Tobias Eckerter*

One year in Manpuku-ji
The Monastery of the Ten Thousand Blessings

Introduction

During my first stay in Japan 2007/08 I participated in the Interreligious Studies in Japan Program (ISJP) at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto. At that time I did not have the chance to visit Manpuku-ji, the head temple of Ōbaku-shū, one of the three Zen schools in Japan. Only after returning to Germany, I read for the first time with great fascination about this monastic movement originated in the 17th century. It maintained its Chinese roots for several centuries, and it established a distinguished form of Zen in which the Japanese and Chinese culture met on a high level. In the field of doctrine Ōbaku-shū would also set a new course. Whereas in Japan different schools of Buddhism are focusing on a special religious practice or teaching, Manpuku-ji, being faithful to its Chinese heritage, tried to unite various approaches from the standpoint of Zen. It includes, e.g., also the practice of calling Amida Buddha’s name (Ch. nienfo, Jp. nenbutsu 念佛).

* Tobias Eckerter studied Theology in Germany and Japanese religions in Kyoto. During his stay in Japan he experienced interreligious dialogue. Because of a special permission by the abbot of Manpuku-ji, he received the chance to undergo one year training as a novice monk in this monastery. Now he continues his training in Heidelberg in order to become minister of the Protestant church.

1. These lines composed by the Chinese founder of Obaku-shū, Ingen Ryūki (1592-1673), are carved on wooden plates attached to the great gate (sanmon 山門) of Manpuku-ji.

* Tobias Eckerter studied Theology in Germany and Japanese religions in Kyoto. During his stay in Japan he experienced interreligious dialogue. Because of a special permission by the abbot of Manpuku-ji, he received the chance to undergo one year training as a novice monk in this monastery. Now he continues his training in Heidelberg in order to become minister of the Protestant church.

1. These lines composed by the Chinese founder of Obaku-shū, Ingen Ryūki (1592-1673), are carved on wooden plates attached to the great gate (sanmon 山門) of Manpuku-ji.
At the time when I became interested in Ōbaku-shū I could not even imagine that I would receive the chance to experience the monastic live in Manpuku-ji. Few years later, by coincidence I learned from my teacher Dr. Martin Repp, that he had a friend in Manpuku-ji, the Ōbaku monk Rev. Tanaka Chisei. Thanks to the kind help of Rev. Tanaka it became possible for me to participate in the daily life of Manpuku-ji for about one year in 2011/12 and to make many precious experiences here. I am Christian and I will become a Protestant minister. My determination has not changed during my stay in a Buddhist monastery. But I am convinced more than ever that mutual understanding between religions is an essential contribution for peaceful coexistence of people and nations. This understanding must be pursued not only on a scholarly level, but it should reach the heart of human beings on a deeper level. For this goal it is necessary to plunge into the religious practice and feeling of one’s counterpart and to discover the foreign and one’s own tradition in a new light. This step might require a lot of effort, but it is also rewarding abundantly.

I would like to thank everybody who helped me with my stay in Manpuku-ji. First of all I want to express my gratitude to the shike of Obakusan-Zendō, Kondō Hakudō, for his permission to let me participate in the training of novice monks, and to Rev. Tanaka Chisei, for supporting me all the time in this endeavor. I am indebted also to the foundation of the Zenkō-ji temple in Yokohama and the foundation of the Christian East Asia Mission (Tokyo and Kyoto), whose generous financial support enabled me to undertake this religious journey. Last not least I would like to thank all the monks of Manpuku-ji who received me cordially in their community, and my family who waited so patiently for my return.

Entering the Monastery

To enter the gate of a monastery and the first steps inside were quite hard. I had to leave behind all the persons and things which were dear and important to me: Family, friends, books and everything I had got attached to in the last years – all this became unreachable from one moment to another. For the first time since my birth, I had to depend on myself completely. But also many worldly problems that were solved through the achievements of modern society, like the division of labour or high-speed communication networks, disappeared in the monastery.

