

ZEN NOTES



WHY DID JOSHU SASAKI ROSHI GO TO NORWAY?

Excerpts from an article by Fredrik Wandrup in Lørdags, 15 September 1984; translated from the Norwegian. Cover photo by Annelise Jackbo.

I have met a 78-year old Zen Buddhist monk. A 78-year old who is known throughout the whole western world as a driving force behind this at least 1500-year old road leading to wisdom and enlightenment.

Joshu Sasaki Roshi started his apprenticeship at 14 years of age. Twenty-two years ago he was sent to California to help establish Zen in the USA. This was certainly no "sun-fun" trip. Before leaving Japan he underwent a ceremony which entailed a promise to "bury his bones in America."

We meet this wise man at Frognerseteren. He is very small as he walks contentedly around under a wooly, grey-white sky which melts into the seven eternities of the Oslo fjord way below. Both the head and body are perfectly rounded, like a Norwegian "rolling" stone, as if the circle of life has formed him in its own picture. From perfect calmness he looks at you from his almost wrinkle-free face with eyes dark like a winter night.

With humility we ask: Master, in the knowledge that this is an infinitely complicated question, what exactly is Buddhism?

He focuses on you with the highbeam on, squints his eyes, laughs and says: So you'd like a few highlights, uh?

Please.

This is not difficult. Everyone has their own center of gravity, human beings, ants, mosquitos, mountains, the whole universe has its balance. The point is to find your balance, to become one with your own center of gravity. Thereafter one must recognize that one's own center of gravity forms a unity with all other centers of gravity. We must try to forget ourselves and share the center of gravity of the universe between us in harmony. First we must find our own self. Then we must recognize that this "self" doesn't exist. Does this sound contradictory?

Well, to be perfectly honest . . .

Our hesitant affirmation is followed by roaring laughter from a handful of the master's students.

There is no contradiction, only a constant circle, the master explains.

Part of the problem when interviewing a Zen master lies in the fact that Zen cannot be explained, only experienced. However, the central point in the teaching is, as far as we can understand, to create some kind of spontaneous feeling of oneness with reality around us.

Laughter means a lot to our friendly friend. Through laughter you dissolve yourself and meet God, Roshi says. Everyone should start the day with a good laugh. Not a flat ha-ha, but a deep laugh from the belly.

The master has no relation to Japanese fashion and Shogun series. He doesn't watch TV, doesn't read newspapers.

I ask, How did Zen Buddhism start? Roshi takes his tea cup and answers: The only thing you need to do is to establish a relation with a tea cup. When you touch the cup you dissolve yourself. Then you get closer to Buddha or God. Do you understand?

The Zen master is no guru, no leader of the people. You are like a child lost in the forest, and he merely points at the way out, one student explains. But he does not walk either ahead of you or with you.

When one has reached 78 as a Zen Master, has one then reached the summit of wisdom?

Once again his face unfolds into a smile, as difficult to interpret as the furrows of an old tree root.


The end of the road? Yes, he says and laughs, but the end is only a new beginning. Self-contradictory, eh?

JOSHU SASAKI ROSHI SAYS

In Zen what we call our work or practice is that whereby the wisdom of Buddha or God, the absolute or perfect wisdom, is matured. Buddhism teaches that this perfected wisdom lies latent in all human beings already. Those who engage in this practice of maturing this latent wisdom are called Bodhi-sattvas. When this perfected wisdom has arisen, has

matured, then there is no longer any need to engage in formal practice. From our present position of immaturity, we engage in practice to mature and develop insight and clarity. Even though we are presently immature, we are still Buddha, we are still absolute.

JOSHU SASAKI ROSHI (quoted by Steve Sanfield in *Zen and Hasidism*, compiled by Harold Heifetz, Quest Books, 1978): When students would ask Roshi to translate the four Bodhisattva vows they chanted into English, he would tell them, "No need translation. Just chant. Forget yourself."

"JOSHU SASAKI ROSHI SAYS" has been the headline for innumerable striking statements by Sasaki Roshi, culled from the spoken (translated) words of this modern, world-honored bodhidharma. In 1987 he is celebrating his 25th year of teaching in America as well as his 80th birthday. His Western centers are claiming so much of his time he has proclaimed that his March 15th visit to New York is farewell to the East coast centers he has been visiting quite regularly for the past 18 years. But "traveling men" don't give up traveling so quickly. D.T. Suzuki, for instance, got past four score and ten, I believe. Anyway, happy birthday and many happy returns. New York  you.

