

# ZEN notes



SOKEI-AN SAYS:

### The Middle Way

I have been speaking about the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha called radical Buddhism. The period from the death of the Buddha to the time of Ashoka, the Indian king, is called radical Buddhism. The period of primitive Buddhism is thought of as lasting a little longer than that of radical Buddhism, and occurs about two or three hundred years after the Buddha's death. From that time Buddhism was divided into two schools: (1) The party of elders (Sthavira); (2) The party of the multitude (Mahasanghika). Later the second developed into Mahayana Buddhism, while the elders party formed Hinayana Buddhism. The Mahayanists emphasized the understanding of the doctrines of Buddhism, while the elders party placed emphasis on the discipline of observing the commandments. I oppose the view that the Buddha's Buddhism was Hinayana. If you study the very old scriptures, the Agamas, or Nikayas, carefully, you can see this.

In the primitive sutras there is one that is very important but largely unknown to students -- the Sutra of Guarding or Not Guarding One's Mind. This title is inaccurate; there must be a short name for it. The translator, who was an upasaka of Bactria, did not translate the title accurately. This sutra has two parts. I shall speak about the first part. It is not necessary to speak about the second part.

But first I must speak about some important words. The first is *Tatha*, sometimes written *Tathata*. Dr. Suzuki translates this "suchness" -- quite an abstract translation. In English this *Tatha* or *Tathata* is "such as that."

*Tatha* was an important term in Buddhism even at the time of this primitive sutra. What is this *Tatha* or *Tathata*, or, sometimes, *Bhutata* *tathata*? If you are not a Buddhist of course it will be difficult for you to grasp the meaning of this "suchness" or such an existence, but if you understand the nature of this religion the term is not so hard to grasp. *Tatha* is occasionally used as a substitute for *Nirvana*. *Nirvana* is the negative side of *Tatha* and *Tatha* is the active side of *Nirvana*. Both *Nirvana* and *Tatha* are obscure in meaning to an outsider but to us the meaning is very clear. Occasionally this *Tatha* or *Nirvana* is called the Middle Way (*Majjhima Marga*). Actually, all these are just names of one thing.

Why is the Buddha's Buddhism called the Middle Way? Usually human beings take one of two attitudes to this existence, that it is "spiritual" or "material," or both. They never take the attitude that there is neither spiritual nor material, but just one existence. Is there such an existence? It is rather difficult to take the attitude that there is.

The "materialist" thinks that the whole existence of the universe is matter, that all the activity of mind is also matter, the activity of electrons and protons playing battledore and shuttlecock, and that this existence will come to an end. Others take the attitude that all existence is nothing but spirit, that "matter" is a false conception. Some hate this "material" existence and wish to return to the spiritual. In the Buddha's time the ascetic schools either practiced intense meditation trying to get rid of mental conditions or prac-

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## SOKEI-AN SAYS

### THE ZEN ATTITUDE

Zen is very easily misunderstood because the teaching itself is a mystery. Any charlatan can imitate the Zen attitude, and people who believe this charlatan's attitude imitate that attitude and believe it is Zen. There are many such people in my own country of Japan. For instance, a friend comes into the room and you hide yourself behind a screen. When he calls, "Mr. Smith, where are you?" you answer, "Mr. Smith is out today." Or someone comes for tea and as you pour the tea you say "Stop the lecture on Buddhism and have a cup of tea." There was a gentleman in Japan who studied Zen for a while and then went to Kyoto for a visit. The hotel manager greeted him. "You haven't been at this hotel for years. Where have you been?" The guest said, "Come here and I'll tell you." When the hotel manager drew near him, the guest slapped his face. He thought this was Zen. Or some painter who hasn't studied from the foundation but imitates the masters, brushes a huge Bodhi-dharma and thinks it is a Zen painting. Everyone in Japan imitates the Zen attitude because it is simple and there is a little humor in it. And though few people really try to study Zen they like to talk about koans. Hakuin's hand is a favorite. One gentleman came to America and talked about the phony attitude of "Which hand produced the sound?" as if it were a real koan. If Hakuin had heard him he would have turned in his grave.

An example of a vaudeville Zen takes place at a dilapidated temple. When the famous abbot of this temple died his disciples scattered and only a novice remained to care for it. At that time there was a famous Zen Master named Nantembo who made a practice of visiting around at Zen temples and trying out their abbots.

The novice heard that Nantembo was coming to visit and that he did not know the old Master had died. Thinking he would like to try out Nantembo, the novice went to the local tofu shop and asked the old bean curd maker to put on abbot's robes and sit in his chair at the temple to play a joke on Nantembo.

When Nantembo arrived, after the usual greetings, he approached the imitation abbot and, without saying a word, made a circle in the air with his thumb and forefinger.

The tofu man stretched out both arms wide.

Nantembo bowed deeply, then held up one finger.

The old man held up five.

Nantembo bowed deeply again, then showed three fingers.

The tofu man opened one eye wide.

Nantembo bowed low and ran out of the temple, thinking he had lost the debate.

The novice ran after him and asked him to explain the dialogue.

