

ZEN NOTES



A ZEN MASTER IN OUR MIDST

It is always a fearful thing to have a dream come true. We had been dreaming about meeting a Zen Master. One day a Zen Master came. What had we expected? How had we imagined him to ourselves?

On June 2, 1954, Asahina Sogen, Zen Master and Abbot of Engaku-ji, came to visit us. We were very happy on that day, but we were all so busy the hours of his visit sped like minutes and he was gone, off to appointments in Washington, Boston, Buffalo, and California. Only the notes of his lecture, reported earlier in *Zen Notes*, and the pictures remained. The Zazenkai were far from satisfied. We decided that no matter how full the Abbot's schedule was with more important audiences we must ask him to come again. And so we did not relinquish our claim. In the name of Sokei-an and our years of faithful zazen practice, we begged more of his time. Very kindly he agreed to visit our zendo, high under a Manhattan rooftop. We will never forget the first sight of the Abbot's face, as he appeared at the top of the many flights of stairs, robes upheld in hands, smiling, confident, effortless. Though he is the abbot of one of the world's greatest temples, he was simplicity itself. A word of Sokei-an's came to mind. "Every religious man comes to this in the end. I wish to become a plain man, a simple man. To become a mere human being is what I am striving for..."

We had asked Abbot Asahina to bring his writing brush to sign his picture to appear on the front page of *Zen Notes*. We apologized to him for demanding so much, repeating another word of Sokei-an's: "The good Zen student, when he meets a Master, goes after him with shovel and axe if necessary, to dig out of him whatever he can." Abbot Asahina laughed merrily at this and signed all our pictures and wrote poems even on the scratch-sheets, sitting under Sokatsu's Bodhidharma, which he had identified with a quick smile and "Ah!" as he sat down.

The Chinese class crowded about this distinguished calligrapher entranced, eyes following each stroke of his highheld brush. "*Honrai jin*", he wrote for us, and "*Dai-ichigi*", and a *Hekigan* poem. Those with Buddhist names were identified. E-nen was asked, by pointing at several swiftly written characters: "Which *nen*?" Selection being made by the same method, "Oh, E-nen of Sansho. That was Rinzai's disciple." "This is Sokei-an's disciple." For those who had not received Bud-

dhist names Abbot Asahina inscribed their surnames, testing the sounds aloud before transliterating them into Chinese characters phonetically near, the explanation of the characters being given with their writing.

Though the Abbot does not speak English, he has a very keen ear, and clearly interprets the sounds he hears. His pronunciation of the English words he occasionally sprinkles into his discourse is flawless. Particularly delightful was his reminder to us that a translation of one of his articles had appeared in our *CAT'S YAWN*. As he meticulously pronounced 'yawn' he seemed to be savoring the sensation as he exaggeratedly thrust forth his jaw for the "yaw". One felt he was vastly entertained to be doing this odd thing. And, it might be added, to every effort on our part to say Japanese words he responded with amused recognition.

After the pictures had been examined, commented upon (some with self-derision-- "sleeping!"--), and signed, we all sat down, about ten of us on zabuton, the rest on chairs.

The Abbot, who, we were happy to observe, seemed perfectly at home, and indeed told us that he felt he was, took off the Western shoes he was wearing and arranged himself in cross-legged posture on the red-lacquered Chinese divan. Then he took his *nyo-i* (the wand with the involute tip which Zen Masters often hold as one of their signs of office) in hand and signified his readiness. We had requested that we be allowed to ask questions, to which the Abbot graciously assented. The moment the signal was given, questions flew like arrows. All our problems were flung into his open hand.

As Westerners, unaccustomed by lifelong habit to the ways of sitting common in the East, many of us have physical as well as mental problems. These problems tend to be of a particularly nagging nature. Each has his own individual weakness to overcome. The Abbot, like a good physician, sprang to our rescue. He very kindly said that he felt our seriousness and sincerity for he could see in the first minutes that though we had faults, we *had* been sitting. The moment he understood our desire to be corrected, he was upon us like a benevolent whirlwind. Those of us who have done physical work were amazed at the acuteness of his observation. By now the Abbot's formal robe was off, and he was in our intimate midst. Each case was diagnosed in an instant and its owner pushed, pulled, and untwisted into correct position with lightning precision. Dr. Kondo, who we learned is especially interested in the physical aspects of Zen practice, was most helpful in interpreting the Abbot's corrections.

