

ZEN NOTES



THE FIRST ZEN OF AMERICA

SOEN SHAKU (1859-1919)

In his autobiography, Soen Shaku speaks of his motive in entering the priesthood: "My brother had often told me that if one could be a high priest, even the Emperor would be his Dharma disciple, and this helped me to make up my mind to be a monk."

This statement, along with other material quoted here, is from an article by Shokin Furuta, "The Footsteps of a Modern Japanese Zen Master," compiled by the Japanese National Commission for Unesco in 1967. Furuta characterizes Soen as a modern in that he was an individualist who came from non-entity to communication with the world of his time because he wanted to bring the truth of Buddhism, Zen, to bear on the problems of humanity and spent his life preaching its message poignantly enough to get the attention of Leo Tolstoy in the beginning of the 20th century.

His effort to transcend national limitations echoed Japan's effort to break out of her seclusion and become a world power. The difficulty for a Japanese individual today to achieve high world or even national status is attributed to the nature of Japanese society in an article by Clyde Haberman in the NYT (12/8/87) commenting on the first Japanese to win the Nobel Prize in medicine. "It remains true that no matter how talented a person may be, if he or she is highly individualistic it is difficult to achieve full potential here because of the nature of Japanese society."

Soen Shaku was the first to teach Zen to Americans in America and can, with some justification, be called the father of American Zen.

During the year of Soen's birth, the forces of the Emperor and the Shogun were in deadly combat. The following year the minister of the Shogun was assassinated. The Emperor's side won. The year after that Shinto was established as the state religion and Buddhism was rejected.

When Soen was 12 years old, he was ordained as a Zen monk by Ekkei of Tenju-in, Myoshin-ji, Kyoto. Ekkei was then guiding 30 to 40 monks as the Zen master in charge of their training, but it had been very hard to support them in Kyoto so he had

taken them out of the city for a while, but when he was invited to be the abbot of Myoshin-ji he returned to Kyoto in 1871. Soen went to several other teachers for his disciplinary practice and academic studies. At Kasan's place, which was supported by more than 800 families, the monks were kept busy every day with funerals and services for them. This was not at all to Soen's taste. After ten days he returned to Kyoto and determined to devote himself to doctrinal studies. He then went to study under Gisan, Kosen's teacher. When Gisan passed away, Soen went to Kosen, who had by then become prominent as a leader in difficult times. Under Kosen, Soen attained enlightenment and was sanctioned as his Dharma successor.

Soen was Kosen's most brilliant student. After studying Western philosophy and science at Keio University, he wanted to duplicate the Buddha's way to enlightenment by practicing the regimen of the Hinayana monks where the orthodox details of practice were intact and prepared to go to Sri Lanka where he could also study the languages of the Buddhist scriptures, Sanskrit and Pali, at the same time. He also wanted to broaden his knowledge of the world outside Japan.

Kosen, although he himself had studied science, had not really approved of Soen's studying it. He thought Soen's career would be better advanced if he were to specialize in Chinese studies, which were being neglected. Nor did he think Soen should go to Ceylon. But Soen, from the beginning an individualist, had made up his mind and, with the financial aid of lay friends, especially Teshu Yamaoka, the last master of the swordsmanship school, carried out his plan, arriving in Ceylon in 1887 after a dreadful trip on a German ship. This first time out in the world made him vividly aware of the low esteem in which Japanese were held. It was at this point in history that Japan was waking up to world power politics. For over 2 centuries before Meiji no one had been allowed to leave the country, nor could anyone from outside enter it. But now Germany was Japan's model in some ways, while Great Britain ruled the sea.

America was the future.

Soen's idea to imitate the Buddha's experience by studying in Ceylon was adventurous to say the least. The hardships he underwent proved nearly beyond his strength. Living according to the disciplinary rules of the Ceylonese monks, he was polishing the jade (Buddhism) of his own mountain with the jade of another mountain, as Sokei-an once put it. He wrote back his experiences with Ceylonese Buddhism and compared it with Japanese Buddhism. He was beginning to have an international viewpoint.

