

Tobias ECKERTER*

One year in Manpuku-ji The Monastery of the Ten Thousand Blessings

地關千秋日月山川同慶喜
門開万福寺人天龍象任登臨

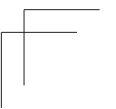
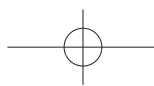
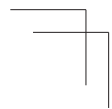
The Earth opens her palms for a thousand years.
Sun and moon, mountains and rivers:
Equally they are filled with joy.
The portal opens and overflows with a ten thousand blessings.
Humans, gods, dragons and elephants draw near.¹

Introduction

During my first stay in Japan 2007/08 I participated in the Interreligious Studies in Japan Program (ISJP) at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto. At that time I did not have the chance to visit Manpuku-ji 萬福寺, the head temple of Ōbaku-shū 黄檗宗, one of the three Zen schools in Japan. Only after returning to Germany, I read for the first time with great fascination about this monastic movement originated in the 17th century. It maintained its Chinese roots for several centuries, and it established a distinguished form of Zen in which the Japanese and Chinese culture met on a high level. In the field of doctrine Ōbaku-shū would also set a new course. Whereas in Japan different schools of Buddhism are focusing on a special religious practice or teaching, Manpuku-ji, being faithful to its Chinese heritage, tried to unite various approaches from the standpoint of Zen. It includes, e.g., also the practice of calling Amida Buddha's name (Ch. *nienfo*, Jp. *nenbutsu* 念仏).

* Tobias Eckertter studied Theology in Germany and Japanese religions in Kyoto. During his stay in Japan he experienced interreligious dialogue. Because of a special permission by the abbot of Manpuku-ji, he received the chance to undergo one year training as a novice monk in this monastery. Now he continues his training in Heidelberg in order to become minister of the Protestant church.

1. These lines composed by the Chinese founder of Obaku-shū, *Ingen Ryūki* 隱元隆琦 (1592-1673), are carved on wooden plates attached to the great gate (*sanmon* 山門) of Manpuku-ji.



At the time when I became interested in Ōbaku-shū I could not even imagine that I would receive the chance to experience the monastic life in Manpuku-ji. Few years later, by coincidence I learned from my teacher Dr. Martin Repp, that he had a friend in Manpuku-ji, the Ōbaku monk Rev. Tanaka Chisei. Thanks to the kind help of Rev. Tanaka it became possible for me to participate in the daily life of Manpuku-ji for about one year in 2011/12 and to make many precious experiences here. I am Christian and I will become a Protestant minister. My determination has not changed during my stay in a Buddhist monastery. But I am convinced more than ever that mutual understanding between religions is an essential contribution for peaceful coexistence of people and nations. This understanding must be pursued not only on a scholarly level, but it should reach the heart of human beings on a deeper level. For this goal it is necessary to plunge into the religious practice and feeling of one's counterpart and to discover the foreign and one's own tradition in a new light. This step might require a lot of effort, but it is also rewarding abundantly.

I would like to thank everybody who helped me with my stay in Manpuku-ji. First of all I want express my gratitude to the *shike* 師家 of Obakusan-Zendō, Kondō Hakudō, for his permission to let me participate in the training of novice monks, and to Rev. Tanaka Chisei, for supporting me all the time in this endeavor.² I am indebted also to the foundation of the Zenkō-ji temple in Yokohama and the foundation of the Christian East Asia Mission (Tokyo and Kyoto), whose generous financial support enabled me to undertake this religious journey. Last not least I would like to thank all the monks of Manpuku-ji who received me cordially in their community, and my family who waited so patiently for my return.

Entering the Monastery

To enter the gate of a monastery and the first steps inside were quite hard. I had to leave behind all the persons and things which were dear and important to me: Family, friends, books and everything I had got attached to in the last years – all this became unreachable from one moment to another. For the first time since my birth, I had to depend on myself completely. But also many worldly problems that were solved through the achievements of modern society, like the division of labour or high-speed communication networks, disappeared in the monastery.

