

# ZEN NOTES



## AT THIS VERY MOMENT

When Sokei-an, the Founder of the First Zen Institute of America, died in 1945, he bequeathed to his widow, Ruth Fuller Sasaki, "Eryu", two important missions. The first was to find his successor, a successor who should be the bearer of the authentically transmitted Dharma of Rin-zai Zen. The second was to edit and publish the Buddhist and Zen texts he had translated into English during his lifetime.

As soon as she was permitted after the end of the war, Eryu went to Japan and in Kyoto sought the assistance of Sokei-an's Dharma-brother, Goto Zuigan Roshi, then Kancho of the great and historic Rin-zai headquarters of Daitoku-ji, in the carrying out of the first undertaking. From their day of meeting on Goto Roshi has been her guide and teacher, and it is to his notable efforts that we owe the firm and unique relationship which has been established between Daitoku-ji, of which Goto Roshi's heir Oda Sessō is now Kancho, and our own relatively young American organization. It is also in large part due to his persuasions that Miura Roshi came to New York in 1955. Now Miura Roshi is visiting us again, and when visits turn to staying the first of Sokei-an's charges will have been accomplished.

In the matter of Sokei-an's second bequest Eryu also had the guidance of Goto Roshi. Keenly aware of the difficulties to be surmounted before undertaking the delicate task of editing Sokei-an's manuscripts, Mrs. Sasaki at once began to work for facility in Japanese, in Buddhist Chinese, and in the Chinese colloquial language of the T'ang and Sung dynasties, in which the majority of Zen texts are written. But the most important requirement was for her to have finished her own Zen study, a prerequisite for translating Zen texts from the traditional view. After some seven years of work, complicated by the serious illness of Goto Roshi, which made progress necessarily slow, Eryu in a recent message informs us that she hopes by next year to be ready to begin the final stage of this monumental task. "For the Zen person," she comments, "Zen practice never ends, but Zen study, with some natural ability, persistence, and time, can be eventually accomplished." As Mrs. Sasaki is the first non-Japanese person to near this goal in Japan, a great deal of work was necessitated which need not be repeated by others since Mrs. Sasaki plans to make the results

of her exceptional labor available to those who follow her pioneering. A byproduct of her preliminary studies, the translation from the German of *The Development of Chinese Zen* by Father Heinrich Dumoulin, with added charts, glossaries, bibliography, and index, which we published in 1953, has already proved its usefulness, not only to our own students, for whom it was originally intended, but also to scholars all over the world, we learn from grateful letters. By the fall of 1956, Mrs. Sasaki's translation of Miura Roshi's outline of koan study, delivered in a series of lectures in New York last spring, will also be available in book form. Another translation, of the *Record of Koji Ho*, an early Zen work little known in Japan even today, will follow. To provide sanzen students with an authoritative koan text, Mrs. Sasaki is also preparing a translation of *Mumonkan* under the supervision of Miura Roshi. After these have been completed, the long-awaited *Rinzai-roku* translated by Sokei-an will be produced in as near to definitive form as present scholarship permits.

But implicit in Sokei-an's first charge was a third. This was to maintain the life of the Institute he had founded until a successor could take his place. Mrs. Sasaki's missions could be accomplished only in Japan. Therefore she was obliged to leave this third task to the untried hands of the New York students. To understand what happened let us review a little what our situation was at the time of leaving. Since the early days of the Institute, meetings had regularly been held on Wednesdays. These continued with Mary Farkas, "Enen", in charge. But in addition to these, after Sokei-an's death the serious students, under Mrs. Sasaki's direction and following her instruction, had begun regular zazen practice. In 1952, however, when Mrs. Sasaki returned to report her activities to the Institute, the likelihood that a successor to Sokei-an could be found had grown so dim that she felt obliged to tell the still-devoted members that though she would continue her search as long as she lived, they were facing a future in which no such possibility could be assumed. If they wished to continue, they must do so knowing that they would have to depend upon their own efforts only, as no suitable teacher was in view.

And now a very interesting thing happened. The students were all of one mind. Even though they had no expectation of having instruction, they were agreed, they had got so much out of their practice and Sangha activities that they were determined to continue, teacher or no teacher.