"While studying Ceylonese Buddhism," Furuta says, "he (Soen) must have seriously contemplated, in Ceylon, away from Japan, how Japanese Buddhism should be." Regarding manners and customs, Soen wrote: "I have had to experience five difficulties. They are: first, the difficulty of learning how to speak the indigenous language here; secondly, the difficulty of eating with fingers; thirdly, the difficulty of walking on heated ground with bare feet; fourthly, the difficulty of cleaning the private parts at the lavatory; fifthly, the difficulty of blowing my nose with only one hand. A couple of practices above, though they may not be condemnable from the viewpoint of precepts, are extremely vulgar from the viewpoint of dignity, and I am not yet quite at ease in following them."

In another letter, Soen wrote: "In this country, unlike in Japan, the primary aim of the monks is to abide by precepts, and they observe 250 items of precepts starting with the Five Commandments... Though there are 64,000 monks and several thousand temples in this country, no direct relations exist between them. Each temple is independently established. The ranks of the priests are not so complicated as in Japan and China; there are only two ranks, of bhiksu and sramanera, and a sramanera will not be ordained as a bhiksu unless he is over 20 in age and is considered to have sufficient ability and give promise of becoming a preacher later. In this country there are no parish divisions as in Japan. For a preacher, therefore, all the people in the country are his followers, and

for a Buddhist follower, every priest is his acarya alike. Therefore, no such complicated relations between supporting followers and branch temples, or between main temples and branch temples, have ever existed. Furthermore, temples in this country do not take care of funeral services for the supporting followers, and they thus do not have any gravestones."

In 1888, Yamaoka Tesshu died, leaving Soen in a financially impossible situation. He admitted to Kosen, who had pressed him to return to Japan: "I am not capable of going through Buddha's noble asceticism for six years..." But in a letter to Ushitaro Shinbori, he vowed: "Even if I eat clay, I will continue my studies..." The following year, in June, he started back, by way of Thailand. There he could do nothing and proceeded to Hong Kong. Without money or food, he slept on deck from Bangkok to Hong Kong, then, via Shanghai to Kobe, arriving in October.

Back in Japan, matters at Engaku-ji had gone from bad to worse. Kosen was aging and ill. In 1890 Soen was appointed Acting Chief Abbot of Engaku-ji and for the first time taught monks as the Zen Master at Horin-ji. There were ten monks for Soen to take care of, but no funds. When the price of rice suddenly rose, they had to go begging daily for food.

That year, a conference of Chief Abbots of all the sects in Japan was held in Tokyo. Soen became one of the four editors to compile "The Essentials of Buddhist Teachings--All Sects." This was when Soen first defined his view that it would be possible to find a point of unity of all religions as well as the unity of all sects of Japanese Buddhism, based on the original spirit of religion as truth. In 1912, he said: "...We can rely on the fact that truth never changes, whether in ancient days or today, whether in the East or in the West."

Two of the other three editors were also progressive Buddhists, who in 1893, attended the World's Parliament of Buddhists with Soen. By 1891, they had compiled five volumes of "The Essentials."

In 1892, Kosen died and Soen became the Chief Abbot of Engaku-ji. He was 34 years old.

--by Mary Farkas (To be continued)

THE GREAT SIXTH PATRIARCH'S TEACHING, VII, 1

After the Dharma was transmitted to the Master from Huang-mei, he returned to Ts'ao-chi village in Shao-chou, but no one observed it. A Confucian scholar received him in his residence as a guest. Liu-chih-liao had a niece who was a nun named Wu-chin-ts'ang. She was always reciting the Mahaparinirvana Sutra.

The Master, having listened to her recitation for a while, apprehended its profound meaning and expounded it to her. The nun questioned him about certain characters.

The Master said: "I cannot read the characters, but nevertheless you may ask me the meaning."

The nun said: "How can you understand the meaning if you cannot read even one character?"

The Master answered: "The profound philosophies of all the Buddhas have nothing to do with the characters of the scriptures."

The nun was astonished and told everyone in the neighboring villages the Master's words. A learned old man said: "He may be someone who has wisdom. Perhaps we should entreat him to accept our support."

There was a man of high station, named Ts'ao-shu-liang, who was the descendant of Wu-hou of Wei. He came with the villagers to pay their homage to the Master. At that time the old Temple, Pao-lin, was still in ruins from the battle fire from the end of Sui. So they rebuilt the Temple upon the old foundation and entreated the Master to abide there. This caused the Temple to become the Temple of Jewels.

SOKEI-AN SAYS

This is the first part of the chapter on the affinity between the Master and his disciples.