In winter it is cold here, there is no heating in rooms only with thin walls of wood and paper. And in summer it is hot, there is no air conditioner when chanting sutras in traditional clothes or when working in the temple garden. Also during the time of meditation there is no relief from being confronted with my own self:

2. *Shike* is the highest position among the monks living in the enclosed area of a Zen Monastery. The *shike* is responsible for the religious training of the novices.

There is no place to escape from the growing pain in one's knees or from disturbing thoughts. There is no access to films or games, one's mind is deprived of any kind of diversion.

Such a situation is described on the two small gates flanking the great gatehouse of Manpuku-ji to the right and to the left:

通霄門 眼底有疑休縱步 胸中無碍自通霄

Tsushō-mon The passage to the wide heaven.

If you nourish doubts inside, behold of entering high-handedly.

If there is no obstruction (muge) in your heart, you will enter wide heaven freely.

Doubts search restlessly for meaning and benefit of one's endeavor: "What will await me in this community? Why have I come here anyway? Is there any deeper meaning of being here? Is here enough time to get used to the monastery? Can I face this challenge? Will there be problems afterwards when returning back to normal life?"

After having made the decision of entering, it was necessary to lay down these doubts like old clothes and to embrace *muge* 無碍, the spirit of non-obstruction. It is not a spirit that tries to trap persons and events in a rigid scheme, attempting to control them; it is rather a spirit that fosters openness and awareness towards the other. Of course, this is easier said than done, but it does not matter how many times one is thrown back in his old way of thinking – it is sufficient to return to *muge* every time anew.

The inscription on the small gate to the right acknowledges this kind of thought:

白雲関 門外已無差別道 雲辺又一重関有

Hakuun-kan The gate of the white clouds.

Outside this gate there is no way of discrimination.

However it is not easy to enter the region of the white clouds.

Regardless, what one's goal or motivation was until now: It is crucial to decide here and now. If one has passed through this gate once, nobody is going to dig out old mistakes and ask about the past. But the first step is connected with great tribulations: During the period of five days the determination of newcomers is thoroughly tested and those who decide to withdraw during that time are not few.



白雲關 Hakuun-kan



通霄門 Tsushō-mon

In Zen tradition, novice monks are called *unsui* 雲水, *clouds* and *water*, because they move freely like wind and rain throughout the whole country. The phrases on the two gates (cf. pictures above) containing words like *heaven* and *clouds* can also be interpreted from this background. In former times in China, not only novices, but all monks travelling from one monastic community to the next in search for a new master (*angya* 行脚) have been called *unsui*.

In the last night before entering the convent there is a great party celebrating the *birth of a new monk*. On this occasion I was presented with a letter of reference from my *shishō* 師匠 (mentor), assuring that I could enter the enclosure of the monastery. After this the equipment for the next months was checked one more time; only the most basic items are allowed to be taken in: monastic robes, begging bowls, shaving razors and a sacred text. This night I could not sleep at all, because I could not remember the correct greeting formula to be said when entering the monastery. I had received the formula a few days earlier, but in the last evening the wording was suddenly changed, so that there were only a few hours left for me to memorize – I was close to despair.

Luckily I could manage to memorize the formula until the early morning hours, so that I could make my way to the enclosure of Manpuku-ji – even though considerably fatigued. After getting there I positioned myself in the entrance hall of a building called *zenshusen* 禪修潛³ and cried out loudly the greeting formula with my last ounce of strength in order to hand over the letter of reference. But no

3. This is the place in Manpuku-ji, where the *rōshi* 老師 (Zen-Master) lives, receives visitors and gives his sermons to novice monks.

matter how hard one is trying to achieve admission to the convent, at first everybody is refused with the statement that the monastery is already crowded and that there is no free space left for another monk. So I was presented with a list of other, more suitable, training monasteries in Kyoto and politely asked to leave.