In winter it is cold here, there is no heating in rooms only with thin walls of wood and paper. And in summer it is hot, there is no air conditioner when chanting sutras in traditional clothes or when working in the temple garden. Also during the time of meditation there is no relief from being confronted with my own self:

2. *Shike* is the highest position among the monks living in the enclosed area of a Zen Monastery. The *shike* is responsible for the religious training of the novices.
There is no place to escape from the growing pain in one’s knees or from disturbing thoughts. There is no access to films or games, one’s mind is deprived of any kind of diversion.

Such a situation is described on the two small gates flanking the great gatehouse of Manpuku-ji to the right and to the left:

通霄門 眼底有疑休縱歩 胸中無碍自通霄
Tsushō-mon  The passage to the wide heaven.
If you nourish doubts inside, behold of entering high-handedly.
If there is no obstruction (muge) in your heart, you will enter wide heaven freely.

Doubts search restlessly for meaning and benefit of one’s endeavor: “What will await me in this community? Why have I come here anyway? Is there any deeper meaning of being here? Is there enough time to get used to the monastery? Can I face this challenge? Will there be problems afterwards when returning back to normal life?”

After having made the decision of entering, it was necessary to lay down these doubts like old clothes and to embrace muge 無碍, the spirit of non-obstruction. It is not a spirit that tries to trap persons and events in a rigid scheme, attempting to control them; it is rather a spirit that fosters openness and awareness towards the other. Of course, this is easier said than done, but it does not matter how many times one is thrown back in his old way of thinking – it is sufficient to return to muge every time anew.

The inscription on the small gate to the right acknowledges this kind of thought:

白雲関 門外已無差別道 雲辺又一重関有
Hakuun-kan  The gate of the white clouds.
Outside this gate there is no way of discrimination.
However it is not easy to enter the region of the white clouds.

Regardless, what one’s goal or motivation was until now: It is crucial to decide here and now. If one has passed through this gate once, nobody is going to dig out old mistakes and ask about the past. But the first step is connected with great tribulations: During the period of five days the determination of newcomers is thoroughly tested and those who decide to withdraw during that time are not few.
3. This is the place in Manpuku-ji, where the rōshi 老師 (Zen-Master) lives, receives visitors and gives his sermons to novice monks.

In Zen tradition, novice monks are called unsui 雲水, clouds and water, because they move freely like wind and rain throughout the whole country. The phrases on the two gates (cf. pictures above) containing words like heaven and clouds can also be interpreted from this background. In former times in China, not only novices, but all monks travelling from one monastic community to the next in search for a new master (angya 行腳) have been called unsui.

In the last night before entering the convent there is a great party celebrating the birth of a new monk. On this occasion I was presented with a letter of reference from my shishō 師匠 (mentor), assuring that I could enter the enclosure of the monastery. After this the equipment for the next months was checked one more time; only the most basic items are allowed to be taken in: monastic robes, begging bowls, shaving razors and a sacred text. This night I could not sleep at all, because I could not remember the correct greeting formula to be said when entering the monastery. I had received the formula a few days earlier, but in the last evening the wording was suddenly changed, so that there were only a few hours left for me to memorize – I was close to despair.

Luckily I could manage to memorize the formula until the early morning hours, so that I could make my way to the enclosure of Manpuku-ji – even though considerably fatigued. After getting there I positioned myself in the entrance hall of a building called zenshusen 禪修潛 and cried out loudly the greeting formula with my last ounce of strength in order to hand over the letter of reference. But no
matter how hard one is trying to achieve admission to the convent, at first everybody is refused with the statement that the monastery is already crowded and that there is no free space left for another monk. So I was presented with a list of other, more suitable, training monasteries in Kyoto and politely asked to leave.

