

ZEN BOW

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SENSEI AND ROSHI

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Since World War II a number of Zen-related Japanese words have crashed the English language barrier, among them satori, mondo, koan. Two new candidates for the English dictionaries are sensei (pronounced sén-sáy) and roshi (pronounced raw-shi, with a soft r). Before we glibly begin tossing off these words, we would do well to familiarize ourselves with their meaning and usage in the country of their origin.

Sensei is made up of the Chinese ideogram meaning "first" and the ideogram meaning "to be born"--hence the first born, senior, one deserving respect, etc. A common English rendering is "teacher," but sensei can also be translated as "instructor," "professor," "doctor," "master." Unlike the English word "teacher," though, sensei can be used with great flexibility. Thus a student at the primary, high school, and even college level can address his teacher or professor as Sensei. Instructors and professors call each other Sensei, as do doctors and other professional people. Patients speaking directly to or about their doctor will refer to him as Sensei. Once I observed two American girls demonstrating Max Factor make-up in a Tokyo department store. Their young Japanese assistants repeatedly addressed them as Sensei. A sensei, then, is anyone who is in a superior position by virtue of special knowledge

and abilities, and who therefore must be shown the degree of respect demanded by his role and function.

One of the first questions asked me upon my arrival in Rochester was, "How do we address you?" I replied that it didn't matter to me in the least, but this did not resolve the dilemma. Younger and older members both felt that "Mr. Kapleau" was too formal and "Philip" not respectful enough. One or two began calling me Roshi, a practice I quickly discouraged. Several thought the Southeast Asian custom of addressing a monk as Venerable Sir might be a suitable form of address. In practice, however, it proved too quaint for American tongues and ears and was soon dropped. As a compromise I suggested Sensei, and it took hold. But it's far from satisfactory. Mail still comes addressed to "Mr. Sensei," and recently an old friend wrote, "I hear you've changed your name from Kapleau to Sensei."

The word Sensei could turn out to be a useful addition to the English language, but until it becomes anglicized and all its connotations understood, it will be a source of confusion as much as a term of convenience.

While sensei belongs to the everyday language of Japan, roshi is a term largely restricted to the Zen sect. Literally it carries the meaning of "venerable teacher," i.e., one who commands respect and reverence by reason of great age or impressive dignity. The abbot of a monastery, the chief priest of a temple, or a lay teacher beyond the age of, say, sixty could be addressed

"The mind of the Zen adept is taut—ready like a drawn bow."

as Roshi and the honorific would imply nothing more than great respect. Both the words *roshi* and *osho*, the latter a more popular designation for the head of a temple, are usually rendered into English as "master." But it is well to bear in mind that the term "master" has many meanings, most of which have disappeared from American usage. Here are a few listed in the RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:

"a person with the ability or power to use, control, or dispose of something; an employer of workmen or servants; the male head of a household; a person whose teachings one accepts or follows; a master of Zen; a man eminently skilled in something, as an occupation, art or science; an old master; characteristic of a master, showing mastery." To most Americans the word "master," I think, conjures up the meaning of "old master" or "past master" in the sense that Rembrandt and Beethoven are old masters. However, when a Japanese renders the words *roshi* and *osho* into English as "master," the meaning he attaches to the word is likely to be "the head or chief priest of a temple," and not one who has thoroughly mastered Zen experientially.

The Japanese have a word, *meijin* (pronounced may-jín), which is close in meaning to "old master" or "past master." A *meijin* is not only an expert who has mastered the techniques of his art and digested all the facts pertaining to his specialty; he is as well a man of spiritual insight and wisdom who has experienced the emptiness and impermanence of all things, and whose life style reflects such knowledge. In this sense it is doubtful whether there are any Zen *meijin* (i.e., genuine masters) in Japan today, or elsewhere for that matter. In his POINTS TO WATCH IN TRAINING (*Gaku-doyojin-shu*), written in 1234, Zen master Dogen deplores the fact that there are no masters of Buddhism in Japan. Dogen's definition of a genuine master is one who is fully enlightened, who LIVES by what he knows to be the Truth, and who has received the transmission from his

own master. Readers of THE THREE PILLARS OF ZEN will recall Roshi Harada's comment upon the enlightenment of Yaeko Iwasaki: "Are there even a handful today (1935) who understand all this?" To extrapolate that there are no highly developed *roshi* in Japan nowadays would be incorrect; what is true is that genuine masters have been rare in all ages and times.

