



Finding Zen: Strength In The Dharma And The Sword

By Reverend Cristina Moon

Cristina Moon (she/her) reflects on training in Kendo, a form of Japanese Fencing, at Chozen-ji Zen Temple in Honolulu. She writes about how learning to spar in Kendo classes helped her develop the ability to cut straight with all her might, while connecting her shift in personal practice through Kendo to a broader reflection on Zen, culture, race, power, and identity..

"A good analogy for zazen," said the Zen priest instructing me in seated meditation, "is early man hunting. Totally still, totally silent, and totally alert. Seeing, hearing, and feeling everything."

"And," he continued, after a brief pause, "ready to jump up and kill something."

It was January 2018 and I had just arrived at Daihonzan Chozen-ji, a Rinzai Zen temple and martial arts Dojo in Honolulu, to do a traditional live-in period as a lay monk. Before this, I had already been meditating seriously for 12 years, learning about different Dharmic traditions, reading sutras and biographies of preeminent teachers, participating in programs for committed Buddhist practitioners, and sitting annual silent meditation retreats,

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sometimes up to one month long. But, despite all of my familiarity with Buddhism, I had never before heard Buddhist meditation and hunting, let alone killing, mentioned in the same breath. Though it shocked me at the time, the analogy fit all that I would come to learn about Zen at Chozen-ji, as well as the resulting shift in my view of Buddhism and its role in the world.

Founded in 1972 by two martial artists and Zen masters, Omori Sogen Rotaishi of Japan and Tenshin Tanouye Rotaishi of Hawai'i, Chozen-ji was established to bring shugyo to the West. Shugyo, one of six terms in Japanese used to describe spiritual self-development, has no direct translation in English but is generally understood to mean the deepest possible spiritual self-discipline. For Tanouye Rotaishi, this meant offering lay people a version of the rigorous spiritual training usually reserved for ordained monks in Japan, as well as employing the martial and fine arts to accelerate the personal and spiritual transformation already brought about by Zen training. Tanouye Rotaishi's ethos is often summed up in a phrase which hinges on the Japanese word *kiai*, which can be translated as an expression of energy, presence, and the yell in martial arts. The phrase is, "Kiai First."

Before I came to Chozen-ji, much of my Buddhist experience had been in Insight Meditation and Theravada Buddhism. My approach had been very different from *Kiai First*. Rather than yelling, for example, I was nobly silent. I entrained myself against striving, including in spiritual matters, and learned to slow down with restraint, patience, and self-acceptance. I sat in meditation with a yielding, open

awareness and practiced being receptive, surrendering to whatever was unfolding in front of me.

'Zazen like early man hunting' was only the first of many shifts I had to make to match the training at Chozen-ji, which meant cultivating a spiritual readiness and alertness that contrasted with what I had known before. I had arrived here drawn to the Zen "through the body" that Chozen-ji promised, but as a Yogi and Vipassanist, all out sparring in Kendo (Japanese Fencing) until I was drenched in sweat and bruised, adrenalin rushing, was far from what I had imagined as a way to cultivate mind-body connection. But then, one day, I sat in zazen and felt the newly familiar feeling of cutting straight and running through an encounter, just as I had learned in Kendo. This time, however, what I cut through was not an opponent, landing a hit on his helmet, but my own mental machination. I had been stewing on a particularly difficult professional relationship, totally caught up in my thoughts and emotions. Then, completely without premeditation or conscious intent, that Kendo feeling cut through all of the thoughts and my tightness around the relationship which had until that moment consumed me. Poof! In an instant, it all fell away. I immediately snapped to and found myself where I had been all along. I was sitting in the Dojo. I could hear the birds singing in the forest not far away. I felt the warm breeze on my skin.

