

The World of Zen

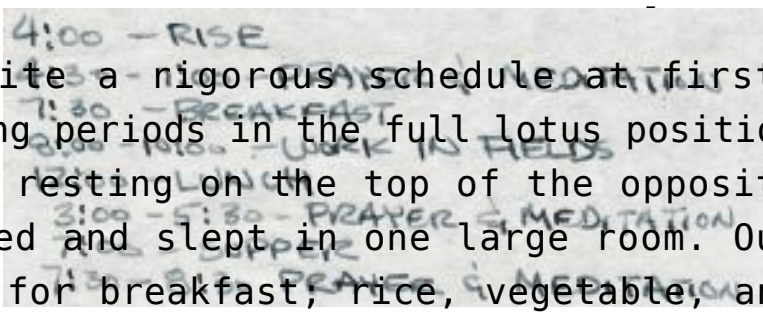
Upon entering the Samanvaya Ashram, I discovered that the program being offered was an immersive course in Zen Buddhism led by Zengo, a Zen Buddhist monk from Japan. There were only eight students (including myself) enrolled in the program—three women and five men. We were from the US, Canada, England and Germany. This picture shows our group with Zengo center front, me behind and to his right, and, on the far right, an Indian man who joined us occasionally.



My only previous exposure to Zen was one visit to a Zen center in Rochester, NY run by Philip Kapleau, author of *Three Pillars of Zen*. Zen can fairly be described as the most

radical form of Buddhism, a fast track path to Enlightenment. At the core of Zen practice is the discipline of Zazen, seated meditation. There was no gradual easing into the rigors of the course for me or my fellow participants. For starters, I had my head shaved as a symbol of giving up worldly attachments to pursue the discipline fully. This was an especially gutsy move for the women in the group. A typical day for us looked like this

(from home): It seemed like quite a rigorous schedule at first, especially sitting for long periods in the full lotus position (legs crossed, with feet resting on the top of the opposite thighs). All the men lived and slept in one large room. Our diet was simple—porridge for breakfast, rice, vegetable, and chapati for lunch and supper. It was clean, wholesome, and no limit was set. I would add a little variety from time to time from street vendors in town.



The founder of the ashram saw it as a laboratory for implementing methods and technologies appropriate to rural India. One was quite amusing. The bathrooms were modern (with squatty potties) and clean. The outflow from the toilets went to a large underground tank, which had a top that would raise or lower based on how much biogas was generated on any given day. The biogas was piped to burners and used for cooking our food. If the cooks needed more gas, all they had to do was increase the amount of lentils they fed to us!

In my next post, I will describe our daily routines of work and meditation in more detail, in addition to some insights into how I was processing all this new input at the time.
