

ZEN NOTES



ZEN IN NEW YORK

FROM where I have been sitting for about twenty years, observing the changing face of the New York Zen audience, there are a number of matters worthy of note at this time.

Regarded from the perspective of the moment only, the Zen movement might well be considered to be going in two divergent directions. Two persons, each of them celebrating what the Japanese think of as particularly fortunate birthdays this month, represent these tendencies.

Dr. Suzuki, who will be eighty-eight (the luckiest of all birthdays from the Japanese view) this October 18th, though not the originator of the movement to bring to the West Japan's greatest treasure, has for some years been the best-known proponent of its way of Reason. Mrs. Ruth Sasaki, whose sixty-sixth birthday, October 31st, will be celebrated in America this year, is the best-known example of a Westerner who has attempted to follow its traditional way of Practice.

The missionary movement of which Dr. Suzuki has since 1950 been in the vanguard I believe, as stated in these pages before, originated during the wave of enthusiasm toward the West which briefly overflowed from Japan in the latter part of the 19th Century. It was Imakita Kosen, a brilliant Zen Master, who gave it first impetus. Seeing the signs of the times, he sent his equally brilliant disciple, Soyen Shaku, to the Japanese university founded in 1866 for the study of western culture and learning and inspired him and his descendants to carry the teaching to the West.

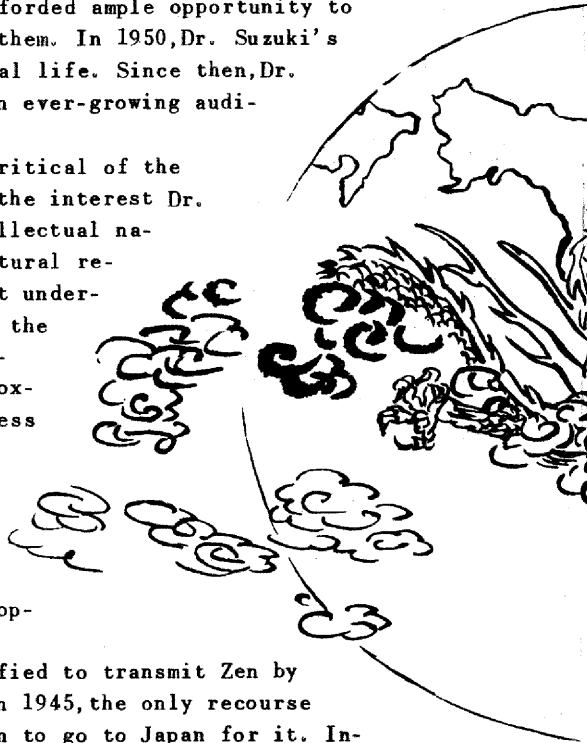
On the "Practice" side of the pincer movement inspired by Kosen, one of Soyen Shaku's spiritual descendants, Nyogen Senzaki, recently deceased, who came to America in 1901, formed a group still continuing in Los Angeles. Presently it is led by the visiting Zen Master Soyen Nakagawa of Ryutaku-ji. Sokei-an, of course, founded the First Zen Institute of America in 1930, thus establishing the orthodox transmission of Zen in New York. Here, as those of you in commuting distance know, zazen has been regularly practiced, and sanzen (koan study) was given in 1955 and again in 1956 to the accepted disciples of Miura Isshu, Zen Master, of Koonji. It is hoped that Miura Roshi will come permanently in 1959. As we see it, with the death of Nyogen Senzaki in May of this year following that of Sokei-an by 12 years, the pioneer phase of the "Practice" side of American Zen has terminated and a new phase is beginning.

