

# ZEN NOTES



*Year  
of the  
Serpent  
1965*



## SCKEI-AN SAYS

### HORIZONTAL AND PERPENDICULAR

In the Western world, everyone speaks about reincarnation or transmigration. We in the Orient do not speak so much about this. We might say, "I was in such-and-such a stage of such-and-such a world in my past incarnation and I will be in such-and-such a stage in such-and-such a world in the future." But no one explains clearly what the past and future worlds are. It is difficult to speak plainly of my understanding because to grasp it as it is, one must open the door of mystic Buddhism--so-called esoteric Buddhism. However, if I speak in allegory, perhaps it will not be so hard to understand.

One way to look at the arrangement of the three worlds--past, present, and future--is on a horizontal line of which these are three points. Another arrangement of past, present, and future can be made perpendicularly.

Buddhists call this universe "the sea of wisdom." This whole universe is a mass of Wisdom, *Prajna*. In English there is no good translation for *Prajna*. "Wisdom" has not the same meaning as *Prajna*--the power we have that knows, perceives, and judges everything without training, experience, or learning. We have this power innately--as the universe has it, intrinsically. It is in water, fire, air; in plants, insects, animals, man, God. This wisdom is innately in all beings and is quite different from studied knowledge, experience in daily life, or anything learned from books and analyzed and systematized in the brain. It is nearer to intuition--perhaps

this is the best English word to take the place of *Prajna*, meaning the power that decides and knows everything without previous experience.

So this universe, this ocean of Wisdom, is a mass of *Prajna*. On the surface of the great ocean there are waves, great waves that reach upward to the sky. Beneath the waves is a swift stream, or current. In the deepest part is eternal tranquility. Here there are no waves, no currents--just solid still water.

If we were to travel across the ocean from San Francisco to Japan, stopping over in Hawaii, San Francisco would be the past, Hawaii the present and Japan the future, arranged horizontally. Another horizontal arrangement would be: my father's body, my body, the body of my child. This is the physical reincarnation, through three physical bodies--past, present and future. The body is transmitted through these three stages.

But these transmigrations have nothing to do with the perpendicular arrangement of the three stages from the surface to the bottom of the ocean. On the surface, there may be a storm with which the middle current has nothing to do; the current may move at a great speed, but the bottom has nothing to do with it. The deep ocean never moves no matter how swiftly the current travels. It remains in eternal tranquility.

The horizontal, the surface of the ocean, the physical reincarnation, is the first stage of the perpendicular. What corresponds to the middle, or second stage? It is our inner phenomena, our mental attitude. This, too, is transmitted to our children: children of an Irish mother have an Irish mind,

children of a Japanese mother have a Japanese mind. Each nation has a particular attitude of mind.

Your life resembles that of a plant: your hair and nails grow but you have nothing to do with it. There is a plant in Africa, for instance, that droops its branches at the approach of an insect, catches and absorbs it, all without knowing. Even though a human being has five senses open to the light, he may be sleeping with his eyes wide open. Such a one looks like a being in a waking condition, but he is really sleeping. If we observe the sleeping stage of life, we see many different movements: the fighting spirit of the pine tree as it opens its needles; the gentle and clinging wisteria; the passionate camellia and the tender rose. Though all are in the sleeping stage, each has its particular attitude. We feel it in ourselves as mood, Samskara, the great current of life. It corresponds allegorically to the middle stream.

At the bottom is the everlasting alaya consciousness. This is the third stage. You do not know anything about it, but it carries your life. Sleeping or waking, it is always there. This is the deepest soul, the deepest life, that is the root of our existence. It has nothing to do with mood and the temperamental life of the surface. Here, though we die, we live; though the universe is destroyed in the kalpa fire, the alaya consciousness is never destroyed.

Looking at our life--past, present, future--from the perpendicular view, we see that one may remain in the samskara stage or one may stay on the surface and never reach the bottom. But in the past, everyone has been in

the deeps -- I saw you there! You sprang from there, but perhaps you have stayed here on the surface so long you have forgotten the deeps.

You can tell from where each has come and where he will go, from where he gets his body. You can judge past and present and future as you stand upon the physical phenomenal stage. You can also tell from what stage of the ocean of Wisdom anyone has come. Sometimes you see a man who never smiles and never grows angry; his eyes are calm as those of an ox and he is very stupid. He has come from the bottom of the sea and is not acquainted, has not much experience with, the surface.