I knew right away that this clarity was not a product of my spending many hours contemplating the philosophical underpinnings of non-attachment, or thinking about how to let go of delusive thinking, or even resolving to do so. I had done these for years and not experienced this kind of result. But, I had now spent many Kendo classes and zazen after zazen training my body and my mind to be ready to jump up at a moment's notice and with unrelenting commitment. I was not an adept Kendoist (and cannot even call myself that today, four years later). I was not technically proficient and

did not know the subtleties of the various waza—how to block, how to parry, how to cut. What I had learned, however, was to cut straight with all of my might, over and over again, no matter the odds. I had learned to give it everything I had, even if it came out a mess. I had learned to do Kendo Kiai First—and thereby had learned how to train in Kendo as not just a technique for fighting but a Dō, a Way to realize my True Self.

The second part of Tanouye Rotaishi's and Chozen-ji's motto is, "Then Ma-ai." Ma-ai means space and time, and also refers to form or technique. As much as my first days at Chozen-ji were focused on learning how to bring out my strength, kiai first, and to cut straight and go forward no matter what, the maturation of my training has been to refine the form. So, after I had learned to yell loudly and clearly, and after I had learned to run and cut, I honed my Kendo technique, learning the waza. Not having heard that much at first about Zen philosophy, history, or ideas, I was later instructed in the Lankavatara Sutra and the letters of Zen Master Takuan Soho on the Wisdom of the Immovable Mind. I continue to "train hard" but today, I feel it as much while learning to put others at ease while doing Chado (The Way of Tea or Japanese Tea Ceremony) as I do while doing Kendo or sitting long hours of zazen.

When I first arrived at Chozen-ji, one of the other things that really struck me was the fact that, for the first time in my experience of Buddhism in the West, I was surrounded by people who looked like me. Hawai'i is a vibrant mix of peoples, many of whose grandparents or great grandparents came here from Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines, Portugal, England, the mainland US, and even Puerto Rico to work on the plantations. I later realized that the sense of home I felt here was not just because of looks and appearances, though. Supported by the foundation of Native Hawai'ian culture that persisted here despite US colonization,

the people of Hawai'i are deeply connected to their ancestries and cultures. Buddhism, especially Japanese Buddhism, has been strongly established in Hawai'i for more than 100 years. Having grown up for my first years in Asia and being of Korean and Buddhist heritage, I found everything here, from the lilting sounds of Hawai'i Pidgin to the mix of ethnic foods, to be comforting and familiar. I also realized, over time, how much Zen permeated Korean and Japanese culture, reinforcing that my training in various arts such as Kendo and Chado was Zen training.

Chozen-ji continues to be led today by Americans of Japanese and other Asian ancestry. I've been encouraged to write, highlighting the efficacy of the Zen training I've experienced here and the importance of how it is rooted in culture. I've also been emboldened to call out the Anti-Asian Racism and Asian Erasure in Western Buddhism that dismisses Chozen-ji's schedule of classes in the martial and fine arts as "just cultural activities" and denigrates the way Asians experience and actualize their Buddhism as "folk Buddhism," "superstitious," or "not real Buddhism." I am very lucky. Lucky to have found a method and a place of training that matches my disposition and abilities, and teachers who can instruct me expertly. This approach is definitely not the right fit for everybody! Or even most people. But for me and others, Chozen-ji is a spiritual home and finding it has brought purpose, relief, and a validation of who we are at our core as spiritual warriors.

I know that, like a good ahi poke, flavored with sesame oil, soy sauce, Hawai'ian sea salt, and sea vegetables, what I've presented here is a complicated mix of juicy morsels that may be hard to parse and pick apart. I can easily imagine my former self, informed by what I had learned in mainstream Western, mostly White convert Buddhism, reading the opening lines of this article and saying to myself, "Well, that doesn't seem very Buddhist!" But I only have to

re-open Zen Master Takuan's letters, dating back to the 1600s, to see how he explains the Buddhist concepts of delusion and Mind. Writing to a samurai, he uses the principles of swordsmanship and even cites what he says is a Zen saying to illustrate the importance of having a universal mind that is free, not stopping on emotions, thoughts, or sense perception: "Although you see the sword about to strike you, do not let your mind stop there... Cherish no calculating thought whatsoever.... You move on, just as you are, entering, and upon reaching the enemy's sword, wrench it away... In Zen, this is known as seizing the enemy's spear and using it to kill him."

