Zen Notes

SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE FOUR FOODS (1942) In the Abhidharma, Shariputra explained about the Four Foods for the first time. I have spoken about these in the past, but I shall do so again, avoiding the Sanskrit names.

1. The material food
2. The food of feeling (It is called food of touch, but it means food of feeling.)
3. The food of thinking
4. The food of consciousness (Perhaps this can be translated the food of knowing, perceiving, but I prefer the food of consciousness.)

These are the Four Foods that support human beings and also the other sentient beings.

1. Material food to be eaten by the mouth is called coarse food. The Chinese translate it *dan jiki* (chopped food). *Jiki* means food, square, triangle; *dan* means chopped, sometimes staircase. I have seen this translated as " food on the staircase"--a very amusing translation. I was very much surprised when a European scholar explained that when the monks who are begging food have received it, they sit down on the staircase outside the door to eat it.

Food was offered to Buddha by the Four Kings, who guard the four quarters. Jikoku-ten is the first guardian king--the king who holds the earth. He stands at the east. Socho-ten, who stands at the west, nurses the growth of everything. Standing at the south is Komoku-ten, the wide-eyed king. He observes all sentient beings with his wide eyes. He gives his care to everything. This symbolizes warm-hearted compassion. Then there is the guardian king who stands at the north, Tamon-ten, the king who hears everything, all sounds. Just as in autumn when the fruits ripen, all the forms of the tree will be conceived in seeds. The forms of the trunks, the forms of the branches, and the forms of the leaves and flowers--all forms will be preserved in the seed. That is hearing, that is the symbol of knowledge.

These four kings offer food to Buddha. Now you must remember that this Buddha is not Shakyamuni Buddha. This Buddha is Tathagata, the nature of Buddha.

When Buddha's monks were on the riverbank washing their bowls and drying them in the sunshine, Buddha's bowl, which was offered by the four kings, made of precious stones from the sea, was also washed and exposed to the sun. A monkey approached the bowl and took it away. The monks started to pursue the monkey, but the Buddha told them to stop. " Stop pursuing the monkey. He will bring back the bowl." A little later the monks saw the monkey bring back the bowl filled with honey. The monkey approached and offered the bowl of honey to the Buddha. The Buddha looked at the bowl and saw that there were many impurities in the honey, wings of bees and tree worms. It was quite inedible. The Buddha refused it. The monkey went back and took all the wings of bees and insects out of the honey and brought the bowl back to the Buddha. The Buddha started to accept the bowl but it was so sticky, so smeared with honey, that he could not. He refused it again. The monkey took the bowl, washed it, and brought it back. The Buddha accepted it. The monkey, in his great delight, stepped back, dancing. Not knowing that he was on the edge of a cliff, he fell back off the cliff and was drowned in the sea. The story is sad, but in the Sutra it is explained that the monkey attained rebirth in the Triyastrimsa Heaven. It

Dear Everyone:

THE Chinese New Year begins only the first of February. It would seem that the 1962 Tiger took advantage of the extra month allotted him by this calendar to roar and thrash around the entire globe during January. The poor little 1963 Rabbit has obviously been afraid to poke his nose out of his burrow.

Never in Japan in the memory of living persons has there been such a winter as this. How much you know of it from your papers--those who live outside of New York and have papers--I don't know. But the entire western coast of the country along the Japan Sea has been swept by continuous snow storms and bitter cold. In many places the snow has reached a depth of fourteen feet, and the temperature gone down to around zero Fahrenheit. Train service in the area was at first disrupted, then came to a dead stop. One train which started out during the early part of this unprecedented weather for a relatively near destination took six days to reach it. In the meanwhile the passengers for a great part of the trip were without food, water, or heat.

The mountainous district of Fukui Prefecture has been one of the worst hit. It is there that the Sōtō Zen headquarters temple of Eihei-ji is situated. Shortly after New Year the Chief Abbot sent out an appeal for help. The great roofs of the temple buildings were beginning to sag under the weight of the snow, and as the majority of monks had returned to their homes for the holiday season there were relatively few hands remaining to take care of an emergency should it arise. The emergency did arise and quite promptly. Less than a week later, during which time snow had continued to fall night and day, the great pillars of the Main Hall gave way and the building collapsed. Fortunately the main image was not injured.

