MY EXPERIENCE OF VISITING THE MINNESOTA ZEN MEDITATION CENTER

By Chikyo Imura

For three months from September 2024, I was permitted to visit Sōtō Zen temples across South America as an overseas training nun from Tōshōji, a Japanese monastery. From the 10th to the 30th of June 2025, I was granted a three-week stay at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. MZMC was running a program and inviting Asian nuns to attend. I applied for this opportunity through Tōshōji. Travelling to North America and visiting a Zen center were entirely new experiences for me.

At MZMC morning services are held daily after morning zazen. All sutras and prayers are read in English translation. Dharma talks, classes on poetry, writing, sewing and a class on Zen and Science are held after evening zazen. During my stay I participated in as many activities as possible.

I was often asked about the differences between MZMC and Japanese monasteries. Having trained only at Tōshōji, the most significant difference I perceived was the greater exchange of words between teachers and students. Students ask questions, seeking clear verbal explanations, and the teachers seem to strive to provide answers verbally. Each time I noticed this difference I recalled the Japanese saying, 'Learn by watching their back.' I also noticed that the hand posture during zazen was not fixed; some followed the Sōtō Zen method while others practiced the Rinzai Zen style. Many non-Buddhists also visited MZMC, and its non-sectarian openness felt deeply welcoming.

The MZMC residents were able to utilize the space according to their individual lifestyles. The garden, where squirrels scampered, was planted with diverse flora, and beautiful flowers gradually came into bloom. Large trees stood as if guarding the building. Some residents practiced guitar while sitting on the garden benches, while others read quietly in the splendid library located underground. Time was set aside for those struggling with alcohol

or drug addiction and for LGBTQ individuals to gather and share their experiences and feelings. I felt that having a place where one could feel safe, free from self-denial, would be a tremendous source of emotional support.

In front of MZMC lies the vast and beautiful lake known as Bde Maka Ska. The shimmering lake, visible from the window, and the trees swaying in the breeze are beautiful, instilling a sense of calm. During free time I often took solitary walks around the lake. The lake is home to various birds, and rabbits can also be seen. The richness of nature is overwhelming.

The trail around the lake was often filled with people enjoying running and cycling or spending happy moments walking with their beloved dogs and loved ones. The surroundings were quiet, creating a peaceful atmosphere. Among the passers-by were people of color, and many women, perhaps Muslim, wearing garments covering their entire bodies. It was a sight I had never seen whilst living in Japan.

Four days after my arrival at MZMC, in the early hours of 14th June, a tragic incident occurred in which Minnesota state legislators and their families were attacked with firearms, resulting in the loss of two lives. Unaware of this, I walked around the lake at the end of that day too. Within MZMC and as far as my eyes could see the scenery remained unchanged and serene. It was only after

receiving an email from a Japanese nun who was residing locally that I first learned of the incident.

On 20th June, priests from various denominations including Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism gathered at the Minnesota State Capitol. Before the press officer and cameras, each delivered a brief speech regarding the incident. I was able to accompany Rev. Ben Connelly, who was participating. When I heard Rev. Connelly say that we must resist forces seeking to foment division and strife, and that it is vital to show people our unity across denominational lines, I felt the deep invisible sorrow of those living in America burn my skin like a stinging sensation.
During my time at MZMC, I often recalled the stories of Suzuki Hōitsu Rōshi, Tōshōji's Seido Rōshi from Japan. Time and again, he has shared tales of his family with us. It was clear how deeply he cherished his father and his family. Whenever I saw Katagiri Dainin Rōshi's photographs at MZMC or witnessed how his Okesa and teachings were preserved and treasured, I felt a profound joy welling up within me. It feels as though I have learned the continuation of his story. The Dharma passed from Suzuki Shunryū Rōshi, father of Suzuki Hōitsu Rōshi, to Katagiri Dainin Rōshi, is now cherished here in Minnesota.

Before sewing class begins the Takkesano-ge is recited. Each person sews their own Okesa or Rakusu. The sewing techniques, taught by Ms. Tomoe, wife of the Dainin Rōshi, have been carefully compiled in a notebook and are treasured. How wonderful; even in such a distant place there is always a connection, and I am a part of it, feeling a sense of wonder and gratitude for the bonds that connect people.

I was invited to attend one of the children's classes at MZMC. Children aged around three to ten gathered in a room to learn about Buddhism. There, they chose offerings for the Buddha from popcorn, stones or strawberries, and performed the incense offering ritual with care. Lavender flowers were used for the incense offering, and watching their small hands clasping the stems reminded me of what I had learnt from my parents and grandparents in my own childhood. I felt they were nurturing a heart that senses the unseen. The short meditation was done lying down, with the teacher reading a story aloud. The children's soft laughter reminded me of days spent playing with friends at temples and shrines in my childhood. I sensed this space would remain a joyful memory for the children, and that alone felt profoundly gratifying for me.

I am glad this place exists. My gratitude goes to all the predecessors who built it and to all who continue to practice here. I also offer my heartfelt thanks to everyone who gave me the opportunity to visit the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center.