

The Lesson

By Yvonne Gordon



Free Your Mind

A Zen meditation class at a temple in Nagano offers a calming experience—and a window into Japanese culture

It's 6:30 on a Sunday morning, and I'm sitting cross-legged on a tatami mat at Japan's Zenkoji temple complex, trying to empty my mind.

I've dabbled with meditation in the past but always found it tricky to keep my mind from wandering, so I've taken the train from Tokyo to Nagano and spent the previous night in pilgrim lodgings at Zenkoji, which is home to what's believed to be the first Buddhist statue brought to Japan, back in 552 CE. I've already watched the priests say their morning prayers, and now, at Daikanjin temple, the on-site residence of Zenkoji's co-chief priest, I'm taking a class in which visitors can learn zazen meditation.



I'm hoping to improve my practice, but this activity is also, according to Nagano-based tour guide Daniel Moore, a chance to gain insight into the local way of life. "When you experience zazen," he says, "you can understand a lot of Japanese culture, because it's very present and calm. People are not rushed or hurried; they reflect as they go. This gives a small window into Japanese culture that you don't get in any other way."

My session is led by a monk named Shinjun Denda, who is dressed in long black robes with a gold sash. He sits in front of an altar decorated with golden candlesticks, incense burners, and bells, and talks through the three elements of zazen meditation in Japanese, with guide Emiko Mizukoshi translating for the students, who sit facing him on small, round cushions on the tatami floor.

The first element is posture and sitting position: Shinjun crosses his legs, placing his left foot on his right thigh, in the half-lotus position. We follow his lead and, sitting up straight, we place our hands in our laps, palms facing up, right hand on top of the left, tips of our thumbs joined. The second

step is to control our breathing—Shinjun counts us in and out slowly—and the final stage is to relax the mind, emptying it of thoughts. "If you can control your breathing," Shinjun says, "you will have a calm mind."

When Shinjun comes around with a *zenjō*—a long wooden stick—we are told to lean forward and bow our heads. He strikes me firmly on the back, around my shoulders. I fear it might be punishment for letting my thoughts wander, but it's just to relax the muscles.

As first-timers, we meditate for just five minutes. Shinjun sounds a bell and wooden clappers to end the session. "In daily life," he says, "I hope you practice Zen."

When I exit Daikanjin temple, the colors of the small water garden outside seem more vivid than before. I find myself feeling peaceful and more aware of my surroundings—and determined to bring more Zen into my daily life. *\$6.50 for a 30-minute zazen meditation experience; for more information, visit daikanjin.de.*

From top: Zenkoji temple; Shinjun Denda in front of the altar at Daikanjin temple; Shinjun wields the *zenjō* above a student