

ZEN NOTES



THE FIRST ZEN OF AMERICA

KOSEN

American Zen has a foreign grandfather. His name was Kosen Imakita (1816-1892).

Kosen became a Zen monk at 25. After completing his Zen study under Gisan, he was appointed abbot of the Eiko-ji, where he taught Zen to the feudal lord of Iwakuni and many of his samurai retainers.

Before becoming a Zen monk he had studied Confucianism and, when he was 46, in 1862, he wrote a commentary on Confucian terms from the Zen standpoint, "One Wave On The Sea Of Zen," which is still studied in his line.

When Old Japan's seclusion ended July 14, 1853 with the receipt of an official communication from the President of the United States, New Japan was born. In 1868, after the conflict between the forces of the Shogun and the Emperor was resolved by the Emperor's taking over supreme authority, Japan's climb from non-entity to world-class power was effected during the last third of the 19th century by a reconstruction or revolution depending on how you look at it. In 1871, the samurai were abolished.

In 1875, Kosen, identified as a modern, was appointed head of the Religious and Educational Bureau of the new Meiji government, which was seeking to remodel the whole school system and to infuse "the methodical and progressive spirit of Western civilization into it." That same year, he also became Chief Abbot--a new official title instituted in the early years of the Meiji era--of the Engaku-ji in Kamakura. He was the first Rinzai Zen master to have his monks undertake modern university study, that is, philosophy and science. He was also interested in instructing lay students in Zen, and started the Ryomo Zen Institute, which attracted people of intellectual ability as well as practical experience. It was here that modern Zen got its start. Among Kosen's students were D.T. Suzuki, Nyogen Senzaki, Soen Shaku and Soen Sokatsu.

Toward the end of the century, many Buddhist monasteries, whose earlier beneficial influence upon Old Japan's civilization can scarcely be overestimated, had grown increasingly corrupt, superstitious

and immoral. Revenues had dwindled, and control of the cemeteries connected with temples was passing into the hands of civil authorities. This meant the loss of immense fees collectible for death rites. Times were changing. Kosen, in his 70's, was ailing. In 1891 he turned over his responsibilities at Engaku-ji to his successor, Soen Shaku, who became acting chief abbot, and died the following year at 76.

THE THREE WAYS OF OLD JAPAN

Excerpts from A Handbook of Modern Japan by Ernest Clement, A.C. McClurg, Chicago, 1903.

Old Japan turned for its guidance to Shinto, Confucianism and Buddhism. These were not in conflict. It was possible for a person to be a disciple of one or all at the same time. Someone said, "In nearly every Samurai's house were the moral books of Confucius, the black lacquered wooden tablets, inscribed in gold with the Buddhist names of his ancestors, while on the god shelf stood the idols and symbols of Shinto."

In 1899 when Shinto was officially disestablished as a religion, it was defined as "merely a cult embodying the principle of veneration for ancestors, and having for its only function the performance of rites in memory of the divine ancestors of the empire's sovereign." As a national cult, it can be summed up: "Follow your own impulses and obey the laws of the state."

An equally brief summation of Buddhism: "Don't do bad things, do good things, and purify your mind."

Similarly, Confucianism is "a philosophy of the relations between man and man, or the rules of life."

CONFUCIANISM

The "five relations" around which clustered the Confucian ethical code, were those of Father and Son, Ruler and Ruled, Husband and Wife, Elder and Younger Brothers, and Friends. In China, "filial piety" was the foundation of the whole system, but in Japanese Confucianism this was relegated to the second place, and "loyalty," the great virtue of the second relation, was put first. It included not only the relation between the sovereign and his subjects, but also that between a lord and his retainers, and even that between any masters and servants. The virtue of the third relation was known as "distinction," which practically meant that each should know and keep his or her own place; that of the fourth relation was "order," which insisted upon the primacy of seniority in age; and between friends the typical virtue was "faith," or "trust," or "confidence."

BUSHIDO

The word means, literally, "The Warrior's Way," which was the code of ethics that prevailed in feudal Japan. Bushido has been styled "Japanicized Confucianism" and it was chiefly Confucian in its constitution. But it gathered elements from Shinto and Buddhism: from the latter it received fatalism (Stoicism); and from the former it received loyalty and patriotism... It ignored personal chastity (except in name); it encouraged suicide and revenge; but it emphasized justice, courage, benevolence, politeness, veracity, honor, and self-control. One of its most powerful principles was giri (right reason), which is difficult to translate or define, but comes pretty close to what we call "duty" or "the right"...so-called peculiarities of the Japanese cannot be understood without a knowledge of Bushido...

BOOK NOTED by John Storm

You might think you'd get a fairly clear view of Tibetan Buddhism by reading the excellent books published in English by the Tibetans who have settled in the West. No better beginners' manuals exist than, say, "Meditation in Action," by Chogyam Trungpa, or "Openness Mind," by Tarthang Tulku. But Tibetan Buddhism isn't so easily grasped. For you can't any more separate it from its roots in a hermetic, pre-scientific, politically preoccupied mountain theocracy than you can extricate Zen from the highly individual cultural mix of modern Japan.

All of which suggests why "The Last Dalai Lama," by Michael Harris Goodman (Shambala 1986) is worth attending to. An authorized biography, the book proceeds slowly, conscientiously and reverently through the religious leader's eventful life, accepting without question the Tibetans' idiosyncratic perspective on things. This doesn't exactly make exciting reading, but it does illuminate the chasm between the world the lamas came from and the world of their Western students.

