

## NOTES

### **My companion as I return to the village without moon.**

#### **Kobori Nanrei, 1918–1992**

When I first arrived in Japan in 1970, I came as a research scholar. The Japanese Ministry of Education had granted me one of their scholarships to study Japanese philosophy at Kyoto University. At the same time, I was carrying with me the last draft of my Ph.D. dissertation for Stanford University. The truth was that I was not the slightest bit interested in doing either project. My years at Stanford—the end of the 60's—coincided with enormous campus violence over the war in Vietnam. Under this duress, the university administration had acted like paid eunuchs, the faculty like pretentious but incompetent sages. I was about to get my Ph.D. and become a permanent member of the university. But I needed a break before cementing my feet forever into that concrete.

In a very short while, I had made my way to Ryōkō-in of Daitokuji where Kobori Nanrei Oshō taught Zen to westerners. The very first time I tried *zazen*, I felt immediately that this was a path for me. At once, I put everything else aside and began to attend every sitting that I could. At that time, the temple had two-hour sittings every morning and also again evenings three times a week. On weekends, there were Sunday morning lectures and sometimes half-day and all-day sittings. Once a week Kobori Oshō gave *sanzen*.

Many Zen teachers instruct beginners in *zazen* to focus on their breathing counting from one to ten. Kobori Oshō however had devised his own instruction method. He told me to count “One” on every breath instead of counting one to ten. After several months of this counting, he surprised me one day by asking, “Where does One come from?” That question thereafter became my *kōan*. For me, it seemed

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to have some sort of special importance. My Japanese name is "Genichi"—"Gen" meaning "origin" or "source," and "ichi" meaning "one." In the *kōan*, I seemed to be asking myself my own name.

Events moved quickly after that. The Oshō made introductions and I was allowed to move into the Daitokuji student dormitory. From there I commuted to Kyoto University while I spent my mornings and evenings in temple life. More introductions and I was sitting as an outside guest, head shaved and dressed in kimono and *hakama*, every evening with the monks in the Daitokuji monastery.

I carried that *kōan*, "Where does One come from?" around with me day and night just as the books on Zen instruction say to do. Walking to school, I remember hoping the light would turn yellow at crosswalks. When other people dashed to get across the street before the light changed, I was pleased to stand quietly for two minutes and work on my *kōan*. On the streetcars and busses, I learned that it was easier to do *zazen* facing sideways; my body was not pitched back and forth as much as in the seats facing forward. Sitting each evening with the monastery monks as an outside guest, I was not allowed to go to *sanzen* but remained in the *zendō* instead. But nevertheless I pretended to myself that I too was in the *sanzen* line-up and each evening pushed myself to come up with a new response to this question, "Where does One come from?" One day perhaps two years after first receiving that *kōan*, walking out the temple on the way to school, I turned on the stone pathway in front of the main headquarters temple where a great branch of a Japanese pine tree sweeps down over the walkway. Suddenly I realized! I knew where One comes from! I had been looking in all the wrong places! It was so obvious! After that I was filled with excitement. I could hardly contain myself, could not wait to see Kōbori Oshō again. At the next *sanzen* with him, I exploded like a small volcano. Kōbori Oshō slowly opened his eyes and looked at me with a little smile. My career as a Zen monk started from that moment.

After submitting the last draft of my dissertation and getting word that I would be getting the Ph.D., I asked to be ordained. Kōbori Oshō put me through a year of preparatory training in his temple, gave me a new name "Sōgen" and then sent me to the Daitokuji monastery as a Zen monk. You cannot know how proud I felt to be wearing the robes, approaching the gate of Daitō Kokushi's monastery 750 years old, asking to be admitted into an ancient, ageless tradition, bearing the name

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that Kobori Oshō had given me.

That was in 1977. In the thirteen years that followed, the wind of karma blew me to three different monasteries or training places to work under four different *rōshi*. From time to time, I would return to Ryōkō-in for short visits. In Zen we are urged not to compare, yet it is often difficult not to. Once when I was attendant to the *rōshi* of the monastery where I was then training, I accompanied him to buy paper for calligraphy. At the paper dealer's store, the *rōshi* had tested the quality of each paper by writing a few characters. He wrote the characters for his name. This surprised me since we do not often use the *rōshi*'s actual name in daily life. Then on one of my visits back to Ryōkō-in, Kobori Oshō was trying out a new brush that he had just bought and he too wrote out a few test characters on a sheet of paper. The Oshō did not write his name. Under his hand, the characters started to form: "Ma Ka Han Nya Ha Ra . . . .," the title of the Heart Sutra. In a trivial little incident like this, I thought, one could see the difference between two Zen priests. In one of our conversations, I once thanked the Oshō for his support and all the effort he was making on my behalf. I said something to the effect, "I hope you will not be disappointed. In the end, it may all come to nothing." Without hesitation, he replied, "Keep at it until it all comes to nothing." It was not till later that I realized what he had said to me.

When I left Japan in April of 1990, Kobori Oshō had been suffering from arthritic rheumatism which had so stiffened his body that most forms of physical movement were impossible. Despite these afflictions, when he was seated and in conversation, one could not tell that he was suffering from disease. His manner and attitude still had his characteristic lightness and good humor. He still retained the calm wisdom and consideration for others which were his special graces.

Early on the morning of January 15, 1992, Sōen-san telephoned me in Cambridge, Massachusetts to say that the Oshō was in the hospital and that the doctor's prognosis was not good. Sōen also telephoned Machida Sōhō who is now teaching at Princeton and by the evening of January 16, both Sōhō and I were in Kyoto. The next morning, we were all gathered in the Oshō's hospital room: his wife Sumiko, the disciples (Sōen, Sōkō, Sōhō, Sōgen) and also Shōryū and Kiyoko-san, the brother and sister whom the Oshō had taken in as children and raised. During the morning, Sōshō, the Oshō's youngest disciple and

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now a monk at the Daitokuji monastery, managed to get permission to come by. At our arrival, the Oshō suddenly awoke. Though he was not able to pronounce his words clearly, it was obvious that he was clear in mind. He was pleased to see each person. Each person he addressed individually and directly, asking each one of us to continue to make great effort in our endeavors.

The effort to speak for so long weakened him and thereafter he fell into a slumber. At 2:11, his breathing stopped.

The funeral was scheduled for January 20, and the *tsūya* or wake, for the night before. Immediately all the many, many people who in the past had lived at Ryōkō-in or had received the benefit of the Oshō's guidance began to arrive offering to help in preparation for the funeral. Though it was a sad occasion, it was also a happy occasion as people who had not seen each other in years met together in a great reunion. There was much unashamed laughter of which surely the Oshō would have approved.

At the funeral itself, Sōen had hung one of the Oshō's scrolls in a prominent place. It contained a verse which the Oshō himself had selected some time before to be used for his own funeral. For the last several years, the Oshō had not been able to walk without a cane. The verse he selected was about *satori* but it used the metaphor of a staff or cane.

扶過斷橋水 *Tasukatte sugu dankyō no mizu*  
伴歸無月村 *Tomonatte kaeru mugetsu no mura.*

“It helps me cross the waters when the bridge is broken,  
My companion as I return to the village without moon.”

For most of our lives, it was Kobori Nanrei's *satori* which helped us cross the waters when the bridges were broken. For his last journey, we placed his cane inside his coffin to keep him companion as he finally returned to the village without moon.

HORI SŌGEN