

ZEN NOTES



SOKEI-AN SAYS

FROM ancient days Buddhist teachers have transmitted their thoughts of Dharma to their followers and have preached to their disciples as they thought. Those ancient teachers left their teachings in the form of scrolls and books for the sake of their disciples and followers before they went away from this world.

I have attained some enlightenment following my teacher who transmitted his Zen to me. Every day from morning to evening I think about many things in Buddhism to decide my questions. Besides talking about my Zen, I talk about this thinking. I have been thinking for a long, long time that I must tell you about a very important view in Buddhism, so that you will not misunderstand Buddhism in the future. I hope Buddhism will be spread gradually in the Western hemisphere in order to create mutual understanding between East and West. Those who follow me sincerely must spread Buddhism in the Western hemisphere, following my method of transmitting Zen separate from these sermons and talking about Buddhism as I do according to authentic manuscripts.

The important view I am going to speak about now is the so-called "harmful view of Emptiness." You must tell future audiences about this.

The harmful view of Emptiness is not a new view in Buddhism. It is a very, very old view. In India such a view has been very dominant at times, of course among those outside Buddhism. The Buddha talked about it many times, warning his disciples not to fall into that pit.

What is the harmful view of Emptiness? Men who do not believe in the law of causation adhere to this view of Emptiness. The Buddha said in a sutra which is in the *Abhidharma, Jiji-ron*: "What is the wrong view of Emptiness? If you... think that all is empty, that there is neither this nor that, this is called the 'wrong view of Emptiness.'"

Those who have a wrong view of Emptiness usually think that there is neither this (existence) nor that (non-existence), that originally there is nothing at all in the universe. You often hear this. I have said many times that, in the conclusion, there is neither this nor that; and those who attach themselves to their own view of Emptiness use my word to try to prove their view.

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I can definitely feel when someone holds that view; it is immediately evident to my feeling that he has misunderstood the view of Emptiness. Such a one holds a materialistic view of Emptiness, taking the words "neither this nor that" to mean that there is nothing in the universe, and that there isn't any universe either. Without reasoning, you can see that this view is entirely erroneous. Such people have never experienced any meditation or Zen attainment. They merely follow the words: "there is neither existence nor non-existence." They think that in the beginning of the universe there was nothing at all. So this existence is nothing either. By some delusion we see these things around us, but what we see is only mirage. There was no cause and there will be no effect, so we do not need to bother with any law at all. The laws of this world have no basis so we are not obliged to accept any law from others, nor do we need to follow any agreement ourselves. We Buddhists say that such a view is a "harmful view." Those who hold it destroy everything precious in human life. They are like intoxicated men.

Some Mahayanists, too, take such a view. They study Mahayana Buddhism and, taking an "empty" view of Mahayana, brush all existing laws aside. Many times my friends have come to me and said: "Well, I follow Buddhism because Buddhism speaks about Emptiness, and Buddhists believe in annihilation. All these existing things are just some mechanism which our eye erroneously sees; all these solid things are just some mechanism erroneously created by our senses. When you wake up you will realize all is empty." Such a one must practice zazen and attain the knowledge of Zen.

In the old days of theoretical meditation, the meditator would meditate upon the scales in rupadhatu, the world of the senses. There are eighteen different scales upon which the meditator meditates. He begins by meditating upon this existing appearance. Of course, from the beginning, in authentic meditation there is nothing which you have to embrace in your mind. You ask: "Shall I meditate upon a word or subject?" I answer: "You do not need to meditate on any word, or subject, or diagram, or thought." This is not necessary. This has not been Buddhist meditation from the beginning. Meditation upon existing phenomena is not like this.

For instance, you go to Riverside Drive and sit on a bench on this side of the river and look at New Jersey. You see New Jersey on the other side, you sit on your bench and observe it. Slowly your thoughts go away from your mind until nothing is left in your thoughts. When you are entirely absorbed in the view of New Jersey, in Zen that moment is called samadhi. In samadhi you observe New Jersey from this side of the river. That is the way meditation begins.

