

ZEN NOTES



To celebrate the completion of five years of ZEN NOTES William Briggs and Secki Shapiro made a Table of Contents to date. Members and subscribers of five years standing may receive this on request.

SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE SILENCE OF SURABHA

THE Buddha's teaching is twofold. It is like going and coming back, ascending and descending. It is like rowing a boat against the current to the source of a river and, then, flowing back down toward the ocean. To study Buddhism you start from here, from this daily life. You will practice many Buddhistic contrivances; and, then, you will attain Nirvana. When you attain Nirvana, naturally you will turn from there to this usual daily life again. You will find your own position between heaven and earth. You will really find your Self; and you will be contented with that Self and emancipated from all the usual agonies.

But always there is someone who asks, "Well, if we must go up only to come down again and find a place at the foot of the mountain where we will be contented, why must we go up to the top of the mountain at all? Why not remain at the foot of the mountain and avoid such useless exertion?"

Many answer, "Going up the mountain is a monk's business; we laymen need not undertake such an activity." This is a common "Buddhist" attitude; many a Buddhist conceives such a notion in order to make himself more contented with himself.

And always there is someone who says, "Whenever anyone asked the Buddha a difficult question, the Buddha answered with silence." So, he thinks, silence is Zen! "In the Zen school we are taught to be quiet, so let's keep quiet! For after all, there is nothing to say and there will be nothing to say. So why should we strive for 'nothingness' and striving for it finally arrive at our original stupidity?"

Such are the answers given many times by half-baked Buddhists.



Once when the Buddha was sojourning at Vulture Peak, there was a young heretic Surabha who once had been a disciple of the Buddha. He was not a young man but rather about the Buddha's age. He often said to his disciples in a loud voice, "I know all about the Buddha's Dharma, knew all about it before I became his disciple, and now I have abandoned it all. I have abandoned the Buddha's Dharma entirely "

The Buddha's monks, who went down to the castle in the early morning wearing their robes and holding bowls for begging food, overheard what was being said by this heretic Surabha. They heard him telling that he knew all about the Buddha's Dharma, that he knew all about it before he became the Buddha's disciple, and that now he had abandoned it all.

After begging from door to door, the monks went back to the garden, finished their meal, and washed their bowls and their feet. Coming into the presence of the Buddha, they bowed down before him, retired to their own seats, and repeated what they had heard from Surabha. They said to the Buddha, "We pray you, Tathagata, go down there and speak to him out of pity." The Buddha, accepting in silence, went down to the bank of the river where Surabha was preaching.

When the Buddha and his disciples arrived, Surabha was in the midst of talking to his disciples. He had been saying as before, "I know all about the Buddha's Dharma, knew all about it before I became his disciple, and now I have abandoned it all. I do not care anything about him. I have abandoned him. Someday I will go and give the fellow hell!" As he was talking, he saw the Buddha approaching. What a conclusion for his talk! What will he do?

The Buddha came with his disciples, came clear as the moon among the stars and with a face calm as clear water. He came slowly to the bank of that river and Surabha quickly spread his nishidana on the ground in welcome. "Pray be seated," said Surabha. He couldn't help himself. The Buddha's presence was like the direct rays of the brilliant sun. When you face into such a brilliant light, you must shut your eyes. The Buddha saluted Surabha and went to the seat and sat down cross-legged.

Immediately the Buddha questioned Surabha. "Have you truly said that you knew all about my Dharma, that you had known it before you became my disciple, and now have forsaken it and do not care for my Dharma anymore? Tell me, is this true? Surabha bowed in silence and did not answer a word.

The Buddha said to him, "Surabha, why are you silent? You had better say something. If your talk is good, I shall be delighted. If your talk is imperfect, I shall make it perfect and you will be contented with it."

Still Surabha remained silent. Was he imitating the Buddha? Was the silence of Surabha like the silence of the Buddha when someone asked him a question and he kept silent? I will not agree with anyone who thinks it was. The silence of Surabha was the silence of cowardice.

