

ZEN notes



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SOKEI-AN SAYS--THE ANTHILL

In the Bamboo Garden Temple, there was a novice called Kumara Kashyapa, who at the time of this story was a boy of eight. His mother was a nun.

One day, some years before, two sisters came to the temple and asked Shariputra to permit them to become nuns. Shariputra accepted them and shaved their long blue hair. Very soon after, the appearance of the elder sister's body began to change. The monks and nuns whispered among themselves. "Look at her! Indeed someone has violated the commandments!" The Sangha was filled with their gossip and they wished to drive her out of the community. Having heard of this, the Buddha said: "You cannot drive her out of the Sangha without knowing the reason why her body has become the shape of a mother's." He then asked Upali to pass judgment on the matter. Upali was the master of the Vinaya, the commandments. He was the judge in the court of the Buddha's Sangha. Upali questioned the young nun, then sent for her parents. They said, "Our daughter asked us to permit her to become a nun, but we would not give our consent. After she had married, her husband gave her permission, but she had already conceived a child before she was admitted to the Sangha." When Upali had related all the circumstances to the Buddha, the Buddha decided she was not to be blamed. Thus her purity was established. When her baby was born, the monarch of Rajagriha adopted him. This rajah was a man of the Kashyapa race. Therefore the child was called Kumara Kashyapa-- "child of the Kashyapas." Later Kumara returned to the Sangha and lived at the Bamboo Garden Temple as a novice.

The Bamboo Garden was only a small portion of a great forest of many kinds of trees called the Dark Forest. There was a part of the Dark Forest that was really always dark, day or night. Even at midday no monk dared go there to take a walk. But the child Kumara Kashyapa would always go through this dark forest to bathe in the warm springs of the river that flowed through it, the Hot Spring River. Then he would dry his body in the sunshine that filtered through the treetops. Here, on the river bank, faint light came through the thick green foliage, but when he turned his head, behind him was the eternal dark forest. The boy used to sit there upon a stone observing the stream. On the bank of the stream there was a little mound. Kumara loved to watch this mound. When the noonday sun shone on its top, fire seemed to burn there; and when darkness fell, smoke seemed to rise from it. Half in curiosity, half in fear, the little boy used to watch this mound.

Early one morning, when Kumara had bathed in the hot spring river and was cooling himself in the fresh autumn air, all of a sudden he heard a voice from the sky and a deva appeared before him shining in radiant light. A deva is different from an angel. There are evil as well as good devas. Devas have power with which to control the minds of men. They are invisible beings that appear in our minds. Though they are described as gods and goddesses, today we know that devas are our thoughts.

The deva said to Kumara: "Behold the ant hill! In the day it vomits fire and in the night smoke arises from it. If you dig into it a Brahman

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PRE-ZENDO PRACTICE

From a letter to Arthur C March
written by Ruth Sasaki in the
early 1930's.

I had prepared myself for my study by the practice of concentration, acting on the advice and instruction given me by Dr. Suzuki on the occasion of my first visit to him (in 1930) and I will now explain the system and methods I followed.

Dr. Suzuki taught me this method and my Roshi gave me permission to teach it to others. It is very simple, but you will find in your study of Zen that everything in Zen is reduced to the most simple terms.

You seat yourself on your cushion in a comfortable posture. Then you begin to breathe slowly and deeply, the lips being closed both in inhalation and exhalation, the breath being taken through the nostrils. As you inhale you will distend and raise the chest, pull the abdomen in, and in so doing raise the diaphragm. When you exhale you will depress the chest, distend the abdomen and pull the diaphragm down. This way of breathing is exactly the opposite from the natural way and from most systems of breathing. If when you are inhaling you will think of pulling up as far as possible the wall of the diaphragm, and when you are exhaling, you will think of pushing it down and out against the solar plexus, I think you will find the mental picture a help to you. What happens as the result of this breathing is that an enormous amount of energy is aroused in the area of the solar plexus. As you continue and do not have to concentrate so much on the muscular control of the breathing, you will find

that you can appear to press the diaphragm down until the final pressure will seem to come from just below the navel.

