

ZEN NOTES



SOKEI-AN SAYS

On April Eighth, in China and Japan, we celebrate Buddha's birthday. It is not celebrated on the same day throughout the world, but it is always celebrated in the springtime. On this occasion I shall speak about Buddha's Buddhism. Today, there are many sects of Buddhism and the priests have almost forgotten what Buddha's Buddhism is. In the Zen school of Buddhism, Buddha's true Dharma is still preserved exactly as it was. From my standpoint, as a priest of the Zen school of Buddhism, I shall explain to you the nature of authentic Buddhism.

In the Buddha's time in India, though there were many different religions, there was no special name for religion. Today we divide mental activity into many departments: there is religion, there is philosophy, there is science, and there are all kinds of ideas and isms. But in the Buddha's time, Dharma was the name given to all these kinds of mental activity. Therefore the idea of worshiping something, or thinking in order to attain something, or meditation practiced to attain a heavenly life, are all included in Dharma. There were ninety-six kinds of religion in India in the Buddha's time. Even today, when we are talking among ourselves, we call one who has haphazard ideas "one of the ninety-six" or we abuse people who think endlessly by saying "he has all ninety-six in him."

The Buddha invented his own Dharma, which was the practice of no-thinking. We, many of us, are afraid of that. If we do not think anything, we believe, we will become stupid and return to the period of ignorance or go back to the age of the caveman. Of course we cannot avoid thinking so we must practice to attain the state of no-thinking with this thinking mind. We begin this practice by meditation. But how are we to attain the true attitude of meditation. On what shall we meditate?

First we meditate on "What is our mind?" We begin this by meditating on the activity of our eyes, our ears, and so forth, and on our mind. We meditate not only upon the human mind, but on the mind of trees and weeds, and on the mind of fire and water and earth. When we meditate upon our own mind we discover that the mind of the vegetable, which does not think, exists within us. So the "no-thinking mind" is really within us. We observe this no-thinking mind with our thinking mind. This is the beginning of the practice of meditation.

(Please turn to last page)

A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION Usually each year on February 15th or thereabouts we celebrate the anniversary of our founding on that day. This year we did not do so. It was because we were waiting for the arrival of Miura Roshi.

Along about the first of the year we had heard from Roshi that he wished to come to New York February 7th. It took no great imagination to guess it was his intention, for the third time, to be with us on February 15th.

On January 28th, we received word that the U.S. Immigration Service had approved our petition for his non-quota entry. We thought any day might be the day. We were bombarded with inquiries we couldn't answer. Then at last we had a rather harassed letter. In addition to the documents relating to his ordination, incumbency at Koonji, and religious qualifications, already supplied, more, much more, was needed. Fingerprints must be made. Medical tests were required. Proof must be given that he was not a criminal. What had been his military service? A complete family history must be provided. All documents must be translated into English, etc., etc. It began to appear that our homegrown red tape far outreached the Japanese variety. But finally on March 9th we received the word we had been awaiting: Roshi would be here March 12th.

Now a revolution in our feelings took place. How could we welcome him properly on three days' notice? We hadn't been keeping up with our Japanese (no time!). What could we offer him to eat? What would he make of so many new students? What would they make of him? Though we had waited nearly three years for this moment we suddenly realized we were little better prepared to meet him than on his first visit in 1955.

Then, on the wings of a snowstorm, Roshi arrived, and we saw at once there was a great difference from the past. This time it was not a stranger we met at Idlewild Airport, it was our teacher. And though the members of our community have greatly increased, their mysterious resemblance recently remarked made the faces of even the newcomers somehow familiar to him. Our kinship of feeling was especially apparent when Roshi entered our meeting room and all the students greeted him. All faces had just one look. It is not a simple thing to describe it. First, surprise, then gratitude, and mingled with it, relief. For it is just three years less a month since we said good-bye to Roshi. We had had some advice from him about what to do to prepare for the future, and we had certainly done our best in his absence to find our own way. But there had been unexpected developments. Some things that had had the appearance of solidity had simply faded away. Long time friends had disappeared. And, being human, it was quite possible we had misunderstood matters difficult to know. We told Roshi: That he is here is the greatest encouragement. For if he has enough confidence in our future to confide his own to us, even though we ourselves do not yet know where our next year's income will come from, even though our quarters are hopelessly inadequate, even though we need no mirrors to show us our own failings, surely with his help we can nerve ourselves to make the all-out effort needed to bring our dream to actuality. When we somewhat enthusiastically commented that it seemed we had now stepped into a new phase of our history, Roshi calmly re-

minded us that we had planned what we were to do years ago. Now we were going ahead with our plans. He told us: "Make the Great Decision and let us all support one another."

