

# ZEN NOTES



## SOKEL-AN SAYS

### THE UNIVERSE IS ANOTHER NAME FOR INFINITE CONSCIOUSNESS

WHEN you think of your religion it is natural for you to think about the nature of God. When we think of Buddhism it is natural for us to think of how the universe is created. The Buddhist does not think the universe was created; the Buddhist thinks the universe is eternal existence: it has never been created, it will never be destroyed. You ask: "Do you say that the sun and the moon, the earth and the stars exist through eternity and will never be destroyed or cease to exist?" The Buddhist will open his mouth and look at your face and say: "We do not understand what you are talking about. We think the universe is another name for infinite consciousness. There is nothing in the universe but consciousness; only consciousness exists." You ask: "Do Buddhists think there is nothing in the universe--no men, no women, no air, no trees, no earth, no moon, no sun--that consciousness alone exists? The Buddhist will answer: "Indeed that is our concept of the universe." You say, "Ridiculous! What are you then?" Opening my arms wide, I say, "This. This is consciousness. What is this gong?" I strike it. "Consciousness. What is this fire? Consciousness." Well, you ask that many questions, and then you put your hat on and go.

Of course, when we borrow your English word "consciousness" perhaps our use or our borrowing of that word is in error. Perhaps we should use your word "soul." But you think that your soul is your own soul, different from my soul; that God created each soul individually. We do not think so. We think all existence is soul, an ocean of soul. We are waves. This is the Buddhist's basic concept of the universe.

Then, you think: "How can this one mass of consciousness be matter and spirit? Matter exists outside, and our spirit exists inside." You ask: "You said this gong is consciousness?" "Yes, I said 'this' is consciousness." "How can matter be consciousness?" I answer, "From our standpoint, 'this' is not matter at all." I strike the gong. "This' also is not matter. 'This' is one 'side,' one of the halves, of consciousness. When we cut a melon in two, one 'side' and the other 'side' fit together. We say the outside is one of the halves of consciousness, one half of consciousness."

In Buddhism there are many explanations of consciousness and of how to think about consciousness. There are many different systems. I have been thinking about it many years, reading all the famous sutras on consciousness.

When I was young I always questioned whether an object's color existed in it. It does not exist there, but on the retina of my eyes, because all color is created in the eyes. Then what is it that exists there in the object? According to your science, vibration exists there. The vibration of what? The vibration of ether. The rays of the sun produce vibrations and our consciousness co-vibrates with them. According to the degree of vibration, color is produced on our eye, just as sound, when I strike the gong, is produced on the drum of the ear. The vibration of air is produced by striking the gong, but not the sound. I thought that Western science explained everything very clearly. I was very glad to know the theory of the vibration of ether, the theory of the waves of light. Your scientists explained that the things that exist about us are ether. Fundamental existence is also ether.

These days you have changed your theory. To explain the foundation of the universe you now use the electron theory; the electron is reality. The name has been changed. Your philosophers explain that the real object that exists is noumenon, not phenomenon. Noumenon is not color, noumenon is not sound. We cannot demonstrate

the shape or color of noumenon. It exists beyond our five senses; but it exists, it is real existence. Sometimes your philosophers call it reality, things existing by themselves. Well, I thought, that is very near to Buddhism. Your philosophers try to prove it. But how can they know the existence of a reality that has nothing to do with the five senses? Since it has never existed in the realm of the five senses, how can they prove it? Somehow, they explain, they have proved it dialectically. I thought: the Buddhists have a shortcut to understand this thing that has nothing to do with our five senses. The pivot of Buddhism is to understand the one thing that exists, but that is not existing in the realm of our five senses. I cannot see it, I cannot smell it, I cannot hear it, I cannot grasp it, I cannot even think about it; but I know there is an existence without calling it by any name. Of course Buddhists have given it many names: Emptiness, Original Nature, Buddha-nature, Nirvana, Adana-consciousness--there are plenty of names; or they call it Amida Buddha, or Maha Vairochana Buddha. They have given it so many names they certainly must have known it.

I woke up to that existence all of a sudden, bewildered how to call it. I realized later that many people have proved its existence. Well, it is not existing in the sphere of the senses, in the sphere of the intellect. Perhaps we do not need to say anything about it. But we cannot

push it entirely outside our thinking activity, unless we cannot think anything about anything. We say, "He has attained enlightenment." Well, if anyone proves the existence of Emptiness, then from the state of Emptiness deduces all existing things, then thinks about the universe, the world, and man, we certainly can say he has enlightened wisdom.

