meditation session, I was formally received into the *zendo* by the monks' elder, a Spaniard over 60 years old (in Japanese culture seniority is one of the main criteria of social hierarchy). This aggregation ritual, basically consists of a series of formal bows and gestures of invitation and acceptance.

Position in the *zendo* is determined by the time spent in the monastery, the most prestigious place being to the right of the altar. Of course, my place was the lowest in the hierarchy, somewhere outside the main hall, along with other 'newbies'.

Each time before and after sitting on the *zafu* a bow is made. Respecting spaces used for prayer or practice, as well as partners, is a prominent feature of Japanese culture.

During meditation, a monk (called *Ino*, established by rotation) is assigned to carry the *keisaku*, a long, flat bamboo stick used to hit the shoulders and back of those who do not have a correct posture. In Soto this is made at the request of those who meditate, in the hope that the blow will help them reduce fluctuations in concentration or drowsiness. In Rinzai it is also done at request, but also at the discretion of the *Ino*. It is important to emphasise the fact that this is not considered physical punishment, but a helpful shock therapy to reinvigorate the mind and body, overwhelmed with pain because of the not very comfortable position that needs to be maintained for hours. The knees and back are the most affected areas and after a *zazen* session even walking becomes excruciating.

Drowsiness is a real problem, especially in these conditions of reduced sleep hours and prolonged meditation. It often happened that some monks fell asleep in the position of *zazen*, which was often noticeable due to the fact that they tended to fall to one side or the other, recovering shortly after.

The *zazen* sessions has regular breaks, during which the monks can go to the bathroom and hydrate. Some 'walking meditation' takes place during that time, consisting of an alert movement for 5-10 minutes around the *zendo*. One can leave or enter the line at any time, after a bow, and always in the appropriate hierarchical position. The person in charge of the session decides when everyone returns to their *zazen* seat, adopting the specific posture and waiting for the signal to start the meditation - the

signal is a bowl being hit in a certain manner with a piece of wood to produce a deep, long and harmonious sound.

One of the most common meditation techniques is to take long, deep 'abdominal breaths', and count them, in order to maintain focus and not let what they call the 'monkey-mind' take control, which refers to the tendency to be carried away by thoughts, from one memory or problem to another.

After *zazen* follows what is call *sanzen*. Despite not being allowed access, I understand it to be composed of private meetings with Roshi, where questions can be asked and the practitioners' progress assessed, after which they are given *koans*, to decipher (in order to bring them closer to enlightenment) - small poetic-philosophical compositions with a hidden meaning, specific to Zen Buddhism. Usually, the key lies in intuitive thinking, after all logical attempts to solve it fail. At the *sanzen* signal, there is actually a race to Roshi's room, because the number of meetings is limited and access is granted by order of arrival, not seniority.

Breakfast (*shuzuka*), the first meal of the day, starts at 7.00, and, like everything in the temple, happens very fast. Each one is assigned a set of 3 bowls, chopsticks (*hashi*), a cloth napkin and a plastic sheet from which the specific *sutras* are read. This set is only used by one person throughout their stay in the monastery, being stored between meals in wooden boxes. The ritual begins at the signal of the highest ranked monk (sometimes Roshi) with the singing of specific *sutras*, while arranging bowls and chopsticks in a certain order, from largest to smallest. After the sutras, the food is brought in 4-5 large pots and shared, starting with the rice, (at the beginning a symbolic donation of a few grains is made, in a separate bowl, '*for the birds*', symbolising compassion for other creatures). Everything is exclusively vegetarian, but every now and then eggs, cheese and milk are allowed.

Most people stay to help clean the cooking utensils and the kitchen. This activity marks the next stage of the day, which theoretically starts at 7.30, called *niten soji* or daily cleaning. It starts with the exterior: sweeping and raking the gardens around the temple and giving them that immaculate and charming typical Zen look. Everything is done, of course, at an extremely fast pace. After completing this beautification of the temple grounds, which is now ready to receive visitors, we move inside the buildings. Usually, I was assigned to the *zendo*, where the dust is wiped, the floors are swept and everything is washed. Older monks constantly give directions to the newer arrivals.

There is a short break before the start of *samu*, theoretically the most important daily activity in a Zen temple. From 9.30 AM the monks are distributed (by the one in charge of organising the activity on that day) to various areas with various responsibilities related to the maintenance, repair and smooth running of the temple. *Samu* is very important not only from a practical point of view, but also for Zen training. As it implies 'mindfulness', the meditative awareness of every gesture, every breath, every thought, every emotion. Focus is even harder to maintain when compared to meditation.

