

ZEN NOTES



Living Zen

ASAHINA SOGEN

I was born in the Prefecture of Shizuoka on January 9, 1891. When I was five years old, I lost my mother; when I was seven, I lost my father. Though I had seen my mother and my father buried, I could not help but believe that some day, some time, they would come again to caress me, as other parents caressed their children, and to say something good to me.

One day, through a medium--my sister believed in mediums--I was given a message from my parents. They said they were always watching over me from the shadow of the grave. After this I went often to their graves to try to see them. All I saw were the insects in the roots of the grass. I believed that they were my parents, kindly and warmly looking after me.

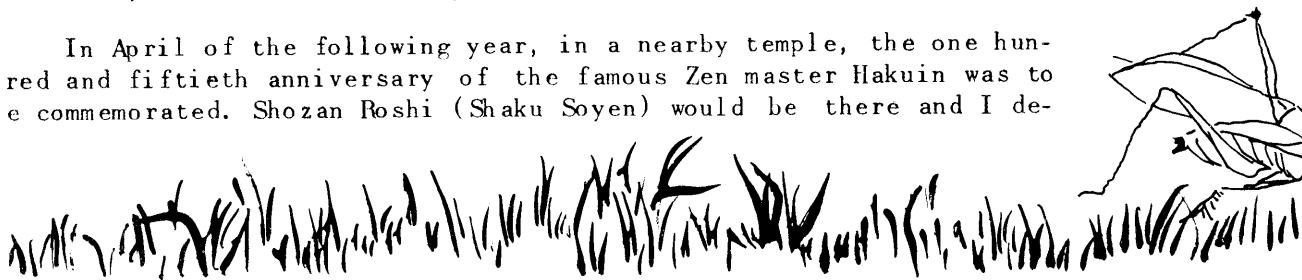
My family belonged to the Zen sect of Buddhism. When I was nine years old, I visited a Zen temple on Nirvana day, that is, on February fifteenth, the anniversary of Sakyamuni's death. In the temple a large painting on display showed the scene of the Buddha's death. Surrounding the body of the Buddha were not only human beings but every kind of living creature. When I saw the Buddha's face and body in that picture of him in death I felt that he was still alive. The expression of his face was very peaceful, his body was not miserably lean; he looked just as healthy now as he must have looked when alive.

I asked the Abbot of the temple why the Buddha looked so alive in the painting and why all the human beings about him were weeping. The Abbot told me: "People are human beings. They weep because it is a wise and benevolent deed. The Buddha looks alive because he is not dead; because he is not dead, he looks alive after death." Now I knew that the Buddha is alive, not because he is so powerful but because he is just alive. And if the Buddha is alive, why not my parents? My parents, I realized then, are alive too.

A monk of the temple, seeing some inclination to Buddhism in me, suggested that I become a monk in order to find out the full truth about my problem. A year later, we talked again. "You should study Buddhism," he told me again, "But not under me, under a more able master."

At twelve I became a monk at Seiken-ji, Okitsu, where Shinjo Roshi was the master. He was an excellent master and very kind. When I asked him questions about my problem of life-and-death, all his suggestions were pertinent, all his answers helpful.

In April of the following year, in a nearby temple, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the famous Zen master Hakuin was to be commemorated. Shozan Roshi (Shaku Soyen) would be there and I de-

