



Practice period participants at Shogoji

Shogoji First International Practice Period

by Taigen Leighton

Dainin Katagiri Roshi, the late abbot of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center and also a former teacher and abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, dreamed of establishing a training center in Japan where Americans and Japanese could practice the traditional Japanese Soto Zen monastic life-style together. In the summer of 1992 his dream was realized with the completion of construction of the traditional *sodo*, monks' hall, and the first formal practice period at Shogoji in the remote mountains of Kyushu, the southern island of Japan. This was possible thanks to the strong effort and guidance of Katagiri Roshi's friend and mentor, Ikko Narasaki Roshi, abbot of Shogoji and of its headquarters temple Zuioji, a major training center of Soto Zen in Japan.

The *sodo* is the center of traditional Zen monastic practice; practitioners do zazen, eat, and sleep at their assigned places. Along with the beautiful new *sodo*, the attached monks' study hall building (*shuryo*) where practitioners study, rest, and bathe, was also completed during the practice period.

Shogoji has a notable history, having been first established in the fourteenth century by Daichi Zenji (a descendant of Soto Zen founder Eihei Dogen) after his return from extended study in China. Shogoji was revived early this

century after a long period of disuse. It is home to a memorial peace stupa containing ashes of twenty thousand World War II dead of all nationalities, and a world peace ceremony is conducted twice a month. Shogoji (literally "Temple where the Sacred is Preserved") is situated high up on the steep pine-covered sides of Hogi ("Stately Phoenix") Mountain. Farmers from the small village below climb up the road to cultivate rice and shiitake mushrooms, the main local crops. Shogoji is reminiscent of Tassajara in its remoteness; there is no telephone, no electricity (save for a tiny generator usually used only once a week to power a washing machine), and no propane gas. All cooking is done on wood stoves, so work in the kitchen includes chopping wood.



Peace stupa

The Japanese participants in this first practice period included half a dozen monks on loan as part of their training at Zuioji. The practice period was led by Ikko Narasaki Roshi, who has been abbot of Zuioji for over forty-five years; his warmth and depth of experience were readily apparent. The director of Shogoji is our old friend Rev. Ekai Korematsu, who spent a number of years at Page Street and Tassajara, and who provides English orientation and translates the lectures. In addition to Narasaki Roshi's frequent lectures, a large number of fine priests from all over Japan visited to practice with us and give lectures. They provided an interesting range of viewpoints and examples of Japanese teaching.

The western participants included Katagiri Roshi's widow, Tomoesan, whose strong spirit was a great

inspiration throughout. Most of the dozen other westerners were disciples of Katagiri Roshi, along with one German layman and this Californian. We were about equal in numbers of women and men and of lay people and priests. Although Shogoji specializes in the traditional forms of daily priest or monk training, the Japanese teachers and monks went to great lengths to welcome and accommodate us. Lay people slept in rooms in the Buddha Hall, but otherwise participated quite fully. Women and men priests had separate sitting platforms in the sodo, where we could all sleep as well as sit

and eat. We had the opportunity to learn and experience many unfamiliar aspects and forms of traditional Japanese practice. The schedule was quite rigorous and challenging, with 3 A.M. wake up and a full regimen of meditation, chanting, lectures, and work. Although zazen is a central aspect of the practice, the emphasis is more on finding the satisfaction and intensity of zazen in all daily activity through "continuous practice."

Shogoji is small enough to operate on a traditional system in which work positions are rotated once every five-day week. This kept us on our toes and allowed us to experience a wide range of the temple's activities, training with the Japanese monks in such positions as *tenzo* (cooking), *jisha* (attendant for the officiating priests), bath attendant, and *shoten* (giving signals for the schedule throughout the day). The latter position, relatively simple at Tassajara, is important and complex at Shogoji; the daily schedule seems to be in constant flux, varying according to the different monthly services and also with the shifting sunrise and sunset times.

All the meals at Shogoji are provided with money raised in *takuhatsu*, the traditional monks' begging rounds. Each month three days are spent doing *takuhatsu* at Kikuchi, the nearest large town, and three days at Kumamoto, the closest large city. There is no cultural context that would allow this practice in America so it was fascinating to have the opportunity to do *takuhatsu* for Shogoji. The traditional uniform for this formal practice includes robes, a large bamboo hat encouraging individual anonymity, and straw sandals worn without socks and with toes extending past them. Walking door-to-door or occasionally standing on a busy street, chanting continuously with bowl extended, one accepts whatever is given as a means for allowing lay people to express generosity and support for Buddhadharma. The effect is of an intensive walking, chanting *sesshin*, which calls for mindfulness of feet and voice.

One of the main themes of the practice period turned out to be the difficulty of crossing cultural barriers in our different styles of practice. Although we westerners arrived with the intention of doing our best to follow the Shogoji program, differences of language as well as of cultural manners and expectations created many challenges. But over the course of the ten-week practice period Narasaki Roshi and the Japanese monks stretched way out of their way to accommodate us. By the closing, which included two days of frank mutual evaluation and feedback, we all had a deep feeling of warm encounter.

As an example of contrasting practice styles, we Americans would frequently ask questions, wanting to understand the meaning and background of the many new practices. Although our queries arose from our interest and full respect and were welcomed by the Shogoji instructors, they were generally shocking to the Japanese monks! In the Japanese educational sys-

tem, students are all trained never to ask questions but to simply absorb the teachers' instructions. In training monasteries the focus is to enact the practice physically, instead of merely understanding intellectually. Questioning is considered disrespectful. On the other hand, the Japanese monks practice to develop impeccability in their manner by very frequently correcting each other as they engage in the many everyday forms. While their attitude toward this is based on respect and dedication to the Buddhist tradition, to westerners it often seems very harsh, rude, and disrespectful.

We all ended up feeling that Japanese and western practitioners have much to learn from each other. It is clear why Katagiri Roshi so strongly desired a place where such concentrated exchange could be nurtured. I feel very grateful to Katagiri Roshi and Narasaki Roshi for providing us with this extraordinary opportunity to connect with our Japanese practice roots.

American practitioners are welcome at Shogoji year-round, but the special practice period will be continued annually, sometime between April and July, and this is definitely the best time to get a concentrated taste of Japanese monastic life. Again, the rigors and difficulties should not be underestimated, but people who have experience of Tassajara practice periods or a number of Zen Center sesshins will find it a rewarding visit. As I parted from one of the Shogoji instructors I'd become friends with, he asked me to "tell Americans we are waiting for you."

Monks' Hall (sodo) at Shogoji

