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Alan Watts 1915-1973

Alan Watts died on November 16, 1973, at the age of 58, in Mill Valley, California. In lieu of a regular obituary, we offer the following contributions from two of his friends.—The Editors

FOR ALAN WATTS

He blazed out the new path for all of us,
and came back and made it clear.
Explored the side canyons and deer trails;
investigated cliffs and thickets.
Many guides would have us travel single file,
like mules in a pack train, and
never leave the trail.
Alan taught us to move forward
like the breeze—
tasting the berries, greeting the bluejays,
learning and loving the whole terrain.

Gary Snyder

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The following poem was included in Mr. Snyder's correspondence to us. We have printed it here with his permission for the relation we feel it has to the previous poem.—Eds.

WHY LOG TRUCK DRIVERS RISE EARLIER THAN STUDENTS OF ZEN

In the high seat,
before-dawn dark,

Polished hubs gleam
And the shiny diesel stack
Warms and flutters
Up the Tyler Road grade
To the logging on Poorman Creek.
Thirty miles of dust.

There is no other life.

IXth A 40073

Gary Snyder

The Vintage Alan Watts

This is a tribute to a friend, and a retrospective on his best years. I have no wish to write a proper biography, nor even a complete biographical sketch; I want only to record a few rather personal impressions of the man's impact on American culture and American Christendom, and his uneasy encounter with provincial academia, and the provincial churchman. And I want to share some memorabilia that, but for his recent death, I would still keep private: a page of sketches, some fragments of letters, and a few treasured recollections.

To begin with, Alan Watts was an Englishman. He was born in the midst of the Great War, in 1915, in Chislehurst, Kent. And though he came to the United States at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, on the brink of the second Great War, he brought with him an especially valuable property: an Englishman's facility with words. Properly used, English is a language of uncommon

agility and elasticity, vigorous in its brevity, yet congenial to flights of imagination and fantasy, courteously elegant, but without display. For those Americans who love the language, the mother tongue serves constantly to remind them of the shadowy presence, within the heart of their own culture, of a true mother culture. And just as educated Japanese feel a special reverence for the classical culture of China, literate Americans are almost hypnotized by an English accent, and by the easy eloquence that often goes with it.

Alan Watts' way with words was one of the primary facts of his existence. I know of only one other fact of equal importance, and that was the curious way in which he was drawn toward those two great institutions of Anglo-American culture, the university and the church, yet always remained on the periphery, the outer circumference, of both. I was instrumental, in 1958, in his receipt of an honorary doctorate from the University of Vermont, and he was pleased as punch. He stood proudly as the citation was read, and the doctor's mantle was placed on his shoulders; but there was also a twinkle in his eye. "I never received a bachelor's degree, you know," he said to me; "but I've gotten a master's and now a doctorate, without it." And he chuckled his impish, gleeful chuckle, with its ominous hint of smoker's congestion. I think he was especially pleased that it was a divinity degree; that somehow took care of the church and the university in a single blow. But I never knew him to mention that honorary degree again, in conversation or in writing, after that day in June when he received it. With one curious exception. An advertisement appeared in the New York Times Book Review, one fine Sunday in 1967, headed "This book could remove your fear of death forever." Beside a profile of the author, a terribly serious Alan Watts, the text identified him as "one of the inspirations of the 'Hippie' movement," and promised that this book (called simply *The Book*) was "a handbook for mental and emotional rebellion," a "textbook on how to get out of the rat-race, *today*." Then, wanting things both ways, the advertisement gave the author's academic credentials: "Dr. Watts holds a Master's Degree and an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity." The ad was not placed by his publisher, but by an organization identified only as "Information Incorporated," who offered the book C. O. D. for \$5.98, with a \$1 "goodwill deposit" (can't trust those hippies too far), your money back within ten days if not completely satisfied.

