

## Living in another country: A trip of self-discovery

By Nicholas Bradley



Living overseas is a great way to learn a language and learn about a culture. When you live overseas to study or work for an extended period of time, you also learn a lot about yourself. People considering living overseas often do not think about this benefit when thinking about their trip.

Living overseas to study and work has been one of the best decisions I have made. Living overseas has taught me so much about the world but it also taught me so much about myself. In your home country or city, you may never think very much about your actions or the actions of others. However, when you go to a new place where everyone does things differently, you always find yourself saying “I never realized I did that” or “I never thought about doing it like that”. What you like, how you do things, and who you truly are all become much clearer when you live overseas. For me, discovering myself was as much a discovery as ‘discovering’ the sights and smells of New York or witnessing a sun dance at Chichen Itza.

Moving out of your cultural comfort zone really tells you something about yourself; therefore I was very interested to learn about a beautiful Buddhist monastery called Sogenji in Okayama

City. This monastery is unique in Japan because it is populated almost entirely by non-Japanese. Coming to Japan to live in a Rinzaï Zen Buddhist monastery seemed to me to be a huge leap into the unknown and I was curious to discover what lead people to do this and, having made this huge change to their life, what advice they could they offer students considering a move overseas and learning another language.

On a hot and humid day in August with the cicadas crying and the sun shining, I sat on a porch at Sogenji with two of its residents, Toon from Belgium and Ryan from America. Together we talked about life in Sogenji, life in Japan and living overseas. Here are some excerpts from our conversation.



Toon from Belgium (left) and Ryan from America (right).

### **N: Are you monks?**

T: No. Most of the people are lay people. Those people can take some vows, but monks are one step more; one step more towards the roshi (Abbot).

R: *We're just trainees.*

T: Yeah, we're just trainees: koji's. That's the Japanese name for us: koji's.

**N: How long have you been at Sogenji.**

T: Almost 2 years.

**N: How long do you plan on staying?**

T: We don't know how long we will stay here because it's up to the roshi. He says you stay here as long as it takes to be "realised". We stick to our plan and then we see if we are going to make it.

My plan is to stay here 3 years and a half in total. I will return in February 2014.

**N: What plans do you have for when you return?**

T: I'm a sports teacher so I can easily go and work in a school again, or somewhere else. So that's no problem.

**N: How did you find out about Sogenji?**

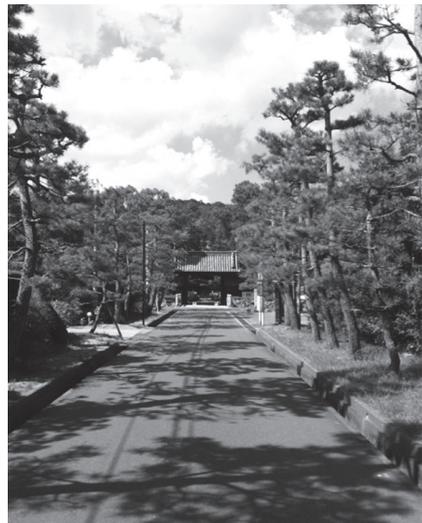
T: That's a funny story..... I saw it on television.

N: Really?

T: Yeah, there was a Belgian guy here (at Sogenji) and there was a documentary about all religions in the world, and a Belgian reporter came here to visit the Belgian guy and I saw the whole episode about here, about Sogenji. I was like, "you know, I can do that, I can go there". Then, for 3 weeks, I couldn't forget about it and I bought a ticket for Japan, not even having contacted Sogenji or knowing if I was allowed here. So, I contacted the Belgian guy and he put me in touch with Sogenji. Then I saw the roshi and that's how I got here.

**N: Before you came here, had you had any experience of monastic life or Buddhism?**

T: No. I had some experience with sitting and doing meditation, but it was very little. In the documentary, it said they sat for 4 hours and I said "I have to train; I have to get ready for this". So I started to sit for 2 hours in a row and my legs were hurting like hell. Then I came here and it was only for periods of half an hour, so it shows you how little I knew about Buddhism and the whole form of zazen (seated cross legged zen meditation).



**N: What other expectations did you have about life in Sogenji?**

T: None. I am always like that. Basically, I have no expectations and I go somewhere and I see how it goes. I had a plan, something like staying for a year, and then I will decide if I'm going to stay longer or not.