This is the perpendicular arrangement of three stages: waves, current, and eternal tranquility. It is not necessary to enter meditation to experience these three stages. You can go from the surface into the stream; when you feel no movement in the mind, no dreams haunting the brain, nothing to think of and nothing to observe--then you become just one soul, one with the universe. You will scarcely know that you are breathing. Then you can experience life at the bottom of the ocean, the sea of Wisdom. It is no longer your life there, but Buddha only. In meditation you can reach your real home. At the bottom of the ocean, there is no differentiation, no form or color. This is the Dharmakaya. In the middle stream is the omnipresent light. You stand in the center of this light and it reaches to the end of the universe--you feel the light with splendor. When you open your eyes to the phenomenal stage, the present, you can see the past and imagine the future.

ZEN AND ART By Mary Farkas

Some time ago a young man of Japan visiting New York asked me to think about whose works should be shown in an exhibition of paintings of American students of Zen. This triggered a chain of thoughts that linked add up co--What is Zen art?

At the time I countered with a series of questions that have been forming in my mind for years. Though they are still not completely jelled, perhaps their asking may clear the atmosphere a bit. The young Japanese smiled, with that particular cautiousness the wary display when they see the direction of the test about to come, and are preparing themselves as for a duel to the death which they know they are also going to enjoy. For the Japanese, I think, have not solved, or even stated the questions that underlie the formulation of a definition. Like any good problem, it goes right to the root of the matter. Let me put it from several angles.

What is the meaning of "Zen" in relation to art? What are the criteria of "art" and "Zen" that may be applied to individual works of art? Who is qualified to decide if a work is "Zen", or Zen art, or even art within the definition determined?

For an answer to the first question I ran to Sokei-an. Sokei-an would not rate as an expert art critic, in my opinion, but he was a recognized art student, and a skilled craftsman. To list his qualifications: In his teens, he was apprenticed to a woodcarver, who specialized in exterior carvings for temples, especially dragons. Sokei-an became sufficiently accomplished at this to support himself by carving for several years. In 1899, then seventeen, he entered the Imperial University Academy of Art in Tokyo, from which he was graduated in 1905. In 1901 he entered the atelier of Takemura Koun, a well-known sculptor, who accepted him as a house student. From 1908 to 1910 he studied art at the California Art Institute and at the studio of Richard Partington, a successful painter. So much for his education in art, which I think entitles him to an opinion.

The one characteristic of Japanese (and, by extension, Eastern) art that differentiates it from Western, in Sokei-an's statement, is "Samadhi."

This is the description of what he means by this given in a lecture November 23, 1940.

*I did not learn how to practice samadhi in a monastery, but from my art teacher. When I was learning to paint the sea, my teacher asked his students not to sketch at the seashore or copy the waves in ancient masterpieces. "Without brush or palette," he said, "go alone to the oceanside and sit down in the sand. Then practice this: Forget yourself until even your own existence is forgotten and you are entirely absorbed in the motion of the waves."*

*We took our teacher at his word, and day after day in the summertime we went to the seashore, to the so-called Ninety-nine Mile Beach on*

*the Pacific Ocean, near Tokyo, and there we would stay all day long watching the waves. When we came back in the evening to our lodging houses and hotels we felt as though we were still at the seashore listening to the pounding surf. Some young artists would stay there a week, then, returning to their studios in the city, suddenly seize their brushes and paint waves in the very rhythm of the sea. This is our way of art. This is also a way of samadhi. You transform yourself into the object you are confronting.*

A modern Chinese authority on Taoism, Chung-yuan Chang, in a very fine book, *Creativity and Taoism*, Julian Press, New York, 1963, carries the case even further when he calls to our attention that the great Chinese Tao-painters (as used here, the same as "Zen", I believe) "make their contributions only when they have had... ontological experience and dwell in a state of inner serenity."

How "spontaneity" (which is the outer expression of inner serenity) is brought to function in an accomplished painter is most often illustrated by the following anecdote told by Sokei-an.

*In the Tokugawa period there was a famous painter, Taigado, who had studied under the Zen Master Hakuin. A certain feudal lord commissioned him to paint Mount Fuji on a golden screen. So Taigado went to see Fuji-san, carrying only his brushes, paper and yatate, his ink-case which he wore fastened to his girdle. He journeyed from Kyoto, along the Tokaido, down to Suruga, a distance of about two hundred miles. Every day he went around Fujisan, observing always. He saw Fujisan in the evening glow and in the morning sunlight, at noontime and at dusk, on rainy days and*

*on windy days, from the back and the front, and flowing down to the sea. He struggled to grasp the spirit of Fuji in the moment of samadhi, but he failed.*

