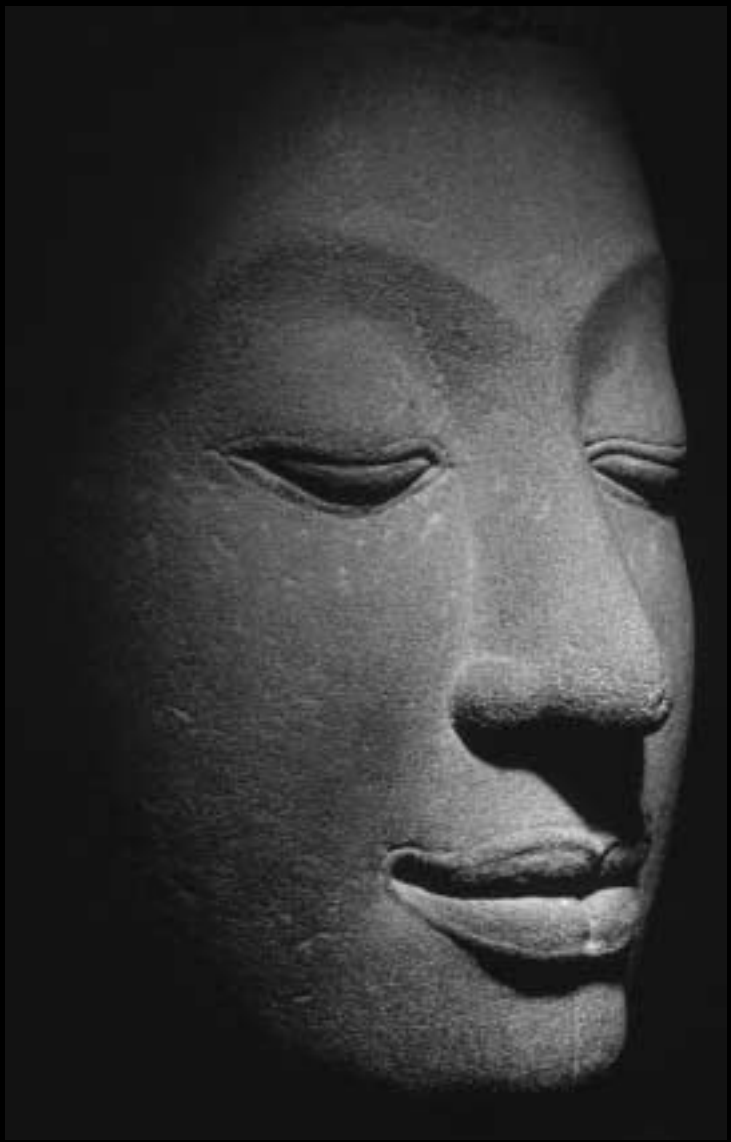

A Critic in Repose

A CRASH COURSE IN POWERING OFF

BY CAROL LUTFY

A CRITIC IN REPOSE:
A CRASH COURSE IN POWERING OFF

I have been "unthinking" in my room at Soji-ji, a Zen monastery in Yokohama, Japan, when word comes that Tomita Tanto Roshi, the master in charge of Zen, has invited me for tea.

It has taken me three days to learn how to unthink, and I cannot imagine now entering an intellectual debate about East vs. West or being and nothingness with a man who is light years more enlightened and experienced. Tomita is regarded as the best mind in the monastery. I am not here to match wits with him. I am not here to challenge or to be engaged.

In classic Japanese style, I compose my reply: "It would be my honor to join him."

I had arrived at Soji-ji three days earlier with unabashedly idyllic expectations even though I had been well-briefed on the daily hardships of temple life. I would be required to pull weeds and scrub floors. I would be asked to meditate four times a day, and food rations would be small. I envisioned rock gardens and perfectly formed maple trees.

From behind my cluttered desk in New York City, the idea of "zenning-out" seemed seductively alluring. After a year of tumultuous change and a summer of back-to-back deadlines, I needed a place where no one could reach me and where I could reach a deeper self. In some ways, my interest in Zen sprang from the same fuzzy spiritual yearning that has prompted so many friends and colleagues to begin studying Eastern philosophy and religion in recent years. I am not a believer in Buddha or Shiva or Jesus or Mohammed for that matter. But I, too, was looking for serenity and silence: a place to pull the sensory plug. My schedule allowed only five meager days which, in itself, did not bode well for an auspicious stay. I was yet another harried American professional checking into a monastery as if it were a hospital or a hotel.

