

ZEN NOTES



SOKEI-AN 1882-1945

The First Zen Institute of America, through its Vice-president Ruth Fuller Sasaki, widow of its founder Sokei-an Shigetsu Osho, has restored the formerly destroyed sub-temple of Daitoku-ji, Ryosen-an, in order to provide a center for foreigners who come to Japan to study Zen.

Daitoku-ji has now graciously declared Ryosen-an restored and conferred the title of "Founder of the Restored Ryosen-an" upon the late Sokei-an Shigetsu Osho. Oda Sessō Rōshi, Kancho of Daitoku-ji, has consented to receive Mrs. Sasaki as his religious disciple, giving her the name Jokei. The Daitoku-ji Honzan has appointed Mrs. Sasaki jushoku (priest) of the restored Ryosen-an.

A ceremony enshrining Manjusri in the zendo of Ryosen-an and a memorial service commemorating the thirteenth anniversary of the death of Sokei-an Shigetsu Osho will be held May 17th 1958.

WHEN SOKEI-AN "buried his bones" in America in 1945, it was under an almost unnoticeable stone on a hilltop under a tree. This was to his disciples quite in keeping with the nature of his life here in New York. He spent his lifetime of effort without expectation of recognition or reward. Those of his disciples who were with him during his last days heard him a few times say he wished he could have five years more to complete his work, but beyond that his comment was only: "I have always taken Nature's orders and I take them now."

After Sokei-an's death, the heaviest share of responsibility fell on the shoulders of a woman who had some ten months before become his wife as well as disciple. As wife, Ruth Fuller Sasaki had received Sokei-an's family name, Sasaki. As disciple, she received from him the Buddhist name Eryu in 1938. Now she has been given a new name. How this came about is another chapter of the history of Zen in America, even though it is taking place 10,000 miles from her eastern shore. It also is a new chapter in the history of Japanese Zen. We are telling you about it this month for the particular reason that the events taking place in Japan now come to their climax on the thirteenth anniversary of Sokei-an's death, and what is happening may well be thought of as the raising of a monument to his name. Japanese tradition places particular emphasis on the thirteenth anniversary. We, as his children of the Eastern Seas, call upon one another to remember him on the anniversary of the day on which his life in America was completed.

Though Sokei-an's life in America was completed May 17, 1945, his mission was not. In pursuance of her vows to Zen and to Sokei-an, Ruth Sasaki, as soon as possible after the conclusion of the war, journeyed to Japan to play her part in the action still to be performed. Sokei-an had been charged with the mission to carry Zen to America by his teacher Shaku Sokatsu, who had been inspired to this by his teacher Shaku Soyen, who had been directed eastward by his teacher Imakita Kosen. Shaku Sokatsu came to America in 1906 with the intention of founding a Rinzai Zen monastery in California and teaching Zen to Americans. With him came, along with Sokei-an and ten others, another personage destined to play a great part in our history, Goto Zuigan. But at that time the current carrying Zen east flowed only as far as the western shore of America. When Shaku Sokatsu and Goto Zuigan returned to Japan in 1910, it fell to Sokei-an to go further, to New York, where in 1930 he founded the First Zen Institute of America (first called the Buddhist Society of America). Goto Zuigan's part was not resumed until 1949, when he took over the teaching of those of Sokei-an's followers who could get to Japan. In the meanwhile he had become the head of one of Rinzai Zen's greatest temples, Daitoku-ji, and had retired from it in his 60's. His disciple Oda Sesso is the presently presiding Kancho, as well as Roshi of Daitoku-ji Sodo.

But we must now pick up another thread of the story. In the early thirties, having come to the conclusion that orthodox Zen could best be transmitted through the priesthood, Sokei-an was ordained a priest of Daitoku-ji, taking the name Soshin, under the sponsorship of Awono Futetsu, priest of a temple near Tokyo. At that time, though it was known to Sokei-an's disciples that the name of Awono Futetsu's temple was Mammanji, it was not known that this temple belonged to the Ryosen-an Line of Daitoku-ji. Daitoku-ji, let us note here, has four temple lines, of which Ryosen-an is one. When someone becomes a priest under the sponsorship of a priest belonging to one of these lines, he becomes a priest of that line. The *innen*, or relationship, established in this way, continues forever. Therefore, when Sokei-an entered the priesthood of Daitoku-ji, it was in the Ryo sen-an Line.

