

Less form - more sitting: The New Year's Retreat in Philadelphia

What is the use of traveling far to attend a retreat in a country other than one's own?

At the kind invitation of Su, whom I had met at the Hermitage in Kyoto in November 2017, I was able to attend the New Year's Retreat in Philadelphia from January 3-8, 2019. Su lives in Rockville, not far from Washington D. C. Together with Andreas, who had come along with me from Germany, we headed to Philadelphia.

The retreat was held at the IHM Spirituality Center, run by Catholic sisters. Each of the 36 participants received a comfortable single room.

Apart from the number of participants, there were many more differences from the retreats I had attended before:

There was no Buddha statue or image, nor incense in the Meditation Hall. Only the Four Great Vows was recited morning and evening, without instruments or prostrations. No *Keisaku*-“compassion stick” was given, only occasional posture corrections. Nor did we file into the dining hall in a row.

However, I realized that these forms are not really necessary. Much more important was the attitude of the participants: From the first sitting period I felt a very strong power through the group. All were very enthusiastic and very focused. Though some were still getting used to the rigorous sittings, not a single one stopped early or interrupted. This created a very intense atmosphere and I felt very strongly supported by the group. Our *Jikijitsu* John, who reminded me a bit of a motorcycle rocker, was also a big part of it, sitting like a rock in the surf and reliably leading zazen from 5 am until 2 am.

To compensate for the long hours of sitting, many participants used a *Seiza* bench at times. Some sat on a chair.

Another difference was that Jeff gave shorter lectures. Then one-on-one started, which usually went almost until the end of the official sitting time at 9.30 pm. Incidentally, this took place in the sacristy of the house chapel, without flowers or pictures.

Before and after the retreat there was also the opportunity to get to know the participants. One of them was Jeff's sister-in-law Tina, who had taken over a large part of the organization and at 73 years of age still attended every late-night sitting. I had a good relationship with her right away. I also met Milan from New York, whom I already knew from the Hermitage. He led me around the building and showed me everything. Andreas and I were the only non-Americans but everyone was very friendly and attentive.

Maybe some of you wonder: Where is the deeper experience, the personal insight – why did you make this long journey? My response: It works and was another valuable step on the way – try it!

Barbara R., Germany