The outside is one side of this Emptiness, and the inside is the other. The outside called Emptiness is vibrating: it is living, it is not dead. Perhaps it is dead matter to our senses, but the thing itself is not dead; it is living always. The inside is living always too. My death and my birth do not interfere with the perpetual existence of the inside called consciousness. When outside and inside meet existence is produced. Until that time there is no existence. Potentially there is, but no one knows of it. When I say inside, it is not my inside. When I say outside, it is not the outside I am looking at. It is the nature of consciousness to look at everything, to realize both existence and consciousness when the concussion occurs. Otherwise we don't call it consciousness. This is the fundamental faith, if I can use this word, of the Buddhist. Buddhists do not call it God, do not call it Creation. That unthinkable existence appears under two different names, matter and spirit. Man proves the side of the spirit by himself, but not until he makes contact with matter, or, to use a Buddhist word, un-

til he makes yoga with matter. Though this word yoga is so important, its meaning has degenerated and it is used in a very loose way today; but when Shakyamuni Buddha used this word he used it in its original sense.

But I must explain further. The next question is: what is discernment? When we make contact with the outside, with consciousness or matter, whichever you call it--some Buddhists call it real or perpetual existence--whether your consciousness has proved it or not, the existence outside is real existence, not phenomena.

We reach this state by meditation, by the study of koans. In a famous koan, we look at a stone in the garden and say: "Is that stone existing within us, or is it existing outside in the garden?" Thinking about such problems, we really come to the knowledge we are seeking.

After we see that this real existence is a single mass of existence, then very slowly we perceive many different appearances within it. When I was motoring on Long Island, suddenly our car came upon an immense garden of tulips; three or four acres of ground were covered with only one color, that of crimson tulips. You could call it a "crimson" field. Then you would begin to discriminate, to see one part and then another. It was like an artist's learning to use colors. When you first look at a landscape, you might say "pale"--the sky is pale, the tree leaves are pale also. Later you would say the sky is blue, the

trees are green; and later still you would find many different shades of blue and green--blue-green, yellow-green, lemon--you will see as many colors as you have learned, thus defining many different shades. Your eye must be trained to divide all these different shades of color.

I studied painting. In the beginning, I used only one color to paint the sky blue. My teacher, Mr. Partington, complained: "You are painting what? Sky?" "Yes, I am." "Then paint sky, don't just spread material on the canvas." When we look at the sky, every minute the color is changing. While I looked away, mixing blue to match the sky, even as I was doing it, the sky had changed. I am sure you understand this.

This knack of seeing different shades of color can be applied to seeing human life. If you say someone is bad or someone is good it is like saying the sky is blue--nothing can be accurate in your thinking. "Good" and "bad" are names. We look at everything by these names and we always think about everything by these names; this is a naive and inaccurate way of thinking. Because your mother said "bad," it is bad; because your father said "good," it is good. And you teach this to your children and never think about

OF VANESSA COWARD THE CRITICS SAY:

NY HERALD TRIBUNE: The Year of the Tiger (1962) has produced these Zen-influenced brush works by an artist who has spent some time in Kyoto. The artist can draw, and luckily draws more on the history of oriental art than on her unconscious. "Fruit in an Empty Bowl" sounds unappetizing, but isn't.

it. Your brain doesn't work until you get into some real predicament. Then you must think about it yourself, and you must make a judgment yourself. Well, you see smoke behind your house and think there must be a fire; this proves accurate. You say "Where there is smoke there must be fire." Then you see a cloud over in New Jersey that looks like smoke and you think there is a fire. This time it is not accurate at all.

When your discernment becomes accurate you will not make this mistake, you will know. When you come to life, you know death. When you know light, you understand shadow. When you realize enlightened mind you can comprehend deluded mind. There is a Chinese saying: "When the women and the horses become fat, you know there is war in the future." The tree is green, but when you see the first leaf falling you know that autumn has come.

But our thinking is not this accurate. In the beginning, our view of the outside is not accurate and our discernment is not trained, so our thinking is not always correct. Why our mind is so deluded and our observation so incorrect will be clear when I explain to you the nature of the seventh consciousness, called samskara.

NY TIMES: Darkling, understatedly poetic landscape water-colors follow the Zen Buddhist precept of letting the picture come into being without thought or anticipation of meaning. That Mrs. Coward is an adept at Oriental calligraphy and stylistic devices adds to the authentic air of her work.

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Founded in 1930 by  
Sokei-an Sasaki

A square seal with a double-line border. Inside, the Chinese characters '第一禪院' (Dì Yī Chán Yuàn) are arranged in a 2x2 grid. The top-left character is '第', top-right is '一', bottom-left is '禪', and bottom-right is '院'.

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