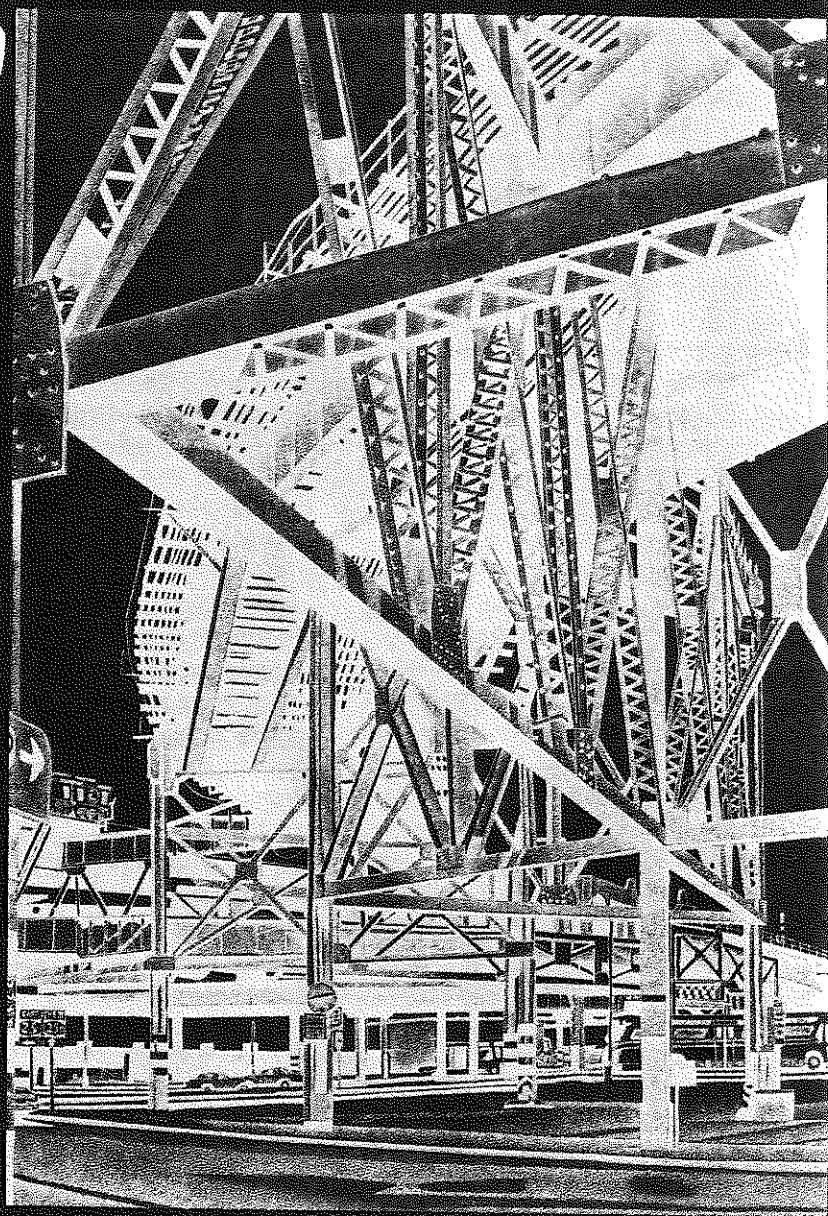


ZEN NOTES



When Sokei-an Sasaki returned to New York City from his final two years of Zen study in Japan with his teacher Sokatsu Shaku to begin his life as a Zen master in August 1928 ("from the first day I commenced to make a hermitage..."), it was the inauguration of seventeen months of frustration and disappointment. He left two men, one after eight months, the other after three days, who had invited him to share their dreams of establishing centers when he found that they were looking for an employee, not a teacher, a servant rather than a master. Their "places" were not in the heart of the city and proved "off the track" literally as well as figuratively. Their means were neither adequate nor proffered. The mission given him by his teacher required means to carry out, but none were forthcoming. His marriage (according to one contemporary "saddled on him" by his teacher) had long since ended in separation. His religious career was at a standstill.

"One year I spent roaming around..." He had already lived in a number of "ethnic" (as they say today) parts of the city he came to know intimately. In pleasant weather he liked to visit Central Park or the green areas near the Hudson River.

"When you go to Riverside Drive and sit beside the Hudson River--your thoughts come and go like the sailing boats. Finally they go away--the mind becomes blank--and you do not see the sailing boats. Then the blank mind goes away, and

you are absolutely not there! But you still see the river and the green trees; you are expanded into the universe, and your heart beats in the rhythm of nature. Then--'Oh!'--and you come back. If you are a religious man, you shiver and know you are with God!"

