

ZEN notes



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SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONS

There is a saying of Buddhism that: "We must renounce all desire." Some question us about this, saying, "Then must we commit suicide?" We answer, "We renounce the thoughts of desire, but we do not abandon desire." Our questioner will say that he does not understand what we have said. We will answer: "Look at the banker, who is handling many bags of money, counting thousands of dollars in a day. To him, the money is mere number. But if he receives a salary, then he will attach to that money. The thoughts that give you the idea of possessing mislead you and you attach to that object. Your body is just like money that is handled by the banker: if you have ideas of possession of your body, of your mind, and of your desire, then you will have the thoughts of desire. This is the experience that one has when one stands on the edge of the cliff of life and death: one must give up the idea of possessing oneself. Then you can abandon the thought of fear, the thought of desire.

But there is one desire we must possess. It is the desire to attain the true wisdom. We possess this body and feed this body in order to attain the true wisdom. Before eating, a monk will recite the oath: "We partake of this food to keep the body for attaining true wisdom." If we have no true wisdom we cannot understand all this--why we must struggle to work, why we must struggle to sleep, why killing is bad, why stealing is bad. We cannot give any answer to these questions.

One of my American friends went to Japan, stayed about six months in a Zen temple, and recently returned to America.

He said: "When I came back to America, Americans looked mysterious and strange to me. They are so busy bustling to and fro, but nothing is written on their faces." I answered: "That phenomenon is not only in America but also in Japan. You would have seen it whenever you came out of the temple gate." That is an ordinary phenomenon of human life. A man is born of a good family and receives a good education and gets married and provides a good and substantial education for his children and then makes them the heirs to his fortune and in his life he is called "reverend" and--"please read some word of Christ to me"--and he listens to the word and cannot understand it and then he closes his eyes and dies. That is the usual life of a human being.

We believe that without knowing the law we cannot know the value of this life. We do not wish to live like cats and dogs; though we can know very little, yet we must know where we are, what we are, how we are doing. We must know the true meaning of human life in the cosmos and the real error of this period of history and of individual life at this time. We must possess the desire to attain the true wisdom, and this desire is one of the four foundations of Buddhism. Without this desire we cannot open the mysterious door of Buddhism and enter into the life of mysterious freedom.

One who really knows the value of life has a sense of veneration and respect, and he who does not have a sense of veneration does not know the true value of life. When the Buddha was in the Venuvana, speaking his Dharma and surrounded by five hundred disciples, there was an elder monk who fell asleep, stretching his feet toward the Buddha.

We ourselves see such things in the crowd while the monks are reciting sutras or giving lectures-- someone stretches his feet and listens a little while, and then closes his eyes and snores. And someone will shake him but will not be able to wake him, and everyone will say, "Oh, let him alone, and he will go on sleeping." But this elder had done it while the Buddha was giving a lecture.

Not so far away from the Buddha there was a novice, only eight years old. He sat crosslegged, positioning his mind at his nose, and he listened to the word of the Buddha. (These words I have used are the usual description in Buddhism: "He sat crosslegged, positioning his mind in a samadhi," or "positioning his mind at his nose." Usually one looks at the tip of the nose, but that is not necessary-- the eyes do not necessarily have anything to do with it.) So this novice sat there not so far away from the Buddha, crosslegged, possessing his mind in samadhi, and positioning his mind at his nose, and he listened to the word of the Buddha.

The Buddha made a gatha, a little verse with meter and rhythm:

To be called an elder shaving your
hair is not necessary
Though you are old you are not yet
free from committing follies
If you see the Law of Wisdom and
harm no sprouts and dump out
all the impurities, then you
are an elder.

The Buddha did not talk directly to the sleeping old man or point directly to the novice, but he did so indirectly with his poem.

If you see the Law of Wisdom and

harm no sprouts. If there is a tiny shoot that has just sprouted out of the seed and an animal comes and nips the end of it, even though it may grow and become a tree, yet it will always show the mark. So everyone who has true love must refrain from destroying sprouts of any kind of existence. If a monk comes to a strange country and tries to build a temple and form a group and someone nips the sprout before it can grow and while it has no power to protect itself, that person is a traitor and does not have the true Buddhist soul. It is always the male who does this-- who sees something and says, "This is coming up," and breaks it. The female has the instinctive love of the mother. Primitive nature is still in the human mind.