Not many Westerners are aware, I believe, that *roshi* is essentially an honorific employed by a teacher's own disciples and followers, and not a title or degree bestowed on one upon completion of a prescribed course of study or in recognition of certain high spiritual accomplishments. This explains why no Japanese (in Japan) would ever call himself *roshi* or sign his name that way.

In a structured society such as the Japanese where it is often better to be polite than 'right' and where it is easy to give offense by not according an individual the degree of respect demanded by his position and function, it is always safe to err on the side of generosity in dispensing honorifics. Accordingly, to show respect a student might address his teacher as *Roshi-san* or, more respectfully, *Roshi-sama* or, even more respectfully yet, *go-Roshi-san*, or, most respectfully, *go-Roshi-sama*. Which of these respectful forms he thought proper would depend, not on the Roshi's spiritual stature but on the degree of familiarity between them and his own sense of propriety about such matters.

That the use of the term *roshi* and other honorifics is in the main a reflection of a disciple's respect toward his teacher and not necessarily a measure of the latter's accomplishments can be seen in the following incident. Many years ago I was in a conversation with some Japanese Zen acquaintances who, it seemed to me, were deliberately downgrading my teacher by referring to him as *Harada-san* (the *san* roughly corresponding to the English "Mr.") and upgrading their own by calling him so-and-so *Roshi*. Afterward when I asked a good Japanese friend about this seeming rudeness, he

assured me: "On the contrary, they were most polite. Had they presumed to speak of YOUR teacher as roshi, that would have been an impoliteness."

"But if they were in the presence of my teacher and were speaking to him directly," I persisted, "they would address him as Roshi-san or Roshi-sama, would they not?"

"Yes, very likely."

"Then why don't they refer to him as Roshi when not in his presence?"

"Because that would be impolite." Period.

This, by the way, is just the reverse of the normal Japanese custom of using honorifics when speaking of the other fellow's wife or children or things, and using plain forms when speaking of one's own wife, children or what have you. Even for a westerner with long residence in Asia the subtlety and complexity of the oriental notion of respect is exceedingly hard to grasp, so if all this sounds enigmatic to a Western mind, perhaps a third incident will shed light. When the roshi of the same zazen group would be away for long periods of time, his teaching duties would be taken over by his eldest disciple, a man of acknowledged insight and teaching capability. Normally during the roshi's presence the group members addressed this man as Sensei, but as soon as the roshi departed and the disciple became the teacher, the group began calling him Roshi-san. No sooner had the roshi returned, however, than this man would again become Sensei to all but a few bewildered Westerners who found themselves unable to follow such delicate Asian twists and turns.

One further incident might be related in this connection. A certain member of this zazen group worked in the Japanese Foreign Ministry and his duties involved, among other things, sensitive protocol. Whenever a question arose among our group as to proper decorum, invariably he was consulted. One day this member suddenly began addressing the roshi as Ro-dai-shi, an expression

which can be Englished as Venerable Great Teacher. For some reason, I was startled to hear the roshi addressed as Venerable Great Teacher and wondered what led this man, gratuitously it seemed to me, to so address him. When I privately inquired as to his reasons he told me, "Why not? When a fine teacher like ours reaches a venerable age, shouldn't he be so honored by his own disciples?" Oddly enough, this trial balloon--not this man's first, by the way--never got far; a few members did attempt to sail along with it during the next few meetings, but most continued to address the roshi as they had previously.

To an outsider this last may smack of excessive devotion and respect, yet it is perfectly understandable. Every true disciple thinks his teacher best--for him if no one else--and accordingly wants to show his respect and appreciation. The more one advances in his practice and gains in purity and understanding the greater his respect toward his teacher, which really is no more than an indication of his greater respect for himself.

If the honorific roshi is no infallible indicator of a teacher's wisdom and capability, how can a prospective Zen student judge the competency of a would-be teacher? There is in fact a 'certificate'--really a calligraphic acknowledgment--which a roshi gives a disciple whose enlightenment he has sanctioned, but it is far from tantamount to a teaching certificate. How can it be when in Zen it is said that only AFTER a first enlightenment does one's training really begin? Nor is it truer to say that a student who has finished training in koans--some five hundred, on the average--and likewise receives acknowledgment (inka) automatically becomes a roshi and, by extension, a bona fide teacher. This is like saying that graduation from medical school automatically makes one a doctor. And let us not forget there are medical schools and there are medical schools, just as there are bright graduating students and dull ones. The truth is, it is possible to pass through

all the koans on a shallow enlightenment --many have done so--but this does not mean there is no gain in other directions from koan practice. As Roshi Harada says in THE THREE PILLARS OF ZEN, "A one-sided realization (i.e., shallow enlightenment) may remain a one-sided realization even though a number of koans have been passed."