KATSUKI SEKIDA (from *Zen Training*): "Mu" means "Nothing" and is the first koan of Zen. You might suppose that as you sit saying "Mu," you are investigating the meaning of nothingness. But that is quite incorrect. It is true that your teacher, who has instructed you to work on Mu, may repeatedly say to you, "What is Mu?" "Show me Mu," and so on, but he is not asking you to indulge in conceptual speculation. He wants you to experience Mu. And in order to do this, technically speaking, you have to take Mu simply as the sound of your own breath and entertain no other idea.

WHERE IS PARADISE? Noted by Long Arm

The other morning a young man who identified himself as a poet came unannounced to the front door. He wanted to know about the life of Zen. Unzipping his canvas valise, he thumbed through a set of his poems that were written in a large, young scrawl.

"I feel every country is a personality," he said, "so I am writing a poem about each one. I've done 53 countries so far."

After surveying the deserted mid-morning zendo he asked several questions.

After he learned how to sit with us, after he graduated so to speak, what higher spiritual life might he move onto? In short, where is paradise? It was quite clear that he felt somewhere, close by, he could find heaven.

When his question was brought up for ZN comment the next day, Mary Farkas, digging like a squirrel into the mass of papers on her desk, emerged with this quotation from Mumon Yamada Roshi:

"What then, is the aim of life? To enjoy. In fact, there is no purpose in life. Only those who have not reached the destination speak of it. For once you are at the destination, what can you do but enjoy your life there? When you reach what you were heading for, you have nothing to do but to enjoy life. A world where everybody can enjoy his life is a paradise."

Farkas, reminded of the comment someone had once made that 113 East 30th Street was like a paradise, noted:

"I happened to look into the outback before sitting this AM and caught a glimpse of something moving. It was a squirrel. He was bounding like a kangaroo and as I watched, suddenly leaped half up the trunk of the peach tree, then onto the top of the fence where he ran along at full tilt, unimpeded by the barbed wire, then down to the ground, then up into the air in a kind of crazy spiral.

"He was clearly unconscious of my presence, so this couldn't have been a display for me. I was talking about this with Janet who told me there are two squirrels out there in the wood. She saw them displaying quite a lot of affection for one another just like Adam and Eve."

Q & A WITH SOKEI-AN

What is that which is called the perfect Sambhogakaya? (This section concludes The Great Sixth Patriarch's Teaching, Chapter VI, 13A.)

First it was asked what is the pure Dharmakaya; now it is asked what is the perfect Sambhogakaya.

Dharmakaya is like the air or etheric atmosphere. Sambhogakaya is like light.

Dharmakaya is the consciousness of the universe: it is not your own consciousness.

Sambhogakaya is the consciousness of the existence of Dharmakaya. Because Dharmakaya does not know its own nature, it is known by Sambhogakaya, consciousness.

There is a story: while the Sixth Patriarch meditated, he saw a fire burning in the bottom of clear, deep water. It means that Dharmakaya suddenly realized its own existence. That which recognizes is really Sambhogakaya. We call it "wisdom." The Sixth Patriarch called it E; Dharmakaya he called Jo.

Everyone will understand Dharmakaya and Nirmanakaya. But Sambhogakaya is hard to understand.

It is this: just as a candle flame annihilates the thousand years' darkness, so the light of your wisdom will dispel the million years' ignorance.

You certainly do not yet realize your own original nature. But when you come to Zen and toil over your koan--then, without speaking a word, without entertaining any thought or trying to express it in any form--all of a sudden you are sitting on a chair and knowing: "This is that." If just once in a lifetime, that comes into your mind, then a million years of darkness are dispelled.

In the beginning, your enlightenment is so weak that I must guard it as I would a window pane, wiping it every day. If you are not here for three or four days, your mind becomes so smeared that I must wash it all over again as a mother washes her child. Until you find out that filth is not the real attitude of mind, I will wipe you; but some day you will find that clear mirror and will come into my room with it. I will look at you with respect and you will know who this Sokei-an is.

To find this mirror is not so hard. Just wipe

it all off and come in shining. You will look at me and I will look at you. Then you will understand the meaning of Buddhism.

EDITOR'S NOTE

An apology is in order to our subscribers. Sorry about delays, and more sorry about "mistakes made," particularly about doing the same thing twice.

Q & A WITH SOKEI-AN

Q What are the rules for meditation?