And dump out all the impurities. We do not need to ask, "What is impurity?" As human beings we have the sense of purity and impurity, just as we have the sense of taste.

Then you are an elder. But this old monk did not pay attention because he was sleeping. So the Buddha looked at the old monk sleeping and said through the gatha, the poem: "He was a dragon through five hundred kalpas, and though he is in the body of a monk for this kalpa, he will return to the body of a dragon because he lacks modesty and a sense of veneration. Look at the small novice, eight years old but sitting crosslegged, his mind positioned at his nose, possessing himself in samadhi. In seven days he will attain the four foundations of the Buddhist."

Desire is one of the four foundations, for without this eagerness you cannot attain the others. These four are desire, concentration and samadhi, tranquillity, and observation.

You can enter Buddhism with desire,



Dear Everyone:

ON the second of January Kanaseki San and Sumie San came in the late morning. Though the wind and sleet were continuing unabated, we decided to drive the twenty-five miles farther along the shore of Lake Shinji to the Grand Shrine of Izumo. A continuous line of sight-seeing buses, taxis, and private cars passed us, all seemingly going to or coming from the shrine.

Izumo is my favorite Shinto shrine. It is the oldest major shrine in Japan, and second in importance only to that of Ise. The shrine of Ise, hidden away in its primeval forest of dark pines, though archaic in its general construction, gives a feeling of a certain conscious sophistication. All we mere mortals are permitted to see of this Japanese holy of holies is the pure white plaster walls of the small central compound and the thatched roofs of the inner buildings and their slender whitewood crossed roof beams. Simplicity, purity, and mystery are the qualities of Ise. The architecture of Izumo, on the other hand, is of a primitive ruggedness. It is the elemental powers of nature that hold sway at Izumo.

There is considerable evidence for the theory that the deity of Izumo was someone who came from the South Sea Islands in the prehistoric period and founded and ruled a great state in the district. He is traditionally credited with introducing medicine, silk culture, and fishing to Japan; popularly he is the god who dispenses the greatest measure of good fortune for the coming year and is particularly helpful in arranging advantageous marriages. Hence the crowds that journey from every part of Japan to this somewhat remote place, particularly at the New Year.

The shrine is situated at the far end of a great park and approached by a long and broad avenue bordered with a double row of magnificent old pines. Behind it rises a semi-circle of jagged pine covered peaks, their steep sides serried with deep ravines and gorges. All the major buildings are easy of approach, and most are built in what is known as Izumo style. They are constructed of massive timbers weathered almost to black, and raised well above the ground on heavy stilts. The sharply inclined roofs with deep overhanging eaves are of enormously thick thatch, and the heavy roof beams that rise to cross above them bear elaborate gilt bronze decorations.

The avenue leading to the shrine was lined, this afternoon, with tents and booths in which the usual knickknacks were being sold. In addition, because it was the New Year, kakemonos with printed pictures of tigers in numerous poses--this is the Year of the Tiger--the Seven Gods of Good Luck, and other auspicious subjects were being offered. The crowd was large, considering the weather. In spite of the continuing rain and sleet and wind, most of the suppliants were dressed as if for a sunny day outing, the women wearing light-colored kimonos and haoris,

if in Japanese clothes, or thin shoes with high spiked heels and light coats, if in Western style. There must have been many sick people the next day.

A huge new building placed just in front of the main shrine has recently been completed. Here shrine maidens in their white kimonos and long scarlet pleated skirts perform the charming primitive dances for a sum, and the priests, also in white kimonos, but with pale blue silk pleated skirts, invoke the god's blessings for the believers, also for a sum. The great roof of this new building is in the thatched style, but made of tiny overlapping copper shingles. It alone must have cost a fortune, to say nothing of the great whitewood timbers of which the entire building is constructed. Other secondary buildings as well are being newly roofed with copper shingles. All of which would seem to substantiate the current rumors that Shinto shrines are unbelievably rich and flourishing these days. The papers say that 2,000,000 people visited the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo on the first three days of the New Year. The crowd was so great that it was impossible for people to raise their hands to clap, let alone get up to the front of the main shrine building and pull the rope of the gong whose muffled rattlenotifies the god of their presence.