Nantembo said: "I asked his reverence 'What is a drop of water?' Your Osho answered, 'It is like the whole ocean.' Wonderful answer. I asked, 'What is one world?' your teacher said, 'It is controlled by the law of the five

consciousnesses.' Wonderful view. I asked, 'What are the three bodies of Buddha?' He answered, 'It exists before my eye.' He is a great master.'

The novice went back into the temple after taking leave of Nan-tembo and said to the tofu man, "You are a great master, I hear. I did not know you were so accomplished."

The tofu man gladly explained the dialogue to the novice.

"That man said my tofu is small. I told him it was big. He offered one sen for it. I told him my price was five sen. He then offered three so I looked at him, no sale."

*To be fully appreciated, "the Zen Attitude" must be acted out. You might like to try it with three people. In giving it originally, of course, Sokei-an acted out all the parts himself very much as a Borscht Circuit monologist might do. Most of our readers are aware that painting, sculpture, words and religion kaleidoscoped in Sokei-an's way of expressing himself. A lesser known element was "acting." His inclination toward this received encouragement even from his "masters," as noted in the following anecdotes, as well as some actual professional training from a relative, perhaps his blood mother. When indications of how his talks were fleshed out with "demonstrations" were recorded by note takers we have included these to help readers experience as much as possible of the impact. Dance, mime, voice were integral parts of almost all his lectures. Though he depreciates "acting" (Oct. 9, 1935) as lesser than the "real attitude," his own demonstrations of "SILENCE," for example, transcended the everyday "real attitude" and sucked the audience right into his own samadhi.*

## SOKEI-AN NOTES OF HIMSELF 1937

When I was twenty years old one of the monks from the monastery where I was staying got me to drink four glasses of beer at a drinking place. Suddenly everything looked different. I could hardly walk. When I returned to the monastery everyone was aghast. I said to my teacher, "After I'm enlightened, I'll become a great actor, a great story-teller, a great monologist!" "Very good," he told me. When I sobered up I realized what I had said.

### CAT'S YAWN-p. 3

My friend introduced me to Soyen Shaku one summer (when I was in my twenties)...The abbot questioned me about what I wished to become. I replied, "I am studying art." "What art are you studying?" "I am learning how to carve Buddhistic statues..." He looked into my eyes again and said, "Carve a Buddha statue for me when you become a famous artist."

The second time I met Soyen Shaku was in April, at the celebration of the Buddha's birthday in Ryomo-an. As his gift to us, the Abbot displayed his calligraphic art. (Then) I was chosen by Koji friends to entertain the Abbot with a monologue, because they knew that I was always mimicking famous monologists of the day. I was terribly disconcerted at having to present myself before the Abbot. "Fancy seeing you here! Have you commenced to carve the Buddha statue?" Certainly he remembered me! My teacher said, "We present

him to you to-day as a monologist." The title of my monologue was "An Acolyte at the Cherry-Blossom Festival." The abbot almost died of laughing. "This is the first time I have heard a Zen monologue," he said.

#### The Art of Acting (Aug. 1, 1936).

There is an actor on the screen -- one of two brothers who were policemen in Hollywood (Wallace and Noah Beery). They were not actors at all, but their environment taught them about other people. When such a one goes on the stage, he seems to know all the rules. He performs naturally; though he does not know this, he fills the entire stage.

#### The Real Attitude (Oct. 9, 1935).

I like to take a real attitude. When I walk, sleep, eat, talk -- every moment is religion to me. I do not wish to copy anything. I see a mountain, a woman, a tree, that is enough. I do not want to make a portrait. Somehow art and the attitude of the artist is not the true thing -- really art is a branch of the true thing. This is the distinction between the artist and religious people. An actor is wonderful, but when he shouts "O-o-oh" on the stage, it is not real to him, it is not his own. But when I shout "O-o-oh" in my room it is real to me, it is not a copy. Some artists may make opposition to this, but that is the reason I gave up art. I have my own face; I do not need to make a portrait. I

have my own world -- I do not need to make a copy of it. I do not wish to lead a double life. I am trying to be simple. I am not discouraging artists, but this was my attitude.

#### Imitation Hero (1936).

When an actress imitates a hero on the stage, she puts on his costumes and assumes his characteristics, but when this "hero" speaks it is the voice of a woman.

When Gutei Zenji was asked a question, he lifted one finger. Whatever question was asked him he always held up his finger.

A smart young novice in his temple used to imitate this to impress the townspeople.

One day the novice appeared before Gutei. Gutei lifted a finger and the little novice imitated him. Gutei drew a dagger and cut off the boy's finger. He screamed, and ran off. "Boy!" called Gutei. The novice turned. Gutei lifted a finger. The boy imitated him. "Oh!" He realized he had no finger. At that moment he was enlightened.

#### DRAGON TROUBLE AGAIN -- SO SORRY

Vanessa Coward's dragons are so exceptionally ornery that we experience great difficulty fixing them to the page. Old subscribers may remember that back in 1961 one succeeded in getting printed upside down and the issue had to be done over. Now the March dragon turned his back so his verse can be read only with the aid of a mirror -- if you can read Chinese characters, that is.

ticed mortification trying to get rid of the physical body itself. Materialists say that we do not know what we were in the past or will be in the future but that what we do know is that we enjoy this moment. From our point of view this is ludicrous.