A There are no specific rules for meditation. But you must know that Buddhist meditation is different from all other meditation. We do not meditate upon any physical center, hip-bone or solar-plexus or any place whatsoever. The Buddhist meditation is meditation upon our own *mind*. There are four stages. The first effort is to eliminate the noise from the mind. When you look into mind, mind is like a pandemoniacal procession. This procession must be eliminated from the mind.

To find *pure mind* without any noise notions or imaginations, if you practice every day, will take you about three years. Sit in the position according to the Buddha statue. Sitting on a chair you cannot arrive at a settled mind. If you cannot bend your legs, stretch your legs and support your back with the wall, then sit with your legs simply crossed, and little by little get into the ideal position. Sit with the hips on a little cushion which is higher than the floor. Breathe deeply so that your breath goes down to your abdomen under your navel. In the beginning twenty minutes is enough for one meditation. Then stretch your legs and your body, and without standing take about five minutes' rest, then take another twenty minutes meditation. We call it mind cleaning. It is the first practice for all meditation in Buddhism.

Q Could the meaning of being born human be, to become human?

A (By FREDERICK FRANCK, in *A Little Compendium On That Which Matters*, noted by Mary Farkas. For further information on this not-to-be-published work, contact FF at Pacem in Terris.)

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition the paradigm of the fully Human is explicitly stated: the transhistorical Buddha is manifest as "Buddha Nature," the "Original Face," Rinzai's "True Man," as that which lies hidden as the spiritual core in everyone born human, waiting to be realized. In contemporary language one might interpret it as being the "Specifically Human."

...Buddhism, especially Mahayana, is rooted in the absolute trust (faith!) that we humans embody the Specifically Human, the Buddha Nature, and moreover have the capacity to realize it in both the sense of being fully aware of It, but also in the sense of actualizing It.

Human community is inconceivable unless founded in the Specifically Human and a value system based on it... There are still options for more or less right livelihood, simplification of life aims and even compassionate action according to one's capacity, circumstance, temperament . . . How? Each one must find these for himself.

Could it be that the swift alternation, each day, of overwhelming beauty and tenderness with unspeakable cruelty, stupidity, horror and evil is the only spiritual discipline we need--provided all the senses are kept open, no moodlifters taken--to awaken to the great Guru, the Master within? Yes!

What for lack of a better term I call "The New Order" is the anonymous, unorganized, organic network of awareness beyond all ideological labels, born under the lash of anxiety on the threshold of our collective suicide. It is a network of loners, encompassing those who reflect on the meaning of being Human in our technotronic rat trap, who dare to fathom the depths of life, of death, in order to attain a life-praxis, an ethos suitable for this end-time: religious attitude to existence. Without badge, without watchword, they recognize, hearten one another.

SOKEI-AN SAYS

The song that follows is from the Buddhist view, the Buddhist standpoint. I shall read it first, then explain the technical terms of Buddhism, and then give a commentary on the lines which I translated from the original Chinese text written in the T'ang dynasty--about the eighth century.

The deluded one seeks good fortune but never cares for enlightenment. He says that ensuring good fortune is the way of enlightenment. He says giving alms to the poor and to the monks is the way to secure good fortune. But he does not know that it is his own mind that produces the three evils. He desires to atone for his "sins" by his good fortune (karma) but, to the contrary, the more good fortune he has, the more he will commit sins. You must eradicate the root of your sins within your own mind. This is called the true confession of sins within your own pure nature. When you understand what is the true confession of the Mahayana, you will eradicate your own erroneous deeds and will practice righteousness. Thus you will atone for your sins! Then you, the students of Buddha, will become one and the same with all the Buddhas in original nature through contemplation. Only those who came before me handed down this teaching of sudden enlightenment. I desire that we should become one in the realization of our own original nature which is common to all of us. If you desire to find your own Dharmakaya, in this incarnation, all the formulas of the Dharma conceived in your mind must be wiped out.

It is very seldom that you find the Buddhist commandments in any Zen Record. From the standpoint of the Zen sect the Sixth Patriarch accepted all the old formulas of the commandments and confession and digested them with his wisdom and assimilated them in his own Zen attitude. So from this you will understand what the confession or commandment in Buddhism was in the true sense is very different from the popularized form of commandment or confession.

Fortune is very different from your idea of fortune as good or bad. What the Buddhist thinks

of as fortune is that one seizes the opportunity to accumulate good karma. --"I am very fortunate that I have assisted somebody today in his difficulty."-- So that by charity principally he can gather good karma. This is a very popular idea in Buddhism. To make good karma is to have good fortune--to make evil karma is sin.