Here and there in the shrine compound of Izumo were large bushes, to every branch and twig of which were tied countless narrow strips of white paper bearing the names of lovers who hope the god will look with favor upon their union. The offices where charms to ward off misfortune and illness are sold were doing a "land office" business. So also were those selling fortunes obtained by shaking a numbered bamboo stick through a small hole in the top of a box containing a hundred or more of such sticks, and procuring a corresponding numbered printed fortune. People cling very tenaciously to the old superstitions even in this space age.

We paid our respects to the god by bowing before the heavy closed doors of the main shrine, then walked around to the charming miniature shrine which is the dwelling of his wife and which he is said to visit from time to time. On the opposite side of the compound we came upon a long low building divided into many small separate compartments and with a narrow verandah running along its length. This is where, during the month of October, the god of Izumo entertains the more important gods from all over the land at a conference for the welfare of the country.

But it was growing colder and the sleet had now turned into a heavy rain. We were glad to drink from shallow white clay cups the hot sake which the priests were offering for a sum, a final gesture in honor of the god, for sake is the drink of all the kami. Walking away down the avenue of gnarled pines, from time to time we turned to look back at the handsome black thatched roofs and beyond them to the mist swirling around the pine crested peaks, or rushing torrent-like down the dark gorges.

That evening the entire Kanaseki family came to the "Military Headquarters of the Eight Clouds" to have with us the wild duck dinner for which the inn is famous. We gathered first in our own palatial rooms and were served thick green tea and heavy sweet cakes, the usual prelude to a lengthy dinner. Then we adjourned

to a large new room which Kobota San has recently added to the old inn for just such parties. Places were arranged around three sides of the room with an empty space in the middle, so extensive that conversation was impossible except with one's immediate neighbors on either side. Before each of us was a small charcoal brazier of clay, and around that several standing trays on which were arranged the various kinds of food from which the piece de resistance was to be individually prepared.

Kobota San, assisted by several maids, himself poured the sake. With this we ate the tiny black-eyed fishes, raw, and several kinds of delicate sea weeds. Then on the coals of the brazier we placed a very large abalone shell. When this was thoroughly heated, a broth, made according to Kobota San's secret recipe was poured into it, then sugar and shoyu, the salty soy bean sauce. To this was then added finely cut vegetables--onions, white radishes, mushrooms, spinach, and *seri*, a green somewhat resembling our parsley. When the vegetables had not much more than wilted, paper-thin slices of raw duck breast were laid on them. A kind of duck *sukiyaki*, you see, and most delicious. This was repeated numberless times until the duck and vegetables were exhausted. Then only were the salted vegetable pickles and the rice brought in. Japanese dining etiquette does not permit of drinking after one begins to eat rice. The dinner ended with tangerines and hot house grapes. These latter are in Japan far from the exclusive luxury we consider them to be in America, and are grown in profusion in the hot houses of Okayama prefecture. The muscats particularly are superb.

The following morning we woke to find that the storm had at last abated. After breakfast we said a ceremonious goodby to our solicitous host at the Yatsuun Honjin, and bumped over the potholes to Matsue. The pale blue mirror of the lake was dotted with innumerable tiny fishing boats, the wild birds rose from the shore reeds into the pale blue of the sky, and the gnarled pines that border much of the lake rested for a time from their battle with the wind. So constant is this Siberian wind that blows over the province of Izumo that the farmhouses in the district, even the most humble, are surrounded on all but their southern side by tall hedges of tightly planted trees. These wind barriers are one of the distinctive features of the Izumo landscape.