*It was a chilly autumn night. Taigado had put up at a poor dilapidated inn in the country back of Fuji. At midnight he arose and walked along the verandah to the kawayu. As is the custom in Japan, the bowl of water for washing the hands was just outside the door. Taigado pushed open this sliding door and casually looked out. There, very near his eyes, in the light of the full moon, he saw Fujisan, gigantic Fujisan, standing jet-black against the midnight sky. He was seized with inspiration. There was no time to fetch brush and paper. He spilled the black ink from his yatate into the washing bowl, dipped his towel into the water and with a single stroke flung Fujisan upon the shoji. "Ah! I greet you, my Fujisan!" he cried, looking at the majestic mountain which he had caught alive on the sliding screens. "You were a stranger to me for a long time." Then he washed his hands and went to bed, thinking no more about it. The next morning he departed for home.*

*Some time later the feudal lord sent for Taigado and said: "You stayed away a long while. You must have brought back some wonderful sketches of Fujisan."*

*"I brought back nothing," said Taigado.*

*"You brought back nothing? What do you mean?"*

*"I dropped Fujisan on the paper of a shoji in a country inn. That was all I could do. I have lost my desire to make another painting of Fuji."*

*"Well, then, we must get that shoji," the feudal lord said. He sent his*

samurai to the district back of Fuji to locate the remote country inn. After much searching, the inn was found and the innkeeper was asked whether he remembered someone, a painter, who had stayed there one autumn night.

"Oh yes, the crazy fellow who damaged the paper on my shoji!"

"What have you done with it?"

"It is upstairs. Soon I shall repair it with fresh sheets of paper. That crazy fellow smeared all the clean white paper with black ink."

"Let us see it!"

The innkeeper led the way up a flight of stairs. As they were about to enter the room, the samurai stopped on the threshold. The fourfold shoji was ablaze with the light of the setting sun, and scrubbed upon its expanse, like a black silhouette, was Fujisan looming in majestic sublimity before them.

"This is Fujisan itself!" We must have this screen. We must bring it to our lord. Wonderful Taigado! How did he enter this samadhi?"

"What! The painter was the famous Taigado?" the innkeeper exclaimed in surprise.

"Yes, yes the famous Taigado."

"Then I cannot give this away," said the innkeeper. "And what is more I will not sell it either. No, I refuse to sell it."

In the end the feudal lord himself had to come to the remote country inn to see the painting which he had commissioned Taigado to paint, and in order to obtain possession of it he was forced to buy the entire house. But, as the inn stood on the land of another feudal lord, he could not move it to his own domain. So, lamenting, he left it where it stood.

A more advanced stage of "creativity" is suggested in the following story. Here it is not objective reality that is to be observed in essence and then reproduced, but essence that must be concretized, and then reproduced. In other words, the artist must really create something from nothing.

A well known painter was commissioned by a Zen master to paint a dragon on the ceiling of his temple. As I recall this story, the temple was Myoshin-ji. After all the usual arrangements had been made, the artist was given the main requirement. It must be a painting of a real dragon he had seen. "But I have never seen a dragon," the bewildered painter objected. The master was adamant.

After a few years of meditation in the temple, the painter was at last able to meet the dragon and paint it. Thus his masterpiece was brought into being.

For a painting to be classified as "Zen" art, at all, then, it must have been produced in a state of samadhi. How shall this be judged? When I asked the young Japanese, he twinkled: "Generally it is thought that a work by a Zen priest or Roshi is 'Zen' art."

"Not necessarily," I countered. "It might or might not be. What would a man's professional title have to do with it?"

If one examines the works of art of the two greatest Zen "masters" who were painters, one must certainly accept their works as art, but are they "Zen?" I am referring to Hakuin and Sesshū, and I do not mean to advance any opinion on this subject at this time, only to open the matter for speculation.

In the case of the great fifteenth century priest-painter Sesshū, I will merely note that although Sesshū was

enrolled at about the age of ten in a Zen Buddhist temple, received the education of a priest, and spent his whole life in the atmosphere of Zen temples, from the beginning he was more artist than Zennist. "A famous legend of his boyhood," recounts Jon Carter Covell in *Under the Seal of Sesshū*, De Pamphilis Press, Inc., New York, 1941, "suggests that the neophyte later known as Sesshū did not relish the orthodox routine of Zen discipline but already evinced a precocious artistic bent."

*Sesshū liked painting from an early age, but not religious studies. One morning his priest-teacher became so angry that he bound Sesshū with a rope to a post in the temple, but as the day advanced and dusk approached the teacher took pity on him. When he reached the room and was about to cut and remove the rope he was surprised to see rats under Sesshū's feet. The priest-teacher tried to chase the rats but as they did not move, he examined more closely. Sesshū, towards the end of the day, had painted the rats as his tears dripped on the floor, using his big toe for a brush and his tears for ink. They appeared on the temple floor as powerful and alive as though running about. After this the priest-teacher acknowledged Sesshū's skill and did not admonish him against painting.*

An attempt has been made by Professor Hoseki Shinichi Hisamatsu, who, if not technically a Zen roshi, has an equivalent standing, to enumerate the seven qualities that a "Zen" painting must have in order to be a demonstration of "Zen spirit." My notes of his view were taken at a lecture he gave in New York in Japanese in 1958, translated by Professor Fujiyoshi. This lecture presented the essence of a

series of lectures he had previously given at Harvard that year and a book which came out later.

