

NAGAHAMA'S NISHIDA TENKO AND KYOTO'S ITTOEN COMMUNE

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"In having nothing lies inexhaustible wealth"

Nishida Tenko

There is a Japanese proverb which says: "The nail which stands out must be hammered back in," the essential meaning being that he who stands out from the group must be made to conform so that collective harmony will not be compromised. Any one spending time in Japan will soon become acutely aware of a group consciousness that dominates individual initiative and creativity. Thus, it is often the case that any Japanese who thinks, behaves, or believes differently than the accepted norms is shunned as a pariah. Only with this stringent cultural framework in mind can one fully realize the boldly different lifestyle that the some 260 members of Kyoto's Ittoen Commune have chosen to follow.

Ittoen, literally meaning "Garden of one Light," a sprawling compound of 40 acres in Kyoto's eastern suburb of Yamashina, was founded in 1905 by Nishida Tenko (1872-1968). The 80 buildings scattered across the grounds of this self-sufficient commune include a conference building, guest house, communal dining room and kitchen, worship hall, shrine, dormitories, carpentry shop, agricultural department, a shelter for anyone in need, architectural design office, knitting and dress making classroom, training center, kindergarten, classrooms for primary, junior high, and high school students, library, baby nursery, and printing factory, among many other buildings and facilities.

In Ittoen's Hall of Light, where the flags of all nations are exhibited around the symbol of Ittoen on the ceiling, the altar, displaying a circular window of light, can be worshipped from both

inside and outside thus symbolically uniting all human distinctions. In the Aizen Muen Hall, a flame has been kept burning since 1930 when Nishida brought it from both the Ise Jingu, Japan's most sacred Shinto shrine, and from Koryuji, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Japan.

The philosophical premises that unite the members of this commune are the pursuit of a simple and natural life without strife and discord, humility and selfless service to society, and in Nishida's words, the belief that "in having nothing lies inexhaustible wealth." Ittoen members renounce all material possessions--an extreme anomaly in modern Japan where the closest thing to religion is the appreciation of technology and its application to consumer products and gadgets.

Philosophical Foundations

Ittoen's philosophical foundations evolved from Nishida's spirited experiences in search of the meaning of life. At the age of 20, he abandoned his lucrative family business and led 100 farming families to the extreme wilderness of Hokkaido, Japan's northern-most island, to cultivate the land. After several years he found himself caught between the demands of the rich land owners who lent him the money for the project and the farmers with whom he worked. Unable to resolve the conflicts over land ownership and profits that he felt arose from innate human greed, he abandoned the enterprise in a mood of extreme pessimism, questioning the need for money that forces one to exchange labor for wages.

His subsequent experiences as a soldier revealed the violent and cruel element in human nature. After three years of wandering across Japan, at which time he read many classic works of philosophy and religion and interacted with people from all walks of life, he resolved to fast until he found the answer to the question of how to live one's life and attain peace of mind without greed, conflict, and causing injury to others. In 1903, after fasting for four days and nights, he was sitting in the Hachiman Shrine in his native Nagahama

City in Shiga Prefecture when he suddenly heard the sound of a baby crying. When the mother gave the baby her breast, it immediately stopped crying. It was at this moment that Nishida had the epiphany that was to shape his life and lead to the eventual founding of Ittoen.

He realized at that moment that the relationship between the mother and baby represented a model of the original state or mode of human existence. Life is given to us, he surmised, and we are allowed to live and prosper by whatever force pervades the universe. We must learn from the baby to completely trust this force at work and remain true to what is provided for us by nature. In providing sustenance to the child, the mother acted in a selfless way in line with this natural force. Nishida came to believe that if we live in accordance with the harmony of nature we will be provided with the necessities of life, even if we don't strive for possessions or exchange our labor for money.

Nishida himself, after reaching this spiritual understanding, had no idea to form any kind of commune. However, a group of women who worked in the "tea houses" of Gion, Kyoto's pleasure quarters, seeing Nishida's simple and peaceful life, pleaded with him to help them break out of their wasteful and decadent lifestyles. He urged them to begin by living frugally and saving money. After jointly accruing a considerable sum of money, they needed to open a bank account. Nishida suggested they do this under the name of Ittoen. This group of women led by Nishida eventually evolved into the Ittoen Commune.

A sampling from Nishida's "Selflessness," a collection of his poetic sayings might serve to illustrate his philosophical and spiritual notions better than any intellectual explanation or analysis. The following ten sayings provide the basis for the functioning of the Ittoen commune:

"Nothing belongs to anyone: all things belong to the whole."

“Worship is self-negation. When you negate yourself, the whole will become yourself.”

“Absolute humility embraces all. It is the earth, is the mother. It supports all things, begets all things.”

“Humility does not necessarily mean lowering one’s station: rather it means non-attachment to one’s station.”