From here on it is time for the so called *niwa-tsume* 庭詰 (“garden test”), which means something like to be forced into the garden: Over the next two days I had to kneel in pleading gesture and lowered head in the entrance hall to proof the sincerity of my wish to enter. (See picture below) Of course, legs and feet began to hurt after a short time in this unfamiliar posture and it was getting colder and colder while waiting in the entrance hall. A few hours later, *oidashi* 追い出し, the driving out of the newcomer, began. Suddenly somebody grabbed me by the collar of my robe from behind and threw me out of the entrance hall! “Why are you still here? Get lost! You have no business here! Go home!” With such shouts and wielding sticks I was chased to a remote area of the monastery – to the bewilderment of some tourists nearby. Although my mentor had explained to me the practice of *oidashi* beforehand, it was a different thing to experience this martial tradition first hand. Even though my legs were numb, I ran as fast as I could from my pursuers. In former times *oidashi* was really used to get rid of annoying petitioners, nowadays it became a welcomed excuse to give the exhausted *unsui* an opportunity to relax his contorted body and to visit the toilet. After a few minutes I returned to the entrance hall in order to resume the admission procedure with crying out the greeting formula one more time.



Niwatsume 庭詰: First part of the admission procedure into the monastery

After this procedure was repeated several times, in the morning of the third day the *tangazume* 旦過詰 (“short-time test”) began: I was led into a small room and instructed to meditate permanently. From time to time a young monk came to serve me some light food, or there were short breaks to visit the toilet. Except of such brief interruptions, all the time of the *tangazume* was dedicated to the practice of *zazen*.

Because the *unsui* were busy going to town for collecting donations these days, they would sometimes forget me and my need. Apart from the transition of night and day, I lost all my sense of time and it was hard to tell, if it was morning or evening. On the first day I could enter into a state of deep meditation and time did fly by. On the second day, a big culture festival was held on the grounds of Manpuku-ji, so that noise kept leaking into my little room all the time. So even if I tried hard, I could not concentrate and my head was filled with loud music and the voice of the announcer. The euphoria of the day before was soon replaced with despair and gloomy thoughts about home and family were intermingled with a piercing pain in the knees. On the morning of the third day the admission procedure finally ended with a solemn entrance into the meditation hall. The following 100 days are called *kinsoku* 禁足 (lit. “walking prohibited”), because during this period it is strictly forbidden for the novice to leave the monastery or to have any kind of exchange with the world outside except in the form of letters.

In the next part of my report I will try to describe the everyday life of a novice living in Manpuku-ji by introducing the standard schedule. Of course there are many special occasions in the annual cycle of the monastery which follow different schedules. There is also a period of five days each month called *sesshin* 撰心 (“concentrating one’s mind”) during which the young monks focus on meditation and do not work in the large gardens of the monastery.

One day in the life of a novice

- 4.15 h *Kishō* 起床: The first monks are getting up to prepare the morning service.
- 4.30 h *Junshō* 巡照: Ritual wake-up call and opening of the monastery gates.
- 5.00 h *Chōka* 朝課: Solemn chanting of sutras in the main hall.
- 5.40 h *Dōnai fūgyō* 堂内諷經: Short chanting of sutras in the meditation hall to beg for protection and spiritual progress for the practicing monks.⁴

4. Some years ago, *dōnai fūgyō* and chanting sutras in the meditation hall were introduced into the daily schedule because the younger monks felt that in this central hall of the monastery there was also a need for prayer, which led to a change of the older regulations.