Samu can also be made in the kitchen. A cook is appointed by rotation (taking however into account the culinary skills of each) helped by a few assistants. In general, there is very little talk during Samu, the kitchen being one of the most propitious environments for communication, hence my delight every time I was assigned here and I had the opportunity to ask questions about life in the temple.

After *samu*, at 13.00, the *saiza* (lunch) takes place, according to the same rules as breakfast. The food comes from donations made by visitors in the form of products or money.

This is followed by *chinmoku*, an hour of silence reserved for introspection, meditation or reading (for some even sleep). It is the most relaxed part of the day, although some continue their *samu* activities.

Yakuseki (dinner) takes place from 17.00 and is optional (some choose fasting). The usual rituals are no longer observed, and often the leftovers from lunch are consumed, together with tea or coffee.

The last *zazen* session of the day takes place between 18.30 and 20.30 under the sustained assault of mosquitoes, kept at bay only by burning a special incense.

Figure 2: Sogenji Temple, Okayama

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e9/Sogenji_05.JPG

Kaichin (closing sutras) start at 21.00 and are sung standing. Presence is mandatory; in case of absences or even the smallest delay, there are reprimands accompanied by penalties related to the next day's activity or position in *zendo*. Thus, one of the nuns was 'degraded' after getting late to *kaichin*, from that point on having to give me priority in any activity or ritual order.

Roshi Harada always leads the singing of *sutras* with a lot of pathos because, as I understand, it is his favourite activity. It requires the same level of involvement from everyone, even from the newest of monks.

After *kaichin*, people generally go to bed immediately, because the hours left for sleeping are very few. There are showers and everything you need for personal hygiene. The total silence of the temple is interrupted only by the sound of insects or night birds, the noise of the city does not penetrate the timelessness of this place.

Interviews with the Spiritual Migrants

The Interviewees

The interviews took place during breaks, and the interviewees volunteered in a quasi-conspiratorial way (indicating a great desire to communicate), as I could not violate the condition set at the time I was accepted into the temple and disturb the monks' practice. One of them even acknowledged that in general they do not discuss much with each other, even aspects related to spiritual practice. It seems to be a very individual path.

With Japanese monks, my communication was almost non-existent. Of the approximately 20 monks at Sogenji, more than half were Westerners, but I could not determine the exact number because some were in periods of isolation, while others came from other temples where they were sent to deepen the practice, other were on 'vacation' to visit a sick relative, etc. The temple was not a closed environment, but I only had daily contact with some of the monks, especially the westerners (12-14). In addition to the Japanese, the group of Asians was also composed of Vietnamese (in Vietnam Zen Buddhism is the most popular form) and an Indian monk. There was a large group of young people, generally white, educated, belonging to the middle class in various countries in Europe, North America and South Africa. This demographic is characteristic of most Buddhist temples open to foreigners, and their presence doesn't seem to be a coincidence, as many sociologists mention that the middle class is most prone to anomie.

The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions, seeking to cover the personal and religious history of the subject, personal traumas, the reasons for choosing Buddhism, the challenges of living in the temple, as well as many issues related to practice.

I undertook formal data collection with six of the monks, but also had a number of informal discussions with other monks, who did not want to be formally interviewed. Inteaction with this latter group mostly confirmed the data obtained.

The real name of the 6 interviewees will not be mentioned. In fact, they all have a Buddhist name given to them by Roshi, but not all of them used it to introduce themselves, a sign that they did not consolidate their Buddhist identity.

1. A, 27 year old female, USA (Oregon), 1 month in Sogenji.
2. SZ, 33, female, Poland, 7 years.
3. SB, 25, male, USA (Massachusetts), 2.5 years.
4. SK 41, male, Hungary (Budapest), 8 years
5. T, 30, male, South Africa, 6 months
6. S, 25, male, Germany, 4 months in Sogenji

Personal Background: Healing in Sogenji.

Regarding the personal history of the six and their past religious beliefs, we can identify common features:

A had a Protestant Christian upbringing that he rejected at the age of 13. She considers Protestantism

> *... a strange teaching, which does not apply in everyday life; I'd rather side with the devil. I didn't like God, he punished people for generations.*

The fact that she perceived divine justice as not being correct (and therefore unpredictable) made her move away from Christianity.