I mention this ad because it illustrates the peculiar difficulties that went with the style of life Alan Watts chose for himself. He chose to avoid the academy, because he found it stuffy and confining. In a country where there is incessant pious talk of man's need for freedom, Alan Watts was that rare individual who truly wanted to be free—and paid the price. The day he received his honorary

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degree from the University of Vermont, he delivered the baccalaureate address in the morning, on the lawn of the campus. As the academic procession filed past the assembled faculty, a familiar voice behind me remarked, "Look what the cat's dragged in." It was one of the elder statesmen of the faculty, a department chairman and prominent lay member of the local Congregational church. In those days, all deans and department chairmen belonged either to the one Congregational church in town or the other. It was simply understood. Alan Watts had guaranteed his personal independence by declining the security offered by an academic post, and supported himself by freelance lecturing and writing. He could afford to feed his family, and keep his houseboat in Sausalito afloat; but he did seem to have neglected his dental work. I presume that was what my colleague was referring to. When Alan Watts grinned broadly, irregularities and gaps showed themselves, and somehow added to the mirthfulness of his grin; it is the sort of thing that provincial academicians notice.

Watts' baccalaureate talk was taped that day, and I had it transcribed and distributed to the local clergy, who often complained that they had to miss the eminent guests we had (Theodor Gaster, Hohn Dillenberger, and Gustave Weigel were among the others) because of their own Sunday duties. A week later I ran into the minister of the local Congregational church downtown, and asked him what he thought of Watts' talk (it was entitled "Faith Beyond Belief," and there was much talk of Taoism and Zen in it). He said that he was preparing a reply, titled "How to Avoid Becoming a Ping-Pong Ball," and invited me to come and hear it. The following week I again bumped into him in the downtown shops, and asked him when I was to come and hear his Ping-Pong sermon. He said he had abandoned the idea, because it was really not worth it. Talk of Zen Buddhism was in the air those days, but our solid citizens took it for a temporary affair. I clipped this item from the *New Yorker* of August 20, 1960: "Overheard in the Scribner bookstore: 'I really don't think I want to spend that much on Buddhism.'"

Watts had himself been a clergyman for a while. He attended an Episcopal seminary in Illinois after coming to the States, and was ordained an Anglican priest. He served as chaplain to Northwestern University from 1944 to 1950, but in his thirty-fifth year, he quit his post, and the priesthood, both at the same time. When he agreed to do our baccalaureate sermon at the university some nine years later, I told him that customarily the speaker opens the proceedings with an invocation, and closes them with a benediction. He replied, in a letter dated January 16, 1958: "Would you be prepared to depart from precedent in asking somebody else to give the invocation; that is, unless you want a period

of total silence!" He had given up the priesthood, and told me afterwards that he simply had balked at the very idea of standing up in front of a congregation and telling people how to live. It was the lesson taught by Chuang Tzu's wheel maker: there is an art to living, and it must be learned in the living of it. But Watts told me he never lost touch with his friends in the priesthood, that he still respected them and they him, and that he still spent pleasant evenings in New York rectories discussing God with his former colleagues.

It was in fact through the Episcopal church, indirectly, that I for one first came to know of Watts. In the late 1940's and early fifties I attended a college affiliated with the Anglican church, and many of my classmates were pre-theology students, preparing for admission to the Episcopal seminary. I took a course there called Philosophical Theology, taught by one George Walsh; Alan Watts' *Behold the Spirit* was one of the books we read and discussed, and the whole campus was buzzing with rumors of Alan Watts' imminent departure from the church. We were told that he had been given time off from his duties at Northwestern, and sent to the Anglican monastery in West Park to "examine his conscience." Rumor had it that he had done so, and emerged a Buddhist.

But to say he became a Buddhist is to miss the point of his life, and his quest. He says in his preface to *Behold the Spirit* the clerics and theologians constantly "confuse the meaning of religion with its form, and when asked to explain the meaning give only a more detailed exposition of the form." Form is sectarian, but meaning rests in the perception of infinitude within the finite. Watts subtitled this book "A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion"; the meaning of religion, he says, "is God himself . . . not as an idea conceived but as a reality experienced." The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation means simply "that we do not have to *attain* union with God," for "God has wedded himself to humanity, has united his divine essence with our inmost being. . . ." Or, to quote Pascal, "Console thyself, thou wouldest not seek Me if thou hadst not found Me."