Or perhaps you hear the sound of the gong with this mind trained in samadhi. At midnight in the quiet temple when you are meditating alone in the darkness, you hear the sound of the gong creeping into the meditation hall...gong...gong...and again gong. This is called the samadhi in

Dear Everyone:

RYOSEN-AN is now very quiet. The wedding is over, the last guests have flown back to America and England, and our young couple are installed in their new home in an U. S. Army housing area high up on the mountains back of Kobe. Phil Yampolsky has left for New York, but plans to return here the end of October for an indefinite stay. Gary Snyder is in Yokohama waiting for a ship to take him to San Francisco. He expects to come back to Kyoto early next spring. So I have moved my writing to the library to keep Yokoi San and Manzoji San company. If I can follow my schedule, the next two or three months will see the completion of the manuscript of ZEN DUST, for which you have waited so long.

I have very good news for you regarding our Egyptian lady. She did not have tuberculosis after all. An extremely serious case of influenza presented all the features of TB and fooled some seven doctors. She is now at home again and almost back to normal health. Our carpenter contractor Wakita San, however, is progressing only slowly from his stroke. The completion of our wall must wait his total recovery, and the completion of the gardens, that of the wall. So it may be well into the spring before everything is finished. I sometimes get impatient at the delays, for I should so like to see everything in order, yet I know well that even delays can work out to unanticipated advantage.

In this letter I shall try to bring my long and rather hit and miss talks about Zen study in Japan to an end with some suggestions to those who think of coming for a long stay, say some two or three years. For a person who wants to get a firm hold on Zen, to get his teeth into it, such a stay, difficult as it is for most people to accomplish, is really necessary.

I suppose the first problem such a student has to face is the economic one. During the early period of Zen study, to earn one's living and study Zen at the same time is practically impossible. Perhaps I should make this statement still stronger by saying it is impossible. Everyone who has come here with any other idea has found this to be true, and where it has become necessary to earn a living, serious and continued Zen study has had to be put aside.

The foreign Zen student in Kyoto should have a minimum income of \$60 a month. That will provide him with the simplest type of

room for the period he is not living in the sodo itself, food that is adequate for his health, but not more, if he cooks much of it himself, and essential miscellaneous expenditures. It will not give him money to buy books and pictures and knick-knacks and clothing. For whatever length of time he plans to stay he should arrange in advance for this fixed income. One who comes to Japan for a long period and who has neither a scholarship nor an advance contract for a job which pays sufficient for his livelihood, must be prepared to prove to the Japanese government that he has funds for his support during his stay and for his return ticket. He must also have a guarantor here in Japan to back him in case of failure of support from outside. Such are the official requirements at present.

How the would-be Zen student should spend his first year here offers a considerable problem. There are two ways open to him. One is to give up the first year here to intensive study of the Japanese language, devoting all his time to it, and to getting acquainted with the Japanese way of life. Even if the student has had several years of Japanese in an American university, he will find the spoken language as it is used every day almost impossible to understand or to speak himself. Attending classes at the Japanese language school five days a week continuously for a year usually results in making communication with Japanese people fairly satisfactory.

It may seem strange to say that one needs a year in which to get used to Japanese life, and everyone, when I tell them so, says: "Oh no, it won't be so in my case!" But one and all at the end of the year admit that they have just then begun to get adjusted to the food, living habits, different social customs, different ways of thinking, to say nothing of the climate. The student should always remember that no matter how Japan may superficially resemble western countries, it is nevertheless an Asiatic country and its people Asiatic people, long conditioned in ways of thinking and behavior that are the antithesis of those in which Americans and Europeans have been brought up. When the student comes for a visit of a few months only, he is treated as a distinguished visitor and, on his part, he is fascinated by all that is new and strange around about him. But when he stays here longer he finds he must willy-nilly conform more or less to the ways of Japanese life. This conforming, no matter with what good will it is undertaken, is a mental and physical strain. An added strain is the impossibility of usual human communication, for very few Japanese have English adequate to communicate more than the most superficial

facts, and the newcomer's Japanese is more than likely to be on the same level or below. So, except when he is with American friends, conversation is reduced pretty much to the kind that takes place between children. Only one who has experienced the sense of frustration that can come to an adult from not being able to exchange ideas over a long period can realize what a strain this is.

