

ZEN NOTES



SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE BUDDHA IN THE SHALA GROVE Sunday Series 1939

BUDDHISM is a very old religion of the Orient. Shakyamuni Buddha founded it in India about two thousand five hundred years ago. In the beginning it was the religion of the Shakya tribe. Shakyamuni-- or Prince Siddartha, as he was called--was the son of the chief of the tribe, the king of Kapilavastu. When he was eight years old he saw in the garden back of the palace a little insect playing with its friend; then a bigger insect came and swallowed the little one. A bird came and swallowed the bigger insect. A bigger bird came and caught the smaller bird. The eight-year-old child, Prince Siddartha, was made unhappy by this incident; he said to his courtier: "That which I have seen just now is most pitiful. Is there no rule in the world that the stronger one may not kill the weaker?" The courtier answered: "Your Highness, the law of the world is exactly that which you have just observed. The stronger one kills the weaker; the bigger one swallows the smaller." Siddartha wept.

This is the incident as it is described in a Buddhist sutra, but it wasn't all that must have been in the Buddha's mind when he was a child. We can conjecture that something more serious and important flashed through the young prince's mind. Shakyamuni's country was very small. It was at the southern foot of the Himalaya mountains. His tribe were farmers. The Brahmans had come from the West, through the Caucasus mountains and along the shore of the Caspian Sea, through Afghanistan into northern India. They were called Aryans. One group went to Galicia (Greece); another came to India and drove off the aborigines. They called themselves "the pure race," "the children of God." Shakyamuni's tribe was aboriginal; their homeland was somewhere on the border of Tibet. The Shakyas did not say they were "children of God"; they called themselves descendants of the potato, for they believed their ancestors sprang out of a potato. Their clan was of the Kshatriya, the second of India's four classes, composed of farmers and warriors. The Brahmans were the priests, the highest class. When the Brahmans had to fight, they employed the Kshatriyas to fight for them. The Brahmans were said to have superior minds.

Next to the Shakya country was a bigger country called Magadha. The Raja of Magadha had a child named Bimbisara ("beautiful boy"). The two boys, Siddartha and Bimbisara, were therefore rivals, though Siddartha's country was very small--about the size of Connecticut--and Magadha was very large--bigger than New York. So the young Prince Siddartha worried lest Magadha attack his country. As he did not enjoy the struggle for life--in fact he thought it was not worth fighting for--he did not enjoy being a prince. This anxiety and mental struggle led him later to abandon his home and become an ascetic. For while "kings" take a positive attitude, Shakyamuni, the Sage of the Shakyas, took the negative attitude, desiring to conquer the world with his thoughts. Yes, he was a conqueror. He conquered all Asia with his thoughts and his religion is still living, while the swords of the rajas have been broken for a long time. These are two different attitudes in human life, the attitude of the saint and the attitude of the king.

In the Orient the Buddhist monk sleeps with his head toward the north while the kings of Asia on their thrones face to the south. The king's court always opens to the south; the monk bows to the north. This symbolizes the fact that the monk takes the negative attitude while the king takes the positive attitude. We, as Buddhist laymen, take both the negative and the positive attitude in our daily life. When we open our eyes and smile to see our friends it is

positive. When our minds are disturbed in the conflict of life we retreat into our minds and control ourselves. Then we walk into the city and conduct our business. To control our minds and rest our bodies, we take the negative attitude.

Those with strong will power can control their minds by exercising it. Those who do not have strong will power must rely upon something eternal when they seek repose of mind.

When I was young, one day a woman came to my temple. She was terribly agitated by some circumstance and wished to control her mind lest she become insane. My teacher showed her a stone. "Now, young lady, this stone is a god. If you worship this stone you will be cured." The young woman believed this. It was a stone one of my brothers had picked up in the garden. It had a nice shape so we washed it and my teacher took it and kept it in an alcove. When he told the young woman to worship it we just laughed inside, but our teacher was very serious. I did not understand the point then nor for many years, but now I do. The whole secret of curing illness is there. Worshipping something outside, concentrating on it, cures physical illness. Through concentration one controls the mind and crystallizes the mind to store its potential power. When the power is always being radiated, the spending power within weakens and the mind becomes unbalanced. Offering prayer to a stone every morning takes the place of medi-

tion. Ancient people, consciously or unconsciously, found that secret--that worshipping something with concentration controls the mind and cures illness. It is true.

Shakyamuni did not worship the outside but found God in himself by meditation. It was universal God so it controlled his mind. It also controlled the physical body. Of course he was a beautiful man.

He left home and spent six years in the woods, where he attained Reality. Then he became a teacher.

When the Buddha was in Kosala, a country north of the Ganges River, going from village to village, he stayed one night under a shala tree. The shala tree is something like a cherry tree; its bark is white like that of the white birch. In May its pale blossoms are like snow. He meditated all night in the shala tree wood. These woods are not so thick as those in the state of Washington or the Sierra Nevada but are like groves. The trees are very beautiful and give a deep blue shadow so travellers keep cool beneath them. And there are pools. These are the oases of India.