For the last five years, I have written about Asia while spending 70 percent of my time in New York. This is a conceit that could only have been nurtured in an age in which technology has changed our notions of access: having a modem is the next best thing to being there. I also divide my time between art and architecture criticism, and am increasingly focusing on the U.S. There are a number of critics who similarly parcel themselves out, but I wonder if they, like me, feel tattered by the wind.

In part, I was trying to answer this question by revisiting a sliver of my past. I lived in Tokyo between 1986 and 1994, and began my career as an art and architecture critic there. Zen played a powerful role in shaping my experience. Its spiritual-philosophical tenets filter into all things Japanese—from bathing to art-making to table manners—and color the intellectual and aesthetic lens through which I view things even today.

Zen also defined my personal life through my relationship with the Kongohs, my Japanese home-stay family. Renzan Kongoh, or Hojo-san, is the abbot of Seirin-ji, a small picturesque Zen temple that he runs with his wife and three children in a 17th-century city about an hour outside Tokyo. Through a stroke of luck, I was introduced to him and his family soon after moving to Tokyo and I stayed at their house next door to the temple during

countless weekends and vacations. I still visit the Kongohs whenever I go back to Japan. I embrace them as my own family.

It is Hojo-san who has arranged my stay at Soji-ji, the eastern headquarters of the Soto school, the largest Zen sect in Japan. This is where the Kongohs' son, Shuko, is now training to be a monk, and where Hojo-san and his father trained as well. He seems gratified that his New York daughter is taking an interest in the family métier.

The family and I drive there together on a clear September morning. Hojo-san and his wife, Hiroko, are in the front seat. Sitting in the back with Fujiko, their youngest daughter, I gaze absently at the patchwork of rice paddies, convenience stores and gas stations that forms Tokyo's suburban quilt. When I first started staying at Seirin-ji in 1986, my Japanese language skills were next to nil; Fujiko, then eight, delighted in giggling at my gaffes. Hojo-san took a different approach. In the evenings, he and I would drink beer after beer together, smiling back and forth, until his face turned hot pink. He would eventually excuse himself to go to sleep.

The Kongohs undermined every preconception I had about Zen. Serenity? The television blared 14 hours a day although nobody seemed to watch it. Austerity? Smoking, drinking, and consumption of delicacies and junk food were a way of life. Purity? Hojo-san frequented bars where he and his fellow monks would flirt with pretty "hostesses." Sometimes he invited me to join them.

Hojo-san is the son of a prominent Zen abbot in the Soto sect. Of his three brothers, two are also monks. All grew up rarely seeing their father, whose frenzied life was a public one. Hojo-san, by contrast, chose an ordinary path in which he could find fulfillment in simple acts. At Seirin-ji, he holds funeral and memorial services and looks after a 300-year-old cemetery. He and his wife take pains to be unpretentious, in part, because their parish is small and poor, with a mere 120 members.

Despite this intimate introduction, I never took a serious interest in studying Zen. Maybe it was because it had been demystified through my contact with the family. As time went by, however, I began to appreciate Hojo-san as the most generous and spiritually centered person I know. I have never seen him refuse a reasonable request. I have never seen him lose his temper. He is rarely judgmental. Contrary to his pretenses, he is, above all, a family man. As we drive up to Soji-ji, sun streaming in through the back seat window, I realize that I am here in search of Hojo-san's inner peace and compassion.

Soji-ji was originally built in the 1300s, then devastated by a late 19th-century blaze. It has reinvented itself as an encyclopedia of the last 100 years of architectural styles. The monastery's biggest, newest, glitziest building is the visitor's center, which receives hundreds—sometimes thousands—of Japanese pilgrims each day. My homestay brother, Shuko, has been assigned to work in the reception area and is waiting for us when we check in. Plump and smiling, he greets with a combination of warmth and politeness that is a trademark of the Kongoh family. Shuko informs me that I am the only woman staying at Soji-ji, a training monastery for monks but not nuns. I will be a guest of the Zen meditation department that is run by Tomita Roshi.

