

ZEN NOTES



A MESSAGE TO SOKEI-AN'S ZEN STUDENTS

By ASAHINA SOGEN

ZEN MASTER AND ABBOT OF ENGAKU-JI

I understand that you are a group of people seriously interested in Zen, a group founded by Sasaki Sokei-an. Naturally, the content of my lecture for you who are interested in and have studied Zen is different from the kind of lecture which would be given to those who are not well versed in Zen and its practice.

In the study of Zen, it is very important to practice it in daily life; it is also essential to have a good teacher who is well versed in Zen, a Master. Of course, after the death of Sokei-an there was no Master to give you instruction, but I understand that you follow the teachings left by Sokei-an very diligently and that you practice the way of Zen. Sakyamuni, before he died and entered Nirvana, said; "My body will perish but if you follow my teachings, it will be the same as if I were alive." This is true of Sokei-an also. If you study and practice his teachings of Zen diligently, his teachings will remain alive. This is one of the reasons why I am now going to say something to you. I hope that that which Sokei-an has taught you and this will contribute to your practice of Zen.

THREE CONDITIONS ARE IMPORTANT In ancient days, there was a great Master who said that there are three important conditions for the study of Zen: first of all, one must have faith that after the study of Zen one can attain enlightenment; second, one must desire to solve "the great ball of doubt", one's problems about one's self, about life; third, one must have great courage, for without it such problems can never be solved.

For you these three conditions are important. First, a strong faith that you can attain enlightenment after strenuous effort; second, an honest desire to seek for the truth, and a vigorous effort to solve your problems; and third, great courage. If one of these is lacking, there can be no perfect attainment. These three conditions may be likened to the three legs of a Chinese bowl. If one leg is missing,

the bowl will lose its balance and break. These three conditions are important to all students of Zen. I understand that you are most seriously devoted to the study of Zen. Because the study of Zen is difficult there might not be many who have passed the barrier, the gate. For you, therefore, the third condition, great courage, is the most important.

THERE IS A RIGHT METHOD OF SITTING There is also in Zen a right method of sitting, as I have demonstrated for you. I understand in this society you practice Zen in the cross-legged posture. In

Kamakura, I have several American students who practice Zen in the cross-legged posture. Of course Americans are not used to sitting cross-legged. It may be difficult. But even if you meditate while sitting in a chair, it is important to keep the upper part of the body in a correct posture. This morning an American who visited Dr. Suzuki gave me an opportunity to observe that there are many ways of sitting in a chair. There is a correct way and there is an incorrect way. In other words, the important thing is to keep the backbone straight; then to regulate your breath and, by breathing properly, to center the gravity in the lower part of the abdomen, keeping the mouth shut and the tongue in the upper part of the mouth, eyes half-closed, looking at a distance about three feet away. You must keep your head erect, without leaning backward or forward, to the left or to the right side. With this kind of posture you are ready to attain the stability and equilibrium of mind needed for solving your problems: What is "I"? What is life? and so on. To seek and find, grasp your mind with your mind. This is a very difficult task, more difficult than to seize something that lies in the distance. That done, you are prepared for the solving of your problems.

TWO SICKNESSES In solving these problems, there are several sicknesses to which students of Zen may succumb. Our minds tend to become confused and disturbed; we lose stability and grow dull and depressed. Therefore some attention must be paid to the physical side. One should not eat too much or too little; one should not have too short a sleep or too long. A quiet environment is preferable, for if the environment is noisy, the mind is easily disturbed. For the study of Zen, the old monks in the Orient enjoyed a very favorable environment. I have been in New York for ten days and, as you know, the life here is busy and noisy. At the same time, it is not difficult to find a quiet room because of the construction of the buildings. As you continue your study and practice of Zen, endeavor to select the best environment you can and pay attention to the two sicknesses; first, disturbance, distraction from your problem; then, drowsiness, laziness in the practice of Zen. Zen teaches us the highest meaning of life; it is a teaching worth devoting all one's life to. If your desire to solve life's greatest problems is deep and strong, then the sicknesses I have mentioned will not be a hindrance to the attainment of your goal.

**YOU WILL ATTAIN
ENLIGHTENMENT**

In Zen, as in other religions probably, the goal of meditation is to see God or to see Buddha, and I do not say that this is impossible. I advise you to study diligently and honestly and to follow the advice I have given you. It is preferable to concentrate intensely on your study for five or six days a week, but if such a schedule is too difficult for you to arrange, why not practice meditation every morning? I assure you that by perseverance in such a practice you can experience a new state of mind and that you will never return to your former way of life. You will attain what is known as seeing one's mind, or enlightenment. It is said that the teachings and sayings in Zen are difficult to understand, but if you pass through all the stages and achieve enlightenment, you will experience a state of mind which is entirely different from what we ordinarily consider as mind. This state cannot be understood by a person who has not experienced it. In Zen we say you can only know if water is hot or cold by drinking it yourself. If you have a strong faith and do not doubt your ability to attain enlightenment, I assure you, you can experience it. Frequently, those who have suffered and lived in pain can attain enlightenment more quickly than those who approach enlightenment only by abstract meditation, especially if that suffering and pain are really serious.