This particular shala tree wood belonged to a Brahman, a farmer, whose fields were near the wood. At dawn the Brahman, coming to work in his garden, saw from a distance that an ascetic--a mendicant--was seated on soft weeds with his legs crossed, meditating. He was calm, the posture of his body expressed complete quietude. His eyes, his nose, his mouth gave an impression of tranquillity itself. To the

Brahman it seemed that the mendicant was surrounded by a faint, mysterious light radiating from his body. He realized this was no mere mendicant. "Ah!" he thought. "This is that prince of the Shakyaya tribe. I heard he left home a long time ago and that he had attained the highest enlightenment. The child of a farmer is now a saint."

The Brahman felt uneasy. Shakyamuni's complete serenity hurt his pride. "What is he doing? After all, he is a man. If he lives without working--seeking food from door to door like a beggar--must one bow to him?"

The village where the Brahman was living was a notorious one. No Buddhist monk was ever ashamed if he could not get alms there. No one could get anything from the villagers. It was anti-Buddhist. And this Brahman was anti-Buddhist too.

The Brahman approached Shakyamuni and asked a question in the form of an extemporaneous poem, as was the custom of the cultured men of that time.

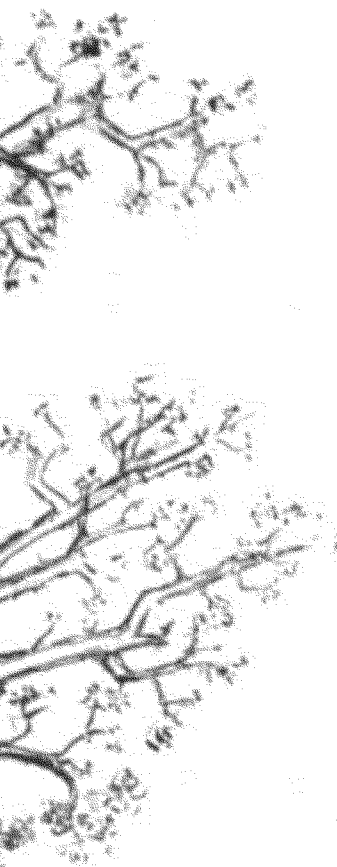
"O mendicant, what are you doing in this wood? What do you enjoy when you are alone among the trees in this wood?"

Shakyamuni replied: *"I do nothing in this wood. The life of the trees was eradicated long ago. Therefore in this wood I do not see any trees at all. I do not enjoy my contemplation in this wood."*

This was his answer. And here this scripture ends.

(continued on page 7)





On another Sunday, in 1935, what Sokei-an said about some of the lines of this sutra was a little different.

Once upon a time, when the Buddha was sojourning in Kosala, he separated himself from the monks and passed the night meditating in a shala tree wood.

From this description you might not feel any mystery, but this one line has deep significance.

The shala tree is like the white birch and its flowers like snowy cherry blossoms. In the silvery light, under the white trees, the Buddha meditated.

In this country the moon seems to me not to have much symbolic significance. Over the radio I have heard a great deal about the moon, but always connected with some amorous idea. In the Orient, the moon gives us a mystic feeling. Under the moon, in my country of Japan, no one thinks of love; we think of the mystery of the universe. The Buddha, in the shala grove, was meditating in the silvery world, the world of one aspect.

The writer has given his description from the Buddha's viewpoint. There were not many things outside; there was just one existence. In Buddhism the shala tree wood is used as the symbol of oneness; the meaning of the shala tree wood is the world of one aspect. The Buddha wasn't looking at the moon or the trees or darkness or brightness or yellow or green, he had entered into the world of oneness by meditation.

*I am doing nothing in this
wood*

You must be careful that some religious teacher does not misunderstand this and mislead you. I am working from morning to evening. I am eating. I am studying. I am dying. It is like the waves of the ocean. It never stops fluctuating, but fundamentally nothing has happened. The waves are moving, but the water is not travelling. The foam is travelling. What makes the foam? Energy? Perhaps science will call it tension. What is tension? No one knows. Someone sings a song in Chicago. On the radio you hear the song in New York but the song hasn't travelled. Electricity travels but protons and electrons don't travel. Is it something in them? What? No one knows. Einstein has been trying to explain this, also Eddington, but they haven't found out yet. There is mystery in this motion. To us it is moving, but the Buddha said, "I am not doing anything in this world."

*A long time ago I rooted out
all the old roots of the trees*

The tree of desire, the tree of anger, the tree of ambition, the tree of agony, the tree of attachment. If you understand the root of these trees, you are emancipated. Buddhism is the religion of wisdom. Through the analysis of your mind and your consciousness you can pull the root of ignorance out of your consciousness. Then you are enlightened. Satori means penetration through your consciousness.