While Senzaki and Sokei-an, monk and priest, were conveying Zen as a religion and practice, another kind of presentation was also under way. Dr. Daisetz Suzuki, who had been introduced to Zen study by Kosen in 1891, and who had acted as interpreter for Soyen Shaku at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, was finding ample use for his skill in the English language. Well-grounded in western intellectual methods during the ten years of his association with Dr. Paul Carus, the German-American philosopher, Dr. Suzuki, during the first quarter of the century, took only one literary excursion into the Zen field, most of his work in that period being devoted to the general Mahayana. In 1906, he published the translation of a series of lectures given by Soyen Shaku in San Francisco, the first work of a Zen Master to appear in English. Beginning in 1927, however, with the publication in book form of the first of his fascinating series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (previously available only in periodicals) Dr. Suzuki's writings afforded ample opportunity to Westerners to read about Zen in terms familiar to them. In 1950, Dr. Suzuki's lectures became a feature of New York's intellectual life. Since then, Dr. Suzuki has lectured, in an ever-widening orbit, to an ever-growing audience, especially among university people.

Of course "Practicing" Zennists tend to be critical of the "Reasonable" approach to Zen, and it is true that the interest Dr. Suzuki's works has created is primarily of an intellectual nature. How this could have been otherwise, as the natural result of thirty years of effort to impart the inmost understanding of the East in the language and milieu of the Western intelligentsia is difficult to imagine. Because of the nature of Zen, however, a certain paradoxical difficulty arises from Dr. Suzuki's very success in making his Zen accessible to the Western intellect, for, as Dr. Suzuki himself has tirelessly reminded his readers, Zen experience, which is the very heart of Zen study, cannot be had by intellectual methods. From this view, certainly, the direction of "Reasonable" Zen seems to be the very opposite of that of "Practicing" Zen.

As there has been no person in New York qualified to transmit Zen by the method of sanzen since the death of Sokei-an in 1945, the only recourse for persons wishing to undertake Zen study has been to go to Japan for it. Interestingly enough, Mrs. Sasaki's first impetus toward studying Zen by traditional methods in Japan came from Dr. Suzuki himself, some twenty-five years ago. At that time, as Mrs. Sasaki has written in an article in *The Young East*, a contemporary Buddhist magazine in English, Dr. Suzuki said to her the words which were so important for her life to come: "If you really want to study Zen, come to Japan. You will learn more here in a few months than in America in as many years."

Mrs. Sasaki's initiation into Zen, following Dr. Suzuki's advice, took place at Nanzen-ji in Kyoto, where Miura Isshu, our Zen Master, was at that time head monk. This year Mrs. Sasaki, after nearly ten years of unceasing personal effort, has, with the cooperation of Daitoku-ji, for the first time made it possible for Western students to follow her example in an organized way. At the Kyoto branch of the Institute which she has established, properly