- 5.45 h *Zazen* 座禪: Seated meditation.
- 6.00 h *Kanshō* 喚鐘: Individual conversation and *kōan*-training 公案⁵ with the *rōshi* 老師 (master).
- 6.30 h *Nitten samu* 日天作務: Each novice cleans the area of the monastery entrusted to him in own responsibility.
- 7.00 h *Shukuza* 粥座: Breakfast.
- 7.35 h *Sentaku-mono dashi* 洗濯物出し: Washing clothes.
- 7.45 h *Samu* 作務 or *takuhatsu* 托鉢: Working in the gardens and halls of the monastery or going to town for mendicant walks.
- 10.00 h *Sarei* 茶礼: A short break for tea-time in which traditional Japanese sweets, donated by benefactors of the monastery, are consumed.
- 11.15 h *Sentaku-mono hoshi* 洗濯物干し: Drying the laundry outside.
- 11.30 h *Saiza* 濟座: Lunchtime.
- 12.00 h *Hiru-yasumi* 昼休み: lunch break.
- 12.45 h *Samu* 作務: Working in the gardens.
- 15.00 h *Sarei* 茶礼: Teatime.
- 15.30 h *Hōyō junbi* 法要準備: Preparing of the evening service. (Cleaning the main hall, lighting candles, burning incense etc.).
- 16.00 h *Banka* 晚課: Evening Service.
- 16.45 h *Sentakumono no torikomi* 洗濯物の取り込み: Taking in the laundry.
- 17.00 h *Yakuseki* 薬石: Supper.
- 17.30 h *Shodō-shime* 諸堂閉め: The gates of the monastery are closed. Each novice performs the personal tasks entrusted to him by his superior.
- 18.00 h *Zazen* 座禪: Seated meditation.
- 18.30 h *Kanshō* 喚鐘: Individual conversation with the *rōshi*.
- 19.00 h *Kaiyoku* 開浴: opening of the bath house.
- 20.15 h *Zazen* 座禪: Seated meditation.
- 20.55 h *Kaichin fugyō* 開沈諷經: Chanting of the vow of Master Daie 大慧⁶ to confirm and strengthen ones own resolution to attain awakening.
- 21.00 h *Kaichin taikō* 開沈太鼓: The big drum of the monastery is heralding the end of the day.

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5. *Kōan* literally means something like a “public case.” They are questions or problems posed by the master to his disciples to lead them towards awakening. Mostly they cannot be solved through rational thinking and the disciples need to meditate a long time until they can solve the *kōan*.
6. *Daie ōkō* 大慧宗杲 is a famous chinese Zen-master. He is known for spreading *kōan-zen* during the Song dynasty (960-1279).

21.20 h *Kaichin junshō* 開沈巡照: The same words like in the wake-up call are now chanted in another acoustic color and a soft voice to remind the monks of their commitment to strive for awakening.

21.40 h *Bonbai renshū* 梵唄練習: Learning and practicing to chant the sutras because the melodies and rhythms of the Sutras in the Obaku school are complex and hard to learn. Much practice is required for the young monks, so that they have to learn until late in night to memorize the holy texts. More advanced monks can use this time to contemplate about the *kōan* they were entrusted by their master. Still others use this time to devote themselves to *yaza* 夜座, the nocturnal meditation. Often all monks gather at night to consume the food donations which have been donated to the monastery during the days before.

Junshō 巡照

After entering the monastery every *unsui* is entrusted with a *haiyaku* 配役, a specific role, which changes every three months. The first and most simple is the function of the *junshō* 巡照 (lit. “go around and shed light”). At five central spots of Manpuku-ji, at the *zendō* 禪堂,⁷ the *sei-hōjō* 西方丈,⁸ the *tō-hōjō* 東方丈,⁹ the *tenzō* 天座¹⁰ and the *shōrō* 鐘樓,¹¹ there is a so called *junshō-ban* 巡照板, a massive piece of wooden panel in hexagonal shape hanging at the wall.

Every morning punctually at 4.30 a.m. the *junshō* strikes with a wooden hammer the first *junshō-ban* and chants with all his power the words written on the wooden plate so that his voice reaches out into the neighborhood of the monastery. As soon as possible he heeds for the next *junshō-ban* until he has went through the whole monastery and opened its doors. Especially on cold winter mornings this task requires from newcomers to get used to rough monastic life very quickly: They have to perform their duty with freshly shaved heads and straw sandals. Often their voice breaks down or cracks begin to fracture the skin of their feet because of the winterly cold. But after a few weeks, most newcomers get used to their environment and execute their work without problems.