Indeed, the Tibet where many of the lamas now in the West grew up--the country as it was, that is, before the Chinese takeover--sounds like a different planet altogether. Transportation was by animal or by foot (when the Dalai Lama was a boy, Goodman says, there were just three cars in all of Tibet; "the only wheels," he says, "were prayer wheels.") It was also a country dominated by priests (Goodman gives the proportion as 25 percent of the population at one point and 15 percent at another; either, of course, would be very high.) But most striking, at least to a Westerner conditioned to admire "science" and scorn "superstition," was the overwhelming dependence on omens and celestial messages for the making of decisions.

For example, a solemn party setting out to find a new infant Dalai Lama--the party, in fact, that eventually did find the present Dalai Lama--passed some men carrying vessels of curd, milk and water. "All these were good signs," Goodman says. "As they neared the top of the pass close to the village, they encountered a Chinese youth leading three donkeys laden with wood. There were three ways to the

house they were seeking, he informed them, but the lower path would prove more convenient. Following his instructions, they came presently to a clearing from which the house could be seen clearly. The late Dalai Lama had rested there while visiting the area some 30 years earlier, and it was said that he had observed the house carefully and remarked on its beauty. Since the upper path would have provided a shorter course, the party wondered if the youth might have been a celestial being who had appeared to show them the proper way. When they arrived at the main gate, their suspicions were confirmed.

Now, there's not the slightest thing wrong with making choices according to what you learn from... well, celestial beings; if you believe, you might get results. Still, few ordinary Americans or Japanese or Europeans, could do so without some rather self-conscious reconditioning. And here, perhaps, there's a glimpse of why so many students from an urban, industrial background are drawn to Tibetan Buddhism. I mean the cultural wrenching required of their Western students by the Tibetans might somehow help bring on the psychological wrenching which is, after all, the goal of Buddhist practice. Perhaps it will be less of a cultural leap for Westerners as they become better acquainted with Shingon, the Japanese form of Tantric Buddhism.

Much of "The Last Dalai Lama" deals with the Chinese invasion, both the buildup to it and its distressing consequences. The story is a sad one, whose ramifications, as any newspaper reader knows, are still making themselves felt. But beyond the details of the tragic Tibetan-Chinese entanglement, the book makes clear that Tibetan Buddhism is something more than a religion: it is also a political system, a government, today a government-in-exile. Zen in its heyday was a religion supported by the state; the Dalai Lama is the very state itself. Imagine a Pope, enfolded in the Vatican by all but impenetrable mountains, who is chosen at birth and rules for life in unchallenged grandeur.

Undoubtedly, Tibetan Buddhism, like Zen, is an authentic vehicle for the splendid experience of awakening, with its share of eccentric sages and unpretentious bodhisattvas. But reading along in

"The Last Dalai Lama," one wonders how far its involvement with political power has colored its methods. Surely, this has had something to do with the Tibetans' richly elaborated organizations and ceremonies. Might it also have intensified the atmosphere of adoration surrounding the Dalai Lama or the vivid emotions associated with guru worship? And to what extent is such a radiant display of power and devotion sufficient in itself to attract middle-class, affluent Westerners who, though supposedly independent-minded and democratic by early training, seem to have gotten lost in the confusion and ennui of contemporary life?

"The Last Dalai Lama" makes no attempt to address questions of that kind, of course, nor should it be expected to. What it does is provide a "feel" for Tibetan Buddhism in its original setting, for the people who have made its teachings flesh-and-blood reality. And for those of us who are immersed in the much different world of Zen but interested in understanding a sister discipline strongly established now in the West, that's a valuable service.

SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE MIDDLE WAY was one of the important teachings of Confucius... It is interesting to know his own confession about this: "For forty years I have been thinking about this 'Middle Way' and practicing to attain it. But whatever I have done, I realize that I have never accomplished this 'Middle Way.'"

Well, he confessed, but if you observe his attitude very carefully, you will see that he manifested the Middle Way, for without anxiety, he lived in this unbalanced state of mind. Of course his state of mind was different from ours. Our state is lunatic...

To live the natural way is very hard. The greatness of Confucius is apprehensible when we read such wonderful words.

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DOWNTOWN: SUNDAY MORNING NONSENSE by Sokei-an

I was waiting for somebody in a restaurant. It is a completely ridiculous situation. I wasn't feeling lonely or sad or left alone or anything. I was interested simply in eating and accomplishing that but I was also waiting for a person who hasn't come yet. I was sitting in the restaurant in a sort of vague way, entranced. When people usually wait for others I feel their round faces get longer. However, waiting for people in restaurants Sunday morning is not that bad. Ten-thirty in the morning on a Sunday in New York the people who get up to come to the restaurant are real early wakers. They have the big Sunday edition of the newspaper. They come in with the sweet smell of toothpaste left on their mouth. Into this mouth they stick a cigarette and wander in.

I don't see anybody who really looks like a customer yet.

The waiter in his black coat comes smoothly through the long dining room and passes in front of my corner table. It's a nice sound, the sound of ice water in a glass.

"Good morning," the waiter says, "are you alone this morning?"

"No, I haven't seem him yet." We always eat breakfast at the same restaurant every Sunday morning.

"Well, will you be waiting then?"

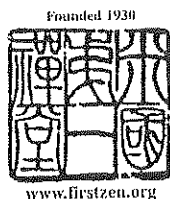
I opened the newspaper.

"He'll get here soon, I'm sure." The waiter said these words as he left.

Sunday mornings are the only mornings that give you that soft morning feeling. Sunday mornings are the epitome of mornings. Saturday nights are the epitome of nights. And the rest of the time from Sunday through Saturday is simply one day. The other days and nights are just the passage of the sun.

--from a Japanese newspaper ca. 1932;
translated by Lynn Bryce

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