Another time about a year later, in nearly the same words, he spoke of this again: "When I meditate on a bench on Riverside Drive, all of a sudden I have forgotten my own existence; I am breathing with the Hudson River; I am one with God--I fill the whole sky!"

He loved New York.

Of course Sokei-an didn't have all that much time to spend "sitting" on a park bench or roaming the city. While he was living at Iwami's, he didn't take a regular job to support himself and send something to his wife. Iwami gave him about \$60 for this purpose during his eight month stay. He went back to Mr. Mogi's carving shop and in May, 1929 wrote to the furniture company where he had previously been employed for his old place back or for a letter of recommendation. They replied:

Chesterfield Furniture Co., Inc.
Designers and Manufacturers of Good Furniture
43-82 Vernon Blvd.
Long Island City, NY

To whom it may concern:

This is to certify that Mr. Yeita Sasaki was in our employ from October 1925 to October 1926. We found him to be a conscientious and able worker.

Very truly yours,

Chesterfield Furniture Co., Inc.

L. Lasdun

May 6, 1929

The Chesterfield letter won him a place with a Mr. Farmer, "who made and repaired many small objects of art." The address may have been Sixth Ave. and 55th Street, which in turn may have occasioned his move to West 53rd Street.

I don't have the exact address of where he was living with a black family on West 53rd Street in 1929, but his description of the pleasant large room in the shadow and earshot of the old New York El and about the size of the library at East 65th Street (pictured in Zen Notes XXVII/2,3/1980) puzzled me until a few months ago I read a fascinating series of New Yorker articles (June and July, 1981) by Jervis Anderson on "Harlem" which called the West 53rd Street district "the most attractive and most culturally stylish---of the black settlements in Manhattan. In the latter part of the nineteenth century this was where the more successful actors and musicians lived or gathered.."

To hear the sound of his one room is not at all difficult for me, as I myself once lived on the second floor of a building fronting the 6th Avenue El. If I narrow my mind's eye a little (or, better, focus my inner ear) I can clearly hear the rumble it made. (If you want to experience this and there's no El available, try the roller-coasters at a luna-park.) I never had a bad feeling about the sound, in fact it was somewhat reas-

uring, like the pulse of the city. Of course, privacy-wise, the people riding by your front windows could look into your home-life when the shades were up. But any glimpses they could catch were at too great a speed to be really intrusive. It's better than having a sightseeing bus go by slowly at dinner time, with people gawking out the windows, as is occasionally my lot even today in the Village, where Waverly and Waverly are joined at an angle, and tourists abound.

Sokei-an's picture of himself living in this room is not unpleasant. Once he told, "Finding time for quiet meditation...is very hard to New Yorkers. One day I went to the country, up the Hudson, because they said it was very quiet. Evening came and those crickets began to sing--all night long. What a noisy place! Oh, it was terrible! When I returned to New York, I found quietude under the Elevated and did not hear a sound. Quietude belongs to the mind."

EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue concludes Sokei-an's comments on the third chapter of the Sixth Patriarch's Record (concerning the Pure Land Teachings). However, we shall, in 1982, go back to pick up those parts that were omitted previously.

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SOKEI-AN SAYS
THE RECORD OF HUI-NENG

If you know your debt to your parents, you know how to be dutiful to them. If every one of you knows your duty, you who are of lower station or of higher station, will open the hearts to one another in compassion. If you know modesty, you who are superior or are inferior, will be reconciled. If you know patience, all evil wranglings will cease to be. If you rub two pieces of wood together, the rubbing will make fire. When muddy water becomes clear, the pond produces pink lotuses. Good herbs will be bitter to your taste and good words will sound harsh to your ear. Mend your fault; it will give growth to your knowledge. Guard your defect; otherwise you will prove that you are in prison. Every day you should practice that which benefits others. Your attainment of Bodhi, however, will not be due to the money that you give to the monks. Seek Bodhi by introspecting into your own mind. Do not seek it extraneously. You who are listening to my speech should practice what I tell you by having recourse to my instructions. You will see the Western heaven before your eyes."

*The Master said a gain:
"Worthy scholars, if you practice Bodhi by having recourse to this chant, you will realize your own true nature and will attain the ultimate of Buddhism. Time passes quickly without waiting for you! Everyone had better go home. I shall return to Ts'ao-ch'i'. If you have doubt, come here and ask your*

questions."

Thus the Governor and his staff and the men and women who were in the assembly became enlightened and accepted his teachings to uphold.

COMMENTARY

This is the end of Chapter three, which recounts a dialogue of the Pure Land between the Sixth Patriarch and Prefect Wei Chu.