1. *Musho*. Nothing sacred. The sacred is negated and does not appear completely.

2. *Kakunen*. Boundless lucidity. No one thing. This is the basis of the simplicity of Zen art.

3. *Sabi*. Dignity, austerity, age, nobility. This quality cannot be seen in flowers or green trees, but appears in an old pine tree that looks like a dignified person. It cannot be explained in words, nor can it be grasped by ordinary people. It is the unique characteristic of Zen art.

4. *Shizen*. Naturalness that is not naive, nor just "not artificial." It is based on the Zennist *mushin* or *munen*.

5. *Yugen*. Based on the Zennist *mutei*, it manifests the depth of the bottomless ocean, its subtlety and profundity.

6. *Datsujaku*. Free activity that depends on nothing, not even Buddha. It is *yugezammai*, play-samadhi.

7. *Seijaku*. Calmness or serenity. There is nothing noisy about the composed mind, but the absence of noise is not enough to produce this quiet. In the East, the stillness of the mountain is felt more strongly when birds are singing.

All seven characteristics are aspects of one unified thing, each of which involves all the others, but it is the oneness of all that creates the simplicity of Zen. The moderns in art emphasize simplicity but it is different from the simplicity of Zen, which is an expression of the deepest self, Buddha nature. (To be continued).

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## THE WORLD OF BOUNDLESS LIGHT

A story is told of a queen of India who, through no fault of her own, was confined in a dungeon with no hope of escape. Shakyamuni Buddha sent Ananda to tell her that she could emancipate herself by meditation. At any moment, her soul could step out of her body and take refuge in the boundless light of the universe. This is the origin of the Amida sect. Amida means endless light. We are just sparks of this light; each will return to it.

It would be wonderful if we could do this right now--just step out of our skins! We all wish to get out, as though we were imprisoned in a dungeon. But we can not succeed while we are searching for something outside.

There is just one way to step out at any time. Shakyamuni Buddha found that way and taught it to us. It is as though you were an orange with one seed in the center. You must always come back to that seed and from there you can step out, because that centermost is the only spot that speaks loudly about the truth of the universe. Can you find that center in yourself? You have no seed that is tangible, but certainly you have a center in yourself. Where is it? If you try to find it, you will search in vain; but if you do not try, it is there like a moon-print in the water. You cannot grasp it--do not touch it! The moon is floating on the surface of the waves. If you abandon all your attention toward anything--you will come into that center. What is it? You think, see, hear, smell, touch, taste; you are conscious of yourself.

Where is the center? Every one says consciousness is the center--but

do not make this mistake! Who *knows* that your consciousness is reflecting all phenomena? Who *knows* that consciousness? Can consciousness know itself, or does something else know? There is something deeper in you which knows that the eye reflects. In meditation, you will know that there is a center, all shadows reflecting upon it. Imagine a crystal ball inside you and that the knowledge is held in its center. But this knower cannot be caught because the knower *is* the catcher--only the knower knows its knowing! It is like standing upon a pin-point; you cannot move from this centermost focus of yourself. This point is the one seed in the orange and you are within the seed. The only way to step out is from *there*. There is nothing more to say about this--all that is left is the practice. I cannot explain it any deeper than this. So step back into that center and step out. But do not have any conception about standing in the center of light and soaring out like a bird.

It is not easy to understand the real meaning of boundless light--but there is a way to reach there. You can step into your innermost spark, and with that spark you can annihilate yourself. When you prove what it is by yourself, you will find it entirely different from your previous conceptions. No one can teach you to swim on the floor--you must learn in the water. So practice this in meditation.

*Excerpts from Sokei-an's early lectures, probably given in 1930, reconstructed by Vanessa Coward from the notes of Audree Kepner.*

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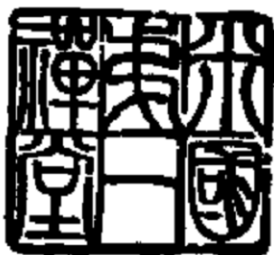
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Founded in 1930 by  
Sokei-an Sasaki



First Zen Institute of America  
113 E30 Street  
New York, New York 10016  
(212)-686-2520  
[www.firstzen.org](http://www.firstzen.org)

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