In November, perhaps, a very nice woman, whose name escapes me for the moment, came to see me, a member of the meditation group of the Sōtō temple in San Francisco. She had come to Japan to practice at Eihei-ji and, after a short sight-seeing tour, was returning there for the winter. I have thought of her many times since and wondered how she has managed to survive the austere monastery life in that mountain temple during this particular winter. She told me she was living and working like the monks, getting up at four in the morning, eating their coarse fare--now more than usually frugal, no doubt, for there is food shortage in the area--going up and down the flight of one hundred and fifty steps between her quarters and the main buildings several times a day, and, of course, do-

ing meditation at night. Here will have been practice indeed!

The Eihei-ji building was not the only temple to collapse. And many, many houses have been destroyed, as many by fire as by snow. Now slides from the mountains are beginning, and not a day goes by that five or six people are not swept to their deaths in their demolished farmhouses.

Kyoto has been spared the worst of these storms, but we, also, have had unprecedented and continuous snow and cold. Last winter, when the pond was frozen to a depth of two inches for some ten days, was the coldest I had ever experienced here. This winter the pond has been frozen solid for six weeks, and as yet the ice shows no indication of melting. I suppose the turtles dug themselves into the earth around the water lilies, but the gold fish must be frozen solid in the ice. I'm hoping they can revive again. And our frog! Will he have hibernated successfully? We'll have to wait for his first croak in the spring to know. Today a pale sun is out and the snow on the roof is melting. Perhaps the Rabbit is beginning to stir.

The Tiger gave a last flick of his tail to me, also, and left me with a broken left arm, fortunately not the right. A heavy cast slowed me down at first, but now my right hand is learning to assume many of the activities of my left, and when it can't, Washino San's two kind hands take over.

Recently, as part of the last remaining work to be done for *Zen Dust*, I wrote a biography of Sekitō Kisen, a great Zen master in the third generation of the Sixth Patriarch's line. I'm sending it to you here, for in it is a quotation from one of Sekitō's sermons which should give you much food for both thought and meditation.

Sekitō Kisen (700-790) was one of the great figures in early Chinese Zen. He was a native of Kōyō in Tanshu, in what is now Kwangtung, and his family name was Chin. The old biographies speak of him as an unusually intelligent child and as having a calmness and self-assurance far beyond his years. The district in which he was born was at that time quite uncivilized, and the natives, many of whom lived in caves, were in the habit of building shrines to malevolent dieties and making sacrifices of wine and oxen to them. It is said that the boy used to go out and destroy these shrines, then return leading the oxen.

When he was twelve or thirteen years old young Chin went to visit the Sixth Patriarch at Sokei, a place not very far distant from his home. Enō was struck by the youth's perspicacity, kept him with him, and gave him some instruction. A year or two later (713), he was among the disciples who surrounded the Patriarch on his deathbed. Little is known of his life during the years that followed, until in 728 he took the full commandments at Rafuzan in northern Kwangtung.

Shortly thereafter Kisen, to give him his Buddhist name, went to see Seigen Gyōshi (*d.* 740), one of

the most important of the Sixth Patriarch's Dharma-heirs, who was then instructing many disciples on Seigenzen in Kisshu, in modern Kiangsi. At their first interview Seigen made the famous remark about his new disciple: "I have many horned animals in my assembly but one unicorn will suffice." (In China the unicorn was a fabulous animal the appearance of which presaged some extraordinary and auspicious event.) Kisen spent several years under Seigen Gyōshi and inherited his Dharma.

In 742 Kisen went to Nangaku in southeastern Hunan. There on a large flat rock a little to the east of an old temple known as the Nan-ji, he built a hut for himself. Thereafter people called him Sekitō Oshō, the "priest [who lives] on the top of the stone." In the opening lines of his *Soanka*, Song of the Grass Hut, Sekitō has given us a glimpse of the hermitage-dweller's mood:

I have built my grass hut without treasure or wealth.
Having finished my meal, I leisurely prepare for sleep.
When my hut was first completed, the thatch was fresh,
When it fell into disrepair, I again used thatch to cover it.
He who lives in this hermitage never leaves it;
He doesn't belong to the outside, the inside, or the middle.
Where men of the world dwell I do not dwell,
What men of the world love I do not love.
Though my hut is small it embraces the Dharmakaya.