A became interested in mysticism (which Weber associates with anomie) and believed that Protestantism lacked this aspect:

> *Mystical Buddhism is more accessible.*

SZ had a similar reaction:

> *My family was not exactly Christian, but I grew up in Poland, I went to church. At 10 years old, I told them I didn't want to go anymore.*

She had a Catholic upbringing,

> *but I always thought they were just stories. At the age of 16, I left the church for good. I don't think about it much.*

T is a complex character, his search revealled pronounced spiritual needs. Unlike everyone else, he experimented with the validated cultural path of Christianity:

> *I grew up in a non-practicing Catholic culture. My family didn't go to church, but I was an altar boy for a while. I chose to go to church because I thought I had found something in the Christian way, and going to church was important to me for a while,*

but he felt that

> *Catholicism in the West is dying as generations go by ... there is no living religion.'*

The perception of the disintegration of the value system is a symptom of anomie.

SK initially had a mechanistic, modern view of the world:

> *I have Jewish roots, so if I had to have a religion, it would be Judaism ... I was not a spiritual person. I thought that people who believe in a god or religion are really retarded and just don't understand how science works. Modernity and religion do not match.*

SB has a degree in philosophy, and his spiritual needs were also not satisfied by Western religion or philosophy:

> *I have always been interested in the big questions. Intellectually, philosophically, what is the purpose of life and death, is there God, etc. I studied religions in college a little ... and philosophies ... and I felt like I could do this my whole life and it wouldn't get me anywhere.*
>
> *My primordial inclination to interrogation, desire, doubt, whatever pushes me in these directions, has not been satisfied by all those intellectual things.'*

A spent 1 year in an organisation called 'Buddha Eye', then 9 months in the Zen monastery in Tahoma. Her partner was interested in Buddhism and martial arts, which oriented her in this direction.

SZ best exemplifies this reaction of rejection of one's native cultural / religious values, as she explored various spiritual practices: Indian, Chinese martial arts, Central Asian shamanism, voodoo, gnosticism. She studied Kazakh language and describes herself as a wanderer, attributing this aspect of her personality to personal trauma triggered by a murder in her family. She practiced Zen from the age of 19 (initially without any connection with a group or a teacher because of shyness), but had problems in dedicating herself to this practice, sometimes giving up after 2-3 months and following another path. She seemed to be running away from something.

SB made his first direct contact with Zen when the high school meditation club organized a trip to Tahoma:

> *I thought it would be cool to wake up at 4 o'clock and follow this strange schedule. ... If I had missed this, who knows where I would have ended up. I did not initially understand the purpose of the early awakening or the incantations. It was different and maybe even exotic. What struck me was that all my basic daily needs were met. You have physical work, you spend time outdoors, you have group relationships and a few other things ... A way of life that fulfills you ... Obviously, I hadn't solved all the doubts I was talking about, but that was much better than living in an office. '*
>
> *I started coming and going ... I was doing the schedule for 2 weeks and I was resetting myself.'*

He became an organiser for groups going to Tahoma.

> *We all felt very connected, it was great.*

SK suffered from a very severe chronic depression:

> *I was not at peace, I was very depressed. Nothing worked, I tried psychotherapy for 3-4 years, I was on medication. It didn't help. I was, in a way, desperate. ... because I was so desperate in my depression, I started looking for any possible way out of the black hole I was in.*
>
> *I had friends who practiced qigong. I tried, it gives you an interesting opening ... Then I met a spiritual healer. She treated people with very complicated illnesses, even mental ones. I went to her without really believing in what she was doing, but I was desperate. She just told me to pray, and gave me Christian prayers. I was ready for anything. Nothing happened for a few months, but after half a year something really changed. I felt light and free.'*
>
> *The first big opening in my vision of the world was with qigong and the healer. The soul chooses the body. I was very open and listened to everything, but I was agnostic. I met a lot of people, but my scientific vision didn't completely disappear ... it just retreated behind the scenes while I was listening. It was interesting ... I didn't know if it's true, but it was interesting.*
>
> *I found a zendo with zazen. I had a few friends looking for a different path - people from the qigong group, the healer's group, etc. We decided that if anyone found anything spiritual in the city, they would tell the others. I found zen and fell in love with its simplicity ... just sit and watch your mind... what's going on in there.*
>
> *I started with zazen. After a year, I was ready to participate in an international Osseshin with Harada Roshi, and then I had the desire to be his true disciple, in Japan, and do it all the time.*
>
> *Before I began to understand, I was half believer, half agnostic.*