When the Institute, at the conclusion of her visit on that occasion, left the fine quarters so graciously provided in Mrs. Sasaki's residence, which of course could not be maintained indefinitely in her absence, its small core took up residence in temporary and, in many ways, inadequate accommodations. The library had to be put in storage, the zendo and meeting-place were on a part-time basis, and guests who came from all over the world to see the only Rinzai Zen Temple in the West had to be told it existed only on certain days at certain times. People were surprised to learn that we had not given up. "Oh, are you still meeting?" they would ask. Some who knew what Zen study is were sympathetic. They asked: "But what can you do without a teacher?" All we could answer was: "We are continuing." And we stubbornly continued, one year, two years.

In 1953, Walter Nowick, the only one among us who had been able to get to Japan, came home for a few months. More experienced than any of our students, he sat with us, discussed our problems with us, then sat with us some more.

In 1954, somewhat to our surprise, upon looking around we found we had increased in number. To maintain contact with our many friends at a distance we began our four-page *Zen Notes*, surely one of the smallest periodicals in existence. The contributions of several members made this possible at

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February 15, 1956, on the occasion of the 26th anniversary of the founding of The First Zen Institute of America, one year to the day from the announcement of his first coming, Miura Isshu Roshi sat for the second time in the Master's place.

Flying five miles high over the Pacific, blown by the great wind which sweeps from West to East at a faster rate than any from East to West, Miura Roshi, accompanied by Walter Nowick and Enen, out of kindness and in pursuance of Dharma-vows, had consented to come again to do his best to convey the transmitted teaching of Zen to those whose earnest request to receive it had reached his ear. In his hand was borne a bronze kansho bell presented to him by his teacher Seigo Hogaku, one of Shaku Soyen's heirs, which he in his turn on this occasion presented to his students.

This handsome bell is not an ornament. As all know who have received traditional sanzen, preliminary communication between Master and disciple is by means of bells. At sanzen-time, when the Master is ready to receive the students, he announces this by a bell. This lets them know he is ready for them to enter his room. Then the students, who have been practicing zazen and are ready to make answer, take up their place at the kansho bell and each, as his turn comes, strikes it twice. The kansho thus plays an important role in the students' practice. It is said that by the manner in which the student strikes this bell his state of mind may be clearly known and his ability to answer attested even before he comes into the Master's presence. While the students are waiting for the signal that the teacher is expecting them their hearts may be uncertain, their posture wavering, but once the Master has signified his readiness they must act with decision, for only when the stroke is precise and unhesitating can the true sound be discerned.

The wooden stand from which the kansho hangs was fashioned to Roshi's order by the Kyoto craftsman whose family has made such objects for Daitokuji for eight generations.

first, then gradually subscribers began to help. Soon we were sending it not only to most of the United States, but also to Japan, to England, to France, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Thailand, Holland, India, Lebanon, Australia, Canada, Hawaii, Venezuela, and Singapore. Every week brought visitors from afar, letters of inquiry, orders for our books. We were far from extinct!

That same year the U. S. State Department, as part of an intercultural project, made it possible for Asahina Sogen Roshi, Abbot of Kamakura's Engaku-ji, to call on us. This was a great encouragement, and Asahina Roshi was more than kind. After answering all our questions through an interpreter, he jumped off the highest seat we could offer him to sit upon and, entering our midst, helped us straighten our backs and put the power in the right place. "I can see you have been working hard," he told us.

We worked harder still.

Month after month O-sesshin--three days of sitting, five hours each on Saturday and Sunday, beside our regular Mondays--became our habit.

Our friends who were not interested in Zen could not understand what we were doing, why we should spend our time in such an odd way. Sometimes, however, such a friend would come to see what it was that took our time and attention. Was there something to it, after all?

Though we were, and are, only a tiny group, day by day our practicing membership was growing in determination. We took counsel one with another and began to make plans. Some we were able to carry out.

And then one year ago came the amazing news. Mrs. Sasaki was coming for a two-months visit and was bringing with her a Roshi she had known since her beginning days, a man of broad experience and strictest training. Of course nothing could be promised and he didn't speak a word of English, but anyway he was coming. He would give sanzen to those who could meet his requirements, with Mrs. Sasaki acting as interpreter.