At that time three other Zen Masters were also living on the "Southern Peak" (Nangaku): the Sixth Patriarch's heirs Nangaku Ejō and Nangaku Kengo, and a disciple of Fujaku of the Northern School of Zen. Since these men spoke in the highest terms of Sekito's understanding, many of their disciples came to study with him.

For twenty-three years Sekitō remained in Nangaku. One day when the master had taken the high seat in the hall, he said: "My Dharma has been transmitted to me by a preceding Buddha. It's of no matter whether it be by meditation or by zealous religious practice; the important thing is to attain the Buddha-knowledge. This very Mind, just this is Buddha. Mind, Buddha and sentient beings, perfect wisdom and the defiling passions, these are but different names for one and the same substance.

"All of you must know your own Mind-essence, know that its substance is detached from cessation and permanence and that its nature is neither stained nor pure; know that it is absolutely still and completely whole and that [in it] secular and sacred are exactly the same; know that its responding to circumstances is limitless and that it is apart from mind and consciousness. The Three Worlds and the Six Ways (of Transmigration) are only appearances [produced by] your own mind, like reflections of the moon in water, or images seen in a mirror. How can [this Mind] be subject to birth and extinction? If you know this well, you will lack for nothing."

The disciple Dōgo asked, " Who obtained the essential teaching of Sōkei?"

The Master said, " He who understands Buddhadharma obtained it."

" Did you obtain it, Master?" Dōgo asked.

" I don't understand Buddhadharma," Sekitō replied.

" What about emancipation?" another monk asked.

" Who binds you?" said the Master.

" What about the Pure Land?"

" Who defiles you?" was the reply.

" What about Nirvana?"

" Who puts you in samsara (life-and-death)," was Sekitō's reply.

In 764, at the request of some of his disciples, Sekitō went to Ryōtan in Tanshū, near present Ch'angsha. There his fame as a Zen master came to equal that of the great Baso Dōichi, who was teaching at the Kaigen-ji, in modern Kiangsi. Though the records are not clear it seems probable that Sekitō returned to Nangaku after a stay of some ten years in Tanshū, and died there in his ninety-first year.

The Master left a number of Dharma-heirs, among whom Yakusan Igen (745-828) and Tennō Dōgo (748-897) became the most famous. During the Chōkei era (821-824), the T'ang emperor Bokusō (*r.* 820-824) bestowed upon the Master the posthumous title Musai Daishi.

Two famous poems from Sekitō's hand have come down to us, the *Sōanka*, Song of the Grass Hut, and the *Sandōkai*, In Praise of Identity. Neither has been translated into a western language. In the *Sandōkai* traces may be discerned of Taoistic thought, of certain ideas from the *Jōron*, and of the Kegon doctrine of the Four Dharmadhātu (*shihōkkai*). This short poem was particularly important for both Sōtō and Rinzai Zen since within it lay the rudiments of the doctrine of the Five Ranks (*goi*) later fully developed by Sekitō's descendants Tōsan Ryōkai and Sōzan Honjaku, founders of the Chinese Sōtō Sect.

Eryu

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was made for this happy ending. It is one of the famous stories used as an illustration of "purifying the mind." Usually this story is told to explain "material food." Food that is offered to the Buddha must be pure.

A monk was traveling through the western desert. Crossing the red desert he reached the blue desert, the desert of blue sand. He was terribly thirsty and tired. He looked for water but couldn't find a drop. He came to a cave under a cliff. He went down and down and down. He realized the sand was becoming wet and thought there must be some water. He went on down until he came to a great cave. In the dim light he saw a million pretas screaming and clutching their throats. He realized they were thirsty. For a million years they had been searching for water and never found a drop. The monk shouted "Water." "Water," the pretas cried. "That is the name of what we are looking for. Water!"