Those of our readers who have been acquainted with the activities of our Kyoto Branch through Mrs. Sasaki's LETTER FROM KYOTO are familiar with the history of the old temple Ryosen-an, on the former site of which have been erected in the last few years the buildings which house the Kyoto Branch of our Institute in Japan. The original Ryosen-an, founded about 1500, until it was demolished about 1870, was the most powerful individual temple within Daitoku-ji and had the largest number--about 70--of sub-temples of its own under its jurisdiction. When Mrs. Sasaki came to Japan in August, 1950, the Daitoku-ji Sodo offered to her for her use a house which some twenty years before they had built for a retired Roshi on a small piece of the original Ryosen-an land given them by the Honzan for that purpose. The remaining land was still a field used by people in

the neighborhood for growing vegetables. Somewhat later, when Mrs. Sasaki remarked to Goto Roshi that the house she was living in had no name, he said: "Call it Ryosen-an. There was once a temple by that name on the site." He wrote the characters of the name to be inscribed on a board for the entrance, but he told Mrs. Sasaki nothing about Ryosen-an's illustrious past.

During the eight years that have passed since then, Mrs. Sasaki's own increasing activities and the growing demands from outside have necessitated the building of a storehouse, study, research library, and recently a zendo for foreign students who have come to Kyoto for Zen study. For these buildings Daitoku-ji has provided a further portion of the original Ryosen-an land. Life seemed to be stirring again on the site of the old Dragon-Spring Hermitage.

With more and more foreigners interested in Zen both at home and abroad have come new responsibilities toward them also on the part of the leaders of Japanese Zen. That these needs ought to be met if Zen is indeed to be transmitted to the children of the Eastern Seas has long been known to the heads of Daitoku-ji. The fact that this eastward impetus had been transmitted to them by the Chinese teacher of their own founder in 1269 as witnessed by the message sent to us by them in 1955 ("I, the old monk Kido, make this prophecy: 'The children of the Eastern Seas will increase in number day by day.'") may perhaps have influenced them in this direction. Of course, looking at it from the even longer view of Buddhism's 2500 year history, it may appear as just another segment of the great eastward current slowly circumnavigating the globe which was set in motion by Bodhidharma's carrying Zen to China.

But there is another thread in the pattern. When Imakita Kosen sent his brilliant Zen student Shaku Soyen to the newly-founded (1866) university which specialized in western thought and culture it was a reaching out toward the West. It was also a move toward the increased interplay between Zen study for laymen and lay-education for Zen monks he favored. Sokei-an's entry into the priesthood of Daitoku-ji and his insistence that the Institute he founded in America be carried on by a fully accredited priesthood came after his long observation of the dangers of the laicizing of Zen study pursued apart from the discipline of monastic training. For in practice lay-instruction has by its nature a tendency to relax standards for the sake of broad dissemination. The maintaining of genuine and traditional standards in lay-instruction therefore was always a major consideration in his planning for the future. Though Sokei-an was well aware that Zen in America as it develops will naturally become American Zen, to be Zen it must, until its own maturity, continually draw from the original fountainhead. Mrs. Sasaki has now taken the final step in this direction by herself becoming a member of the priesthood. That a western layman and even more remarkably a western laywoman should have been accepted into the very heart of orthodox Zen is,

we feel, a tribute not only to Mrs. Sasaki, however, but to the foresight of a tradition which can, in one leap, make such a strong alliance with a foreign future. To our eye this represents the completion of a nearly century-old pattern of the current of Zen which as it sweeps on and on in its encircling flow also is eddying between the two points of greatest dynamism now, America and Japan.

All the threads are now tied. A new milestone in the history of Zen in America has been reached. Sokei-an has been named Founder of the Restored Ryosen-an, the headquarter temple of the line of which he was a priest. Mrs. Sasaki, his American disciple, has been named its presiding priest. Mrs. Sasaki has been given the temple name of Jokei, a name which comes in part from the temple name of the founder of the Daitoku-ji Sodo and in part from that of Sokei-an. In recognition of her long study of Zen the rank in the priesthood which Daitoku-ji has bestowed upon her is one fitting for the presiding priest of a temple which has played so important a part in the past history of Daitoku-ji and which undoubtedly will do so in the future. From now on the official organization through which Daitoku-ji will reach out to make the transmission of Zen available to foreigners will be the First Zen Institute of America in Japan, the Japanese branch of the First Zen Institute of America, with its headquarters in the Restored Ryosen-an.

OBITUARY Just as we were going to press, we learned with deep regret of the passing away of Monk Nyogen Senzaki May 7, 1958, in Los Angeles, California. Though we do not know the year of Mr. Senzaki's birth, we believe he was in his early eighties.

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