The philosopher talks of Reality as something metaphysical, outside the realm of the five senses, impossible to demonstrate. But he is looking at Reality with his brain, not realizing that his five senses are part of his brain and that without his eye, ear, and so forth his brain could not function. To the Buddhist the five senses are a part of intellectual activity. If one observes existence from the standpoint of the inner man, IT has no form--no sound, color, or taste--IT cannot be proved or observed with the five senses. This is the abstract view. But, observing from the inside, we are using the outside also. When we see IT, Reality, we observe it using all the functions that we have. IT is *this* (raising a book) or it is *this* (circled arms). We cannot call IT matter or spirit. Buddha called it the central viewpoint--Majjhima--or Tatha, Suchness, or such an existence. *This* is the conclusion of our reasoning and the starting point of our practice of daily life. Buddha calls it Nirvana. It is characteristic of the Buddhist not to take the metaphysical

attitude and not to think that God's existence is outside our body. To the Buddhist the whole universe is God. We can see IT with our two eyes--seeing is believing--and we can touch IT and hear IT. When we look at IT abstractly only, from the center of our mind, IT is tangible to our brain--we can conceive IT abstractly--but we do not realize IT tangibly. The Buddhist takes the direct attitude. We see Buddha, we stand face to face with HIM. This is the resurrection and we perceive IT from *this* (strikes self). Buddha calls it Tathagata. It is very clear, isn't it?

Daily life is our prayer and daily life is our sacrifice and daily life is our hope. It is the conclusion, consummation, life-and-death. Therefore we find a place in which we can relax; we are content when we have food to eat, a roof over our heads. If more energy is left we serve our brothers and sisters. Life is very simple for the Buddhist if he understands this true standpoint. Some later Buddhists fell into the usual Hindu transcendentalist attitude, taking meditation as an end, not as a means to an end or a method to realize this Suchness. When we meditate in the evening at the end of our hard day's work, clasping our hands and crossing our legs, it is to come back to our ultimate standpoint. And from that standpoint



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again we start to work next day. So in the evening before retiring or in the morning before putting our feet into our slippers, we always meditate. This one moment is our prayer, our decision. This is Tathagata. Very clear, isn't it?

*If you do not guard your eyes, your eye-consciousness will be carried away by the phenomenon outside and you will lose your mind with the going out of the ego.* This is a very famous line in Buddhism. All the outside is phenomenal, your face is also a phenomenon, like the cherry blossoms in spring or the clouds upon the summer sky. If you do not keep your mind on your eye, your mind will be carried away with its going out.

You weep because you are no longer eighteen, because at forty or fifty your physical form changes and beauty fades. Your mind is carried away by this phenomenon and you lose your mind. If you lose your mind you feel agony. When a Buddhist teacher who depends upon his audience loses that audience and he cannot pay his rent, his mind is disturbed because it is dependent on the outside, is carried away by the outside. He has lost his mind, he is unhappy. If he takes the Middle Way, he depends upon his own mind, his own eyes. I did not study Buddhism to support myself with it. I worked hard thirty years for my own salvation. Consider the cherry blossom. The flower is not beautiful to please others, but just as itself, so it is something desirable in itself. The Buddhist who takes the Middle Way works hard to get enlightenment just for himself, so all come to ask his help. If one comes or two go, it does

not disturb him. All right, if they go, they go. Even if he starves, he joins his hands and dies peacefully because he lives in his own decision, in his own mind. If he hasn't made this decision, he can hardly be called a monk. If he lives in agony, he cannot have tranquility, samadhi. You understand this in meditation, you who meditate. In samadhi you become entirely one with IT. You forget the barrier between the outside and the inside. You feel spirit and matter are one. The oneness within you is tranquility. If you do not understand this samadhi, you do not understand truth. If you do not understand truth you cannot realize Tatha. If you cannot realize Tatha you cannot find the errors in your mind, your life, your physical attitude.

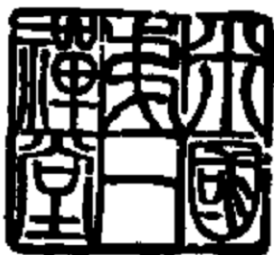
The Hindu fakir is faithful to his own ideas, but his ideas are wrong. Mortification of the body is a misconception, so one who mortifies himself cannot clear up his question. He is depending on something that is not himself. Just as a poor servant is not standing upon his own feet when he is depending on someone outside himself. He is standing upon the feet of his master, not upon his own feet, so if the master is rude to him he feels insulted. If you are dependent upon something other than yourself you cannot find peace. The real attitude is to stand upon your own feet. If you stand upon your own feet you will find peace under them. If the insulted workman disregards insults, he can do his job and be his own boss.

Though this sutra is very short, it denotes the central faith of Buddha himself, the Middle Way.



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