Hojo-san and his wife accompany me to my private tatami-matted room at the end of a narrow corridor in a handsome early 20th-century building. Unfurnished except for a low writing table, the room is everything I had hoped for. "Just do exactly what they tell you," Hojo-san advises me before heading home. "Don't analyze, don't internalize, don't react, and you'll be fine." I feel a little like a child going off to college, even though I went through that rite of passage 20 years ago.

I am left in the capable hands of Sasaki-san, my 23-year-old docent, who is charged with the laborious task of teaching me basic temple etiquette. As we head over to the Zen Hall, he shows me how to walk: always to the left, almost brushing the wall, with hands resting on the stomach, right over left.

When bowing, I should clasp hands heavenward, forearms parallel to the floor. Over the course of the day, I will also be instructed in how to prostrate myself three times before and after entering the bath, how to use pickle slices at the end of my chopsticks to clean the last grain of rice from my bowl and how to bellow at the top of my lungs to express my enthusiasm for menial chores. There is no end to learning and improving form: this is my first lesson about Zen.

Though Zen Buddhism is typically associated with Japan, it originally came from India, and it touched down in China before it was accepted by Japan's samurai class in the late 12th century. In the simplest of terms, it embraces the belief that attempting to understand the world through observation and critical thought ends in illusion. Both religion and philosophy, Zen advocates a mastery of meditation and Zen conundrums—most famously, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"—as tools to nurture a deeper awareness of self and to ultimately achieve spiritual enlightenment. Of the three Zen sects in Japan, the Soto school leans toward the practice of meditation and the belief that enlightenment is an evolution.

I have never practiced Zazen meditation before and feel a tingle of excitement about it as I enter the Zen Hall. I am immediately comfortable in the room with its heavy wooden beams, straw and cement walls, paper shoji screens and raised tatami platforms. But I am nervous that I will fail at this, that I will expose my undisciplined mental state. There are many steps to memorize for a first-timer. After bowing to the wall, fluffing and turning the round pillow, folding my right leg over the left, resting my hands, as if holding an egg, thumbs barely touching, on my right foot; after tilting my head to the left to signal that I am ready to be hit on the shoulder by a stick-wielding monk, I am left to stare at the mold-stained wall for forty minutes.

Occasionally, I hear children laughing and running outside. I am also aware of the measured pacing of the monk who is monitoring the session. But my overall experience is one of blankness. All critical properties are shut down —and it is exhilarating. Though my mind is still racing, I am not in touch with

my thoughts; they blur like scenes from the window of a bullet train. When the bell rings to mark the end of the session, I am on a high.

That night, I am told that I will be introduced as a guest during morning service the next day. There is yet more to memorize: how to sit by myself on a small red carpet, how to bow at designated times and how to rise to make an offering at the altar. I am not told the significance of any of it. This is my second lesson about Zen: content is immaterial.

At Soji-ji, the day begins at 3:30 a.m. when we wake, put our futons in the closet, and wash our faces and hands. By 3:50 a.m., I am walking down a long, narrow corridor that leads to the Zen Hall. It has whitewashed walls, squeaky wooden floors, high ceilings and towering gates on either side. This is a walk I will do close to 100 times over the next five days and I grow attached to it like a comforting thought.

From the first, 4:00 a.m. is my favorite time to sit Zazen. My nebulous thoughts are conducive to the fluid mindset that for me, at least, is a goal of

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meditation. A monk is always pacing with his kyosaku stick, so I don't doze off. But others do, and I jump at the cracking sound every time he makes contact with a shoulder blade. You can tell a lot about a monk by the way he handles the stick. Many take pleasure in the pain they inflict, maybe even enjoy being hit. It strikes me for the first time that there are many dark souls who are attracted to Zen. This is my third lesson.

At 4:50 a.m., I am guided through an underpass and up the stairs to a dark, cathedral-size room. My eyes soak up the cavernous space with its ornate altar and gilt chandeliers that dangle from the ceiling like enormous earrings. Head Abbot Ishikawa enters at precisely 5:00 a.m., and morning service begins.