**N: Can you tell me about your typical day in Sogenji?**

T: We generally wake up at 3:40 or 3:30, something like that. Then its sutra reading in the hall. Well, its actually more like yelling than reading; we have to chant the sutras. And

about 5:30 we meditate and we also have zazen with the roshi; we have an interview with the roshi. At 7 o'clock we have breakfast and after breakfast we go outside and we have outside cleaning. We clean the grounds then at 8:30 we go inside for inside cleaning and we have a break until 9:30. Then we start working. All the people have a job here: inside the temple or the kitchen, or the garden, or any job. At 1 in the afternoon we eat lunch then we have free time until 6:30. Then we sit zazen until 8:30. Then at 9 o'clock we have an evening sutra in the genkan. And that's our day!

Then most people go to bed. Sometimes people do evening meditation. I don't know how long they do it. Some people do it at 2 at night. Eventually, everyone goes to sleep.

**N: So you only get a few hours sleep?**

T: Yeah, not so much. It's about 5 hours, not so much.

**N: Do you get used to it?**

T: You get used to it and also, meditation gives you energy. It keeps you awake. You're tired, but it keeps you awake. It's difficult to explain. It's a different kind of being awake.

**N: So everyone has their own job? What's your job?**

T: I get different tasks from the head monk: gather leaves in the cemetery, cut bushes, preparation, anything.

**N: What do you usually eat?**

T: They usually say food in a monastery is really bad, but here, everyday, it is a different cook

and everyone can cook. There are no bad cooks here. Every meal is vegetarian, but it changes. We eat all kinds of dishes. We have people from Israel here and they make humus and falafel and pita bread. So everyone brings their own culture here. Also, people from India, they have delicious curries.

*R: But there is a form. You have to have miso soup and rice. Always brown rice with soy beans, and at lunch it's always white rice and soup and other side dishes.*

T: Yeah, there always has to be rice and soup on the table with the side dishes.

**N: Do you grow any food here?**

T: Yeah, we have a garden.

*R: The reason we have side dishes is because we receive so many donations. We don't need to grow much.*

T: Two people have a food market and they donate whatever they don't sell. Sometimes it's too much.

**N: What is your favourite thing about life here?**

T: For me, it's the result of the meditation. It's like a cleansing. The result of that, it's indescribable. We are tired, but at the same time, we are full of energy.

**N: Is there anything particularly difficult about life here?**

T: The schedule. Every day is the same thing and there are a lot of rules here, but the rules are important for your concentration. If you're here a long time and you live in this community; you're always with the same people. It's a

very intense way of getting to know yourself because people are from all corners and they push your buttons. In the outside world, if you don't like someone, you just avoid them. But here, it's impossible. You have to find a way to make it work and that's how you really get to know yourself.



**N: I have been told that Rinzai Zen is very strict. Is it true?**

T: It is, it is. But..., this is a western monastery, so for starters, there are women here.

R: *It can be very strict, but that usually only comes from the roshi.*

**N: How many trainees are there here at Sogenji? Where are they from?**

R: *About 20. America, Belgium, France, Hungary, Taiwan, Japan, Poland.....*

T: Oh, Israel of course.

R: *...Argentina...*

T: Mexico already left. Some people just come for a few months.

R: *....Canada, Denmark.....*

T: ...and the Netherlands and Germany.....

But no England, they don't come here. I don't know why.

**N: What kind of commitment do people need to make when they come?**

R: *1 or 2 years.*

T: But that's changing. People who come now have to stick around until they are finished. Until the roshi says....

R: *But to get permission...at least 1 or 2 years.*

T: It's changing because the roshi is getting older, he is 74 years old. It's getting tougher for him to give all his energy to his training, so he wants to give it to people who stick around. Some people stick around for 20 years and then they go and teach.

R: *Or they stay here.*

**N: Do some people come to Sogenji and find that it is not for them and leave early?**

R: *Everyone after me....it's been a constant rotation. Some people decided that they would only come for a short time, but some people cut it short or cut it very short. Or it wasn't decided by them and they were....let go.*

**N: Is there anything in particular that causes people to leave early?**

T: It varies. For some people, its psychological problems or physical problems; too much pain in their legs. One guy from Sicily got a phone call from home and left because of family problems. All sorts of things.

R: *Money is an issue. Some people don't have enough money to come back after they have left.*

T: But sometimes the roshi will pay.