Just as the drill comes through the wood you penetrate sensation, conception. Most people are living in this turmoil but never penetrate. It is like the tree worm. The tree worm bites and gnaws the tree. It goes round and round inside the tree but never comes through, never comes out because it never penetrates. So you with your words. You eat words and more words. Abolish your philosophy of words! You cannot think except within words, so you never know satori.

*Though I am living in this
wood, I have abolished the
appearance of it*

This is an important point in Buddhism. When you go to the moving pictures, you hate, cry, hiss, in excitement. It is just a picture, just a shadow. Why do you wail at a shadow tragedy? When you come out, all the shadows are left behind and you don't remember. Nothing happened--there was no murder--no thief... If you understand the root of this phenomenal world it is just like a moving picture. We are actors and actresses, we are playing a play on the screen of the retina. I enjoy this playing--I took the monk's part, I don't know why. One day I will come out of the moving picture house and know that nothing has happened. I enjoy my observation of human life. When I am hanging I scream, but I am screaming on the screen.

Reconstructed by MARY FARKAS

(continued from page 3)

These old scriptures were composed in sutras immediately after the Buddha's death by Mahakashyapa and five hundred monks. They were transmitted orally for more than two hundred years, then, two hundred and seventy years after the Buddha's death, they were inscribed on seashells. At that time there were no materials on which records were printed. These brief anecdotes are very important in Buddhism because they come from the immediate disciples of the Buddha. Of course we read this poem with our knowledge of today.

The Brahman asked the Buddha: "What are you doing in this wood? What do you enjoy when you are alone among these trees?" Shakyamuni answered, using "these trees" to signify the whole world: "I do nothing in this wood," which means "I do nothing in this world."

"The life of the trees was eradicated long ago" means "no individual life." He is the life of the universe itself. The tree does not know Life so the life of the tree is eradicated.

The Buddha is hinting something to this Brahman when he says "the life of the trees was eradicated long ago," "You are a tree of this wood, Brahman," he is saying, "but your life is severed from the root of life. You are an egoist, you are not connected to the life of the universe. You are Godless."

"In this wood I do not see any trees." To Buddha there were no physical or phenomenal trees-- everything in and of the world

was Reality to him. He did not take the world as in form or color but as Reality itself; all was transparent to him. His mind did not attach to form or color, beauty or ugliness. Transparency is a wonderful metaphor to explain Reality.

"I do not enjoy my contemplation in this wood" means "I do not enjoy meditating upon this phenomenal transitoriness, or appearance. I enjoy beauty. But it is transient. It passes away, it evanesces as a cloud in the sky."

"I do nothing." He did not work like a dog. He did not fight like a tiger. He did not take life. Of course a king swallowing a country, then being swallowed by another country, takes a different attitude toward life. The Buddha disdained the meaningless struggle of life. So he took the negative attitude. In early primitive Buddhism they emphasized this negative attitude.

The Brahman came, insultingly: "What are you doing, begging in this wood, alone without friends? What do you enjoy in this?" The Buddha said: "There is nothing in this wood. No one can drive me out. I am not living in your terms. Your life is severed from the main life of the universe. To me this wood is nothing but transparency. I am not meditating in visible things. I am meditating in eternal Reality."

This was his answer.

Reconstructed by BRIAN HEALD

EDITOR'S NOTE

MEDITATION is different from sleeping, but there is a common base. In sleep you pillow your head, close your eyes and stretch out your body. Before I fall asleep there may be an interval of two, three minutes; some take a half-hour. In meditating you will find some similarity. In the beginning you cannot enter samadhi ("tranquillity") at once. When I was studying a long time ago, for three months I was ignorant of samadhi, then one day I suddenly entered into it.

When you enter oneness your heart beats in rhythm, you breathe deeply. It is a decidedly different feeling from the ordinary moments of life. When you sleep you lose consciousness. In meditation you will not lose your consciousness but it will be placed upon greater consciousness. There you find the unity between yourself and the universe.

The imaginary trees on Pages 5 and 6 are the creation of VANESSA COWARD.

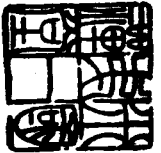
Sokei-an must have enjoyed telling this story, for he has done so three times, in 1935 and 1938, as noted here, and again in 1942. In 1942 Mrs. Ruth F. Sasaki identified the story as coming from the *Zō-agon-kyō (Samyukta-Agama)*, Vol. 44, Number 1182; *Sara-rin*, corresponding to *Samyutta-Nikaya 2.7: Navakammika*.

In the 1935 version, and, slightly differently, in the 1942 version, there are some lines in the poem Sokei-an did not comment on in the 1938 version. These are:

*My pleasure is in tranquillity
I will never root up the
deeps of meditation.*

His comment was: I enjoy my meditation. I will never root out the satori which carried me into the true root of the universe.

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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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