In Zen, as in other traditions, a disciple is deemed capable of teaching when his teacher says he is. This naturally places a great deal of power and responsibility in the hands of a roshi. If he is wise and compassionate, his seal of approval is the public's safeguard. If he is not, his approval means little. It is doubtful whether any first-rate roshi would allow a student of less than ten years' training to hold himself out as a fully-qualified teacher. But not all roshi or sensei are first rate. We must not forget that even accomplished roshi are human beings with human failings, though clearly they have far fewer than the ordinary man. Unfortunately, when certain roshi become old--and up to seventy is regarded as still 'young'--they go 'soft.' They become, as the Japanese say, grandmotherly and sugary. They may even develop a "one-more-notch-in-the-belt" complex and begin to sanction as kensho experiences which are borderline, or which if genuine are so weak that unless supported and nourished by regular zazen they may fade and die--like a new-born chick deprived of its mother or incubator--and the student may find himself with a stronger ego than the one he temporarily banished, for now pride in having kensho has been added.

Other roshi--again with obvious lacks--when they reach an advanced age begin to find fault with their disciples. They may, for instance, grant a disciple permission to teach and then arbitrarily withdraw that permission when the disciple shows too much independence, not unlike a father who sets his son up in business and then withdraws his capital and moral support when the son refuses to go along with his father's ideas.

Asians, more understanding in such matters than Westerners, do not categorically reject a teacher whom they discover to be less than Buddha-like, for they know a man may be a fine teacher and yet have not purged himself of all defilements. They accept his shortcomings philosophically, which is another way of saying they recognize and accept that each man has his own load of karma to expiate. A Japanese long experienced in Zen once told me: "I know my roshi has character flaws, yet of the teachers I've had he is the only one who has taught me real Zen and I am exceedingly grateful to him. But, alas, his karmic load is heavy."

In her book INITIATIONS AND INITIATES IN TIBET, Alexandra David-Neel, who spent many years in Tibet, writes: "In spite of many hyperbolical expressions used in their speech to or concerning him, the veneration of a Tibetan disciple is really given to the knowledge of which the master is the guardian. With few exceptions, the disciples are fully aware of the shortcomings of their lama, but respect keeps them from confiding to another their discoveries in this direction. Besides, many things which would appear reprehensible to a Westerner do not shock them in the least." It is questionable whether the Tibetans, any more than the Japanese, keep such discoveries entirely to themselves. Naturally they do not bruit them about, but on occasion they do speak of them among close friends, more in sorrow than in anger.

Granted that there are roshi with feet of clay, none, I'm sure, has been guilty of conduct as heinous as that of the master in the Buddha's time (recounted in the Angulimala sutra) who to avenge himself on a disciple he suspected of improper advances toward his wife persuaded him that the only way he could achieve rebirth in heaven was to slay a thousand men. The obedient but innocent disciple, lacking one more victim to accomplish his grisly mission, pursued the Buddha, who foiled his diabolical purpose and eventually

liberated him from his homicidal course. Perhaps the moral of this story is not to wish for rebirth in heaven--an un-Zennish aspiration in any case.

Again we return to the question: how does the serious Zen student find a competent master? In Buddhism as in Hinduism there is a saying, "When the student is ready the teacher will appear." The question that inevitably follows is, "Yes, but how will I know him?" A rabbi when asked how one went about finding the right marriage partner replied, "It is more important to BE the right one than to find the right one." The same may be said with respect to finding a spiritual teacher. The individual who spontaneously cries out, "O help me, I need help!" has already taken his first step in the direction of the right master.

Zen tradition sanctions an aspirant's courting many teachers before asking for the helping hand of one. But which one? The one who arouses awe and respect, who inspires such feelings of confidence, trust and devotion that one willingly bows down before him and, childlike, opens himself to receive the teaching; the one who invokes trust, stimulates faith and banishes doubt and suspicion. A master may have deep enlightenment, many followers and a fine reputation, but unless he sets the blood racing and the spine tingling of a would-be disciple so the latter can say, "He is the teacher for me, the one I've been searching all over for," in the end the relationship will come to nought.

