

Do Not Call Winter the Beginning of Spring

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You do not call winter the beginning of spring, nor summer the end of spring...
—from Dogen-Zenji's *Genjokoan*

Gendoji Zen Temple, Fukui-ken Province, Japan.

"It isn't really cold until that pool is frozen," the American monk and Gendoji Temple long-timer Kotoku-san tells me, gesturing to the water gathered in a carved depression on a stone that sits in the small moss and pine garden outside the meditation hall. I am already cold—"freezing!" I call it, or in weaker moments, "*fucking freezing!*"—have already been *freezing* for at least a solid month.

The whole temple assembly is cold: lines of defense are established in long johns, thermoses, "chemical warmers" that some monks stick to their bodies. Jackets of course are inappropriate over monks' clothes, formal and informal, and socks and hats also go contrary to monastic decorum. Only the abbot's room has a heater, the drafty buildings hardly even hold the collective body heat, and the windows in the meditation hall—in keeping with tradition—are very seldom shut. In the kitchen, leftover food stays out on the counters overnight, and, in our morning cooking crew joke, we huddle around the two open household refrigerators, their two or three degrees Celsius like heaters in the sub-freezing air.

We haven't seen the sun for weeks. It lands outside the gate, warming the bodies and hearts of the townspeople, but the mountainside we are tucked up against shades us—our snow won't melt and we only see the sun if we're working, late morning or early afternoon, in the furthestmost vegetable plot. Kotoku-san confesses that he goes to that plot sometimes, just walks out there after lunch for some sun, medicinal light.

"My first winter almost killed me," he remembers. "I made a list, and each day I would check it. Had a parent died? Nope. Abbot died? Nope. Medical emergency? Nope...Every day I thought of going home, but my list kept me from it—I could only go if one of its conditions were met."

We all do whatever we can.

As for me, I make no lists, but just cry; cry every damn freezing night: *no warmth, no insight, just this mind-boggling weakness*. Huddling under blankets, or stripping with numb hands out of my thick outer robes before entering the bathroom—hot tears turning icy on cheeks.

Coming back in towards the main temple gate one day in January, with Kotoku-san, the German monk Daishu-san, and a couple of Japanese newcomers, after an afternoon building a new

bamboo fence around one of our garden plots, the wiry head monk Shoryu-san plows towards us with his characteristic intensity.

"*Mite!* Look!" he cries, showing us a sort of flower he has found. It is a slightly unfurled, enormous green bud, bright against his white cotton gloves. I know the blisters and raw flesh beneath those gloves, the severe, cold-induced chilblains that have permanently disfigured the hands and ears of the kind, austere monk; I almost see them through the cotton, as I look at the young blossom in his hand.

"Smells like spring," he says, delighted.

"What is it?" I ask, jumping at the word "spring."

"*Fukinoto*," Kotoku-san says, staring with us into Shoryu-san's hands. "It's great. Edible. Makes really high-class *tempura*."

"Spring!" Daishu-san says chuckling. "Yeah, winter's behind us."

Is it? I don't know much about the Japanese seasons: sure, based on the pictures I've seen of snow-covered temples, I figured that it would snow a bit more, but it has already been damn cold, that I know. I've felt like I've been dying since that day in November when it hit twelve degrees Celsius.

"It's the temperature *changes* that kill you, not the temperature itself," a monk told me that November "rest day," as we soaked up desperate heat in the weekly bath. "In March when it's twelve we'll be dancing in the streets!"

I didn't believe him; I'd be damned if I would ever celebrate twelve measly degrees. But now, at long last, it is over! Is it over? It is cold, but the blossom is incontrovertible—Shoryu-san said "spring"—is the tide turning, buds opening towards summer?

Kotoku-san laughs. "Umm huhh," he says, "glad that's over!"

Shoryu-san giggles, his mouth so wide it nearly reaches his splitting, cold-cracked ears, and I catch myself.

It is early January. Winter has scarcely begun.