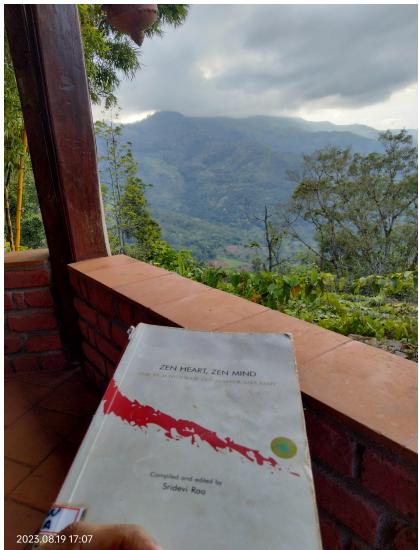


# Bodhi Zendo

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## Zendo: Meditation hall



In August 2023, when I was taking a short career break, I got an opportunity to visit the only Zen meditation center in India at Bodhi Zendo. Located in the beautiful hills of Perumal Malai adjacent to Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, Bodhi Zendo was established by Father A.M.A. Samy, a Jesuit priest who embraced Zen. I am sharing a note I jotted down when I was sitting in the Zen gardens between meditation sessions.

## Perumal Malai: God's Hill

by PURU SARATHY

As I sit in the shade of what looks like a fir tree, surrounded by a forest full of avocado, jackfruit, coffee and banana, I am sharing my experiences of being at Bodhi Zendo Perumal Malai for a mini-sesshin, which is the name given to a three day silent Zen meditation retreat master-minded by the only zen master from India, Father A.M.A. Samy.



To start with my coordinates, Bodhi Zendo (which I shall proceed to call BZ) is located on top of a small hillock just outside a village in Tamil Nadu, India, called Perumal Malai. Perumal Malai is around fifteen kilometres from the better known hill-

station of Kodaikanal. Getting here was not hard – overnight train from Bangalore to Kodai Rd., and then breakfast and a short two hour ride up the hills. The place is really beautiful. Typical of some of these coffee estate houses in the Tamil Nadu hills, this place was clearly the central house in a coffee plantation. I could tell by the drying beds that are typically used to dry the harvested coffee fruits before sending them through a series of steps before the seeds are ground to land into our cups.



BZ has a Zen garden, nice rooms with attached batrooms, a Zendo (meditation hall), a full fledged kitchen with staff and an in-house Zen master.



## Stay

Least expected from a Zen meditation camp, the food here is outstanding, definitely the best vegetarian place in Perumal Malai. Maybe even Kodaikanal, although I cannot say for sure. Between our meditation sessions, we had enough breaks for rest/sleep and meal and coffee/tea.



## Zen

So, what is Zen about ? We have to careful with words while describing Zen concepts. Whatever I understand about it is this. Zen is the realization of the emptiness of the mind. In Zen, emptiness is the same as fullness! In a way emptiness refers to the un-knowability of the depth of our mind, and how all of us are made of the same emptiness. True realization is the recognition of this emptiness. Now, how does one recognize this emptiness? Through 'Dhyana' or 'Chan' or 'Zen', which shows how the word evolved through India, China and then on to Japan. Interestingly, Father A.M.A. Samy is the person who brought Zen back to India from Japan where it had reached a thousand years ago. In English, an attempted translation is the word 'meditation'.

### Zazen: Sitting Meditation

In Zen, there is a special word for sitting meditation - Zazen. So by sitting Zazen, you realize it. This is it. It is all about the practical experience, not so much about the theory. The theory of Zen is considered to be as valuable as the theory of violin playing is to Yehudi Menuhin, who delivers Paganini's caprice not because he knows the theory of violin, but more so because he's played the piece more than ten thousand times. To accommodate some questions and theory, there are some lectures and private question answer sessions, for the more curious disciple. Public lectures to the class are called 'Teisho', where a Zen master gives a lesson on what Zen is about. No questions are allowed here, it is a completely silent listen-only affair. Private one on one questions with the Zen master in between meditations sessions are encouraged. These are known as 'Doksan', where a pupil is allowed to ask the deepest of questions that may come to her.

The entire three days is spent

in silence with around five hours of meditation per day, with frequent breaks and meals to ease the transition for new comers to the practice.

## Koan: Case

I end with a Zen Koan, which in the Zen tradition is a question intended to have a deeper meaning than what appears at first glance. Ananda, the Buddha's faithful attendant asked the great sage Maha Kashyapa: "The great one transmitted the brocade robe to you. What else did he transmit to you as part of your training?" Maha Kashyapa calls "Ananda!" Ananda replies "Yes, master!" Maha Kashyapa says "Go knock down the flag-pole at the gate!" Sounds crazy, right? Knocking down the flagpole here is a sign of having achieved it, or having realized it. On hearing Ananda's fully present and attentive reply to Mahakashyapa's call, Mahakashyapa says that this is the essence of enlightenment! You've realized what you just asked about. Go declare your victory.