The first contact was made through cultural marketing associated with Eastern spirituality:

> *I heard that meditation is good. I didn't know what it was. I looked for meditation groups and found one in Hamburg. I didn't like it, there was a lot of talking, lights, chakras ... no thanks! ... Then I went to the Zen monastery for a weekend. I liked zazen because of its simplicity and focus on breathing. Zen is so simple and clear! You just have to count to ten. Then you realize it's not that easy ... When you focus, the world becomes very clear ... After the monastery, I meditated by myself for half an hour a day. Two years later, I heard about a group doing this for two hours a day. In another group there was a weekend sesshin. Then I met Roshi. An extraordinary master!' 'In January I left my job and came here.*
>
> *It's the only thing that matters, to do something like that. It doesn't have to be Zen, but everything else is impermanent and has no real value.*

T, 3 years earlier, had practiced Korean Zen in South Africa, then in the USA (New Mexico and Tahoma) in sessions that lasted for between 2 weeks and a month,

after which he spent 6 months in an anthroposophical community:

> *It gave me a certain spiritual fulfillment.*
>
> *I got to Zen through a series of coincidences. I read a book about and Zen and the brain ... I wanted to experience monasticism. I contacted the author of the book and asked him about the practice of Rinzai Zen in Japan.*
>
> *I was attracted to Rinzai because of its rigor and my militaristic practice.*

Practicing Zen in Sogenji: Refuting Theory, Rituals and Religion

Regarding the practice, ***SZ*** offers some interesting opinions:

> *Zen is the most focused on the experience of going beyond life and death ... I felt that I could put aside all the religious shit ... Zen also has religious shit, but he doesn't force you to go there ... it has the precise tools to bring you to this experience, beyond whatever your mind creates'.*
>
> *For me personally, the religious aspects of Buddhism do not matter that much.'*
>
> *I respect the rituals because I'm here ... it's not at all what interests me at Zen ... I'm only interested in the experience.*

She even refutes any theoretical understanding of Buddhism.

> *I hope I have no intellectual understanding!*
>
> *We are not discouraged from studying texts ... I studied a little before I came here, I had to look smart; I was in college and read a lot. I don't read much here, I read at the beginning, but now I don't really do.*
>
> *When you practice Zen, texts and studies can get in your way. You risk becoming too cerebral, looking for explanations about Zen, which will take you away from the real experience.*
>
> *I do not really agree with religion or with the comfort given by intellectual practices.'*

The others display a similar attitude:

> ***SB**: I don't study anymore ... I read some classics, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, Three Pillars of Zen ... The religious part simply didn't appeal to me.*
>
> ***SK**: I learned a little Japanese so I could understand Roshi when he talked to me. I have always been interested in studying different languages ... I wanted to read and I wanted to understand, but I stopped reading after a few years when I realised that there was nothing to understand ... just practice.*
>
> ***T**: I read Roshi's comments about koans. I don't read other Buddhist texts.*
>
> ***S**: I see that there is more than that, something I might perceive at some point, but I don't think too much about religion and I don't read ... too much in my brain ... I would like to study, but that might be an obstacle. I can also study in Germany ... Now I only focus on zazen.*

Being asked What do you want to achieve? ***SZ*** replied:

> *This is a question that comes from the mind that seeks, to believe that you have to achieve something, to believe that there is a goal or an objective. I wouldn't even ask that question. This environment gives you the tools and teaches you how to be alert and present at all times. It completely transformed my life.*
>
> *What brought me here - that feeling that the Buddha was not a Buddhist. People turned it into a religion, it filtered through every culture and got to this form.*

SB, like ***SZ***, denies the 'religiousness' of Zen Buddhism:

> *I am not sure if Buddhism is really a religion. It says nothing clearly about what God is or if He exists. We have no such doctrines in Buddhism. ... If someone asks me: what is your religion? ... Do you identify as a Buddhist? As Zen? - for me these labels and identities don't matter much. I can believe in them as a temporary classification, so people should know something about me, about what I do, but I don't personally think I'm a Buddhist. I would check this in a survey just because I have no other choice.*

What's cool about Zen Buddhism is that it puts a lot of emphasis on re-learning your habits and renewing yourself through true practice and experience. You don't have a list of things to believe in before you walk through the door. In the old days monasteries would have kept you out for a week before they let you in. That was the criterion they cared about. They didn't make you swear on certain doctrines, you had to have the determination to change your life. That's what being a Zen practitioner means.