Now, as you sit breathing, begin to count the breaths, one, two, three, and up to ten, counting this way indefinitely as long as you are practicing this exercise.

You will keep your mind on the breath count and on that alone. When other thoughts come in, do not try to get rid of them, but just keep on counting and push them out of the way. A determined (will-ful) attempt to keep away other thoughts seems only to make for more disturbance. Just keep patiently coming back to the counting. At first I found this exercise of keeping the mind concentrated on the numbered breathing very difficult. I was advised to begin with ten minutes' practice, then through fifteen, and to increase gradually until I could sit without moving for an indefinite time. Three hundred counts, that is, ten counted thirty times, is considered the goal to aim for. But these three hundred counts must be made without another thought of any kind intruding during the entire course of the practice. And when one breathes sufficiently slowly, to count three hundred will take close upon three hours.

I practiced this method, sitting on a chair. I eventually succeeded in sitting still for one hour and a half, but I did not succeed in keeping out vagrant thoughts during the whole time.

One important thing to remember is that it is to the exhaled breath that one directs most attention. The exhaled breath should be considerably slower than the inhaled breath. The exhaled breath and the downward pres-

sure should continue so long that in reality the inhalation is a reflex action from the exhalation. Also, remember that you must keep absolutely relaxed during all this practice, the correct posture maintained but with no nervous tension.

If you will study the posture of the meditating Buddha rupas of the Japanese schools, the Buddha of Kamakura, for example, you will see that the abdomen is always distended and the shoulders just a little drooping. This is quite different from Indian or Burmese meditating Buddhas. My own Buddha rupa is a Tibetan but of the Indian type. He sits with raised chest and shoulders and contracted abdomen. I think no better picture for one's own meditation portrait, one to keep in the mind's eye, than the Kamakura Buddha. As you continue your meditation in accordance with the Zen method, you will gradually become conscious of the depressing fold coming in your own abdomen above the navel and the distension below the navel.

The exercise is, as you see, quite different from the usual method taught. There is no concentration upon a problem or an idea, or a verse or a diagram or an image or upon the tip of one's nose. This method seems to me quite consistent with the attempt of Zen to always get rid of form.

If you will refer to Dr. Suzuki's translation of Asvaghosa's *The Awakening of Faith*, at pages 132-134, you will find instructions for the practice of cessation of the mind, which also says that one should not let the mind dwell on this or that or the other

THE BODHISATTVA POSTURE

Japanese people, particularly of the old school, sit on the floor and use

no chairs. Meditation posture in a Zen temple is of two kinds, one for men and one for women. The men sit in full "lotus posture", that is, with the right foot on the left thigh, just as we see the Buddha depicted. Or they may sit in the "half lotus posture", that is, with the right foot on the left thigh and the left leg stretched out at a right angle to the other; or the reverse of this, namely, left foot on right thigh with right leg stretched out in front. The monks call this the "bodhisattva posture." During long periods of meditation they will change occasionally from one of these postures to the other in order to relieve the muscular and nervous tension.

They sit usually upon two cushions, called a zabuton, one about thirty inches square, moderately well padded; the other, which is about the same size, being doubled in half and placed under the back half of the other. This gives a sloping surface, of course, there being three layers of cushion at the back and one layer in the front. This slope throws the body slightly forward, and helps to keep the body in the correct posture without tiring the spine.

Japanese women who do Zen meditation usually sit just as Japanese people sit at all times, with the lower leg and the foot doubled back under the thighs, and the buttocks on the upturned heels. Many, however, sit on cushions, but arrange them differently. They use similar cushions, but the thicker is placed on the floor and the thinner is folded into four and is used as the actual seat, the legs being bent and placed one on each side of the folded cushion that is being used as the seat.