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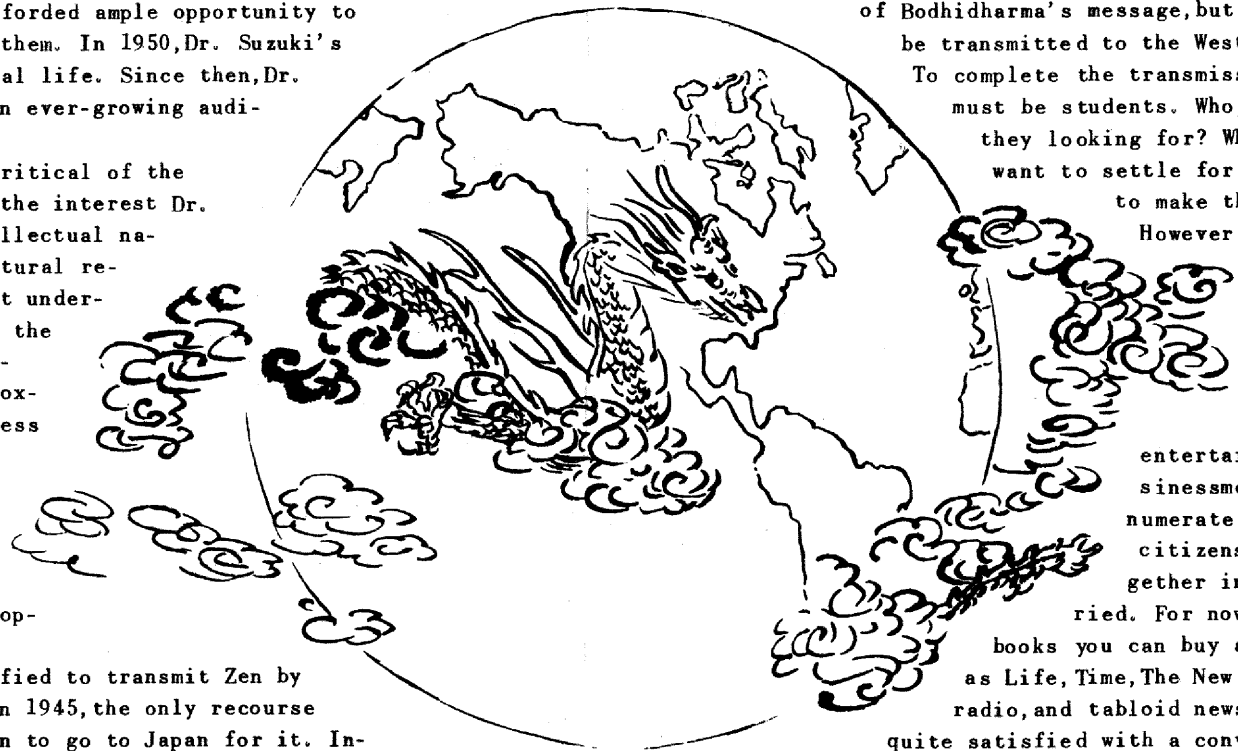
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But though the tendencies to propagate Zen through the intellect and through practice may well appear to be two different things, they may also be regarded as ways to the same end. And though Japan-bound students and America-bound missionaries may seem to be going in two different directions, regarded from the perspective of Buddhism and Zen's 2500 year history, their to-and-fro movement may also be seen as merely the eddying of the slow but inexorable belt-flow from India to China to Japan to America, a self-repeating pattern. And already the current can be detected in the island of England and the spray on the continent of Europe.

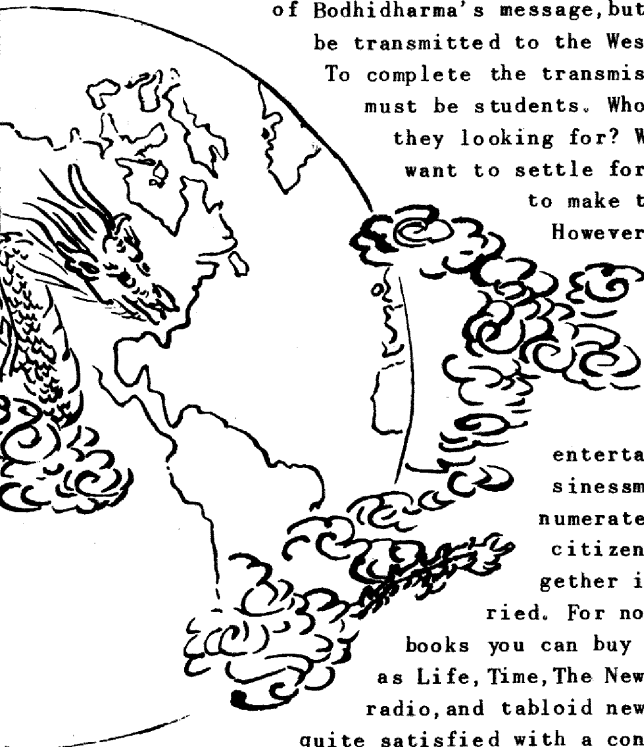
What we are led to now, however, is not the differences in the way of presentation of Bodhidharma's message, but a much more overwhelming question. For Zen to be transmitted to the West there must be those capable of receiving it. To complete the transmission more than teachers are required. There must be students. Who are the Americans interested in Zen? What are they looking for? What are their chances of finding it? Will they want to settle for their own idea of Zen, or will they be willing to make the all-out effort needed for the real thing?

However slowly, inevitably the responsibility for the future of American Zen must shift onto their shoulders.