**THE WORLD OF
ENLIGHTENMENT**

The world you will see in the state of enlightenment is totally different from what you were accustomed to seeing before. Even a blade of grass, a tree, becomes different from what you have previously seen. They then express vividly the real value of existence, and you come to know that after all the world is not a world independent from your real self, but that your real self is the world, and the world is your self. The whole world, the beautiful streams and the wandering clouds, these are all you yourself.

There is no distinction here between life and death. All these travails, these psychological experiences, are seen to be no more than the images that appear in dreams. This world of enlightenment, this state, is, according to the Buddha's experience, a world of infinite life and infinite light. When I say life, this life is a life different both from life and from death; and when I say light, it is a light beyond light and darkness. It is a light which is really not light. If you put out the light in this room, it becomes dark. But this light is beyond darkness. Artificial light is an interference from this view, for without it light is black, but with this light you can see light even in the walls or the mountains which block ordinary light.

**IN BUDDHISM WE CALL
THIS COMPASSION**

The following is a warning, except to those who live as a part of the entire world. Zen warns not to fall into a false unity. If you open your eyes to those who are suffering from their own problems, how do you feel about

their problems? One who is enlightened always has a tremendous desire to help those around him who are suffering. He tries to help them enter the world of infinite light. One with enlightenment cannot stay in a stagnant type of life; he must assist others to the world which is infinite light. It is not enough for a Zen student either to stay in this world or to remain in the world of infinite light. It is not self-indulgence to wish to go out from the world of enlightenment to help others, to alleviate suffering, to assist others to solve their painful problems. In Buddhism we call this compassion and it may be called love, too. This means that as long as there are people who are suffering from their problems, a Zen student has not solved the entire problem. These problems are not his own personal problems, like those from which he suffered before enlightenment, but it is still his problem to assist others toward enlightenment, and to assist them even after their enlightenment. There is a big difference between problems caused by clinging to one's self, and those which are on behalf of others. This is why Zen Masters have solved many important problems and helped people in their suffering.

A WORLD OF MUTUAL RESPECT

I think I have given you a rough outline of Zen. By the study of Zen you can liberate yourself from your small self and attain the realization of your real self, the great egoless self. We cling to this petty, egocentric self; we make ourselves suffer by clinging to our egocentric ambitions; by this clinging we create suffering not only for ourselves but for others as well. All egocentric qualities are aggravating and make this a miserable life. Zen seeks to liberate us from the relative ego, or self, and to help us experience the real self, the greater self; by such a realization we help others to experience this wonderful self, the greater self. Thus we attain freedom both for ourselves and for others. This brings to mind the famous Japanese Zen Master Dogen, who taught that by practicing Zen one learns to respect oneself and others. Thus by the practice of Zen this becomes a world of mutual respect.

Abbot Asahina's message given here is as it reached our understanding. It was delivered in Japanese (characterized by one of our Japanese-speaking members as in poetic "floating" Zen style) it was translated on the spot by Dr. Akihisa Kondo; Dr. Kondo's words were noted by Mr. L. B. Chow, who very kindly gave us a copy of his transcribed notes; it was then prepared for use in this paper by your editor. These words, therefore, it should be noted, are three times removed from the original. Because of the shortness of Abbot Asahina's stay we could not have the benefit of his corrections for this issue. If any are forthcoming in the future they will be passed on to our readers.

ZEN HISTORY IS MADE IN NEW YORK

When Sokei-an, the Founder of our temporarily templeless temple, came first to America in 1906, from so far west that it is geographically called the Far East, he did so as the disciple of the disciple of one of the greatest of modern Zen Masters, by name Shaku Soyen, Abbot of Engaku-ji, one of the oldest and most important temples of the Rinzai Sect of Zen.

June 2, 1954, a half-century later, our small group, which has faithfully continued, for nearly twenty-five years, to uphold as best it can the tradition of Zen as transmitted to us by our Founder, was privileged to welcome another "spiritual grandson" of Shaku Soyen, Asahina Sogen, a man who is now the Abbot of that same Engaku-ji and also a great modern Zen Master.

In 1939 Sokei-an, whose coming to America might be said to parallel Bodhidharma's coming to China, said this in a lecture: "When I came to America and was tramping through the country of the Cascade Mountains and Montana, or along the Columbia River, I felt that the soil of America has Zen essence. Zen is inborn in Americans. Americans have this precious jewel in their minds, given them by nature. But they have never opened the box so they have not discovered it. Three hundred years hereafter someone will come and destroy that box for you, and you will find that jewel by yourself."

In these words Sokei-an predicted that the course of Zen in this country would follow that in China, where Zen reached its heights at the same time Chinese civilization reached its greatest glory, starting about





three hundred years after Bodhidharma.

But Zen, like everything else these days, may speed more rapidly than could be anticipated a half-century ago.