We may not like or be able to grasp Takuan's teachings, but, few, if any of us, are in a position to argue with Master Takuan about whether this is Zen or not, Buddhist or not. It can be helpful, however, to know how Omori Rotaishi expounded on this Zen within swordsmanship, explaining a pathway to ultimate peace through the terms "mutual slaying" and "mutual passing." Having fully accepted and resolved herself to death, ready to move forward in an encounter that will lead to the slaying of both herself and her opponent, then both swordswomen may be ready to pass each other instead of striking. In doing so, they defy and transcend the limitations of their accepted roles, purpose, identities, and realities, and this makes real peace possible.

To be fair, before I came to Chozen-ji, this was not the Buddhism I knew. It took me time and experience to realize that Buddhism is very much not monolithic. It traveled around the world and it permeated down into different local contexts over hundreds of years. When it reemerged, it was still the same pathway that the historical Buddha described to end suffering, but now expressed in ways that addressed the realities of people's lives when and where they lived them. In the case of Japanese Rinzai Zen,

this meant becoming a method of training that was effective for warriors and feudal lords. Shin Buddhism, founded by Shinran Shonin in the 1200s, is a lay tradition and Japan's most populous school of Buddhism, a Buddhism for families with no monastic order at all. There is no one Buddhism, let alone one Japanese Buddhism. There isn't even one Zen and no one doctrine, only the gleaming kernels of The Way at the heart of every school and sect.

If before I felt that Buddhism's one practical contribution to the world was teaching people how to be more sensitive—to be able to recognize and discern emotions through more patience and yielding, and to empathize and communicate with others through mindful practices—then today, I believe that Buddhism's potential is varied and can include the ability to impart strength. Together, strength and sensitivity are two vital tools to realizing the Mind, No Mind, and the Immovable Mind. Along the way, in the here and now, we may also be aided in being the people we want to be, able to sacrifice ourselves for the wellbeing of others and to recognize that every day is a fine day.

Just the other night, I was in Kendo class doing keiko, or sparring. The knuckles of my right hand were still swollen and bruised from the previous class, when I was reminded that I still need to learn to hold the sword correctly so as not to open my hand up to being struck. I was tired. The other students, though still beginners, had progressed enough that now, not only are they bigger and stronger than I am, they're also faster than they used to be and more aggressive. Maybe it was the news of war these days or that I've been particularly busy. It could have been the quickening pace of this Year of the Tiger, with the pandemic starting to wane and life returning to its usual, frenzied clip. But, in any case, I was feeling beleaguered and like being in a fight was the last thing I wanted to do, perhaps the last thing I could do. But yet, the matches kept coming.

As I was thinking, I don't want to fight anymore, I don't want to fight anymore, I realized how common a refrain this must be for so many people. We survived the global pandemic and now, our rewards seem to be an epidemic of anti-Asian violence and war with a nuclear Russia. That hardly feels fair. Who would want to keep fighting, keep going, against such odds? I recognized, however, that, regardless of what I wanted, a fight was what was in front of me. This was my life. I had made a lot of choices that led to my being here. A few years ago I would have gotten angry and taken it out on my opponent. Or, I would have simply given up and quit the match or skipped class altogether. But the other night, my physical strength and enthusiasm all dried up, I drew on my spiritual strength to fix the resolve to keep going and keep fighting. I even found it in me to fight cleaner and better, and it moved my opponent to fight differently, too.

Kendo class is coming up again tomorrow night. I still don't particularly want to go but I'll be there because I know it's the best training for me right now and it is my choice to train, to go all out and with everything I've got. Before class begins, we will sit as we always do, two 45-minute sittings without moving. Seeing, hearing, and feeling everything; and ready to jump up and fight. Ready, perhaps, to jump up and grasp the spear which my small mind wields against me and use it to kill my own ego. Text