Morning service starts slowly and has a cumulative numbing effect that recalls Noh theater in its exaggerated footwork and in the whispering sound of stockinged feet against the tatami. Zen influenced an intellectual and creative culture known for the delicately imperfect wabisabi aesthetic, now most closely associated with the Japanese tea ceremony.

Wabisabi is as elusive to define as the philosophy of Zen. Some people regard it as an anti-aesthetic, for it rejects the notion of classical beauty. In the realm of wabisabi, greatness exists in tiny details; beauty can be coaxed out of ugliness. In a sweet-and-sour sort of way, wabisabi celebrates high and low, refinement and distortion. Wabisabi has numerous contemporary adherents: the fashion designer Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, for example, or the sculptor Richard Serra. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao has a wabisabi component. So do Donald Sultan's paintings.

But it is an ancient concept, and as I watch morning service, I feel well-acquainted with its subtle universe. The key performers, besides Ishikawa, are a half-dozen senior monks who run back and forth to the altar, like lithe nymphs carrying prayer books and utensils. The majority of the players, though, are novices. They are called *unsui*, literally, "cloud and water"; and their physical appearance bears up to the poetry of the name. Mostly in their early 20s, all with shaved heads, they are dressed identically in flowing black robes. They comprise the chorus.

I do not understand a single sentence of the archaic Japanese used in the ceremony. Yet I am not bored. I am lulled into a slower, hypnotic state and I savor it.

In its ability to ratchet your internal speed down, Zen offers itself as an antidote to the frenzy of our times. Frenzy is defined as "madness; inflammation of the brain; wild excitement; frantic outburst; brief delirium that is almost insanity," according to my dictionary. For writers, it has reached an earsplitting pitch in recent years. The need to keep up with vast amounts of information and yet present it to readers in ever-shrinking formats is a daily grind. The encouragement of imposed limits of our knowledge, given the

endless branchings of information, is a nagging frustration. So is the fleetingness of what is considered "important," the unyielding constraints on our time, and the relentlessness of "bigger, better, brighter." These themes are entrenched in our lives.

We compensate for knowing less by hyping our critical judgments. And yet in the very moment that we urgently declare that something is the "best, worst, must-see, all-time-waste-of-time, play/movie/book/CD of the year," we say it with unprecedented distance in a haze of more signals, devices and noise.

One of the tenets of Zen—the ability to see, hear, or touch something in the moment you experience it—sounds quaint, circa 1960. But this is an ability that all critics need—and one that I am losing gradually. At Honzan-ji, I try to take Zen at its word and experience rather than analyze it. I try to be a critic in repose.

In reality, I probably think more about laying down my critical sword than act on it. For a student of Zen, I think entirely too much. One of the major themes of Zen is anti-rationalism. In the classic "An Introduction to Zen Buddhism," D.T. Suzuki argues that Zen "has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual analysis." Another source explains that Zen "stresses direct, intuitive insight into transcendental truth beyond all intellectual conception." Whereas the study of Zen can help alleviate a frenzied state, it offers no such consolation for critics. Is it not possible to possess an enlightened mind and a critical mind simultaneously? (To be honest, I had always assumed that a critical mind was an enlightened mind.) How remarkable to think that in the context of Zen thought, a critic is more pitiable than a madman.

At least, that is what Suzuki suggests. He writes that Zen is "primarily and ultimately a discipline and an experience, which is dependent on no explanation; for an explanation wastes time and energy and is never to the point; all you get out of it is misunderstanding and a twisted view of the

thing." As much as I hate to admit it, his point rings true for me. For while we hold our subjects up to the strictest standards, what critic, constrained by time, intelligence and moods, does not face the futility of trying to convey the essence of something in all of its complex subtleties?

Criticism has never developed in the East in part because it is still considered laughably egotistical. The job of art critics is to promote art, not to evaluate it. When I was living in Japan, gallerists would feel betrayed if I

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included one harsh observation in a review. Only artists, starved for honest dialogue, seemed grateful for the feedback. Over time, as I internalized Japan's "go-with-the-flow" psyche and unconsciously began toning down my opinions, hard-hitting criticism became difficult for me to write. That is one of the reasons I left Japan.