Finally, what a perceptive observer said about the bonds of matrimony applies equally to the master-disciple bond: "Before entering into it one should keep both eyes open; after, only one."

On the way to Self-perfection a man must not loiter for an instant. If he should stop for a moment working on himself he will slip back.

-Attar

MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR CHESTER CARLSON

A memorial service was held at the Arnold Park zendo on Tuesday, September 24, for Chester Carlson, a Life Member of the Center, who was stricken fatally with a heart attack in New York City on September 19. The service, conducted by Philip Kapleau, included an account of Chet's engagement with the Center through his benefaction and attendance at sesshin, and acquainted some of the 30 members present with the character of this remarkable man.

Chet, indeed, exemplified the aims of the Zen disciple: he was flexible without being compromising, unassuming without losing his crisp curiosity and transcendent humor, persistent in his practice although he suffered the difficulties of arthritis. Some of us who knew him despaired of ever reaching the egolessness, in one life, that Chet seemed to be born with.

Many who read about him as the inventor of the Xerography process did not realize that he and his wife, Dorris, were also involved in a spiritual search that encompassed daily meditation before it became popular, as well as the giving of encouragement and generous financial aid to sponsor meditation facilities for others. The Carlsons' founding grant to the Zen Meditation Center of Rochester, as well as their support of the New York Zen Studies Center and the San Francisco Zen Center, have certainly furthered zazen in the West.

Two years ago Chet attended the Pacem-in-Terris Conference in Switzerland, sponsored by the Center for Democratic Institutions, which he also supported. During one of the meetings while he was in conversation with Erich Fromm, the psychoanalyst, Chet asked Dr. Fromm if mental health could be achieved through Zen. "It's the only way," Fromm retorted.

Chet Carlson is the first member of the Center to pass on. In life an inventor and student of the Way, he is in death a continuing inspiration to those who knew him.

A.F.

CLEAN UP OF FIRE CONTINUES

After having volunteered hundreds of hours throughout August and September to scrape off wallpaper, strip old paint, apply new paint, install new fixtures, shellac and polish newly-sanded floors, the Center's loyal members have come back to the Arnold Park house since the October 4 fire to shovel out heaps of charred lath, smoking plaster and splintered glass. They have done all this with the same diligence and good cheer that marked the earlier operation. Women have soaked the soot-stained sheets at home, scrubbed the blackened dishes and pots and contributed various delicious casseroles for lunch so that the monastics and male helpers might give full time to the extensive clean-up of the house.

"No situation can become favorable until one is able to adapt to it and does not wear himself out with mistaken resistance," says the I CHING. This acceptance, with its non-attachment to results, is the aim of the Zen disciple. At the Center, acceptance has included a move to the four-car garage with its heated workroom, which has been converted to a kitchen. Using old boards, tables and chests spared from the fire, we are developing new ideas in kitchen design. (It has been jokingly said that we are one of the few religious groups trained in disaster relief.)

The zendo and its contents were spared; in only one corner was the floor damaged by the firemen's hoses, and that, slightly. A full schedule of

meditation has begun again. Three generous members have volunteered their homes for sesshin until the Center is restored. Others have responded with checks and offers of equipment and supplies.

Presently an inventory of the damaged and destroyed contents is being compiled for insurance purposes and an architect has been consulted to draw up preliminary plans for rebuilding. When we know how much money will be available from insurance and contributions, the work will go forward. The fire may well turn out to be a blessing in disguise, for with the support of members and friends the Center can be rebuilt closer to our needs and desires. A neighbor has observed recently that the Center, Phoenix-like, is recreating itself from the ashes of its own destruction. We concur, for beyond acceptance there has been gratitude, not resistance, and a creative response.

ON GIVING THANKS

Thanksgiving (gratitude) leads to wisdom and tenderness. How so? The supreme outward gesture of gassho or bowing down when done easily, is a reflection of a heart casting off the shackles of conceit and envy and self-pre-occupation.

The repeated performance of these gestures strengthens humility and fosters self-effacement, bringing us closer to people and things. Our built-in wisdom and tenderness can then flow outwardly, embracing everything.

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