Behold the Spirit is a watershed in Alan Watts' spiritual biography.¹ In it, you can see that he has not quite left Chislehurst, and he has not yet discovered California. He stands between cultures, between lives, on the boundary. It was the most promising, and the most fruitful period of his career. He has set himself "the incarnational task of so uniting religion with ordinary life that ordinary life becomes religious in itself." The "presence of God as the eternal Now," he says, "is a truth which, at least in part, should be able to penetrate our

¹ *Behold the Spirit* was published in 1947 by Pantheon, New York.

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consciousness with ease." And why has that presence not easily penetrated the Western psyche heretofore? It is because the forms of religion, instead of directing us toward their meaning, only get in the way of that meaning, that presence. Small wonder that seminary students of post-war America were paying attention to this book. It offered a devastating criticism of the religiosity of the day, and yet the critic, Watts himself, came through as a free spirit, without grudges, offering hope, and a promise of a life with greater depth. Watts wrote (and we all cheered): "The ordinary modern Church service is an insufferably stodgy and joyless affair, where people go to acquire merit for the penance of boredom." What joy there is is manufactured joy, it "is merely surface joy, like the sugar on a pill, and those who take themselves seriously will of course think of religion as a pill." And he wrote of the "hermaphroditic Christ of popular Church art . . . solemn, effeminate, sanctimonious, moralizing, ethereal, neither red-bloodedly human nor majestically divine." And he wrote of the church's "hymnodic abominations," the "pure *schmalz*" of hymns like

I need Thee, precious Jesu:
I need a friend like Thee,
A friend to soothe and pity,
A friend to care for me . . .

Having swept away the husks of a religion gone stale, Watts now began to spin out his new theology, a curious but amicable blend of the Hindu *lila* doctrine, Taoist philosophy, medieval Christian myth, and Zen humor. The spiritual life, he said, is meaningless unless "it is understood that in the very heart of God there is that colossal gaiety which is represented in the symbol of the angelic choirs encircling the presence of God in an eternal dance of ecstasy." For, he says, "viewed as a work of 'serious purpose' the creation simply does not make sense. For a great part of the universe seems to have no purpose at all; there is much more of it than is necessary; there is a prodigious waste of space and energy; and it is inhabited by a stupendous variety of weird organisms that apparently have nothing better to do than reproduce themselves in alarming quantities. But preachers have always talked, rather vaguely perhaps, about God's *purpose*. . . . One might think that God is purpose personified, but his whole universe is on the whole a whimsical contraption filled with much rather glorious nonsense."

And then he turns to man. "Children (and adults who have their wisdom) are usually the most happy when they are doing things that have no particular purpose There is a timeless and peaceful satisfaction in these actions, a

fascination such that it would seem possible to go on with them for all eternity. To sit and watch the changing shapes of clouds, or specks of dust floating in the sunlight, or the patterns of concentric circles made in a pool by the falling rain—the contemplative happiness of these things belongs to that childlike wisdom which must be learned again before one may enter the kingdom of heaven, for the reason, it must be, that the activity of heaven is of a similar kind.” He concludes that “God’s creative activity is not his labour but his play,” and the perfect life for man “has no purpose because it is the life of God . . . in so far as man has not realized union with God he has purpose but no meaning; but in so far as he has realized it he has meaning and no purpose. A purpose is justified by something beyond itself, but a meaning is its own justification. Thus the inner life of God and its created reflection is not purposeful; like the greatest achievements of human art, it is meaningful and playful.” There is his life’s message, summed up in a few paragraphs, later to be spun out in a dozen or so volumes. For the church, Alan Watts was playing about too close to the edge; his ideas bespoke another encounter with Oriental paganism, in a time when dusting off old notions of defining heterodoxy to preserve orthodoxy would surely not have been popular. A heresy trial at this late date in history? Alan Watts saved them the trouble, and left the church. And some churchmen admired him for his courage. “Snatch the wind in a bag,” he wrote, “and you have only stagnant air. This is the root of every trouble: man loves life, but the moment he tries to hold on to it he misses it.” Life is suffering, agitation; suffering is caused by grasping, clinging; this grasping can be extinguished . . . “We are scared stiff to awaken to the truth that we are being swept along by the life of God as in a mighty torrent; that it sweeps us away from our possessions and our very selves . . .” The doctrine of *anicca/anitya*, impermanence. One of Watts’ best titles, *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, said it all.