**N: So is Sogenji free? Do you have to pay anything?**

T: No, we don't have to pay anything. Once there was a guy here, a rich guy, and he wanted to give a lot of money to the roshi but the roshi refused. He said "I only want you to train here". I also thought I was going to give him a lot of money because I sit here, I get beautiful training, I get food everyday, I get a bed, well....I don't sleep on a bed but....and I don't have to pay anything! We even get money!

*R: It's an allowance.*

T: It's pretty weird for me, from a western view.

**N: Is Sogenji supported by donations?**

T: Most of the time yeah.

*R: They do begging for alms, but it is not so much. Also, the roshi goes out to do sutras and that brings them money but....*

T: Yeah, he has money but we don't know where it comes from.

**N: Is your family Buddhist?**

T: My family is Catholic. My grandmother is a very strong Catholic. My parents are not so strong Catholics.

**N: Now did they react when you told them you were going to live in a Buddhist monastery in Japan?**

T: They were not so happy. Not because I was going to live in a monastery but because I was going to live on the other side of the world. But they came here in April and now they are..... less concerned. They were impressed. They had a whole different view after their visit.

**N: Why did you choose Buddhism over Catholicism?**

T: Because I have never been a strong Catholic. For me, it was lacking some deeper profound practice, like understanding what life was. There is only one way to answer questions and that is silence. You just shut up and watch your thoughts go by and you just see it, you experience it. And that's how I came to meditation. That was something that Catholicism was not offering me. It was just giving me more rules of how I should behave.

**N: What languages can you speak?**

*R: Japanese and English*

T: English, Flemish and a little bit of French and a little Portuguese.

**N: What is the language of communication in Sogenji?**

T: English.

*R: With a little bit of Japanese mixed in. We use some Japanese names for things and simple things.*

**N: Are people required to speak Japanese once they have been here for a while?**

R: *In terms of rules, it's not formal, but some people expect you too.*

T: They encourage it. There are Japanese classes by a teacher who comes here. I haven't attended them. I don't speak Japanese. I know some words that I have picked up working in the kitchens and around.

R: *I studied at high school and college. But actually here, I use it more. Even if I don't speak it a lot I hear it from listening to the roshi and I can understand more and more. So I learned most through...it being all around...*



**N: From immersion?**

R: *Yeah, immersion in the language.*

**N: Toon, what helped you the most when you were learning English?**

T: I learnt the most from watching television with subtitles. I learned English in high school, but I learnt the most from television.

**N: Is this your first time in Japan?**

T: Yeah.

**N: Do you get chance to go out into the wider Japanese community?**

T: Three days a month are free days and sometime in the afternoon is also free so people can go out. People go shopping, people go eating, people go wherever they feel like....go walking, go biking.... So we do, but there's nobody who goes out to a bar drinking.

R: *If your family comes, you can travel a little.*

**N: What do you think about Japanese culture?**

T: What's different for me is the whole rigid way of behaving of Japanese. Something I need to get used to.

I visited some schools, they play tunes and then all the kids do and say things in unison, in one voice. It's something you don't see or hear in Belgium, it's impossible. It's like a machine. No kid sticks out or stands out. There isn't much room for creativity or originality. It's something I need to get used to because for me it's a bit scary.

**N: Anything you respect about Japanese culture or Japan?**

T: For me, what I am really impressed by is the community, the solidarity of Japanese. They stick together. It's connected to what I just talked about. It's amazing but I guess it has 2 sides.

R: *I came to Japan 2 or 3 years ago through Waseda University. I lived with a family there. And before I came the whole build up of coming to Japan, I was interested in the culture from everything from cartoons to the food... everything. But now I am here and things..... well aren't as interesting I guess. Seeing a family, a Tokyo family from the inside, how similar it was to what I grew up with....it was*

*a real wake up. Once you know what to look for in a culture, you see how it's kind of the same but you just have to see it as a different manifestation.*

**N: You both came from overseas to live in Japan. Do you have any advice for students leaving Japan and going to live in another country?**

*R: Adapting to a culture can be painful but don't avoid the painful things. Try to learn from them as much as you can. Be patient.*

**T: The fewer expectations you have, the less painful it will be. The idea that attracts you to a place is just an idea. Just say "What ever comes comes, and I will deal with it".**

## Language Café



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開催曜日・時間等詳細については豊橋語学教育研究室へお問い合わせください。

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