If you know your debt to your parents, you know how to be dutiful to them. This is the usual Chinese virtue of filial piety. They place more emphasis upon this than on any other virtue; they thought it was the foundation of all virtue. They thought that the golden age was in the past, not in the future, and they believed that they came from a wonderful civilization which was not that of men but of gods.

So the father is always superior and the child is inferior, devolving from generation to generation. This religious consciousness points to the past, looking back to their source. Naturally they pay great respect to their parents. Modern man's home is always in the future, not in the past, so children will not look back to the parents and will not compensate for debts they owe to the parents. The emphasis is always on the children. In the Orient, the father and mother work all their lives for their children; at no time do they indulge themselves in their own comfort. So the children do the same thing. All their work is for the parents. Of course the grandfather and grand-

mother are living in the same home with these children. This family relationship is their system. The son finds a wife and makes a home. Then they call the parents into the home and their life begins. Today, the son finds a wife and says "Goodbye," beginning his own life.

Of course, according to the civilization which evolves from group to individual life, family life is still group life and then it will advance to civilized life. This is more comfortable. Today, husband and wife take the attitude of individuals; the individual is more important. The wife lives her life and the husband lives his life. Both may live in different houses and visit on Saturdays. This week they visit father, next week mother-- or they may make conversations by telephone. Perhaps this is how it will be in the future. We in the Orient are staying longer between group and individual life. Looking back to grandfather's time when all were in one house, there are many things in common to talk about. Which is better?

According to one teaching of Buddhism, you do not kill anyone, how can you forsake your father and mother? If you can get servants for the sake of the children, why not for the sake of the parents? In the Orient, no one must sacrifice more for his children than for his parents. We do not like to see a woman attaching to her children and looking scornfully at her old mother.

The Sixth Patriarch was an Oriental so his book takes the Oriental view.

If you know your debt to your

parents, you know how to be dutiful to them. If every one of you knows your duty, you who are of lower station or of higher station will open your hearts to one another in compassion. This is our commandment. Do not steal. If you know your duty, you will say: "My servants work very hard. I cannot take everything from them, so I will repay something." And the servant thinks: "For generations we have been kept by these lords. I have not done much. It is only my duty to my lord. I will die with him." In war, he dies proudly in front of the lord's horse, and the master cries: "Brave warrior, I will take care of your children!" This is not cold capitalism; capitalism is as a whip in the galley ship. Men are not chained with iron, but with dollar bills. There was no such capitalism in the Orient. There was a relation between lower and higher minds by compassion.

If you know modesty, you who are superior or who are inferior will be reconciled. Modesty! When I came to this country as a wood carver, the studio boss said: "Are you good?" "No," said I, "I am poor, but if you use me you will find what I can do." "But this is not a school of carving!" I did not get the job and I was discouraged. But my friend said to me: "This is America, and you must say, 'I am the best artist in the world--seventy-five dollars a week!'" So I went back another time and said: "I am the best artist in the world!"--and the boss took me at once. Everything is bluff.

In the Sixth Patriarch's time, the superior one would say: "Well,

it is not much comfort we are giving you, but in harvest day we will make good. Please endure." And the worker would say: "Oh master, I cannot work as I used to--you are good to me." Today, if anyone heard this, he would laugh. But modesty is very important, as well as a good brain and good speech. That is the law. Usually man is upside down. He has wonderful speech, a clever mind--but a bad heart. In other words, he has no guts; he is no good.

If you know patience, all evil wranglings will cease to be. Today, we cannot be patient any longer. In the factory, the boss says: "Work faster," and next day and next day it is the same--there is no end. Patience does not serve today. We must have a new commandment. I have a good commandment which I produced myself. Some day I will tell you, for patience is no longer expedient.

If you rub two pieces of wood together, the rubbing will make fire. When muddy water becomes clear, the pond produces pink lotuses. Good herbs will be bitter to your taste and good words will sound harsh to your ear. Also, there was a commandment not to abuse others for their faults nor to boast of your own ability.

Mend your fault. It will give growth to your knowledge. Guard your defect. Otherwise, you yourself will prove that you are in prison. Every day you should practice that which benefits others. This commandment is also no good today. There is no altruism. One has to be a strong egotist to win the fierce struggle of life today.

Attaining Bodhi, however, would not be due to the money which you give to the monks. By giving money to the temple, you cannot attain enlightenment--but people still think so today.

Seek Bodhi by introspecting into your own mind. Do not seek it extraneously. You who are listening to my speech, had better practice what I am telling you by having recourse to my instructions. You will see the Western heaven before your eyes. Right here is the end of this chapter. It is not so important to talk about, but the chant is made on the ten-fold commandments of Mahayana Buddhism, especially Zen. "You shall not kill, steal," and so on. It is a heavy commandment: "You shall not lie, you shall not be angry, you shall keep your treasure, you shall not despise the Buddha's three-fold treasure." About this, the Sixth Patriarch made his chant. It is important that you know this, but the rest is not so important.

