

ZEN NOTES



SOKEI - AN SAYS

THE QUIET LIFE Perhaps you cannot imagine such a practice as that which has been current among my people. In China or Japan, monasteries are built on a mountain top or on the edge of a cliff. From there you can see a thousand miles before your eyes. In winter, when the valley is covered with snow, you feel you are in a world of silver. No color is before your eyes. In the valley it is so quiet. In the daytime when the monks are meditating, if there is any sound in the temple it will be only that of a mouse or a rat.

These monks are not retiring from the world; they are trying to find quietude in their minds. This state is longed for by oriental students. They try frantically to find it. Occasionally they renounce their home, or separate from wife and children to pass their lives in such a quiet place. You could not dream of men like this until you meet them. They value highly their quiet way of life. They cannot see the value of the life we are in daily contact with, our present civilization, where men hold a cigar in the right hand and a glass of whiskey in the left hand, listen to music, watch dancing, and eat delicious food. We might say that these are the two extremes of human life.

Perhaps you will ask, what value is there in that quiet and aloof way of life. The monks would ask the same question of you. What value is there in passing your nights in a night club?

From a lecture Feb. 21, 1942

WHEN I WAS A CHILD my father always put me to bed. From three years old I remember he told me bedtime stories in Chinese, so the sound of Chinese was familiar to me from my earliest memory. When I was five years old he began to teach me Chinese, and writing those characters was my life work as a child.

From a tea talk

NEW YEAR The New Year is approaching. Here in Japan, a day or two before, we shall go to the market and buy from the heaped-up carts of the peasant women of O Miya-dori braided and fringed ropes of straw, the large oranges called *dai-dai*--a word which can also mean "long life"--branches of pine, bamboo and earliest blooming plum--symbols of good fortune and congratulation--and with them decorate the gateway to our house. In the *tokonoma* we shall have an arrangement of the fruits of forest, field and sea--a spray of fern and of laurel, a white pounded-rice cake, a branch of dried persimmons, a large *dai-dai*, bands of grey seaweed and a lobster--on a stand of fragrant white hinoki wood.

The day before the New Year everything will be put in perfect order. We shall make certain that all the end of the year bills are paid. We shall prepare innumerable things to be eaten cold or warmed up, for we shall not cook during the first three days of the year, yet must have the delicacies of the season to give to our visitors. We shall clean the house from top to bottom, shall take our baths, have our hair freshly done at the beauty-shop, and shall lay out our best clothing for the next day. Then, late in the evening, we shall take all the charcoal embers from the braziers and cover them with ashes in the garden. Thus all that has accumulated of dust and dirt during the year which is passing will have been destroyed.

For me, these New Year customs in Japan sum up what the end of the old year and the beginning of the new should mean. But the custom I love best is that of procuring fresh fire at the Yasaka Jinja in Gion. When all other preparations have been completed, we start on our pilgrimage. Every one goes--old men, old women, husbands, wives, lovers, students, serving maids, children, babies. At the booths lining the approaches to the shrine we buy hemp ropes, then slowly follow in the crowd to the great iron braziers of flaming pine faggots presided over by white-robed Shinto priests wearing high black-lacquered hats. With a quick twist of the arm the priest seizes a blazing faggot and lights the end of our rope, and then the next, and the next. In a constant stream more than a half-million people will present their hemp ropes to be lighted, and dawn will be approaching when the fires finally die down.

Carrying their fresh fire, men, women and children will go one by one before the main edifice of the shrine, its darkness and mystery made darker and more mysterious still by the two or three lighted candles of the inmost sanctuary. They will pull the twisted rope and clang the great gong to let the Kami Sama know of their presence, then clap their hands three times and bow deeply and respectfully. Who the Kami Sama is, what the Kami Sama means, why they bow so respectfully to the Kami Sama perhaps none clearly knows, only vaguely senses. But all undoubtedly feel some inner need satisfied, some cleansing of the spirit through their simple act.

Last year, with a full moon making huge black shadows of the ancient pines among which the shrine is set, and glistening silhouettes of the heavy tiled roofs of buildings and gateways, we walked through the compound on to the Sammon (Mountain Gate) of the temple, Chion-in, on Higashiyama. Up the three hundred steep stone steps we plodded, across the moonlight-flooded courtyard before the main temple building, again up uncertain steps hewn out of the mountain-side, and through the forest to the tower where hangs the great bell of the headquarters of the Jodo (Pure Land) Sect, the second largest bell in Japan.

On the edge of the forest to the side of the bell-tower, over boiling cauldrons propped on blazing bonfires, bent and wrinkled *obasans* and *ojisans*, like so many forest gnomes and witches, were ladling out bowls of steaming sweet-bean soup to shivering watchers. Just before twelve, the great candles on iron stands were put in place in the four corners of the earthen floor of the tower. They illumined the eager, pushing crowd and brought into sudden relief a huge and strange dark-faced figure completely swathed in orange robes. A visiting monk from Ceylon, I knew. But just so must Bodhidharma have looked among the native crowds at some ancient festival in China. Before the simple Buddhist altar set beneath the bell itself, the *Kancho* and attendant priests, arrayed in purple robes and golden *kesas*, recited sutras and burned incense till it rose in clouds. The gnarled old bell-ringer, grasping the rope of the enormous log with which the bell is struck, stood immovable, watching for the signal that the year was done. A priest's hand dropped, the hour struck, struck with a great boom that went rolling over the entire city of Kyoto and far out to the fields and villages beyond. By this signal over many centuries have the folk of the Kamo valley known that the New Year has begun.

Again the great bell was struck, and again, and again, one hundred and eight times in all it was struck, a number sacred to all Buddhists. On the one hundred and eighth stroke, the great bell of the temple next north on Higashiyama sounded, and after that the next and then the next, until all the hills by which the city is surrounded echoed and re-echoed with the booming of the bells.

Late into the night the temple bells were still booming. And all through the city people were still streaming toward the shrine and out into the city streets carrying their fresh fire. Booming of bells, twinkling of tiny fires! A new year is beginning. A Happy New Year? A Prosperous New Year? Would the Kami Sama answer the unspoken hopes of these hearts?

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JAPANESE VOCABULARY

tokonoma: the raised part of the room (lit.); the alcove in which are displayed the one picture, one ornament, and the flower arrangement in a classical Japanese room.

obasan: "granny," an old woman.

ojisan: "grandpa," an old man.

Kancho: the title of the highest ranking priest in the headquarter-temple of a Japanese Buddhist sect; the title is not used in every Japanese Buddhist sect, however. This priest is administrative as well as spiritual head of the sect. Usually the office is an elective one.

kesa: the large mantle or robe covering the right shoulder, the left shoulder remaining bare, worn by Buddhist priests when they are conducting services.

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CHINESE CHARACTERS Our class begins with three Chinese characters.

You are invited to read them at sight. If you doubt your grasp of their meaning, a correct translation is given below, upside down.

The three Chinese characters are 1,2,3.

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