7. The meditation hall where the novices also sleep at night.
8. The west wing. Formerly it was used as dormitory for senior monks. Today it is used for trainees, who want to experience the monastic way of live for a few days.
9. The east wing. Here lives the abbot with assisting monks since the days of the founding of Manpuku-ji.
10. The kitchen. Today, most senior monks live in single rooms located in the kitchen building.
11. Tower which houses a big drum and bell.

Every night at 9.20 p.m. the procedure described above is repeated, but this time the words are not chanted with a loud voice, but in a gentle voice after the sound of the nocturnal drum and bell have ceased. The words written on the *junshō-ban*, are as follows:

謹白大衆	Kin Pe Da Chon	謹んで大衆に白す
生死事大	Sen Su Su Da	生死は事大にして
無常迅速	U Jan Shin So	無常は迅速なる
各宜醒覚	Ko Go Shin Kyo	各々宜しく醒覚すべし
慎勿放逸	Shin U Fua I	謹んで放逸すること勿れ

*Sincerely I announce to the great assembly:
Live and death are matters of great importance!
Everything is vain and passes by quickly!
Everybody may achieve awakening quickly!
Guard yourselves and do not waste this live with vanity!*

Through this first and last words of a day the monks shall be reminded that all existence is transient and a person's lifetime is limited. Far too often we have to face the end of a period of life and regret to have not used all possibilities presented to us. The *rōshi* often reminded us of these words when he pointed out to us: "Live every day so that you have no regrets! Here you have the unique chance to dedicate all your time to Zen. Practice diligently before you return to your own temples." The theme of vanity is also to be encountered at other points in the daily routine of Manpuku-ji. At the end of every day's evening service the following words are chanted:

是日已過 命亦隨滅 如少水魚 Su Ju I Ko Min I Sui Ken Chi Chau Sui Chi

*Now this day draws to its end
also our lifetime is reduced again.
Like fish in a little bit water!*

Awakening from all illusions is seen as the goal of all striving in this limited lifetime, this is called the "great matter of life and death" in the verses cited above. To be not deceived through one's own perception, opinions and desires, but to conceive reality as it is. For this difficult task the monastery tries to create a suitable environment: All possible distraction is reduced to a minimum. Eating, sleeping, working, and reciting sutras: The goal is not to be seen in a far dimension but unfolds itself before the eyes of the mindful here and now.

The Refectory

The meals in Manpuku-ji are also fashioned to match the same goal as described above. Besides the Zendō and the bath house, the *saidō* 濟堂 (refectory) is also entitled as *dōjō* 道場, a “place of the way,” in which the Zen-mind shall manifest itself with the help of silence and mindful practice. When the preparations for breakfast or lunch are done, one of the Unsui hits the *kaipan* 魚槌, a wooden instrument in form of a giant fish, for three times. In the mouth of the fish sticks an orb representing the cause of all human suffering. In Buddhism this complex cause is formed by the so called three poisons: *musabori* 貪り (desire), *ikari* 嗔り (anger), and *guchi* 愚痴 (ignorance). The beating of the fish symbolizes the practice of monastic life, through which human beings should be enabled to spew out all harmful poison, which endangers a wholesome existence. This can be a rather painful procedure, but it is never directed against the individual: Before and after striking the *kaipan*, the monk makes a deep respectful bow in front of it.



Kaipan (wooden fish)

Shortly after this, the so called *unpan* 雲版 (lit. “cloud plate”), a massive metallic panel in shape of a cloud, comes into action. In popular belief its sound can dispel earthquakes and other disasters. While it is beaten in a complex rhythm, the Unsui leave the Zendō and proceed in a solemn manner to the refectory. On their way, in exact timing they answer the call of the *unpan* with an *inkin* 引磬, a portable hand bell. After arriving in the refectory the monks invoke the names of several buddhas and bodhisattvas¹² wishing that through eating this meal they may be able to be of service for all sentient beings. In this context the *gokan* 五観 (five reflections) are chanted:

12. *Niji rinzai-gi jū-butsumyō* 二時臨齋儀十仏名.