Another advantage in devoting a year to acclimatization is that during that period the student will have learned much about the external facts of Zen monastery life and have made some acquaintances among Zen monks or priests. In addition, he will have learned to sit well in zazen posture--his daily program should be arranged so as to give him adequate time for that practice--and he will probably have enough Japanese language to be able to take sanzen without an interpreter when he is ready for it, though this may be being a little optimistic.

Therefore, when, at the beginning of the second year, he enters a sodo for strict Zen practice he can pack all his books away except for his handy dictionaries and give himself up totally to his practice. It is difficult to stress sufficiently the necessity for having the mind completely freed from ordinary concerns during the initial stages of Zen study. This necessity can be explained psychologically as it relates to the aim of Zen practice in the beginning, but to take up that discussion here would lead us too far afield at the moment. You must just take my word for it that this is so. But at the conclusion of this year spent in the sodo, our student should have a reasonably well trained mind and body and he should be familiar with what constitutes real Zen practice. How to meditate should no longer be a puzzle to him, and he should have a fair idea of what is expected of him in sanzen and how to prepare for it.

The third year of his stay may also be passed in the sodo or, if he feels he has had enough of monastic Zen training as differentiated from pure Zen practice, he may live outside the monastery, going there morning and evening for sanzen and participating with the monks in their long evening meditation periods and in their O Sesshin weeks. If he has conducted himself correctly and earnestly while he lived in the sodo, he will find himself not only a welcome guest, but taken to be one of the body of monks. At this time, whether he stays in the sodo or not, if the student's intention is to continue his Zen practice in-

definitely, either in Japan or elsewhere when a teacher is available, he should again take up his Japanese language study. This time he should concentrate on the study of the written language as it appears in Japanese translation of the koans. Better still, he should begin to study Chinese. Though we here at Ryosen-an have already made considerable progress toward the translation into English of koans and the verses used in answering them, every serious Zen student, at this period at least, will find himself at a disadvantage if he does not have sufficient familiarity with Chinese characters to make rough translations of his own koans. If his year of intensive Zen practice has been successful, he should now be able to carry on these language studies without disturbing his ability to handle his mind in the fashion necessary for zazen and sanzen. But until he is thoroughly grounded in the way Zen practice demands that he handle his mind, he should not attempt intellectual work together with it. If he does, his Zen progress will suffer sadly.

Earlier I said there were two possible ways of beginning Zen practice here. I have spoken in detail about the first. The second way is to enter the Sodo immediately on arrival and, in spite of language and other difficulties, to devote oneself to Zen practice, picking up what language one can in the course of daily life in the monastery. Perhaps for some persons this second way is preferable, though I, personally, feel that it has much less to recommend it than has the first. But in the end, circumstances and temperament will naturally play an important part in the final decision.

Of course, one who goes immediately into a sodo will not need a room outside; but he will have to contribute his share to the fund for general living expenses. In addition he will have to make gifts from time to time to his teacher, and to buy extra sustaining food outside the monastery at least once or twice a week. The sum I have mentioned above is an average minimum. Naturally there will be times when more will be necessary, times when less.

After two or three years of practice will the student go home an enlightened man? That is a difficult question to answer. Undoubtedly he will have passed his first koan and perhaps a number of other koans as well. If he expects to have become what at present he conceives an enlightened man to be, then the answer is "No." But that the man who returns will be a different man from the one who came, that I can promise.

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the gong.

Slowly you leave color and sound and retreat into the state of mind by itself. Yet you will still observe the fragments of outside which have filtered through into your mind, left in your subconscious. They appear before your mind like gossamer in a summer field. And then you come slowly into the state called akanishtha. This is the highest state of rupadhatu, the world of sense. Then your meditation will slowly ascend to arupadhatu, the state of pure mind only. First there is pure space, next pure consciousness, then you go into pure Emptiness.

Before the Buddha had experienced all these states and had reached his highest empty state, the teachers of that time taught that the emptiness of arupadhatu was the highest state attainable. Even in this empty state of arupadhatu there is no harmfulness. Arupadhatu is pure mind, empty mind. But when this mind comes back again to this world it comes back according to the law of this world, the law of the senses, the law of the body. The previous Buddhas, too, that is the Buddhas before Shakamuni, had an "empty view", but it was entirely different from the harmful view of Emptiness.