The first story is usually named "The Illiterate" because the Sixth Patriarch was not a learned man. He was just a kindling wood peddler in the city of Shao-chou, a city of Southern China. Today it is Canton.

One day he was selling kindling wood on the street where someone was reciting the Diamond Sutra. When he heard the line: "Depending upon nothing, find your own soul (or manifest your mind)", he was suddenly enlightened. He asked a question: "What is

this you are reciting?" The answer was: "Oh, this is a famous Buddhist sutra named the Diamond Sutra." "Where did you get this?" "I got this from the Fifth Patriarch of Bodhidharma's school on the other side of the river. You had better go there and ask the Fifth Patriarch."

This was a question of the affinity that the Sixth Patriarch possessed. He was an illiterate, but suddenly he opened his mind to the Dharma.

As soon as the man who was reciting the Diamond Sutra finished his conversation with the Sixth Patriarch, he disappeared in the air like smoke. (This is a little too much! Later, everyone realized it was fictitiously inserted. Someone always mischievously adds some questionable line in order to encourage superstition.)

And then the Sixth Patriarch went to Huang-mei Temple. After a talk with the Fifth Patriarch, he went to the mill house and pounded rice. The rice pounder is a huge pestle and mortar. He did this work for eight months and then was called secretly to the Fifth Patriarch's chamber at midnight. The Fifth Patriarch made him his successor as the Sixth Patriarch. But he urged Hui-neng to escape from the temple, fearing some jealous monk would do him harm. The Fifth Patriarch carried him safely to the other shore in his own boat. Then he went to the Ta Yu mountains which lay on the border between central and southern China.

The monks of the temple said that "The illiterate had stolen the Dharma," and set out in pursuit. A soldier, Hui-ming, overtook the Sixth Patriarch who, understanding the danger, left his robe and bowl on a rock, hiding himself in the bushes.

Hui-ming came and tried to take the robe and bowl, but could not lift them.

Hui-neng said: "This robe and this bowl are the symbols of the Dharma. You cannot pick them up with your own strength."

Hui-ming then asked for mercy and for the secret of enlightenment.

Hui-neng said: "Before your father and mother, what was your original aspect?"

After the Dharma was transmitted to the Master from Huang-mei, he returned to Ts'ao-chi village in

Jan Noto

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Shao-chou but no one observed it. Ts'ao-chi is the name of the village of Sokei (my name), in the Japanese way of saying it. I, too, came here from a far country.

A Confucian scholar, Liu-chih-liao, received him as a guest in his residence. This Liu may have seen the Sixth Patriarch once at the temple in Huang-mei.

Liu had a niece who was a nun named Wu-chin-ts'ang. Her name means "store of endless possession."

She was always reciting the Mahaparinirvana Sutra. A very famous sutra.

The Master, having listened to her recitation for a while, apprehended its profound meaning and expounded it to her. The nun questioned him about the meaning of each character. The Master said: "I cannot read the characters, but nevertheless you may ask me the meaning." The nun said: "How can you understand the meaning if you cannot read even one character?" The Master answered: "The profound philosophies of all the Buddhas have nothing to do with the characters of the scriptures." The nun was astonished and told everyone in the neighboring villages the Master's words. A learned old man said: "He may be someone who has wisdom. Perhaps we should entreat him to accept our support." You had better remember this; it is a new phraseology for the English language. It was the sentiment in those times. Even in my own time, I did not strive to be supported when I first came to America.

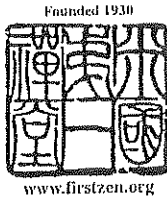
There was a man of high station named Ts'ao-shu-liang, who was the descendant of Wu-hou of Wei. In the Wei dynasty, before the Three Dynasties, Bodhidharma came to China. This was in the T'ang dynasty.

He came with the villagers to pay his homage to the Master. And then all the farmers realized--"Oh, he must be the guest at the Confucian scholar's house!"

At that time the old temple, Pao-lin, was still in ruins from the battle fire from the end of Sui.

This temple, Pao-lin, still exists. About fifteen years ago the Japanese made a donation to help rebuild this temple. In Buddhism there is no discrimination between Chinese and Japanese.

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First Zen Institute of America
113 E30 Street
New York, New York 10016
(212-686-2520)

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