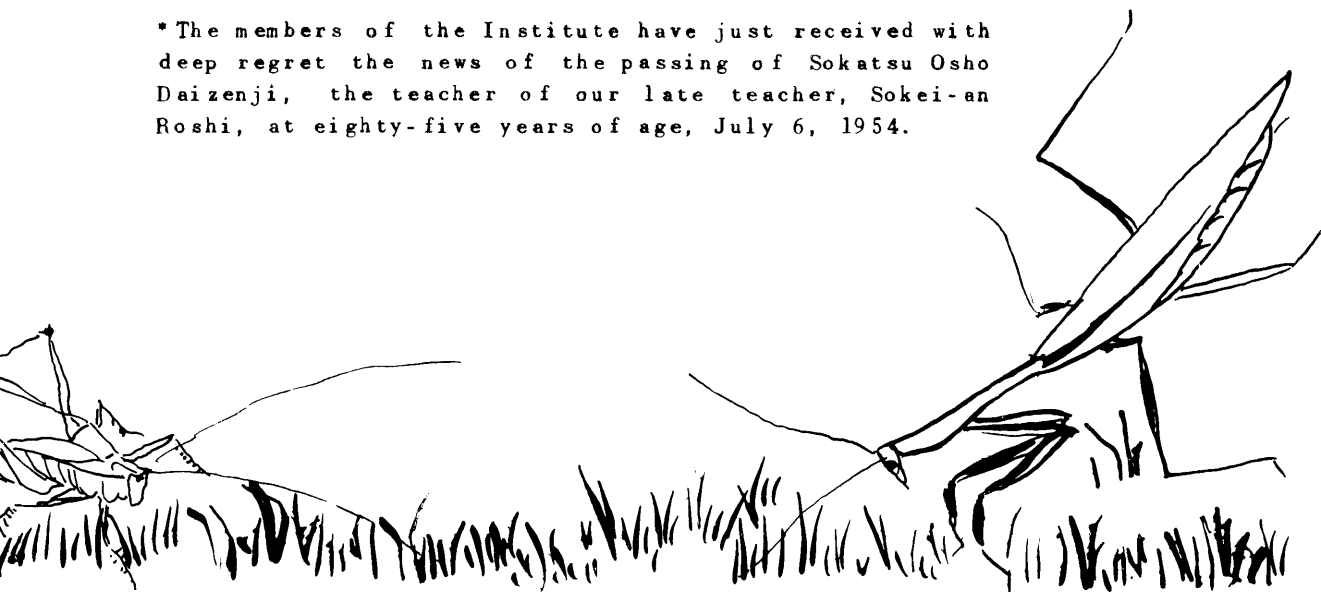


terminated to go too. On this occasion Shozan told how Hakuin was led to Zen because he had a problem concerning life-and-death when a child. That impressed me very much. Knowing that Hakuin once had the same problem as mine, I was encouraged by his having solved it. I thereupon decided to study Zen with all my heart.

During the first stage of my endeavor, I was still a student in the middle school. Also I studied many sutras. However, as my personal problem grew to be of more and more significance to me, I decided I must give up studying lukewarm things. At seventeen I began to practice meditation concentratedly under the guidance of my master. Although I had some temple duties to perform, the greater part of my time was now devoted to meditation. During the summer, this was out of doors. One night, during the winter, my left arm and cheek became paralyzed. Because of this, I was obliged to practice less strenuously for a time. The following year, however, after taking some rest, I went to Myoshin-ji, in Kyoto, where Shozan Roshi was the master. By that time, I knew that it was not so easy to attain enlightenment, indeed it was not until I was twenty-one, during the month of May, that I felt I had attained anything at all.

I continued to practice. When I was twenty-four, my master died. That means something too. Now, I felt, I must go on by myself. The following year I went to Hida Mountain and found a place where no one lived. It was in the spring. I practiced meditation alone there until autumn, one hundred and four days. Having then completed seven years at Myoshin-ji, I went to Engaku-ji, at Kamakura, where, in 1912, when I was twenty-nine, I finished my Zen under Jodo Furukawa, spiritual brother of Shaku Sokatsu.*

*The members of the Institute have just received with deep regret the news of the passing of Sokatsu Osho Daizenji, the teacher of our late teacher, Sokei-an Roshi, at eighty-five years of age, July 6, 1954.



仁 One of the simplest, structurally speaking, of Chinese characters is 仁, composed of 人 man and 二 two, yet tomes have been written on it without exhausting its profounder possibilities. Among its most-used translations are: love, benevolence, complete virtue, charity, humanity, human-heartedness. Easy to remember is this: When two men meet, if they are true men, the natural result can only be 仁

LEGENDARY ENCOUNTERS

High on the list of those Abbot Asahina wished to meet on his world-tour was Albert Einstein. We are happy to report that neither geographical nor linguistic difficulties interfered with the natural result of that meeting. On parting, when photographs were taken, the diminutive Abbot, seeing that his newfound friend was a giant beside him, reached up and lightly touched his elder's cheek. Charmed to find it smooth and resilient as a child's, the Abbot said: "Oldman, your face is very supple. I hope you can live many more years." Einstein could not have known the Zen saying: "To be supple is to be alive; stiffness is sickness; rigidity is death." On another occasion, the Abbot demonstrated this "suppleness" by shaking his *nyo-i* (the wand with involute tip Zen masters usually carry). It is the symbol of Zen and stands for freedom.

The proudest young man in the Zen world today, we believe, is our own Fielder Schillenberg. Introduced to Abbot Asahina by your secretary in the three of about ten Japanese words she could muster for the occasion as "*zazen no hito*" ("a zazen man") Fielder drew himself up to his athletic six feet or so for the Abbot's inspection. The Abbot, with great dignity and keen penetration, gazed for a compelling moment into Fielder's eyes, and then--in the next second--belted him! Our Fielder, a living testimony to the efficacy of Monday zazen, stood firm; nor did he flinch!

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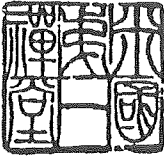
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