In the Buddha's time there were a number of famous heretics and six different heretical teachings. Among the heretics Purana Kasyapa was the one who had this harmful view of Emptiness. He thought that when you do good things in this world there will be no good result; there is no recompense for your good deeds. If you do bad things, in the future there will be no bad result; you need never accept punishment, for no one will punish you. From the beginning all dharmas are empty-natured. Therefore between father and child, between master and subject, there is no morality or filial piety. That was his view. Thinking that this is the Buddhist's view, people say that to believe in Emptiness is very bad, for those who believe in Emptiness think they can do everything they want to, and their minds become poisoned.

In my teaching of Buddhism or Zen, the student comes slowly into Zen, comes slowly into Emptiness. If someone with this wrong understanding tells him it is bad to believe in Emptiness, he may become confused. For this reason you must understand this Emptiness quite deeply.

Usually people have one of two views of Emptiness. Some think that everything exists forever: mountains exist as mountains; rivers exist as rivers; Mr. Sasaki's soul exists as it is and never changes; Mr. So-and-So's soul exists forever and will never perish. The others have this "harmful" view: that there is nothing at all, that nothing exists. You appear here like an air-bubble and psst!--no more! Those who hold this harmful view never believe in consciousness and the many different stages of consciousness. We are living here in these surroundings in a conscious state, and when our consciousness changes we shall be in different surroundings. Those with the harmful view do not believe this.

I feel very sorry for those who fall into this harmful view of Emptiness and never come out of it. The Buddha said that anyone who once falls into this harmful view can never be saved. So the Buddhist teaches the true view of Emptiness very carefully, never using the word emptiness to teach it, for the word emptiness is a poisonous word. If anyone falls into that view, he must ask the teacher. Do not decide by yourself and make your own conclusions about Buddhism. Ask the teacher.

In volume twenty of the Ekotarra Agama there is a story about the Buddha's true view of Emptiness. There was a monk whose name was Mrigasirsa. He was a Brahman in the beginning. His occupation was telling people where their beloved ones had gone by examining their skulls. "After his death he went to such and such a heaven or hell," he would say. Or: "This is the skull of a woman. She died of such and such an illness; her bones were eaten by acid and her viscera dissolved into water. After her death she fell down to hell." In such a way Mriga was talking about people's fortunes. He met the Buddha and tried to contest his knowledge against the Buddha's. The Buddha took in his hand the skull of the monk Udayana, who had died at the foot of the Gandhamadana Mountains in the Nirvana where nothing is left behind. That was his attainment while living. The Buddha showed his skull to Mriga, saying: "Now tell me, where has he gone?" The Brahman took the skull and looked it all over but could not find where Udayana had gone. He said: "He has gone into Absolute Emptiness." Then the Buddha said: "The monk Udayana is living in the state where there is neither end nor beginning, neither life nor death; for him there is no place to go." That was the Buddha's answer. In one word, the Buddha's Emptiness was mental emptiness, empty mind, because his whole universe is Mind Itself--there is no place outside Mind.

Of course, there are many places outside the human mind, but there is no place outside this Great Mind. When you have faith in this great and true Empty Mind you will never fall into the materialistic view of Emptiness. I hope you remember this sermon, and when anyone tells you that Buddhists believe in Emptiness and that therefore they do not observe any morality or any law, you will tell him his view is erroneous.

BOOKS *ZEN FLESH, ZEN BONES* makes available once more, in a single volume, the perennial *101 ZEN STORIES, THE GATELESS GATE, AND 10 BULLS*, Zen classics transcribed by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps. New is "Centering," originally in Gentry magazine, and illustrations of the *BULLS* by Tomikichiro Tokuriki. We wish to compliment Charles E. Tuttle Co., the publishers, for making the outer form of this work so attractive that a local bookstore was prompted to feature it as a window display.

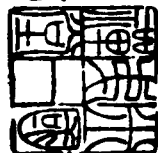
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