Abbot Asahina, in a talk given at Steinway Hall as part of a U.S. Government sponsored program, commented on the current American interest in Zen. While noting that it is easy to be "interested" in Zen, but difficult to realize it, he expressed his view that this growing interest points to a tremendous future for Zen in this country. He also ventured his opinion that the Zen training which had so greatly contributed to Japan's culture and spirit in the highest period of her civilization might be of considerable benefit to the Americans who bear such a heavy burden of world-responsibility today. He added that what was needed most at this moment of history was an "atomic leap of mind" to increase our spiritual progress to match our material progress. Geographically and politically, he reminded us, we are approaching a world of oneness, regardless of what we think or do. Once we realize this, and consciously work toward it, all differences will dissolve, and we will be able to break through the barriers of hostility and establish the world of enlightenment for which we all, in our hearts, yearn, the world which all our religious faiths have taught us that once established, can never perish.

For more details of Engaku-ji and Shaku Soyen, see *CAT'S YAWN*, pp. 2, 3, 7, 12, 16, 17, 19.



ON THE WORD ZEN ZEN is the romanized spelling of the Japanese pronunciation of a Chinese character (spelled *ch'an* when it is romanized from the Chinese pronunciation) which stands for the Sanskrit word Anglicized as "dhyana."

When we try to render Indian Buddhist terms into English, we encounter a problem. One answer is to write down our approximation of the sound of the original in roman letters, in this case "dhyana." Our other answer is to try to translate the term with an existing English word, in this case usually "meditation." But "meditation," though more familiar to our ear, by no means conveys the sense of the original, a fact we should do well to bear in mind whenever, for convenience, it is used.

At the time the Chinese began translating Buddhist terms into Chinese, their problem was similar. As no Chinese words existed which could give back the exact meaning of the Sanskrit, they too attempted to approximate the sound of the original, but in Chinese characters instead of in roman letters. In the case of "dhyana" one character, pronounced "ch'an", was frequently selected from among those of similar sound because its meaning was the most compatible to, though by no means the equivalent of, the sense of "dhyana." As all Chinese words are monosyllabic, sometimes a character with the sound "na" is added, but just the one character is more common. With the passage of time, the meaning of this character has extended to cover its use.

Zen appears in the names of certain sects and schools of Buddhism, notably Rinzai Zen and Soto Zen. And it sometimes refers to the whole method of practice of the Zen School. A tendency on the part of certain modern Zennists to employ the word Zen as synonymous with "Reality" also adds to the variety of meanings in general use.

An examination of the character itself gives little help on its meaning, therefore. However, as our Chinese class finds that knowing the "story" of a character aids our eyes to see it and our minds to remember it, we record its "story" for you here.

示單 (Chi. *ch'an*, Jap. *zen*) divides neatly into two parts. The right-hand part is a phonetic, which gives some clue to the sound and has no bearing on the meaning. The left-hand part occurs frequently as a signfic relating to various transcendental matters. The *I. CHING* (quoted by Blakney) says of this signfic: "示 is what we see for good and evil in the way celestial objects are suspended in the heavens." This refers to the belief fostered by ancient astrologers that mankind is informed of the will of heaven by changes in its configuration. The two horizontal lines 二 are the old form of the character 上 high, superior; here they signify "heaven." The three vertical lines 小 represent what is suspended from heaven, that is, the sun, the moon, and the stars.

示單堂	(zendo)	zen hall	坐示單	(zazen)	to sit in zen
示單師	(zenji)	zen master	參示單	(sanzen)	zen interview

ART June 10 a delegation from the Institute attended the opening of an exhibition of paintings by the City College students of our member James Martin at the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library. Among the several promising styles represented perhaps the most highly individual was the combination of primitive and Near Eastern characteristic of Miss Anna Azarician's canvases. Other works shown were by Frances Haynes, Victor Carter, Naomi Coker, Juanita Canegata, and Melba Bailey.

ARCHITECTURE Recognizing the all-pervasive influence of Japanese domestic architecture on modern design, the Museum of Modern Art has constructed a charming and complete Japanese house on West 54th Street. The house, based on 16th and 17th century prototypes, was made in Nagoya in 1953. It was shipped to the United States with all accessories, including stones for the garden, and reassembled in the Museum with the aid of Japanese craftsmen under the supervision of the architect, Junzo Yoshimura.

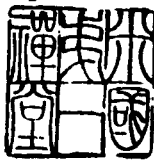
All comers are given paper slippers to put on--in three sizes, small, medium, and large--and a paper bag in which to carry their shoes, to protect the *tatami*. It was saddening to see how unhandy some visitors were at getting their shoes off and on, though others perched easily on the edges of the wooden walks or relaxed on the red cushions. A polite sign requested "Please do not sit on the *tokonoma*" and no one did, though there were those who looked as though they'd like to.

The residence is described as suitable for a scholar, official, or priest, and includes a tea house. The garden, executed in *sansui* ("Mountains and Water") style, is said to represent a "Buddhist image of Paradise with heaven symbolized by a mountain in water." On its second day of display it was swarming with architects and stylists, busily examining and sketching its details.

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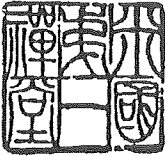
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