A recent census of our own active membership included housewives, psychiatrists, university professors, clerks, radio operators, salesmen, artists, scholars, entertainers, writers, musicians, students, dancers, businessmen, doctors, dentists, and social workers, to enumerate a few of the occupations represented. Senior citizens, teen-agers and even babies take part together in our activities. Transients are even more varied. For now that Zen is a subject treated in paperback books you can buy at the corner drugstore and such mass media as Life, Time, The New Yorker, Mademoiselle, Esquire, television, the radio, and tabloid newspapers, everyone and his neighbor who is not quite satisfied with a conventional spiritual diet wants a taste of this more exciting fare.

Of course there are those who think Zen can be used as a gimmick in their business or profession. "His writing is completely irrational, just like Zen." "He never corrects a line. His paintings paint themselves." "He never thinks. He is full of Zen." "We don't know anything about Zen or its philosophy and we haven't time to study it but it sounds just like what we are doing so what we are doing must be Zen." Soon we will have Zen tooth-paste and cigarettes, one must suppose.

Frequent inquirers are those who are writing articles, papers, and books about Zen after reading other articles, papers and books about Zen. The New York Times delighted us as it appalled us with its cartoon of the matron who came into the library to "Take a stab at Zen Buddhism." We had seen her before. There are also those who timidly approach: "I'd



like to study Zen. How long will it take for me to be enlightened?" Or "Can I practice Zen and continue to be a Christian?" Or "Will it interfere with my married life?" Frightening was the doctor who after attending a few lectures and reading a book he himself stated he had not understood told us he was utilizing Zen as a "method" to treat psychiatric patients.

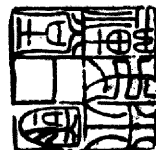
A certain segment of the current Zen audience eliminates itself, we feel, from serious consideration by having misread some of the words used in the Zen vocabulary. Their feeling of relationship to Zen is due to their miscomprehension of its terms "emptiness," "nothingness," and "purposelessness" as nihilism. Of course this is not a new error, its prototype dating right back to the time of the historical Buddha. One of our Japanese members tells us Japan, too, had its attack of this disease around the beginning of the century. Sokeian used to lump the variations of this error under some such heading as "the false view of emptiness." Let us leave them there.

The current Zen craze may be presumed to be no different from others. It will go to its extreme and subside. But among the many who come and go through our open door these days ("Those who come are welcome, those who go are not pursued"), we hopefully note there are some of a more promising nature. Their faces we are coming to know. They are young, not necessarily in physical age, but in spirit. They are serious, questioning, responsible, alert. They may not know exactly what they are looking for, but they know what they don't want. They don't want the merely conventional, the superficial, or the phony. They don't expect to be entertained or comforted. They might be willing to submit to discipline, bow their heads, risk their necks even, once they assure themselves Zen is the real thing. They sense its depths even as they damn its perversions; they sigh for its ideals with the very breath with which they hiss its false prophets. Though they have never met any persons who completely fulfill its promises they are tantalized by its clues, haunted by its mysteries, uplifted by glimpses of its heights. Their questions are tough to answer, though they are not argumentative. They are looking for something to depend on in sickness or in health, in business or in art, in wealth or poverty, at births and weddings and funerals, something that will see straight through their eyes, be immune to tyranny and corruption, act fearlessly in war and peace, in short, a true working principle. Principle is not a very good word, they have pointed out to me, for what we are talking about, but up to now we haven't found a better. The Emperor Wu asked Bodhidharma. "What is the highest principle of sacred truth?" Bodhidharma replied: "Kakunen! Nothing sacred." It is this principle we are referring to.

Though someone said recently: "Zen is strictly for geniuses" we do not at all take this view. Those who sincerely persist will find the way to go. In the eyes of some of these fine young people who are coming our way, there is what we believe is a first requisite for a Zen student, the faith that there is something to find, that the universe is not just a chaotic mess, and the determination that man's future lies in his own hand. They sense a mighty current as they are dizzied by its whirlpools, jolted by its waves, exhilarated by its foam. But to jump right into it? That's another matter, isn't it? ENEN

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