一つには功の多少をはかり彼の来處を量る
 二つには己が徳行の全闕と付って供に應ず
 三つには心を防ぎ過食等を離るるを宗とす
 四つにはまさに良薬をこととするは形枯を療せんが為なり
 五つには道業を成せんが為にまさにこの食を受くべし

At first, we reflect about how many different factors were necessary to make this meal possible and how many people's work was needed to prepare it.

Secondly, we reflect upon our own failures and if we are worthy to receive this meal.

Thirdly, we vow to guard our mind against passions and other transgressions and to refrain from them.

Fourthly, we regard this meal as good medicine to heal our exhausted body.

Fifthly, we reflect upon this meal as receiving it to complete the way of awakening.

Thanks to this short meditation even eating is transformed into a religious exercise that provides the opportunity to contemplate the deep relationships through which all sentient beings are connected to each other and where oneself's place is to be located in this chain of life.

While breakfast consists of a simple rice soup, at noon and in the evenings often steamed vegetables, rice and *miso* soup with seaweed are served. To value these precious gifts, which are not to be wasted, the monks clean their eating bowls at first with tea and then with warm water and a piece of pickled radish. With this special method the time for cleaning the bowls afterwards is also saved and the monks can use their spare time for meditation.

Takuhatsu 托鉢

In addition to the daily work in the widespread gardens and halls of Manpuku-ji, the *unsui* leave the monastery two times a week for a ritualized mendicant walk called *takuhatsu* 托鉢. The tradition of *takuhatsu* can be traced back to the early days of Buddhism in India: What the monks could collect in their begging bowls until 12 a.m. had to suffice for the daily meal. The Chinese characters for *takuhatsu*, "bowl" (*hatsu* 鉢) and "to put something on the palm of one's hand" (*taku* 托), are a literal description of the practice of the mendicant ritual. Nowadays the monks do not use their begging bowls, which are kept in their fixed location in the refectory, but they carry big cloth bags with them to receive rice and other food donations. In the last years however many supporters have switched from giving food to donate money, which is very convenient for the monks, who had to carry their heavy bags over many kilometers. To each bag is tied a piece of small wood which carries the seal of the head monk. The seal is necessary because there are also impostors who walk around in monk robes and beg for money to make an easy living. In the case of doubt the police may control the seal attached to the monk's bag.

When leaving the monastery walls the monks will take an *ajirogasa* 網代笠, a conical wicker hat, with them to shield them against sun and rain, but also to hide their faces from prying eyes of curious people: All donations shall be given without regard of the person receiving it. In the streets of the neighboring town the monks proceed in slow motion and pass by the houses of the believers while raising their voices chanting *hō* 法 *ō* 法 *ō* 法.¹³ The character *hō* 法, which is often translated as “law,” represents the teaching and religious instruction, namely Buddha’s dharma, which the monks offer the lay people. Out of gratitude the recipients support the monks with what they need to make their living.¹⁴ When a potential donor hears the call of the monks in the streets, he or she leaves the house, makes a bow and puts the donation into the bag of the monk. The monk bows deeply and thankfully answers with the *shigu seigan-mon* 四弘誓願文, the fourfold vow, widely used in Japanese Buddhism:

衆生無邊誓願度	Shu Jō Mu Hen Sei Gan Do
煩惱無盡誓願斷	Bon Nō Mu Jīn Sei Gan Dan
法門無量誓願学	Hō Mon Mu Ryō Sei Gan Gaku
仏道無上誓願成	Butsu Dō Mu Jō Sei Gan Jō

Although sentient beings are without number, I vow to liberate them all.

Although desires are unceasing, I vow to cut them off.

Although the gates of teaching are numberless, I vow to learn them all.

Although the way of the Buddha is unrivaled, I vow to master it.