In both these cases the arrangement of the cushions tends to throw the abdomen slightly forward, which relieves the strain somewhat.

Even the Japanese people who are accustomed from childhood to sit in postures very similar to those described above find the muscular strain of Zen meditation very painful at first; to foreigners it is much more so. But my experience leads me to believe that such methods of sitting as I have described are absolutely necessary for any great progress in meditation. The centre of gravity of the body differs according to posture, and the correct posture is best attained and retained by using cushions as described. When one has conquered the physical obstacles, meditation thus practiced becomes much easier, and also when studying at a Zen monastery, if one is able to sit as the monks do, the sense of difference of nationality and background is much less pronounced. I was told that if I found any real difficulty in using the cushions as seats, I might use a chair, and I believe that with a few exceptions foreign people have meditated in chairs; but after trying the chair for the first ten days and being unable to "find my seat", as they express it, I decided to try the cushions and thereafter always used the cushion method and still do so.

I would advise any prospective student to begin at once using the cushions as his seat. He (or she) will get accustomed to it, and should he go to Japan, he will not have the trouble of getting his muscles accustomed to the strain after he gets there. Let him get a low table, about fifteen inches from the floor level, and use that as

his desk or writing table. Practice sitting at this table while he is doing his usual reading or writing, for as many hours a day as he can. This will be excessively painful if one practices sitting at this table long at first, but a start should be made with short periods; they should be gradually lengthened until one can sit for at least three hours without moving from one's seat.

Men should use the "bodhisattva posture" at first, and they may, of course, shift the leg posture from time to time, as above explained. The women will sit on the folded cushions as described, and will not change their posture.

ZABUTONS

I had two cushions specially made, each about ten inches square and stuffed with cotton filling; these I put on top of the other, a larger, loosely filled cushion. I sat on the two smaller ones, with my legs doubled, one on each side of the cushions used as the seat, and resting, of course, on the larger cushion. I find this quite satisfactory and more easily arranged than the folded Japanese zabuton. The larger cushion should be about three inches in thickness and the two smaller ones, stuffed rather harder than the larger one, should be at least six inches in height when placed one on top of the other. They sink considerably when sat on, of course.

will appear. He will say to you: 'Wise One, with your sharp spade dig the ant hill deep. Your spade will strike a coffin. Dig it out and discard it. Then, digging deeper, you will find a rock. Dig it out and discard it. Under the rock there is a huge toad. Do not be afraid of it, but dig it out and discard it. Beneath the toad you will find a dead body. Under the dead body is a pillory that holds fast the hands, feet, and head of the corpse. Dig all these out of the mound and discard them. Then dig deeper in the hole and you will come to two roads. One goes to the right, one to the left. But do not hesitate. Dig deeper and you will find the thickly twisted roots of trees. With your sharp spade dig these out and discard them. Then you will find a cave. In the cave is a dragon who is waiting for you. Look at the dragon but do not disturb it' Consider the Brahman's words well. Do not mistake their meaning. Meditate night and day and you will find the truth you are searching for."

When the deva had finished speaking, she disappeared, trailing her shining veils through the sky.

The description is quite naive, but a child might imagine something like this. It is analogous to the story of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

The boy was frightened and ran back to the vihara. Dare he repeat what he had heard to anyone? Through all that day and night he meditated upon the words that he had heard the deva speak from the sky.

I must remark here on the tendency of Oriental teachers to instruct their disciples to dig deep into their minds. They seldom teach that you must go higher and higher in the sky. Of

course, in Buddhism there are many heavens--the first heaven, the second, third, fourth and so on, to the seventeenth heaven of the rupadhatu, and on to the fourth heaven of the arupadhatu. But these heavens are not the heavens you think of as existing high up in the sky. Usually an Oriental teacher will tell you to introspect deep into your own mind. I shall take this opportunity to talk a little of this religious idea, this Oriental teaching of digging deep into the mind.

