

1. Report

Please write a report on your study experience, addressing the matters listed below. Your report should be more than 500 words in English. Matters to include in your report: (a) Academic outcomes (how participation in this program affected your motivation, university study and international understanding, and what interests and plans you developed for further study in the future); (b) Your experiences in Kyoto University; (c) The content of the program; (d) The impact of the program on your career plans.

Bringing Zen Outside Kyoto

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Zen Buddhism is, at its heart, a philosophy and a way of life: Scholarly notes and articles depict a series of stories, each revolving around how a certain monk achieved enlightenment. Though there were some fundamentals that we had to pin down, such as the concept of the middle way bridging the dichotomy between Form and Non-Form, a lecture or two with Professor Garfield quickly laid the foundations of our understanding of Zen Buddhism concisely and accurately. What we could never have prepared for, however, was the practice of Zen Buddhism in the everyday life, and that was exactly what this trip to Kyoto taught me. Rows of houses and shops were interjected with temples and shrines; each one a symbol of a not-so-distant past, a working slice of history still very much engaged with the modern Japanese lifestyle.

Indeed, it was glaringly obvious to anyone who stepping into a shrine such as Daitokuji or Kozanji that Buddhism was a lifestyle, and one greatly influenced by and influencing the environment it operated in. It was a dialectical process: Everywhere we turned, we could glean the thoughts and teachings of Zen Buddhism from the temple gardens; in turn, the temple made us gain a new spiritual dimension to our understanding of what was previously just words on paper. One particularly striking illustration is the pebble garden—a staple in the traditional Japanese temple garden—but particularly the one we saw in Nanzenji, which demonstrated how such separate and distinct pebbles could come together to form a coherent whole, something that was strong yet fragile as it had to be carefully rearranged every morning or after a storm. For me, that really captured the fundamental concept of Zen Buddhism as a product of conscious effort and a thorough understanding of the emptiness of Form.

This new understanding of Zen Buddhism as a dialectical process further expanded my academic interests into the realm of how the human psychology is affected by its spatial environment, something that tied very well into the lecture Professor Garfield gave on consciousness during his stint with Kyoto University the past week. He argues that there is no one consciousness and the way of examining this consciousness cannot be through introspection, which further illuminated my idea of how there may be workings underpinning our conscious thought that we were not aware of, such as how environment shapes our behavior. Here, philosophy tied in with neuroscience and psychology.

More so than the pure contents of the lecture, watching and learning not only together with but also from the Kyodai philosophy students was also a highlight of my time in Kyoto. Getting to know seniors in the field of philosophy really helped put together some perspectives on my future academic direction, but more importantly, I think I made some close friends, and I'll be very glad to extend the same amazing generosity and hospitality should the Kyodai batch come to Singapore.

In conclusion, the past week in Kyoto has taught me a lot, among the top are a deepened understanding of Zen Buddhism and its links to the Japanese culture, a greater understanding of myself and my academic interests and potential academic development directions. Outside the classroom, I've had a taste of the Japanese lifestyle, felt the hospitality of my Japanese friends and seen the wonderful mix of tradition and modernity. What I am left with, then, as I type this report, is a lingering sense of the Kyoto magic that I've experienced over the past week, and a keen desire to return sometime in the near future.

*The information you provide may be included in Re-discovering Japan Project reports, or published in printed materials or on our website in pages dealing with the outcomes of programs offered by the Asian Studies Unit and/or Kyoto University. Please ensure that your report only includes content which is publishable in light of privacy considerations and the need to safeguard personal information. Also note that depending on the publication format, we may need to edit parts of your report.