The Master said again: "Worthy scholars, if you practice Bodhi by having recourse to this chant, you will realize your own nature and will attain the ultimate of Buddhism. Time passes quickly without waiting for you. Everyone had better go home. I shall return to Ts'ao-ch'i". The place of his temple. Sokei-an is my name. The Sixth Patriarch went south as I came east. This is another analogous relation.

"If you have doubt, come here and ask me your questions." Then the Patriarch retired.

Thus the Governor and his staff and the men and women who were in the assembly became en-

lightened, and accepted his teachings to uphold.

I wish that all here would be enlightened as soon as I finish this lecture!

REGRETS that ZN is late this month and will be again.

THANKS TO the kind persons who have once again eked out our diminished resources by adding to our modest requests for subscriptions and associate fees. We note the president of the USA is now imitating some of our economics. A week of no heat that happened to coincide with a warm spell was regarded as a bonus. Down-cut tree branches supply fireplaces. A burglary did not help. We're on paper bags cut down for wrapping paper.

LOST AND FOUND A woman's wrist watch with initials on back, after October sesshin.

BERNICE ABBOTT EXHIBITION noted from "Museum Magazine" art directed by Mel Tashian, showed her great 30's photos. November 22-30 at the International Center of Photography, 1130 Fifth Avenue. A reasonably-priced (\$4.50) Dover Paperback book is available at Barnes and Noble. If you want to be visually transported into Sokei-an's New York of the 30's --the El, the Park, the Flat-iron Building, the 'higher and higher' skyscrapers, they're all there.

THE RECORD OF BANKEI

Translated by Haskel

The Master addressed the assembly: "I don't speak about Buddhism and I don't speak about Zen; I can manage perfectly just talking about the precious virtue of the Buddha Mind that you all intrinsically possess. That's why when I speak to you I don't quote the words of the Buddhas and patriarchs. Other than the Buddha Mind you received from your parents at birth, there's nothing else (to discuss). That's why we speak of the School of Buddha Mind.

"It's because you fail to realize how vastly precious the Buddha Mind is, that you're deluded by things of no account. And it's being deluded that makes you into unenlightened beings. There's not even a shred of such a thing as a seed of ignorance that from the outset (predestines you to become) an unenlightened being. (On the contrary,) all of you are (endowed with) the seed of Buddhahood, but because you fail to realize this, you become deluded in all sorts of ways and transmigrate. To change the precious Buddha Mind you received from your parents at birth for (that of) an unenlightened being is certainly the height of unfiliality, and when you die and transmigrate you can't escape falling into the hells of the Three Evil Ways. This is indeed the very greatest unfiliality of all toward one's parents."

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CONVERSATIONS WITH FARKAS

Noted by Hackney

There are quite a few Zen teachers coming to America these days. I haven't met all of them, but I've talked with a number of them and I observe their careers here. I ask them the same question I ask any man--woman, too, if they are on their own. When, a while back, a Zen master came to New York, I asked him the question I always ask which is: do you want to come. He didn't answer this then nor over the years he remained. Why he kept coming back to New York City (which he really didn't like) was not clear. Once he said that he would remain as long as there was a person here or even half a person who was worthwhile to help.

Sokei-an's teacher was the one who first brought him here. Then he went back to Japan and he was drawn back to America and bounced back and forth. Finally, he remained.

He always stated that his teacher told him to "carry" Zen here--he did want to bring Zen here--that was clearly his purpose and all the time he was lecturing that was what he was really interested in.

Sokei-an had a personal feeling for America. He said, "I think Zen is inborn in American. They just haven't discovered it yet." He tried to point it out to them and say, "That's it!" This is what he did here--it was his destiny some say. He did tell a woman friend, who visited me after

his death, that he thought he had Western blood and that is why he felt to be in the West. I don't think he ever thought of going back to Japan.

The last time he returned to Japan, he visited Eizan, his dharma brother. Eizan later told me that Sokei-an by then had actually become uncomfortable in Japan. He didn't like to sit on the floor and follow Japanese etiquette. He didn't feel to do it.

When Nyogen Senzaki went back to Japan, he was not pleased to be there either, I was told. Senzaki, of course, was not Japanese, so therefore he had problems of various types over there which he didn't have in America. Both of them experienced anti-racial feelings against them in America, especially in California, and especially when they were in the concentration camps.

As Senzaki pointed out in his letters from the concentration camp, he really wanted to be here. He really loved America.

Cover: "The El" by Rudolph Hasler from the collection of Alan E. Kahn

gan-ri-ta

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