All these questions about religious issues, such as life after death, or the nature of the divine, or even ethics to some extent, are useless ... you just have to connect to your own essence and that makes you a Zen Buddhist.

T's approach is similar:

I am moving towards the continuous realisation, not only in flashes, of my true nature. I decided to stay here for 3 years and I plan to do it within this period.

Regarding the practice at Sogenji, ***SK*** talks about the difference between ideals and reality:

Before I came to Japan, I was in a dream… I had a lot of illusions about how beautiful life is here. You have a teacher that you see every day in Sanzen ... Then, of course, you see that Zen Buddhism is much more than attending Sanzen ... it is a carefully designed way of life.

The religious aspects of Zen Buddhism are dismissed as superstitions or practice aids:

I was very surprised that in Japanese Zen there are gods and goddesses who come from the Shinto tradition, or that sutras are sung for kings and gods. Roshi doesn't talk much about it. We do it because it is a tradition and to direct our efforts in other directions, to think of other things than ourselves. The goal is to forget about ourselves and give something to other people or gods or anyone who is not us.

I like the Buddhist view… nirvana, reincarnation ... but for me it's just important to live in the present moment.

S agrees to a certain extent:

I respect most rituals as part of my practice.

However, ***S*** is the only one who reported an authentic spiritual experience during meditation:

I had a moment when everything appeared very clear to me, the colours were bright, everything was beautiful, but after ten or twenty minutes the feeling began to disappear. At Sanzen I wanted to tell Roshi, but he already knew. He told me 'you wanted to hold on to it, but you have to let go'

Japanese Zen and Western Zen

One of the most important issues raised was the comparison between the Sogenji practice of Japanese monks and Western monks. The answers display a remarkable consistency:

***SZ**: In the beginning, 35 years ago, when Roshi came here, there were more Japanese. Gradually, he opened the temple to the Western world. This was the vision of his teacher, who wanted to spread Zen to all corners of the world, to help this suffering planet.*

[Sogenji] *is adapted to us, of course. Roshi made immense efforts to understand how the Western mind works. He would not compromise on the quality of the teachings ... but in the form and manner in which everything is organised, things are not as strict as in other Japanese temples. It is easy for Asians to respect everything without asking questions. We always have a certain resistance ... MY free time, MY clothes, MY opinions and MY decisions. They are raised differently, they may have a group ego, but not a personal ego, so it's easier for them ... but from our perspective it seems stricter. It is easier for them to obey.'*

The paradigm of ontological individualism cannot be renounced, and even Roshi Harada understood it, adapting the practice.

***SB**: The Japanese here practice a much stricter version of Zen. Asians are treated much harsher than Westerners and there are double standards everywhere. For example, the ceremonies*

where we present our poems as a glimpse of our inner state - we laugh a lot when we share them. With Asians there is much more analysis, more criticism, not as much fun. I sincerely believe that the people here would not survive in a serious Japanese Zen monastery. This is also traditional in a way ... but rather half-traditional.'

Asians would suffer if they had the same flexibility as us ... they would be anxious ... but for Westerners it is not enough. We are free to do what we want. We are not forced to stand with our backs straight. There are people here who would be constantly hit in a traditional monastery because of their posture, their posture is simply wrong ... people sitting in zazen without power. This would not be tolerated in a traditional Zen monastery. Here there is a dose of negotiation and compromise to make things work for us. It is important to have Asians who set a higher standard. It's great to see them.

***SK**: This is not a 100% Japanese temple, because the rules and daily life are different. We don't do everything like in a traditional Japanese Rinzai temple. That would probably be too hard for us Westerners ... we change the continent, we leave our lives behind, there are many changes that take place even before we start practicing ... it would be very difficult ... it's like military training ... faster, louder, many shouts, blows, humiliations ... Roshi changed that, he understood that he would remain the only one in the temple if he did things in the Japanese way.*

***SZ**: I'm sure it's not as strict as in other Japanese temples, because this temple has a lot of Westerners.*

In Japan, being a monk is a job. Many monks undergo formal training to obtain a priest's license and are set for life. Roshi does not issue such licenses, he is only concerned with real training and transformation, and the Japanese are not so interested in them.

***T**: Roshi's master realised that interest in Zen is more alive in the West than in Japan.*

Roshi's mission is to open the genuine Zen to foreigners, and to train them in such a way that they return home and teach it to others.

Zen in Japan is alive as a path to the priesthood, not as a spiritual practice. Much more attention is paid to form if you want to become a priest ...