Enlightened in Sanskrit is "Bodhi." When one knows the law of mind, the law of nature and the law of man, then one is enlightened. Certainly the enlightened one knows, realizes all spheres of consciousness. The Buddhist thinks that consciousness has many degrees of evolution, and when one has realized all the degrees of the evolution of his consciousness, he realizes the law of mind, of nature and of man. And we call such a one an enlightened one.

The *three evils* are passion, anger, ignorance--ignorance of the law of the nature of man. The three evils are the original suffering. Passion will be controlled by shila--morality. Anger will be controlled by meditation. Ignorance will be enlightened by wisdom. They are originally the same in nature but these three are in the primitive stage, and commandment, meditation and wisdom are in the developed stage.

Sin--evil karma--this is what came from the original suffering, passion, anger and ignorance. These are erroneous and the human being thinks that they are sin (to use a Christian expression).

True confession is meditation. We do not confess our sins to the reverend in the monastery as people do here. Here one confesses and then goes home and commits another sin.

Conscience applies to the moral side of conduct. When it takes its activity from intellect first, you call it wisdom.

Pure nature is your original nature which is intrinsic nature. In one word, it is Buddha-nature or God-nature. It is common to all sentient beings. Original nature has a tendency to find good even in evil as the ivy plant instinctively turns to light even in darkness.

The deluded one seeks fortune: The deluded one is one whose soul is buried under imagination and

superstition, who has no time to find his own true nature. His mind is stuffed with sawdust. The direct way is through contemplation.

To find out the real cause of suffering is real salvation, when you find the true confession of Mahayana. Hinayana is the ascending way of Buddhism --Mahayana is the descent.

To learn how to open your first sight is difficult. I am fifty-six years old, everyone thinks I could live perhaps twenty-eight or thirty more years. Perhaps I could live to be one hundred-and-twenty-five years--this would sit heavily upon me.

Rightness in Buddhism is non-ego. No sinful desire, no artificiality--that is, be natural with no particular establishment of law. This last is very hard to understand.

Suppose the water that runs between two mountains has a particular law--to go two miles here and then turn and go on two miles there? Water flows naturally, it will change its course at any time--it makes no mistake.

The best way is to find Buddha. There is no other way.

ON CHANTING

TAISEN DESHIMARU ROSHI (*The Zen Way to the Martial Arts*): "When we chant the Hannya Shingyo we push the sounds out, long and deep, pressing down on the intestines."

HAKUIN (from the *Orategama*): "The vital breath must always be made to fill the space between the navel and the loins...the source of strength two inches below the navel must naturally be filled with the vital breath and at no time may it be allowed to disperse...If a person is able to acquire this kind of breath concentration...he can recite the sutras from morning to night without becoming worn out..."

Journal

BOOK NOTED by John Storm

Despite the maturing of American Zen and the emergence of variants from Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam, many students in this country still perceive Japan as the place where Zen can be found in its most authentic form. And to some of the more conscientious (and economically independent) of them, a trip to Japan for a taste of the real thing in its traditional setting still seems essential. But where in Japan should they go? What clothing and other personal gear should they take? What about food, time of year, expenses? Where are the best teachers and which ones will accept students with limited or no Japanese? Dozens of questions must be dealt with, once the decision to go has been made, and at last a book is available with some practical answers: "Zen Guide," by Martin Roth and John Stevens, Weatherhill, 1985.

The main part of "Zen Guide" is an area-by-area rundown of individual centers, their histories, their specialties in everything from Zen practice to food, even their mailing addresses and telephone numbers. This is of obvious value to any prospective pilgrims, although, as the authors point out, the detailed information is subject to change and shouldn't be used without updating.

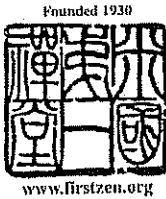
There is some trenchant general advice as well. Don't go in winter, for instance, unless you're prepared to practice in the numbing cold of an unheated temple. Take plenty of money; temple fees may be reasonable, but travel and lodging on the outside are very expensive. Avoid those places, if you are a woman, where you will be unwelcome or, on being allowed inside, expected to serve as a seamstress and maid.

Mr. Roth and Mr. Stevens also make a point that could apply anywhere: Don't get the idea that any given amount of practice qualifies you as an expert. The authors report, "One fellow we came across, here for a brief 100-day training session, related to us how he had already selected his 'Dharma-heir' from among his followers back in the U.S." No delusion is more pernicious, evidently, than the delusion of enlightenment.

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