

REMINISCENCES

however. To those who knew him the most remarkable thing about Nishitani's practice was its very lack of the extraordinary—it is precisely because Zen was such an ordinary part of his life that he was able to continue for so long. As his practice deepened over the years *sanzen* became the foundation of his everyday activities, so that in effect his true instruction continued not for 25 years but for his entire life.

Nishitani was given the *kojigō*¹⁹ of *Keisei*—"Sound of the valley stream," from the opening words of an enlightenment poem by the Sung Dynasty poet Su Tung-p'o (1037-1101)—by Yamazaki in 1943, at the urging of his successor, Ōtsu Rekidō (1897-1976). The implications of this name can be judged from the final two lines of the poem: "The sound of the valley stream is the preaching of the Dharma; the form of the mountains is the Buddha's pure body."

In his final years Nishitani received formal recognition of his Zen understanding from Kajitani Sūnin, the present abbot of Shōkoku-ji monastery and one of those most familiar with Nishitani's Zen practice.

Layman Keisei Nishitani

Kajitani Sūnin Rōshi

The words of Nishitani Keiji were always simple, always to the point. Yet not a sound nor a phrase he uttered was out of accord with the principles of Zen. He was truly a man of the Way.

I once called the professor's unpretentious approach "Keisei's dead-tree Zen." By "dead-tree" I was not implying a lack of vitality. Nishitani was a man who, with the most considerate of words, addressed the flaws of our sect; a man whose selfless aspiration for truth impelled him even in great age to an untiring education of the young. How could one call such a man lacking in vitality? The term "dead tree" points not to lifelessness but to that pure state of oneness and simplicity in which all distracting thoughts have been swept away. This state—"nobility of spirit" is the best I can describe it—Nishitani attained through his long years of Zen practice.

¹⁹ Literally, "layman's name": the special names which Zen teachers sometimes give to long-term lay practitioners.

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

Nishitani possessed a certain changeless quality. Although I knew him best during the final twenty years of his life, our first meeting was more than forty years ago, when I was a monk in training at Shōkoku-ji monastery. That was in about 1950. At this time Nishitani was studying at Daikōmyō-ji under Yamazaki Taikō (1875-1966),¹ the retired abbot of Shōkoku-ji. He never the less continued to sit at the monastery during special training periods. Although I was unaware of it then, it was a time of great difficulty for the professor. Never, though, did he convey to others even the slightest hint of this. The first time I saw him he was meditating quietly in the dim light of the meditation hall during *rōhatsu ozesshin*, the severest retreat of the year. Although we exchanged no words on that occasion, I was profoundly impressed by the composure of his movements and the focus of his zazen.

Nishitani practiced for 25 years under Yamazaki Taikō, who gave him the *kojigō*² "Keisei" ("Sound of the valley stream"). He was also a fellow student and practitioner of the tea ceremony with my own teacher Ōtsu Rekidō Rōshi (1897-1976). Keeping these things in mind, and recognizing in his words a penetration of the profoundest truths of Zen, I presented Nishitani in his latter years with a poem testifying to his practice and certifying his completion of Zen training. I would like to repeat this poem now in honor of his memory.

Under Taikō Rōshi he penetrated to the very source;
With Rekidō Rōshi he fathomed the hidden depths.
Even if asked, there's nothing to explain in the Way—
"The clouds float in the clear blue sky; the water lies in the pool."

The mountain monk finds this not quite sufficient,
And adds another verse:
"The sound of the valley stream is the preaching of the Dharma;³
Day and night he preaches the true Law."

In praise of Keisei Rōshi
Shishi-an⁴

¹ The teacher of Kajitani Rōshi's teacher Ōtsu Rekidō.

² Literally, "layman's name": the special names which Zen teachers sometimes give to long-term lay practitioners.

³ The first line of a famous Zen poem by Su Tung-p'o (1037-1101). It was from this line that Nishitani's *kojigō* of Keisei was taken.

⁴ Kajitani Rōshi's honorary title.