

## 2. Appeal of Rinzai Zen

Editor's Note: *The two main branches of modern Zen in Japan are Soto Zen and Rinzai Zen. Most Zen centers in the US teach variations of Soto Zen. As far as I know, there are only three official Rinzai Zen branch temples in the US, one on Maui, one in Los Angeles and one in Northern California. A signature feature of Zen training is intensive practice periods, called sesshins, typically lasting a week or more. Sesshins are highly structured and focus on formal practice (called zazen) and one-on-one encounters (called sanzen or dokusan) with a teacher referred to as a Roshi. A practitioner asked Marcy why she finds practicing Rinzai Zen so appealing.*

I had been practicing vipassana meditation for a long time but I was friendly with a couple of Sasaki Roshi's students. One happens to live near me and when she told me what Rinzai was like, my heart sang. I immediately thought, "Oh, this makes so much sense to me. This sounds wonderful. I have to check this out." So, I went to a one-day event at Rinzai-ji in Los Angeles and I met Sasaki Roshi, but he was about a hundred and seven years old and died not long after I met him.

At around the same time, I had gotten to a certain point in my mindfulness practice where I could feel very strongly that I needed some complementary perspectives, so I started looking for a Zen teacher. I located Harada Roshi on my own. He is still teaching and he's based in Japan, but he also comes to Whidbey Island in Washington State a few times a year and teaches all over the world, when there's no pandemic. A couple of my friends in Ireland sit with him when he goes to Germany. He is a great living Rinzai Zen master, but I have never sat with him personally.

I read a book by Harada Roshi and I watched some of his videos so I really appreciate him, but I ended up staying local. I started going to the Mount Baldy Zen Center because they got another Japanese master, Noritake Roshi, to come there to lead sesshins. So that became my home.

I studied with Noritake Roshi for a few years and went to several sesshins with him and I even visited his home temple in Japan. Then Noritake Roshi retired and he gave up his abbotship at Rinzai-ji. The *shika*, the leader at Rinzai-ji, got in touch with Ursula Jarand, who I'm planning to see soon at her temple, Daishu-in West, in Northern California, and invited her to visit Rinzai-ji. I read Ursula's book, *Infinite Ocean*, and she just blew my mind. I think it had something to do with her being a woman, but there was also something really different about how she came through in her writing.

It's a big deal to be a transmission holder in traditional Rinzai Zen in Japan because their approach is different from a lot of traditions. It's held very closely, with the idea that the master needs to feel that the student is surpassing the master in their understanding of the Dharma in order for the master to transmit their lineage and say "I authorize you to teach." Ursula Jarand received Dharma transmission from her teacher, Morinaga Roshi. A young monk is the abbot of her temple but she's the teacher.

I have only met Ursula once and it was a profound experience. My upcoming visit to her temple will be the first time I'll sit with her for an extended period. I was considering attending a retreat with Jeff Shore, who's another American who has received Dharma transmission from a Japanese teacher. He actually lives in Japan and runs his own place there, but he travels - he leads a lot of retreats in the Netherlands and Germany, and he's going to do a retreat in Pennsylvania in January. But Rinzai is where my heart is for formal practice, for training with a teacher.

I was captivated by Rinzai when I first heard about it because I had gotten enough traction through my vipassana practice that I knew for myself that there was a greater understanding and a greater presence available than I had previously realized, before intensive practice. I already knew from attending many retreats with a teacher who had some exposure to Zen that "This stuff is real, I'm going to do this for sure. I like this stuff." Already being on board and my own experience with certain breakthroughs helped my mind understand why this might work.

So when I heard about Rinzai, and the incredibly rigorous schedule, and the attention to detail, and the perfect order of everything, I got a sense of how that set the stage powerfully for transcendent and liberating experiences and breakthroughs for people who are open to them. You'll hear teachers say that retreats in one way are good because they offer you this simplified environment so that you can put more of your attention on the practice. Right? So it allows you to drop your daily concerns gradually over a couple of days until you're really focused on your practice.

Rinzai amps that up to the nth degree by saying, "Okay, now nothing's optional, you're going to get up at 2:45 a.m., you're going to do exactly as you're told all day long." You have your place in line and you walk in line to get your meals, you signal what you want at meals in a certain way. There's absolutely no speaking whatsoever unless you have a need, in which case you know exactly who to speak to and how to signal that you need to talk.

Every single thing is thought of for you, so you have no excuse to think. To be available for that concept, for that to sound appealing - of course, for a lot of people it does not - you have to already be on board with the idea of the path and the practice. Otherwise, it sounds like boot camp. But for a practitioner who's had just enough insight to see that this thing is real, when someone technically removes all of their excuses for thinking, they're left with "Wow, now I want to know what'll happen when that's the case; when I have no excuse to think, then what will happen? I want to find out."

Then, when I finally went on sesshin, at first it still blew me away, it was so intense. There's a lot of chanting, and the chanting is really fast. They gave us a Sutra book to read from, and it's so fast. It's so fast I counted the beats at one point. It was several beats per second. So several syllables per second. I realized that I could track it with my eyes, but if I so much as began to be pulled toward a thought, I would lose my place.

You can hear the power of the attentional skills in this. So this structure that Rinzai Zen has had for over a thousand years, well over a thousand years, is all designed to facilitate an accelerated breakthrough process because if you so much as even begin to have a whiff of wavering, you'll be lost. It helps you notice immediately when you start to lose concentration, whereas under normal conditions, you can be lost in thought a long time before you notice.

That's why there's all that structure on the officers, too, where they'll tell you what to do. They'll tell you if you forget to take your hat off, or if you look up, or if you put your feet where they're not supposed to be, because they're reminding you constantly, "Pay Attention!" So it's this loving attention, attention, attention. And because everything is ritualized, the people around you can see, literally, if your attention has wavered, because you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing. It's kind of amazing, right? It's so intense. *[laughing]*

And if a person is not available to it, it's Hell on Wheels. That's why some people talk about it as being horrible or uncomfortable. But it's really their resistance that they're talking about. They don't like being told what to do or they don't understand why the structure is there, that there's a good reason for it, and on and on like that. Once you get that this is all a loving tradition designed to penetrate your resistance and help you see the nature of things, then there's nothing to fight.