To give thanks for receiving support the monk renews his resolution to pursue the way of awakening until the end. He knows that he is not able to walk this way alone, but is in need of the support of his brother monks and the lay people. Hence “give” and “take” are on the same level: The donor participates in the sincere wish of the monk to advance on his way for the sake of all sentient beings, in so far as he enables him to accomplish this goal.

From a Christian viewpoint statements like the vow to *liberate all sentient beings* may sound unrealistic or even hubristic. But in this context this vow is not to be seen as the statement of a specific individual in a limited lifetime, but as a vow uttered on behalf of all living beings in whose community the speaker feels himself drawn into. This genre of uttering one’s wish for awakening in a formal manner, the so called *hatsuganmon* 発願文, has a long history in Buddhism and can be also found at other

13. These words can also be understood as a reference to the *sanshin* 三身, the three bodies of the universal Buddha who instructs sentient beings according to their capacities in different manifestations: The *hōshin* 法身 (the universal dharma body), the *hōshin* 報身 (the reward body) and the *ōshin* 応身 (manifestation body).

14. Offerings or giving alms (*dāna*) in Buddhism signifies both, the monks’ expounding Buddhas teaching to the lay people, and vice versa the lay people’s donation of food to the monks.

places in the daily service of Manpuku-ji. Last but not least the *hatsuganmon* is a reminder that spirituality and religion are not a private matter of lifestyle, but have to be realized in serving one another.

Zendō 禪堂

The *Zendō* 禪堂, the meditation hall, serves the *unsui* as a place to study, to sleep and to meditate: it is the central place in the live of a novice.



The eastern *tan* of the *Zendō*

When one enters the building via the enclosure area of the monastery, at first an enormous wooden threshold, which marks the borderline between the sacred and the mundane, has to be crossed. This threshold forces the entering person to stop for a moment and to realize that one is entering another sphere. After making the first steps inside, a massive plate in which old Chinese letters are engraved attracts the eye. It is the *dōki* 堂規, the code of conduct regulating all movements in the *Zendō*. It demands uninterrupted silence and concentration.



A monk studies the code of conduct of the Zendō

Each monk has make a deep bow in front of the *dōki* before he directs his step to his own meditation seat. The floor of the Zendō consists of black tiles which give the wide hall even at noon a mysterious and gloomy atmosphere. At the east and the west side of the room the so called *tan* 単 rises up from the ground, on which the monks spend much of a day's time. The *tan* is a wooden structure of about one meter height, which is covered by *tatami*-mats. Each one of these mats demarcates the personal space provided for one monk. On top of the *tatami*-mat lies a long cushion, the *tan-futon* 単布団: In its folded form it serves as meditation seat and in its spread form it is used as mattress at night. The *tan-futon* is smaller and thinner than the sleeping futon which is commonly used in Japanese households, so that it can be very difficult for newcomers to sleep comfortably on them. Behind each *tatami* is a little box, *tan-bako* 単箱 called, where the few personal belongings of the individual are stored.

Against heat and cold the inner room of the Zendō is only protected through thin *shōji* 障子, Japanese sliding paper windows, so that outdoor and indoor temperature during winter and summer are almost the same. The gates of the Zendō leading to the enclosure area are also open through the whole year. Only at night a thick curtain is lowered in front of the entrance to keep out wind and rain. The gates leading to the area of Manpuku-ji which are accessible for tourists remain closed almost all the time. Only when the *unsui* solemnly process to the main hall or the refectory, these gates are opened.

Central object of worship of the Zendō is the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara¹⁵ being placed on an enormous lotus pedal behind the long altar table in the middle of the room. *Avalokitesvara*, Jp. 觀世音 *Kanzeon* or *Kannon*, is in many cases referred to as the manifestation of *jihī* 慈悲, compassion or mercy, and one of the most popular figures in the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist pantheon. Believers pray for his help since they consider him as a reliable savior. He is venerated in masculine form as well as in a feminine form. His Sanskrit name *Avalokitesvara* is probably a compound of *avalokita* for “to see” and *ishvara* for “lord” or “ruler.” The translation *Kanzeon*, literally “he who sees the sounds of the world,” or more freely, “he who perceives the cries or prayers of the world,” is a very suitable translation for a being who is believed to never turn his face away from the suffering, but always is about to lend a helping hand.