From here on it is time for the so called *niwa-tsume* (庭詰, "garden test"), which means something like to be forced into the garden: Over the next two days I had to kneel in pleading gesture and lowered head in the entrance hall to proof the sincerity of my wish to enter. (See picture below) Of course, legs and feet began to hurt after a short time in this unfamiliar posture and it was getting colder and colder while waiting in the entrance hall. A few hours later, *oidashi* (追い出し, the driving out of the newcomer), began. Suddenly somebody grabbed me by the collar of my robe from behind and threw me out of the entrance hall! “Why are you still here? Get lost! You have no business here! Go home!” With such shouts and wielding sticks I was chased to a remote area of the monastery – to the bewilderment of some tourists nearby. Although my mentor had explained to me the practice of *oidashi* beforehand, it was a different thing to experience this martial tradition first hand. Even though my legs were numb, I ran as fast as I could from my pursuers. In former times *oidashi* was really used to get rid of annoying petitioners, nowadays it became a welcomed excuse to give the exhausted unsui an opportunity to relax his contorted body and to visit the toilet. After a few minutes I returned to the entrance hall in order to resume the admission procedure with crying out the greeting formula one more time.

![Niwa-tsume](image-url)
After this procedure was repeated several times, in the morning of the third day the tangazume 旦過詰 ("short-time test") began: I was led into a small room and instructed to meditate permanently. From time to time a young monk came to serve me some light food, or there were short breaks to visit the toilet. Except of such brief interruptions, all the time of the tangazume was dedicated to the practice of zazen.

Because the unsui were busy going to town for collecting donations these days, they would sometimes forget me and my need. Apart from the transition of night and day, I lost all my sense of time and it was hard to tell, if it was morning or evening. On the first day I could enter into a state of deep meditation and time did fly by. On the second day, a big culture festival was held on the grounds of Manpuku-ji, so that noise kept leaking into my little room all the time. So even if I tried hard, I could not concentrate and my head was filled with loud music and the voice of the announcer. The euphoria of the day before was soon replaced with despair and gloomy thoughts about home and family were intermingled with a piercing pain in the knees. On the morning of the third day the admission procedure finally ended with a solemn entrance into the meditation hall. The following 100 days are called kinsoku 禁足 (lit. "walking prohibited"), because during this period it is strictly forbidden for the novice to leave the monastery or to have any kind of exchange with the world outside except in the form of letters.

In the next part of my report I will try to describe the everyday life of a novice living in Manpuku-ji by introducing the standard schedule. Of course there are many special occasions in the annual cycle of the monastery which follow different schedules. There is also a period of five days each month called sesshin 摂心 ("concentrating one’s mind") during which the young monks focus on meditation and do not work in the large gardens of the monastery.

**One day in the life of a novice**

4.15 h  *Kishō* 起床: The first monks are getting up to prepare the morning service.

4.30 h  *Junshō* 巡照: Ritual wake-up call and opening of the monastery gates.

5.00 h  *Chōka* 朝課: Solemn chanting of sutras in the main hall.

5.40 h  *Dōnai fugyō* 堂内諷経: Short chanting of sutras in the meditation hall to beg for protection and spiritual progress for the practicing monks.\(^4\)

---

4. Some years ago, *dōnai fugyō* and chanting sutras in the meditation hall were introduced into the daily schedule because the younger monks felt that in this central hall of the monastery there was also a need for prayer, which led to a change of the older regulations.
5.45 h  Zazen 座禅: Seated meditation.
6.00 h  Kanshō 喚鐘: Individual conversation and kōan-training 公案 with the rōshi 老師 (master).
6.30 h  Nitten samu 日天作務: Each novice cleans the area of the monastery entrusted to him in own responsibility.
7.00 h  Shukuza 粥座: Breakfast.
7.35 h  Sentaku-mono dashi 洗濯物出し: Washing clothes.
7.45 h  Samu 作務 or takuhatsu 托鉢: Working in the gardens and halls of the monastery or going to town for mendicant walks.
10.00 h  Sarei 茶礼: A short break for tea-time in which traditional Japanese sweets, donated by benefactors of the monastery, are consumed.
11.15 h  Sentaku-mono hoshi 洗濯物干し: Drying the laundry outside.
11.30 h  Saiza 済座: Lunchtime.
12.00 h  Hiru-yasumi 昼休み: Lunch break.
12.45 h  Samu 作務: Working in the gardens.
15.00 h  Sarei 茶礼: Teatime.
15.30 h  Hōyō junbi 法要準備: Preparing of the evening service. (Cleaning the main hall, lighting candles, burning incense etc.).
16.00 h  Banka 晩課: Evening Service.
16.45 h  Sentakumono no torikomi 洗濯物の取り込み: Taking in the laundry.
17.00 h  Yakuseki 薬石: Supper.
17.30 h  Shodō-shime 諸堂閉め: The gates of the monastery are closed. Each novice performs the personal tasks entrusted to him by his superior.
18.00 h  Zazen 座禅: Seated meditation.
18.30 h  Kanshō 喚鐘: Individual conversation with the rōshi.
19.00 h  Kaiyoku 開浴: opening of the bath house.
20.15 h  Zazen 座禅: Seated meditation.
20.55 h  Kaichin fugyō 開沈諷経: Chanting of the vow of Master Daie 大慧 to confirm and strengthen ones own resolution to attain awakening.
21.00 h  Kaichin taikō 開沈太鼓: The big drum of the monastery is heralding the end of the day.