Imagine the confusion of Surabha's disciples when they saw their teacher cowed. He could not speak a word. Among them was a young man who spoke up and said to Surabha, "My teacher, I think you should repeat what you just said to us: that you knew all about Buddhism before you became the Buddha's disciple, know all about it now, and that you do not care anything about him and have abandoned him. I think that you should speak. You are always saying that you will go to the Buddha and give him hell. Well, the Buddha came to you. Why don't you give him hell right now? Tell him all that you just told us about Sakya-muni Gotama. The Buddha said that if your opinion was good he would be delighted, and, if it was not good, he would make it perfect. Why do you hesitate to speak to him?"

But Surabha remained silent, his eyes closed and his head down. Slowly the Buddha opened his lips to speak. Now he will make a lion-roar. The Buddha was a kind and loving man, but his love was not lukewarm. His compassion was like fire! He said, "If anyone says that Sakya-muni Gotama is not Tathagata, that he has not attained the highest enlightenment, I will ask him the reason he has for saying so. If his conception is wrong, I shall be a good friend to him, and discuss his error with him, giving him reasons and an explanation for it."

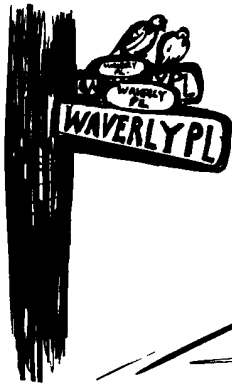
That was the Buddha's attitude. It was a very interesting moment. You can see Zen in such a moment. Now, what will happen? Surabha's disciples do not speak a word, but they are thinking many things. The Buddha gave Surabha just a short "Ah-h-h" of a lion-roar. If it had been Rin-zai, he would have given Surabha a "Kwatsu!" The Buddha said: "Those who are out of the orbit of the true Dharma take an attitude like your keeping quiet, Surabha."

When Surabha remained silent to the very end, the Buddha spoke no word more but started home.

After the Buddha had left the young disciple said to Surabha, "You were like an ox whose horns have been cut, kneeling down in an empty pasture to make a big noise. You can roar in the presence of your disciples, but in the presence of a real lion you kept silent. As when a woman imitates a hero on the stage, she puts on his costumes and assumes his characteristics, but when this "hero" speaks it is in the voice of a woman. In front of a real lion, you kept silent. Your silence is like that of a fox in a cave."

This sutra isn't too important, to speak of the Buddha's doctrines, but to illustrate the surroundings of the Buddha it is interesting. It is said, "When someone goes to the summit and returns to his little village, his voice is really different." This story gives you a clear conception of the difference in the silences--the silence of the Buddha and the silence of Surabha. The sound of the silence of one who transcends this life and then returns to live it, is also different.

Reconstructed by WILLIAM A. BRIGGS



Enen, headed to The Avenue of the Americas, noted three men, somewhat the better for Holiday cheer, weaving toward her. One, bearded, barred her way long enough to sound off with a lion-sized roar. She could not help smiling. Perhaps he'd been reading a book on Zen? The man, astounded, turned to his two friends. "She liked it!"

BUDDHA-NATURE Everyone thinks that Buddha is different from everyday men, from human beings. Mahayana Buddhists think that Buddha has been living for a million years in the western sky. We have no relation to such a Buddha. We have nothing to do with the Buddha living in the western sky. Our own Buddha-nature is Buddha. Of course, sentient beings are like orphans who never knew their own home. A child was abandoned and grew up. He had heard that his own true home was in a particular village. He went to the village to find his own house. Through all the streets of the village he went, visiting every house. He went into and came out of his own house but never realized that house was his own. Every man has Buddha-nature within him. Going into it and coming out of it he can never realize it is his own Buddha-nature. The child finally found out which house was his own home and then all of a sudden he realized that all the neighbors living there were his relatives, cousins, uncles and aunts. Once in a long time, man realizes his own Buddha-nature within himself. Then he all of a sudden realizes that his hand is the hand of Buddha, the Lotus Hand; he realizes that he himself is a Buddha. There is no other Buddha in the world.

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