This self-sacrificing work of Kanzeon is not to be seen as some kind of pure actionism, but stems from a profound insight achieved in a deep meditative state, telling him that all beings are without self-existence, but fundamentally empty in their existence.¹⁶ In this context *kū* 空, emptiness, is not simply to be understood as a negation of existence, but designates the belief that all existence is without substance. The existence of an apple, e.g., is constituted by factors such as sunlight, nutritious earth, temperature and humidity. If one takes all these factors away in order to inquire what the essence of the apple is, its true being, there will be nothing left but emptiness in the end. The same can be said about all other phenomena to which the being of the apple is connected: Light, earth and water are also connected to countless substanceless entities on which they are dependent. *Kū* is one of the central concepts of Zen, even above the central altar the words *shin-kū* 真空 (“true emptiness”), are engraved.

This profound insight into *kū* is to be seen as foundation for Kanzeon's saving activity: All beings are essentially *one* in their emptiness. Because they are connected inseparably it is not possible to help one and to discard others. On this level of realization there can be no discrimination between self and other. Against this background the installation of Kanzeon as central icon in a Zendō can be understood: On one hand he serves the monks as example for endurance and resolution for their quest for awakening, but on the other hand he is also seen as merciful guide and helper in this difficult search.

15. A bodhisattva is a being determined to achieve perfect awakening while helping other sentient beings to reach the same goal. Historical persons as well as transcendent beings can be called bodhisattva.

16. Cf. the first verses of the *Prajna Paramita Sutra*.

In his practice of Zen almost every monk has to make the experience that there are times when he cannot rely on his own power any more and when he is overcome by pain and sorrow. At those times there comes a moment when he has to give up all struggle and fighting, turning his attention fully to *mukō* 向こう, the other side, from which he is awaiting the unconditioned help Kanzeon is promising.

But as the central icon of the Zendō, Kanzeon is also a practitioner in the midst of practitioners: Each morning, before the monks begin their meditation, they recite a short sutra dedicated to him, hoping for support on their way. Before eating their breakfast they offer incense and a bowl of rice soup to him. Before entering meditation they make a proskynesis toward Kanzeon's lotus pedal. Every donation made to the *unsui* is offered first on Kanzeon's altar.

Conclusion

Here I attempted to give a short outline of the daily life behind the walls of the enclosure at Manpuku-ji. Of course I am fully aware that there are many details of great importance which I could not mention in this essay. After having read the German version of this essay, some people were disappointed, because nothing was written about special meditative states or profound spiritual insight. During the first weeks of my stay at Manpuku-ji I felt the same way. Nobody would talk with me about religious matters – just the same monotonous life every day. I even thought about leaving the monastery. But slowly I began to realize that it was this *monotonous life* which was the most important matter in the monastery. The spirit of Zen is not necessarily something spectacular taking you on a trip to another world, but can reveal itself in the simple everyday life. I still like to remember a story the *rōshi* told us about the Chinese master Sekitō 石頭 (700-790). As Sekitō decided to travel to another monastery to search for a new master, he was asked by the abbot there what he had learned in his former monastery. Their conversation developed as follows:

“I have learned nothing except the fact, that I missed nothing before entering the monastery for the first time.”

“Than it was of no use at all for you to enter the monastery?”

“No, if I had not entered the monastery, I would not have recognized that I missed nothing from the very beginning.”

– Since our birth we carry the fundamental Buddha nature in us, as my friends at Manpuku-ji would say, or we are loved unconditionally by God the way we are, as we Christians believe. But it takes a long time of practice until one opens one's heart and embraces this simple truth which had been there all the time already.