Our members went wild with excitement. What would he do? Would he like us, beat us, turn up his nose at us? What would he be like? How could we communicate with him? Speculation was endless.

When the hopeful band of would-be students, some twenty-odd, met Miura Roshi for the first time on the platform of LaGuardia Airport, it was like welcoming a visitor from Mars. We were without a common language or background, and we were uncertain of anything but a great wish to receive instruction. During the eight-week visit which followed, ending June 15th, everyone was so rapt in the effort to attend, to catch, to understand, that time slipped by as if motionless. It was difficult to realize what was taking place. But what was happening made such a great difference! Sanzen was no longer something written about in a book or happening to mysterious persons on a remote mountain. It was a blow in the solar plexus, human beings encountering in a wilderness, the opening of unknown eyes. From the first moment we forgot all about the fact that we spoke in different tongues. Here was a real teacher who knew before we did ourselves what we were trying to express. We became deeply attached to him, and his heart was clearly touched by our eagerness. But suddenly we were nearing an end. Time had not come to a stop. All had been moving forward even as we seemed to be standing still. And then the time was gone. He was gone!

We woke to turmoil. What should we do now? What could we do? How could such an insignificant group dare ask the Master of a great and ancient temple to leave it to come to we knew not what? What inducements could we offer? Struggling to survive at all, what support could we give? Not knowing our own future from one day to the next, how could we ask anyone to share it.

In a moment all the forbidding barriers, like dragon's

teeth, were bristling before us as dangerously as before. Even though, we remembered, with Roshi's patience and Mrs. Sasaki's help, we had somehow been able to communicate, there was a real language problem. Manners, food, clothes, houses, thinking even, were different.

But were we not Zen students? The chance was there. In such a case one cannot, must not hesitate. We pressed our demand.

Letters were exchanged. Ours were painfully constructed, hopefully dispatched. The first from Roshi were elegantly brushed, masterpieces of formality, the last in characters so simple a child could read them. Even we could.

Still unable to communicate in more than the most primitive way, however, we on this side could only guess at the problems viewed from the other side. In Japan, reports of unorthodox methods adopted by those frenetically seeking "satori" or "enlightenment" are a matter for deep concern. It is feared that Western students are all in a rush, that they think Zen is something to be got or grasped, that it may be sought by other than the religious path. Then, too, Miura Roshi, responsible for Koon-ji and its eighteen sub-temples, had and has many obligations to fulfill before new ones may be undertaken.

To resolve these and other long-range problems, much discussion and planning was needed. In November, 1955, after lengthy consideration here, Fuen took to the air for a first visit to Japan, and in Kyoto, at Eryu's residence, there took place a three-months conference combined with a personally conducted tour of the vital areas of today's Buddhism. Here were made the plans for our second twenty-five years, to coincide with the commencement of Buddhism's second 2500 years, beginning now, according to southern reckoning. Gradually it became clear that as to be in two places at once is the only solution to our problem, we must find the way to expedite two-way trans-oceanic traffic over the long bridge (Goto Roshi's word) we now realized was already in existence.

On both sides our language study is in progress, and though we know it will be years before ease of speaking can be achieved, some headway has been made. During Roshi's current visit the heaviest burden in this regard has been lodged on the broad shoulders of our fellow student, Walter Nowick, who, after six years of Zen study under Goto Roshi, is perhaps the only person in either country other than Mrs. Sasaki qualified to act as interpreter for sanzen.

Roshi's stay this time as last is of the nature of an O-sesshin. This time, however, when he returns over the Pacific, the rule by which we shall abide in his absence will have been established and in our zendo will stand the kansho bell as token of permanent relationship. Next year perhaps we shall have advanced enough in understanding to communicate in words without mediation, but if this has not yet then come to pass we will continue to rely on that which is not in words, but cannot be mistaken.

For today, one fact is enough to convince us that our dream is true. At this very moment Roshi is here!

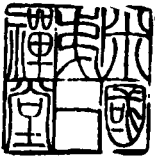
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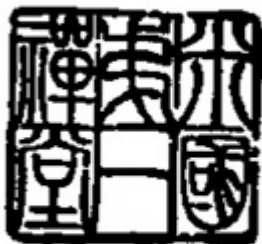
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