5. Kōan literally means something like a “public case.” They are questions or problems posed by the master to his disciples to lead them towards awakening. Mostly they cannot be solved through rational thinking and the disciples need to meditate a long time until they can solve the kōan.
6. Daie ōkō 大慧宗杲 is a famous chinese Zen-master. He is known for spreading kōan-zen during the Song dynasty (960-1279).
21.20 h *Kaichin junshō* 開沈巡照: The same words like in the wake-up call are now chanted in another acoustic color and a soft voice to remind the monks of their commitment to strive for awakening.

21.40 h *Bonbai renshū* 梵唄練習: Learning and practicing to chant the sutras because the melodies and rhythms of the Sutras in the Obaku school are complex and hard to learn. Much practice is required for the young monks, so that they have to learn until late in night to memorize the holy texts. More advanced monks can use this time to contemplate about the *kōan* they were entrusted by their master. Still others use this time to devote themselves to *yaza* 夜座, the nocturnal meditation. Often all monks gather at night to consume the food donations which have been donated to the monastery during the days before.

---

**Junshō 巡照**

After entering the monastery every *unsui* is entrusted with a *haiyaku* 配役, a specific role, which changes every three months. The first and most simple is the function of the *junshō* 巡照 (lit. “go around and shed light”). At five central spots of Manpuku-ji, at the *zendō* 禅堂,7 the *sei-hōjō* 西方丈,8 the *tō-hōjō* 東方丈,9 the *tenzō* 天座10 and the *shōrō* 鐘楼,11 there is a so called *junshō-ban* 巡照板, a massive piece of wooden panel in hexagonal shape hanging at the wall.

Every morning punctually at 4.30 a.m. the *junshō* strikes with a wooden hammer the first *junshō-ban* and chants with all his power the words written on the wooden plate so that his voice reaches out into the neighborhood of the monastery. As soon as possible he heeds for the next *junshō-ban* until he has went through the whole monastery and opened its doors. Especially on cold winter mornings this task requires from newcomers to get used to rough monastic life very quickly: They have to perform their duty with freshly shaved heads and straw sandals. Often their voice breaks down or cracks begin to fracture the skin of their feet because of the winterly cold. But after a few weeks, most newcomers get used to their environment and execute their work without problems.

---

7. The meditation hall where the novices also sleep at night.
8. The west wing. Formerly it was used as dormitory for senior monks. Today it is used for trainees, who want to experience the monastic way of live for a few days.
9. The east wing. Here lives the abbot with assisting monks since the days of the founding of Manpuku-ji.
10. The kitchen. Today, most senior monks live in single rooms located in the kitchen building.
11. Tower which houses a big drum and bell.
Every night at 9.20 p.m. the procedure described above is repeated, but this time the words are not chanted with a loud voice, but in a gentle voice after the sound of the nocturnal drum and bell have ceased. The words written on the junshō-ban, are as follows:

**Kanji**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kin Pe</th>
<th>Da</th>
<th>Chon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sen</td>
<td>Su</td>
<td>Su Da</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>Shin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ko</td>
<td>Go</td>
<td>Shin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shin</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Fua</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sincerely I announce to the great assembly:

*Live and death are matters of great importance!*

*Everything is vain and passes by quickly!*

*Everybody may achieve awakening quickly!*

*Guard yourselves and do not waste this live with vanity!*

Through this first and last words of a day the monks shall be reminded that all existence is transient and a person’s lifetime is limited. Far too often we have to face the end of a period of life and regret to have not used all possibilities presented to us. The rōshi often reminded us of these words when he pointed out to us: "Live every day so that you have no regrets! Here you have the unique chance to dedicate all your time to Zen. Practice diligently before you return to your own temples."

The theme of vanity is also to be encountered at other points in the daily routine of Manpuku-ji. At the end of every day’s evening service the following words are chanted:

**Kanji**

| Su Ju I Ko | Min I Sui Ken | Chi Shau Sui Chi |

*Now this day draws to its end also our lifetime is reduced again. Like fish in a little bit water!*

Awakening from all illusions is seen as the goal of all striving in this limited lifetime, this is called the "great matter of life and death" in the verses cited above. To be not deceived through ones own perception, opinions and desires, but to conceive reality as it is. For this difficult task the monastery tries to create a suitable environment: All possible distraction is reduced to a minimum. Eating, sleeping, working, and reciting sutras: The goal is not to be seen in a far dimension but enfolds itself before the eyes of the mindful here and now.
The Refectory

The meals in Manpuku-ji are also fashioned to match the same goal as described above. Besides the Zendō and the bath house, the saïdō 済堂 (refectory) is also entitled as dojō 道場, a "place of the way," in which the Zen-mind shall manifest itself with the help of silence and mindful practice. When the preparations for breakfast or lunch are done, one of the Unsui hits the kaipan 魚梆, a wooden instrument in form of a giant fish, for three times. In the mouth of the fish sticks an orb representing the cause of all human suffering. In Buddhism this complex cause is formed by the so called three poisons: musabori 貪り (desire), ikari 嗔り (anger), and guchi 愚痴 (ignorance). The beating of the fish symbolizes the practice of monastic life, through which human beings should be enabled to spew out all harmful poison, which endangers a wholesome existence. This can be a rather painful procedure, but it is never directed against the individual: Before and after striking the kaipan, the monk makes a deep respectful bow in front of it.

Shortly after this, the so called unpan 雲版 (lit. "cloud plate"), a massive metallic panel in shape of a cloud, comes into action. In popular belief its sound can dispel earthquakes and other disasters. While it is beaten in a complex rhythm, the Unsui leave the Zendō and proceed in a solemn manner to the refectory. On their way, in exact timing they answer the call of the unpan with an inkin 引磬, a portable hand bell. After arriving in the refectory the monks invoke the names of several buddhas and bodhisattvas12 wishing that through eating this meal they may be able to be of service for all sentient beings. In this context the gokan 五観 (five reflections) are chanted:

---

At first, we reflect about how many different factors were necessary to make this meal possible and how many people’s work was needed to prepare it.

Secondly, we reflect upon our own failures and if we are worthy to receive this meal.

Thirdly, we vow to guard our mind against passions and other transgressions and to refrain from them.

Fourthly, we regard this meal as good medicine to heal our exhausted body.

Fifthly, we reflect upon this meal as receiving it to complete the way of awakening.

Thanks to this short meditation even eating is transformed into a religious exercise that provides the opportunity to contemplate the deep relationships through which all sentient beings are connected to each other and where oneself’s place is to be located in this chain of life.

While breakfast consists of a simple rice soup, at noon and in the evenings often steamed vegetables, rice and miso soup with seaweed are served. To value these precious gifts, which are not to be wasted, the monks clean their eating bowls at first with tea and then with warm water and a piece of pickled radish. With this special method the time for cleaning the bowls afterwards is also saved and the monks can use their spare time for meditation.