In April of 1959 Watts was on the Vermont campus again, this time as a participant in a three day conference. He flew in, from Boston as I recall. He was on the lecture circuit then, having severed his connection with the American Academy of Asian Studies, which he had served for a time as dean. “I am most fortunate in being able to pursue a life of independent writing and research,” he wrote me, “which is very much more congenial.” He traveled with an old hip-pocket flask recovered from the flaming twenties, which he kept filled with vodka, to fortify him for the flight. He had a fear of flying, but he had to fly to maintain his schedule and earn his living. It was part of the price he paid.

He was by then a kind of godfather to the beat generation writers of the San Francisco area; but here again, he was on the periphery of a movement, a free

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agent who could not quite be absorbed. He appears in Jack Kerouac's autobiographical novel *The Dharma Bums* as Arthur Whane, director of the Buddhist Association, who drops in on one of the bohemians' parties.² The narrator records (and Watts remembered the incident well): "Suddenly I looked up and Alvah and George were walking around naked . . . Nobody seemed to mind. In fact I saw Cacoethes and Arthur Whane well dressed standing having a polite conversation in the firelight with the two naked madmen, a kind of serious conversation about world affairs." Gary Snyder (known as Japhy in the novel) had been translating the Cold Mountain Poems of Han Shan, and sharing them with his friends, who saw one another as Bodhisattvas and Zen lunatics.

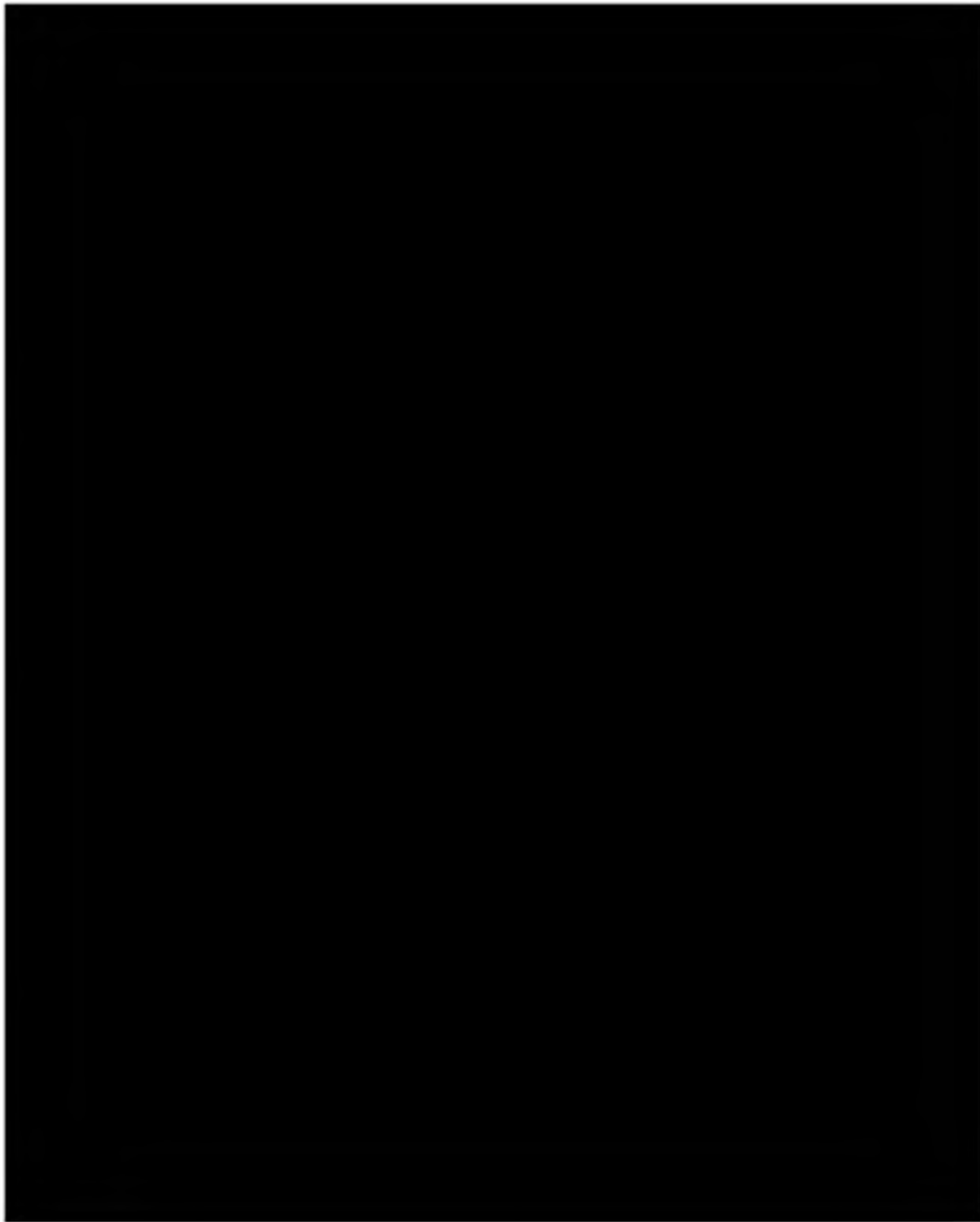
But by 1959 the boozy bohemians of Kerouac's circle were already preparing the way for the California drug culture, whose godfather was I suppose Aldous Huxley. It was to this group that the *Times* ad of eight years later made its appeal, no doubt to the chagrin of Watts, who wrote to me in a letter from Mill Valley dated March 5, 1959: "Having experimented with both mescaline and lysergic acid, I think too big a case is being made for them. They may have some therapeutic value, but, for me, they are simply nothing like a *satori*."