Seeing handy the "stick" we had put out in reach of his hand, the Abbot demonstrated its use on a willing member. Well aware of the usual interpretation of its use as "cruelty" or reproof by naive and uninformed observers, the Abbot illustrated its application. But first he showed, with exquisite pantomime, the removal of the stick (made in the form of the sword of Monju, representing the power of wisdom) from the altar, and the transformation of its carrier into Monju. He explained the relation-



ship of the two persons involved, one giving, one receiving the blows, noting to us that the one who receives is the same as the one who gives. The usual interchange of respectful bows was portrayed. The stick's blow is to be understood as encouragement, we were told. On the physical side it is a stimulus "to awake" and requires considerable practice for skillfulness of performance.

The Abbot cautioned us about "dead" meditation. Again showing the *nyo-i* (given him by his teacher, Shaku Soyen) he shook it to demonstrate its quivering flexibility. "A symbol of freedom," he described it. "Suppleness" he told us (the word was translated on the spot as "tenderness") "is very important. We say: If it is supple, it is alive; if it is stiff, it is sick; if it is rigid, it is dead."

The Abbot then added, "Of course originally the *nyo-i* was a back-scratcher." On this Sol asked: "Do Zen masters need back-scratchers?" The Abbot, catching the joke instantly, humorously and delightfully mimicked this use of the *nyo-i*, with the comment: "When Zen masters no longer need to scratch, they are dead."

The Abbot was asked to instruct us about "walking", as it is our practice to "walk" for part of the zazen session as an antidote to the fatigue suffered during long "sitting" by our members, many of whom lead arduous lives. The Abbot graciously demonstrated with "slow" and "quick" walking, indicating how the step relates to the breath. To a question on "heaviness" or "lightness" of movement, he responded with the taking of a fencing "on guard" position, awkward in the beginning but the best for its purposes when practiced, which, though it appeared "heavy" was the base for speed and balance. "Westerners," he told us, with which Dr. Kondo heartily concurred, "tend to overemphasize the development of the upper part of the body to the detriment of the lower part. The proper development of the lower part gives stability and strength. Freedom is the characteristic of the upper part, but in the West the upper part is sometimes so over-developed as to become actually deformed. Though it is difficult at first to become accustomed to 'sitting' and 'walking' with the center of gravity resting in the lower abdomen, once acquired, this posture has great value. In long 'sitting' it is particularly helpful." As the Abbot swiveled us on our bases to illustrate, we hoped we resembled the Daruma dolls which came to our minds in their ability to rebound to correct posture no matter how many times or which way they are pushed off balance.

Breathing was discussed. "There is no general length of time for a breath," the Abbot explained. "Each must find his own rhythm. Remember only that the breath is deep rather than long."

Distraction of mind, the thought of "nothingness", other details of practice were taken up in some detail. All too swiftly the hours passed. We did not even stop for tea, but served it right along with more questions, also ice cream.

As the Abbot was eating his ice cream with apparent enjoyment, the question of infinity was under discussion. "Though we live in relativity, we must always be aware of infinity," we were told. "Even when eating ice cream?" asked Sol. "Of course," was the reply. "Because he is enlightened, a man can better appreciate the eating of ice cream when it is hot, but in the tasting of each spoonful he is also experiencing infinity."

During a moment of pause E-nen asked: "When we read Rinzai, we are uncertain how to pronounce Rinzai's 'Ho!' Would you repeat it for us?" The Abbot obliged with a fine "Ho!" then smilingly added, "To give a 'Ho!' is agreeable in the quiet night air of New York."

And so the evening was over, and we reluctantly allowed the Abbot to depart, an hour later than he had planned. To the question: "When will you return?" he answered by joining his hand and making a formal bow. "That is as Buddha pleases."

Living Zen Before Abbot Asahina left Japan for his visit to the United States, we asked him for his life-story, as the first in our planned series of autobiographies of modern Zen masters and personalities, which will appear in *Zen Notes* from time to time in the future. During his stay in New York, demands on the Abbot's time were so great that only a brief question period could be devoted to this purpose. Abbot Asahina's comment: "If I tell you my whole life-story it will take all evening; if I tell you also about my teacher Shaku Soyen it will take three days more." Though we should have liked nothing better, stronger claims prevailed. Our story of Asahina Sogen, therefore, concludes with this issue.

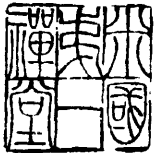
Another autobiography we had hoped to present was that of Sokatsu Osho Daizenji, Sokei-an's teacher. As that is now impossible because of his death July 6, a brief account of his life will be included in the October issue as the next in this series.

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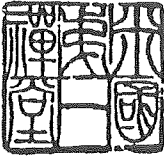
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