**Takuhatsu 托鉢**

In addition to the daily work in the widespread gardens and halls of Manpuku-ji, the unsui leave the monastery two times a week for a ritualized mendicant walk called takuhatsu 托鉢. The tradition of takuhatsu can be traced back to the early days of Buddhism in India: What the monks could collect in their begging bowls until 12 a.m. had to suffice for the daily meal. The Chinese characters for takuhatsu, “bowl” (batsu 鉢) and “to put something on the palm of ones hand” (taku 托), are a literal description of the practice of the mendicant ritual. Nowadays the monks do not use their begging bowls, which are kept in their fixed location in the refectory, but they carry big cloth bags with them to receive rice and other food donations. In the last years however many supporters have switched from giving food to donate money, which is very convenient for the monks, who had to carry their heavy bags over many kilometers. To each bag is tied a piece of small wood which carries the seal of the head monk. The seal is necessary because there are also impostors who walk around in monk robes and beg for money to make an easy living. In the case of doubt the police may control the seal attached to the monk’s bag.
13. These words can also be understood as a reference to the sanshin 三身, the three bodies of the universal Buddha who instructs sentient beings according to their capacities in different manifestations: The hōshin 法身 (the universal dharma body), the hōshin 報身 (the reward body) and the ōshin 応身 (manifestation body).

14. Offerings or giving alms (dāna) in Buddhism signifies both, the monks’ expounding Buddha’s teaching to the lay people, and vice versa the lay people’s donation of food to the monks.
places in the daily service of Manpuku-ji. Last but not least the hatsuganmon is a reminder that spirituality and religion are not a private matter of lifestyle, but have to be realized in serving one another.

Zendō 禅堂

The Zendō 禅堂, the meditation hall, serves the unsui as a place to study, to sleep and to meditate: it is the central place in the live of a novice.

When one enters the building via the enclosure area of the monastery, at first an enormous wooden threshold, which marks the borderline between the sacred and the mundane, has to be crossed. This threshold forces the entering person to stop for a moment and to realize that one is entering another sphere. After making the first steps inside, a massive plate in which old Chinese letters are engraved attracts the eye. It is the dōki 堂規, the code of conduct regulating all movements in the Zendō. It demands uninterrupted silence and concentration.
A monk studies the code of conduct of the Zendō

Each monk has make a deep bow in front of the dōki before he directs his step to his own meditation seat. The floor of the Zendō consists of black tiles which give the wide hall even at noon a mysterious and gloomy atmosphere. At the east and the west side of the room the so called tan 単 rises up from the ground, on which the monks spend much of a day’s time. The tan is a wooden structure of about one meter height, which is covered by tatami-mats. Each one of these mats demarcates the personal space provided for one monk. On top of the tatami-mat lies a long cushion, the tan-futon 単布団: In its folded form it serves as meditation seat and in its spread form it is used as mattress at night. The tan-futon is smaller and thinner than the sleeping futon which is commonly used in Japanese households, so that it can be very difficult for newcomers to sleep comfortably on them. Behind each tatami is a little box, tan-bako 単箱 called, where the few personal belongings of the individual are stored.

Against heat and cold the inner room of the Zendō is only protected through thin shōji 障子, Japanese sliding paper windows, so that outdoor and indoor temperature during winter and summer are almost the same. The gates of the Zendō leading to the enclosure area are also open through the whole year. Only at night a thick curtain is lowered in front of the entrance to keep out wind and rain. The gates leading to the area of Manpuku-ji which are accessible for tourists remain closed almost all the time. Only when the unsui solemnly process to the main hall or the refectory, these gates are opened.
Central object of worship of the Zendō is the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara\textsuperscript{15} being placed on an enormous lotus pedal behind the long altar table in the middle of the room. Avalokitesvara, Jp.観世音 Kanzeon or Kannon, is in many cases referred to as the manifestation of jibi 慈悲, compassion or mercy, and one of the most popular figures in the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist pantheon. Believers pray for his help since they consider him as a reliable savior. He is venerated in masculine form as well as in a feminine form. His Sanskrit name Avalokitesvara is probably a compound of \textit{avalokita} for “to see” and \textit{ishvara} for “lord” or “ruler.” The translation \textit{Kanzeon}, literally “he who sees the sounds of the world,” or more freely, “he who perceives the cries or prayers of the world,” is a very suitable translation for a being who is believed to never turn his face away from the suffering, but always is about to lend a helping hand.