He was as agile as ever at that spring 1959 conference. At dinner someone asked him to pass a knife, and he told the *Zen mondō* about the *rōshi* who asks for a knife, and the student politely passes it handle first. "Blade first!" says the *rōshi*; "what would I do with the handle?" That evening, one of the panelists, a nuclear physicist, kept talking about the need for hard facts. Watts commented that he thought our civilization ought to give more attention to soft facts. A student in the audience said, "Mr. Watts, would you give us one example of a soft fact?" He replied: "A woman."

When the evening was over, he came to our home, and relaxed in our living room with the books at hand, and a bit of refreshment. He picked up a copy of *Max*, a unique and charming book of cartoons by a Swiss humorist named Giovannetti.³ Max is a furry animal, something like a groundhog, who gets himself into all sorts of mischief and tangles, doing the simplest things. I think I shall never again see a man enjoy a book as Alan Watts enjoyed the antics of Max. His laughter left such a good feeling in our home that I sent him a copy of *Max* the following week, and soon after a thank-you note came by mail.

² Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* was published in 1958 by the Viking Press, New York.

³ Giovannetti's *Max* was published in 1954 by the Macmillan Company, New York. Many of his cartoons first appeared in *Punch* Magazine.



There were no words; just the page of cartoons reproduced here, penned on ordinary letter paper, and done in the style of Giovannetti. But the figure top left leans slightly to the left, as Alan Watts did when he stood to speak; and there is something in the eyes and the expression that is more Alan Watts than Max. He saw himself in Max, I suppose. Max was his alter ego.

—A. W. SADLER

Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi 1885-1973

Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi passed away March 28, 1973, at the age of 88. He had come up to Kamakura from his temple in Kyushu to lead *jukai* at the San Un Zendō on March 25. Feeling indisposed thereafter, he rested at the home of his daughter in Tokyo, where he suddenly died three days later.

Yamamoto Gempō Rōshi used to say there is no murder worse than the

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killing of time. Yasutani Rōshi seemed to feel this imperative during his relatively brief teaching career. In the course of his last 20 years, he operated from a small temple in one part of Tokyo or another, and conducted Zen meetings and *sesshin* all over Japan, from Kyushu to Hokkaido. He made eight trips to the United States as well, leading *sesshin* in Hawaii, California and on the East Coast.