We asked Roshi, tired by his busy days in government bureaus and his long plane trip, about zazen. "Let's have a week of sitting every night. Then we'll see." This week was concluded March 23rd. On this evening Roshi read his *Kikan* (Admonitions) to the assembled students. So many were in the Zendo that evening the cushions had to be redistributed with only one to a sitter instead of the usual two. Although much was to be desired in the posture of the newest comers to the Novitiates' Foyer, as several we had let sneak in under the wire had no previous experience at all, everyone during our six evenings of sitting was quiet as could be. Though their legs were cramped, and their necks were stiff, it was somehow clear their hearts were in the right place. The first test was passed!

During the days our quarters have been thronged with workers (most of our activities are carried out by volunteers). Before these weeks we had regretted we weren't able to answer the mail. Now we didn't even get to open it. Offers to help have been numerous, but to organize everyone's skills to the best advantage takes time, too. We have set up our 10x12 office to accommodate eleven workers at one time, but they have to be small or at least thin ones to get in. Roshi himself supervises the preparation of the Zendo and the meeting-room, setting up as in earlier years a handsome altar and delightful flower offerings. He has seemed pleased at the way everyone has been able to join in the chanting of the Hannya in Japanese. But as he once remarked, "If you continue to practice you cannot avoid improvement." Young members have been learning how to scrub the unfinished wood tables, clean, dust, make tea, and cook. And though they have been threatened with every kind of impending severity, including corporal punishment both manual and pedal if they don't do their chores properly, the warm kindness behind the words cannot be masked. The crews that had already learned how to work together during the preparation, plastering and painting of the Zendo have now embarked on new duties, giving us much hope that we can all cooperate on constructive efforts in future. And of course everyone is thinking about a country Zendo.

Pots of blooming white flowers remind us this is the most joyous season of the year. And indeed the air is turning softer, and it is time to prepare for a pilgrimage to Washington to greet the Japanese cherry-blossoms. Also to celebrate Roshi's birthday April 10th.

Instead of on that more solemn day, the Buddha's Nirvana day, therefore, this year our main celebration will take place on one of its most auspicious occasions, the Buddha's Birthday, April Eighth. This year we won't have to borrow the central image of the ceremony as we did when we first observed it three years ago. For Roshi, as his gift to us brought us a most exquisite expression of our hope for the future, the baby Buddha himself. With one tiny finger pointed aloft, and one earthward, he fearlessly tells us: "Beneath heaven and above earth, I am the only one to be revered." ENEN

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When I eat my dinner, my thinking mind does not digest it; something else digests it. Some other power pumps my blood and circulates it through my body. My hair and nails do not tell me they grow; they grow, while I pay no attention. Something else is living in this body. The part I call myself is only a little part of the whole. I cannot refuse to see without closing my eyes; whether I want to hear or not, sound vibrates on the drum of my ear. The activities of my eye and my ear do not belong to me, they belong to something within me. So, we discover that what we call ourselves, our ego, is a very little part of us. Meditating upon our self, upon our mind, we discover the greater life and, by discovering this, discover the greater self or greater mind which can be reached immediately through our own mind.

This religion, therefore, has an entrance immediately here. The shrine is right here. Temporarily I call it Buddha--not the Buddha who was born in India, but the Buddha who exists everywhere. I can call him "This Buddha." The answer is here immediately.

Shakamuni Buddha decided this was his religion. To us, the discovery of this religion by Shakamuni has great significance. We say that a human being has reached true religion, and that the avenue through which he reached it is straight and without hindrance. Buddhism can be explained very easily and plainly, and you can have faith in it without doubt, immediately. Others, however, try to reach something higher than themselves. They are always looking upward, joining their hands, and, when they hope to realize something, offer prayer to someone in the sky. From our standpoint, this is not wrong, but it is not very convenient. Why must we search for it in the sky? Why try to get something we hope for by asking someone else for it? Prayer is the expression of man's immediate desire, and he offers a gift to assure an answer. To us, prayer is our hope, our immediate desire, but we work to get an answer; work, therefore, is our gift. Without the offering of gifts, prayer is not answered. If our desire is natural, it will be answered naturally; if it is unnatural, it will not be answered.

We do not need any image to worship. Our self is Buddha; our mind is the entrance to the shrine of Buddha. The Buddha's birth brought this religion into the world and we follow it.

Reconstructed by WILLIAM BRIGGS

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Founded in 1930 by
Sokei-an Sasaki

A square seal containing stylized Chinese characters in seal script. The characters are arranged in a 2x2 grid. The top-left character is '禪' (Zen), the top-right is '美' (America), the bottom-left is '會' (Association), and the bottom-right is '一' (One).

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會 協 禪 一 第 國 美