Back in New York, I was giddy about critics like Robert Hughes, who challenged anything that crossed his path. After all, aren't the best critics supposed to hold their subject up to impeccably strict standards? Or are they? Can any critic sustain the long-term psychic wear and tear?

There are two central quests for a critic: the quest for perfection (and the as-yet-only-imaginable joy of celebrating and expounding on it) and the quest for perfect deconstruction. They are pursuits of intellectual and aesthetic truths: truth in the abstract. Zen's truths, by contrast, are the simplest truths we have. Nothing is perfect. Nothing is permanent. All things are sacred in their own way.

I am beginning to see that I came to Soji-ji in search of these simpler truths. Abstract quests are thankless, which explains, in part, why the frenzy is so debilitating. The constant bombardment of information and noise makes everything abstract.

There are moments of sublime beauty and clarity at Soji-ji. I experience the mornings as a series of orchestrated sounds through which time reveals itself. First is the ringing of hand bells as novices race through the halls, feet pounding the wood floors, to rouse their peers from slumber. The clacking of wooden blocks and the banging of gongs call everybody to temple service. The progression from monotone chanting to riffs of sing-song mumbling to swelling crescendos as the monks push purposefully through long sutra texts lends morning service a musical tempo. Finally, the faint cawing of crows outside is a sign that dawn is about to break and that the service will soon be over.

There are black moments too—and petty rules for everything. Without meaning to, I break most of them. I lean against walls and wear the wrong clothes and don't do my chores with enough enthusiasm. I squirm during services and complain far too much. I race through calligraphy exercises with such evident misery that the monks stop asking me to practice.

I am not the only slacker. I watch the novices sleep through morning service and listen to their uninspired exchanges with the masters. In the evenings, I listen to their complaints. Many are counting the days until they can go home.

The tension in the ranks is palpable. I see this when the monks in my department gather as a group, typically to host a Zazen session for the pilgrims. It usually starts with some minor infraction by a first-year novice. (Once it was taking a cookie before offering me one. Another time it had to do with adjusting the volume of the mike.) This invariably precipitates a cruel public chastising from the monk-in-charge: pushing, slapping, yelling, wild gesticulating—and a lot of contrite bowing by the guilty party. To my amazement, no one seems to notice. Whatever happened to Buddhist acts of loving kindness? Bullying is rife at Soji-ji. After one young novice, beaten once too often, ran away earlier this year, a "no punching or kicking" rule was instituted. Only slapping is now officially allowed. One monk confides that he thinks this is too lenient. Another attempts to persuade me that it is necessary to be cruel in order to keep the novices in line. Where does all of this darkness come from?

Is there something about the austerity of Zen culture—the sleep deprivation and painful sitting postures and hunger—that pushes people to their limits? Steeped in hierarchy and conformity, is the monastery a thinly veiled military environment in which new recruits must be initiated? Or is it that dark souls, perhaps like frenzied ones, are drawn to Zen in the hope of finding solace?

I wonder if Shuko, my lovely homestay brother, has been put through the wringer. Like the other novices, he must complete a minimum two-year stay in order to secure the certificate that will enable him to return home and work at his father's temple. It's no surprise that so many novices see the monastery as a trade school. The spiritual journey seems to be an afterthought.

The days at Soji-ji have been very much like this: After sitting Zazen, attending morning service, eating breakfast, and doing chores, at the ripe hour of 8:30 a.m., a time at which most Americans are still commuting to work, we quietly retreat to our rooms to unthink. "Unthinking"—a term coined by one of the masters—is the equivalent of removing the hard drive and rejigging my computer as a typewriter. With scant visual and mental stimulation and chasms of empty time, I don't need a computer. I am able to void most thoughts, to ditch excess memory. My daily routine is not about how quickly I can download, trash things, and move on. It's about mastering the art of powering off.