This story is also used to illustrate the longing and search for many years, the feeling there must be something. Human beings know they want something but do not even know the name of it. Sentient beings who are born in very remote countries, for instance the Eskimos, have never seen or heard of the civilized world, have never heard the name of a religion. Or those pretas who live in the slums of New York--no sage's word has ever entered their ears. They do not know the meaning of human life. They have never heard the law of human life. No one has told them the words of "good" or "bad," or shown them the compassion of the human heart. They were born in the slums and they will die in the slums. They have never heard the name of Buddha or of the Three Bodies or Three Treasures of Buddha. They are pretas. They have never heard of the sentient mind that has five shadows or known what is Samsara or Nirvana. Longing all their lives for something, they have never heard its name. Looking all their lives for it, no one has told them what it is. On Fifth Avenue they buy a cheap incense burner in a queer shape. "What is this?" "It is Buddha." "Oh." This is just as when the monk cried, "Water!" The food we eat every day is material food. Without it no sentient being can live, no soul can exist.

2. The next food is the food of feeling, touch. You cannot eat this food, but you can feel it. Clothes, for instance, are food for your body. The sunshine is food for your skin. You cannot eat it, but the feel of rain, wind, cloth--all are food to the senses. To the child, the mother's care is food. Without the mother's care the child does not grow. When I came to this country I felt very sad seeing all those babies who had to suck milk from bottles, not knowing the warm breasts of a mother. I thought this is a terrible thing for those young sentient beings. All sentient beings care for their children.

When I studied Buddhism a little more carefully I realized that there are many ways of taking care of children. Turtles lay eggs in the sand and go away, never looking back or even remembering the place, but when the time comes the young ones will be born from the eggs hidden in the sand. In the Sutra it is written that the turtle lays the egg in the sand and goes away but day and night is thinking of the baby. Her concentrated mind, *smrti*, is the food for the baby in the shell. If the mother dies, the baby will die without being hatched. I do not know if this is true or not,

but this is the way it is written. There are many stories of birds and food, too.

3. The third food is the food of thinking--the food of thoughts, the food for those sentient beings living in the mind. The human being is the one who lives in the mind. The human being is like a vegetable. The food provided for the vegetable is water. The essences of stones--we call them iron, copper, and so forth--also are food for vegetables. Higher sentient beings that live in animal shape eat vegetables and still higher sentient beings living in the mind eat animals. Animals nourish their bodies by eating the bodies of other beings. Still higher sentient beings eat the human mind. Not only do they eat it, but they cultivate it for food, as the ants cultivate insects for food. This mind is food for higher sentient beings.

Every man is a country of thousands of sentient beings. In the Sutra it is written that the Buddha said: "Through many countries I come and a million Buddhas from every country and millions of Bodhisattvas come bow to me." "Each country" means "each man." You must think a million men's minds accept him.

You must learn to read the Sutra. In the early days Zen was thought to be a key to open the pages of the Sutra's secret meaning. So the Sutra is also food to nourish higher sentient beings. And all those words and education, all that emotionalism, all that appears to your mind, is food for sentient beings.

4. And then the last one: Consciousness is a food. "Oh," you say, "I thought that consciousness was the end and that no one eats consciousness. But it is also food. Who eats consciousness then? Is there something higher than consciousness? If there is something higher than consciousness how can it live without consciousness?" No, there is no sentient being that can live without consciousness. Therefore, consciousness is the eternal food for the sentient beings that eat consciousness. In this teaching I realize that the Buddha very carefully and very kindly set the idea of Nirvana. Through thinking of these Four Foods one will open the eye to Nirvana. When one opens the eye and attains Nirvana, all foods are not poison, all are holy and sacred heavenly foods.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Sanskrit spellings of terms related to the Four Foods, with diacritical marks omitted, have been taken from Soothill's *Chinese Buddhist Terms*. For equivalent Pali terms and an interesting discussion of their import, see *What the Buddha Taught*, by Walpola Rahula, Grove Press, New York, 1962, p. 30-34.

There are many fascinating tales of the Buddha's bowl comparable to the Holy Grail stories in Christianity. The Four Kings or Guardians, here identified under the Japanese names, are also favored subjects of art and legend in Buddhism. For a wealth of detail see *The Gods of Northern Buddhism*, by Alice Getty, Oxford University Press, London, 1928; *Chinese Buddhism*, by Joseph Edkins, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., London, 1879.

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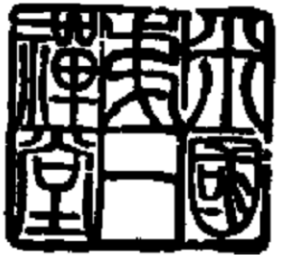

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