In those 20 years he published 30 books and pamphlets, including major commentaries upon portions of the *Sōbōgenzō*, and upon the principal texts used in his tradition, the *Mumonkan*, *Hekiganroku*, *Sōyōroku*, *Denkōroku*, and *Goi Kōan*. The list also includes five substantial volumes of his own poetry. Not only did he write and publish these works himself, he distributed them, often wrapping them for mailing, addressing them and carrying them to the post office.

Those active 20 years were the flowering of a life that developed less dramatically in earlier years. Though ordained as a child, Yasutani Rōshi did not begin his Zen training until he was past 40. By then he was a primary school principal, and a family man with several children. Those decades of lay life were surely a foundation for, rather than just a postponement of his future career of Zen teaching. His incisive style of presentation was no doubt being cultivated as he dealt day by day with inquiring minds at his school. The understanding he always showed for the problems of laymen as Zen students, and his capacity to communicate readily with women probably grew out of his own domestic and social experiences during those early years.

Yasutani Rōshi trained under Harada Daiun Rōshi for about 18 years, receiving *inka sbōmei* when he was 59. Harada Rōshi was an innovative Soto master, who had trained under Rinzai teachers, notably Toyota Dokutan Rōshi, in the early years of this century. He developed an eclectic school that maintained a tone of Soto Zen in a program of *kōan* study. The *kōan* themselves were taken from texts conventionally used in Rinzai practice, and also from Soto collections. I imagine that in teaching from the *Denkōroku*, for example, Harada Rōshi established his own *sbitsunai* tradition.

Each *rōshi* puts his own individual quality into his teaching, and Yasutani Rōshi was no exception. We also find *rōshi* commonly taking a modest position in relation to their own teachers. In Yasutani Rōshi we find this deference convincingly expressed. His *teishō* and his comments at *dokusan* were peppered with references to Harada Rōshi's opinions. One gains the feeling that to know Yasutani Rōshi, one must also know Harada Rōshi.

During the eight or nine years after receiving *inka*, Yasutani Rōshi devoted himself to becoming established as a Zen master, founding first a center in Hok-

kaido, and then another in Kamakura. Today those centers continue to flourish, and two others, in Kyushu and Osaka, also are active, all of them directed by his Dharma successors. In Hawaii, the Diamond Sangha with its centers on Maui and Oahu is affiliated with the San Un Zendo in Kamakura; and mainland U. S. centers as well trace their establishment to his influence.

I suppose one hallmark of a true *rōshi* is the quality of being uniquely himself. Yasutani Rōshi was certainly his own man. He laid on the line, with incisive words and vigorous action, the direct expression of his convictions. He held to what he considered to be the fundamental teachings of Dōgen Zenji, and the fire of his great confidence sustained him through isolation from his Soto Zen peers and the Soto Zen hierarchy. I can recall him standing before the assembly at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California, addressing the elite of American Soto Zen students, and holding forth vigorously on the importance of *kōan* practice, and condemning *shikantaza* as preliminary training,—and earning the profound respect of his listeners.

Except for his group in Hokkaido, which included a few priests, Yasutani Rōshi's followers were almost entirely laymen and laywomen. They included many Westerners, as Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen* will show. This was deliberate on his part, for although he was master of a *sōdō* early in his career, he soon concluded that the Dharma can best be maintained among people of the workaday world. The ramifications of this conviction are still developing at the San Un Zendo, for example, where students include people of many nationalities in addition to the Japanese, and of Christian faith as well as Buddhist.

We are always being reminded that Zen is not merely the Zen Sect. Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi will be remembered as the master who practiced this fact. His own organization, the Sanbō Kyōdan (Fellowship of the Three Jewels), is a recognized sect, but it is clear that it functions to support the work of its leaders, rather than the other way about. Yasutani Rōshi's great struggle was to begin again, with only truth as his foundation. In great measure he succeeded, and the further developments of his ideal of "international Zen," at home and abroad surely will find continued inspiration in the recollection of his style and the study of his writings.

—ROBERT AITKEN