I am lazing around my room in "sleep" mode when word comes that the Zen master Tomita Roshi has invited me to tea. I instantly power back on. At the appropriate hour, I am escorted to Tomita's quarters. His attendant, waiting outside the door, bows deeply to me. I bow deeply back and am led into a tiny room, only eight feet by eight feet, but strewn with colorful robes, seemingly for every ceremony known to Buddhism. There are three calendars from nearby stores hanging on the walls and papers piled like stacks of bricks. In the center is a small table at which Tomita sits. He does not rise to greet me, but rather motions with his left hand that I should join him. As I do, I notice that the room is connected to a private bathroom and to sleeping quarters in the back.

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I had already listened to two of Tomita's lectures. Unable to follow his difficult language, I refrained from asking questions each time. Now, I am stuck, I think. As he whips up the frothy ceremonial green tea in a lovely rough-hewn bowl, he talks easily about things. I am surprised initially that he does not want to engage me as a journalist. He seems, rather, to be playing the role of therapist.

Flattery is a convenient social lubricant everywhere. In Japan it is insidious. What I do not know is that I am about to become the object of gobs of it. Your aura is warm. Your big ears are like Buddha's. You look like an Indian goddess when you lower your eyes. Eventually we come to the reason that I have been summoned: Monasteries are lonely places. Tomita's wife lives at his home temple in Yamanashi Prefecture, but he spends most of his time at the monastery. It's unnatural for men and women to be living separately. Don't I think?

I had been so much happier unthinking! I smile. I sympathize with his predicament. Maybe the honorable Roshi should consider returning home more often? But I am rattled, and when I get up to go, I try to leave through the bathroom door.

On my last night, I am granted an audience with Ishikawa, Soji-ji's head abbot. He receives me in his elegant wood-paneled quarters, large as a hotel lobby. He is inquisitive and concerned, speaks clearly and directly. After my dubious encounter with Tomita, he is my ace-in-the-hole. I look to him for a brush with enlightenment.

I tell Ishikawa that Soji-ji is spiritually ailing. To my surprise, he readily acknowledges the truth in what I say, doesn't offer a single excuse. In fact, he doesn't offer excuses about anything. He diffuses all of my bombs. Ishikawa says that Zen has taught him "how to relax the mind and body at the same time. The only way to cope with a truly deep understanding of things is not to think too much about them. You have to decide what is worth holding on to and let go of the rest."

On the spot, I decide to let go of the incident with Tomita and don't bring it up. But toward the end of our discussion, I do mention my work as a

critic and ask whether Ishikawa thinks I can reconcile this with the study of Zen. He pauses for a long moment before responding. Of course, it is his job to promote Zen. “Maybe not,” he replies. “No, I’m not sure you can.”

Back in Tokyo the following day, I phone my homestay father. With the candor of a journalist, I tell him about the bullying, about my experience with Tomita, about the spiritual contradictions. I realize too late that my indiscretion hurts him. I give him content. He wants form.

Over time, I have come to think of Soji-ji as a classically wabisabi experience: oddly instructive and unsettling at the same time. Instructive because I realized that the culture of Zen I encountered there is as familiar to me as the culture of the New York art world. With the Kongohs, I had spent almost a decade surrounded by Zen’s incongruities. I realize now that I had reconciled myself to them a long time ago—that I had come to anticipate flirts and lushes and slackers in the Soto sect as readily as I anticipate them in Chelsea and SoHo. I guess I just forgot.

In the frenzy of my New York life last autumn, Seirin-ji was one thing and Zen became another. It was more convenient to buy into the sanctified American view of Zen as some exotic spiritual cure-all when I know that Zen is as straightforward and as universal as swimming, or writing, or hosting a party.

That doesn’t mean that I am now, or will ever be, any good at it. And that’s the unsettling part. Zen, like criticism, is a vocation that requires honing and concentration and calm. The *modus operandi* of Zen is to accept the nature of things. The *modus operandi* of a critic is to question them. For me, there is no choice really. I am genetically programmed to question. What remains unclear is whether the two are mutually exclusive as Suzuki and Ishikawa suggest. Zen could probably use a few more critics. Frenzied critics would undoubtedly benefit from daily Zazen.

From Soji-ji, I learn how important it is to approach things with the right form: back straight with hands clasped respectfully, eyes and ears wide open, and mind skeptically alert. I learn that there is no such thing as a critic in repose.