“Serve with no thoughts for rewards, and things will be given you when you need them.”

“The ultimate negative is the ultimate positive.”

“Man is like a bubble formed by chance on the waters. Let not your mind be occupied by it, but let it know the waters, the First Cause.”

“Bow to great nature.”

“We cannot do well without ‘numbers’: nevertheless we should always make ‘zero’ the center of our thought, and treat ‘numbers’ as playthings.”

“What is called ‘progress’ is often a roundabout way. In ‘receding one step’ will be found a short cut surmounting all kinds of difficulties.”

Variety of Activities

The members of Ittoen do not keep their own individual money, but rather pool resources with the whole commune. Ittoen supports itself through a variety of activities which include farming (Ittoen mushrooms are famous), agricultural research, the sale of seeds, architectural design, and the publishing of various periodicals, posters and books, in addition to the sewing of Western- and Japanese - style clothing.

Another source of revenue for Ittoen is the commune's touring modern drama troupe, Suwaraji, which began to perform 60 years ago. The troupe's name has a dual meaning: it is the Hindi word for independence, and in Japanese means straw sandals with barefeet, a symbol of a simple life. The 20 members of the group shun the star system; leading roles are determined on a rotation basis. Suwaraji members are in no way exempt from Ittoen's spiritual and menial responsibilities. The troupe tours all year with June and July dedicated to the big cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya while the remainder of the year it makes the rounds of small towns across Japan. The content of the troupe's performances deals with serious philosophical and social fare but is not concerned with the propagation of Ittoen dharma.

The children of the approximately 70 families attend Ittoen schools which range from nursery school through college "forest." The commune's high school, according to Masaki Murata, head of Ittoen's Life Research Institute and a 30-year Ittoen veteran, holds classes in the evening with the days reserved for on-the-job work experience. This is based on the Confucian precept of "Study after labor." The three-year college forest course operates on similar lines: the first year consists of classes, with the second and third years giving way to work opportunities which the students want to explore. Professors from leading universities in the area come from outside to teach without receiving any remuneration.

The members of Ittoen employ an eclectic assortment of religious methods culled from Buddhist, Shinto and Christian sources in pursuit of their spiritual goals. Perhaps the most well-known of Ittoen's practices is that of "Rokuman Gyogan," toilet cleaning as a form of prayer and practice. At the time of the new year, the members of Ittoen leave their base with no money or prospective place to stay, wearing only simple clothes and straw sandals, and wander around Japan knocking on doors requesting to clean the toilets of the house. Murata admits that perhaps only about one family in ten or 20 allows Ittoen members to actually clean their toilets. The goal of this practice is to learn humility and strive to

forster relationships with people.

Practice of "Roto"

Another practice of Ittoen is that of "Roto," a form of service where days are spent on the street, seeking to serve any need that families may have. For several hours the members work in one or more homes, seeking no payment of any kind. According to Murata, this homeless existence is the foundation of Ittoen life. The commune members do not regard the Ittoen Kyoto village as their permanent home, or these houses as their homes. They consider the true state of a human being to be out on the road stripped of roles and all non-essentials. The purging of attachments and possessiveness is an essential Ittoen aspiration in order to serve others and be one with the force of the universe.

One other prime concept in Ittoen's philosophy is that everything, even our bodies, is only temporarily offered to us and will return to the life force after a period of time, be it 60 or 90 years. Even knowledge and wisdom are only on temporary loan to us. One's place of dwelling is called "karizumai," a temporary residence. Each member merely keeps two bowls and chopsticks wrapped in a cloth, and Nishida's concept of the ideal living space was one tatami mat to sleep on and one ralf to sit on, thus giving rise to the motto "the house of one and a half tatami mats."

Every morning at six o'clock and evening at five o'clock, Ittoen holds religious services called "otsutome," which consist of the chanting of sutras and a form of meditation similar to zazen of Zen Buddhism. The following are "The Five Prayers" of Ittoen which constitute the essence of the group's spiritual aspirations:

"May we be born anew into the world of the One Light and live only as Light allows."

"May we revere the Essence which is the same in all religions and work for the goal which is also the same for all."

“May we serve others in the spirit of sange (selfless repentance for all the evils of the world) and in gratitude for the gifts we have received.”

“May we perfect our lives by shaping them in accord with the sacred laws of nature.”

“And may we thus return to our Home, and move in the Paradise of Formless Light.”

Throughout the years, Ittoen has welcomed members from all over Japan as well as foreign countries. At present, there are people residing at Ittoen from the U.S., China and Korea. From the seventh to tenth day of each month, the Ittoen community holds training sessions on the life of Ittoen for all persons who are interested. Visitors are encouraged to come even for a few days to experience life at the commune. The contact address is Ittoen, Kosenrin Foundation, Yamashina, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto, Japan. Tel: (075) 581-3136.

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