Oriental teaching was born in fruitful country and is the product of a rich earth, in contrast to those religions that arose in the desert or in lands bordering on the desert. Desert dwellers had no land to cultivate, no trees to raise. They could not wait for the desert's scanty fruits to mature. They were nomads and tradesmen. They had no tie to the earth. When they found something in one country they carried it to another. Perhaps they had some relation to the sky, because the stars indicated the directions to them. Western religions have many stories about the stars, but Oriental religions, on the other hand, seldom mention the stars. Oriental religions have a profound connection with the earth; the minds of Oriental people are always connected with it--Orientals are fastened to the earth. They hate to change their place; many stay in their own birthplace because, being born there, they can never really belong to other places--there is different weather, different water, there are different plagues. But desert dwellers do not think that way. They go wherever they find benefit. Naturally they are not familiar with the earth. They associate with all dif-

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ferent kinds of people. Orientals, on the other hand, are very timid; they shrink from strangers. It is said in the Ye-King that the power of the sky moves under the earth. In the spring it comes forth from the earth like the power of thunder. In May the first lightning comes out of the earth. All power and all spirit come out from the bottom of things, not from the top.

I return to the sutra.

The next morning Kumara Kashyapa put on his robe and, when he had come before the Buddha, knelt down and kissed the Buddha's feet.

"Boy, you are so early. What has happened?" Lokanatha inquired.

Kumara Kashyapa then told the Buddha in detail what had happened the previous day in the woods of eternal night, and the Buddha interpreted to him the real meaning of what he had heard. You can almost see the Buddha himself, there, the Master of the Sangha, the Great Teacher. To this eight-year-old boy, in his smiling way, he said:

"Very well, Kumara Kashyapa, I shall interpret the deva's words for you. Listen carefully. The mound means the physical body that you received from your parents. It is an existence that in the end decays. The smoke that rises from the mound in the night is your mind and the thoughts, notions, imaginings, and dreams that haunt it. They have nothing to do with truth. The fire burning on the top of the mound in the day is the karma that you create by body, mind and speech. The Brahman is your Self. The Wise One is you, child, as a novice. You will be a wise and enlightened monk later. 'Take your sharp spade and dig the mound.' The action of digging the mound is

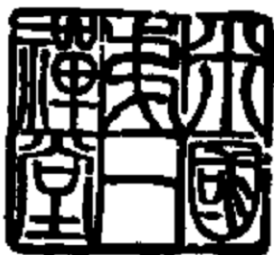
your ceaseless endeavor to attain enlightenment, and the sharp spade is your wisdom. The coffin is the bond, the hard shell, of your deluded mind. And the rock is your pride. Because of your self-pride you cannot see truth. The toad is the symbol of stubborn anger. (The toad is a most obstinate and stubborn living thing. In Japan we say "stubborn as a toad.") The dead body means avarice and greed. The pillories--there are five--that tie your hands, feet, and head are color, sound, smell, taste, and touch. 'When you have dug them all out of this mound you will come to two roads.' The two roads mean doubt, the doubt that all deluded men have, doubt about mind and matter. The thickly twisted roots of trees are beginningless darkness, eternal ignorance. You do not know the truth because as soon as you were born you were covered with this darkness. 'When you dig these tree roots out of the mound and go still deeper you will come to the cave in which sits a great dragon.' This dragon is Buddha. He is Tathagata. He is True Awakening. Child, go and meditate day and night and attain enlightenment. Do not take my word. Attain the awakening of the arhat for yourself."

So the eight-year-old Kumara Kashyapa went back into the eternal dark forest and meditated day and night upon what the Buddha had said. Meditating in the eternal dark forest signifies emptiness. He dug everything useless out of his mind and threw it away. Finally he attained the awakening of the arhat.

Kumara Kashyapa's later life is also written in the sutras, but the part of the story about the ant hill comes to an end here.

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