Kanaseki San and Sumie San joined us in town. This morning our objective was Yaegaki Shrine on the farther side of Matsue, the oldest shrine in the province, even older than the Grand Shrine itself, so it is said. Few people come to this tiny shrine hidden away in the back country hills and sacred to the mother of the great god of Izumo. Here there are few buildings, and these small and dilapidated. The frail old priest, whom we found sitting alone in his little office huddled over an *hibachi* trying to keep warm while hopefully waiting for buyers of his charms and fortunes, eagerly suggested that he take us in into the inner sanctuary itself. He quickly put on his white kimono and pale blue pleated skirt and helped us into short white cotton coats which, I suppose, purified us sufficiently to permit us to enter.

The main shrine, built after the Ise style, is not more than twenty feet wide and forty feet deep. The *tatami* is tattered and the shrine implements covered

with the dust. The inner room, however, contains painted wooden panels that are most interesting. They date from the 9th century, or even earlier. Though much damaged, they show us charming life-sized portraits in faded colors of several men and women wearing Heian period court dress. The shrine has been rebuilt several times during the passing centuries--the present building dates from about 200 years ago--but fortunately these panels have managed to survive.

The old priest told us that numerous relics of a very primitive culture had been found in the caves in the surrounding hills. It is believed that the goddess of the shrine and her husband were members of the clan of prehistoric people who once inhabited these caves. In the utterly lovely grove of old trees behind the shrine, a grove which it is quite easy to believe the *kami* still inhabit, or at least come from time to time to sport in, is an aged double-trunked cryptomeria tree sacred to the couple. And in the dark heart of the grove is the fern-bordered pool fed by a trickling spring where the goddess performed, or perhaps still continues to perform, her daily toilet. We gladly purchased postcards and charms and fortunes from the sweet old man. Another car drove up as we were leaving, so perhaps his meager income was somewhat augmented that day.

Time still remained before the train left for a short drive around Matsue itself. It is a delightful old city and still almost unspoiled. The modest castle of the lords of Matsue--the Tokugawa Shogunate kept them in near penury so that they would not have the means for staging a revolt--rises on a low hill in the center of the city. It is surrounded by a small park which seems never to have known the hand of a professional gardener, and a moat over which several charming bridges arch. The moat itself is ringed on its far side by the old houses in which lived the samurai retainers of the lord. Some are more pretentious than others, but most are small and unassuming. That in which Lafcadio Hearn lived for several years while he was teaching English in a school in Matsue--he married the daughter of a Matsue samurai and was adopted into her family--is open to the public. And down the road just beyond this house is the Hearn Museum, for which Kanaseki's father was the architect. Kanaseki San spent all his boyhood in Matsue.

Fortunately through the influence of a friend Kanaseki San and Sumie San were able to get seats back to Osaka on our train. The train was overcrowded, as I have said. The station platforms were veritable forests of skis. Many mountain climbers heavily weighted down with their packs were there also. Mountain climbing at the New Year is an old pastime in Japan, the aim being to see the first sunrise of the year from the top of some peak. Twenty-nine persons lost their lives this New Year trying to do just that.

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with hope, with prayer. Then you can possess your mind with concentration and you will achieve and keep tranquillity. And finally you observe from the state of tranquillity. If you meet a Buddhist, look at him; if he does not have the four foundations he is not a true Buddhist.

This novice had the desire, and so it was not necessary for him to wait seven days. The Buddha said, "He will attain in seven days, but look at that monk--he will be a dragon because he lacks the sense of veneration."

If one lacks the sense of veneration, one will have no concentration, no tranquillity, no observation. In tranquillity you can find observation--you can see all of you. When you find your brain you can observe all inside yourself, just as a gardener in the winter observes the seed in warm earth, banked and covered up. He gives it a little water

with a damp cloth--very carefully and not too much, because otherwise it would sprout too soon--and he tends it every day. He cannot see what they are, these million different seeds of flowers or vegetables. He can only keep it alive.

When we receive seeds through the five gates of our senses in our Alaya consciousness we keep them in our five consciousnesses. We don't know what seeds are in our Alaya consciousness, but in tranquillity they sprout one by one and we can observe it, and we can observe our past life and think about our future, observing our life in tranquillity.

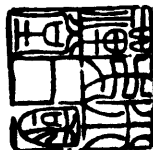
Thus observation can be gained in tranquillity. And this tranquillity is the result of concentration. And this concentration is the result of desire and of prayer to attain true wisdom.

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