This self-sacrificing work of Kanzeon is not to be seen as some kind of pure actionism, but stems from a profound insight achieved in a deep meditative state, telling him that all beings are without self-existence, but fundamentally empty in their existence.	extsuperscript{16} In this context \textit{kū} 空, emptiness, is not simply to be understood as a negation of existence, but designates the belief that all existence is without substance. The existence of an apple, e.g., is constituted by factors such as sunlight, nutritious earth, temperature and humidity. If one takes all these factors away in order to inquire what the essence of the apple is, its true being, there will be nothing left but emptiness in the end. The same can be said about all other phenomena to which the being of the apple is connected: Light, earth and water are also connected to countless substanceless entities on which they are dependent. \textit{Kū} is one of the central concepts of Zen, even above the central altar the words \textit{shin-kū} 真空 (“true emptiness”), are engraved.

This profound insight into \textit{kū} is to be seen as foundation for Kanzeon’s saving activity: All beings are essentially \textit{one} in their emptiness. Because they are connected inseparably it is not possible to help one and to discard others. On this level of realization there can be no discrimination between self and other. Against this background the installation of Kanzeon as central icon in a Zendō can be understood: On one hand he serves the monks as example for endurance and resolution for their quest for awakening, but on the other hand he is also seen as merciful guide and helper in this difficult search.

\textsuperscript{15} A bodhisattva is a being determined to achieve perfect awakening while helping other sentient beings to reach the same goal. Historical persons as well as transcendent beings can be called bodhisattva.

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. the first verses of the \textit{Prajna Paramita Sutra}. 
In his practice of Zen almost every monk has to make the experience that there are times when he cannot rely on his own power any more and when he is overcome by pain and sorrow. At those times there comes a moment when he has to give up all struggle and fighting, turning his attention fully to mukō 向こう, the other side, from which he is awaiting the unconditioned help Kanzeon is promising.

But as the central icon of the Zendō, Kanzeon is also a practitioner in the midst of practitioners: Each morning, before the monks begin their meditation, they recite a short sutra dedicated to him, hoping for support on their way. Before eating their breakfast they offer incense and a bowl of rice soup to him. Before entering meditation they make a proskynesis toward Kanzeon’s lotus pedal. Every donation made to the unsui is offered first on Kanzeon’s altar.

**Conclusion**

Here I attempted to give a short outline of the daily life behind the walls of the enclosure at Manpuku-ji. Of course I am fully aware that there are many details of great importance which I could not mention in this essay. After having read the German version of this essay, some people were disappointed, because nothing was written about special meditative states or profound spiritual insight. During the first weeks of my stay at Manpuku-ji I felt the same way. Nobody would talk with me about religious matters — just the same monotonous life every day. I even thought about leaving the monastery. But slowly I began to realize that it was this monotonous life which was the most important matter in the monastery. The spirit of Zen is not necessarily something spectacular taking you on a trip to another world, but can reveal itself in the simple everyday live. I still like to remember a story the rōshi told us about the Chinese master Sekitō 石頭 (700-790). As Sekitō decided to travel to another monastery to search for a new master, he was asked by the abbot there what he had learned in his former monastery. Their conversation developed as follows:

“I have learned nothing except the fact, that I missed nothing before entering the monastery for the first time.”

“Than it was of no use at all for you to enter the monastery?”

“No, if I had not entered the monastery, I would not have recognized that I missed nothing from the very beginning.”

— Since our birth we carry the fundamental Buddha nature in us, as my friends at Manpuku-ji would say, or we are loved unconditioned by God the way we are, as we Christians believe. But it takes a long time of practice until one opens one’s heart and embraces this simple truth which had been there all the time already.