There is a paradox regarding how the interviewees relate to Japanese Zen. On the one hand, it is considered 'authentic', culturally enriched, on the other hand, it is considered decadent at the level of practice, eroded by material motivations. Most interviews confirm this view:

***SB**: Westerners are in a better position to appreciate Japanese culture from the outside. We've come a long way to find a real teacher, but maybe the Japanese don't think that's real, they don't look at it objectively.*

The Japanese way means precision, cleanliness, respect. Westerners are less formal in talking to the teacher and other practitioners ... When you come to practice Zen in Japan, conformity is very important ... doing things the way everyone does. For example: the stick - for Westerners it is very confusing - is this person right to hit me? Should I be allowed to sit in my own way and not the right way? ... But in a Japanese monastery you simply accept the blows and trust that this is part of the system. You don't over-intellectualize as you do in the West.

***S**: The cultural aspect here is huge. Asians only teach by showing you. It doesn't work for me. It's stricter here.*

Other temples are just priestly schools. Good salary, car ... most people don't care about enlightenment, they just want to get their license and then leave.

***SK**: In the US the practice was more relaxed ... Everything is very demanding here ... people are required to persevere until enlightenment ... or at least for 3-5 years. In the US, you can't ask for that. Even one year scares people. Here in Japan Roshi can ask people for such an investment, because by being here they have already shown a strong motivation ... People run away from here all the time, but you think twice before you do it because they put a lot of effort into getting here.*

To conclude, I asked ***T*** why he thinks that Zen is so popular in the West:

> *Between World War II and the turn of the century, post-hippie movements were interested in anything coming from the Orient. Interest has dropped a lot. In Zen, Vedantha and other mystical traditions, the hope that there is truth, goodness, is still alive ... the experience of being human has depth. In the West, in post-modern culture, there is no place for truth, there is no place for meaning, on the contrary ... it is something to be laughed at, you can't even get close to it. Here, not only do they believe in it, but they are also make it accessible, through practice, to ordinary people, who are looking for real answers and meaning. Here is the right place to find them. Christianity can provide these answers, but even though I was born in a Christian culture, it was easier for me to travel half way around the globe and find them here rather than in my cultural environment. They are more accessible here.*

Discussion and Conclusions

Each of the spiritual migrants at Sogenji seem to be looking for something: the answer to big existential questions, a search for meaning, getting away from personal trauma or depression. In their native cultural environment, these answers and coping solutions are not available, mainly as a result of the perceived social and cultural anomie around them, as Western culture proves incapable to fulfil needs that go beyond the material. They embrace Zen on the one hand because of its discipline: the anomic contraction of the personal and social self can easily be diagnosed here, determining the need for simplification, the reduction of the perceived unpredictability of the environment and a tendency to yield control to an outside authority, with refuge in tribalism - the community of monks in the temple is a closed group, with specific values, following specific rules, isolated from society. On the other hand, the existential questions that previously troubled them are refuted, together with any religious doctrine, in favour of an extreme focus on experience and a mystical devaluation of the real.

It is clear that the interviewees did not come to a Zen Buddhist temple in Japan to become a Zen Buddhist. Some of them explicitly state this, although they have all retired (sometimes for years) in a Buddhist monastery. Their practice is different from that of Asian monks; they are not interested in the rich doctrinal background of Buddhism and religious rituals are performed exclusively out of respect for the local tradition. In order to facilitate decontextualisation and adaptation of certain cultural elements to their own cultural paradigm, some even deny Zen Buddhism the status of religion.

They employs Foucault's 'technologies of the self' for undertaking a transformation, but always, despite some of their efforts, within the frame of ontological individualism, which is an organic part of their psyche and, incidentally, the main thing that pushed them to come to Japan. Self-development always implies the existence of a self, being therefore a meaningless concept in Asian spiritual traditions.

I found out that many (especially Westerners) fled the temple after suffering a violent collision between their idealised expectations of life in a Zen temple and the reality of it. Those who could negotiate some sort of a functional compromise between the individualistic framework and the rigours of temple life, however, stayed for many years.

Individuo-globalism, the phenomenon manifested here, in which the objective is finding one's true self / essence (as ***SZ*** explicitly states), is the West's spontaneous solution to the anomie resulted from centuries of secularisation and the subsequent collapse of Christianity's axiological dominance. The spiritual migrants of Sogenji are wanderers, experimenters and self-healers, cultural alchemists in search of the philosopher's stone that could someday maybe heal all of us.

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