

# Suzuki Shōsan, Wayfarer

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## *Introduction*

SUZUKI SHŌSAN'S LIFE, 1579–1655, spans one of the most significant periods in Japanese history, the transition from the Sengoku war decades to the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate. During this period Japan shifted from the disorder of competing daimyō to a tightly organized central government which unified Japan for the first time in its history. The shogunate established a rigid socio-economic pattern which put the samurai at the summit. It was also a time when Japan's leaders were making up their minds about how to treat foreigners, foreign religion, and foreign influences. There was also the organization of Buddhism under state control and the conclusion of the tragic Christian drama, in which Christianity was savagely exterminated about eighty-five years after its introduction. Shōsan is a unique embodiment of several of these diverse tendencies.

The presently known sources for a biography of Shōsan are relatively few. The main source is an account of about a dozen pages entitled *Sekihei dōnin kyōgō-ki* ("Record of the life of Sekihei dōnin"),<sup>1</sup> written by his most prominent disciple Echū (1628–1703), who came to him in 1651

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\* All quotations and references indicated by page numbers in brackets, unless otherwise specified, are from *Suzuki Shōsan dōnin zenshū* 鈴木正三道人全集 ("Complete collected writings of Suzuki Shōsan, Dōnin"), ed. Suzuki Teshin (Tokyo; Sankibō Busshorin, 1962). References to *Roankyō* 羅鞍橋 [138–284], however, cite part and entry number (i.e., 1. 14). All translations herein are those of Winston L. and Jocelyn B. King, with the assistance of Professor Fujiyoshi Jikai of Hanazono University, Kyoto.

<sup>1</sup> 石平道人行業記 [1-13]. Sekihei dōnin is one of several names for Shōsan.

and was only twenty-seven years old when his master died. Besides this there are the Suzuki family records from the temple at Kōji-yama, incidental references in other official documents, and autobiographical statements scattered through *Roankyō* ("Donkey saddle bridge"), Echū's collection of Shōsan's sayings over a period of several years.

Shōsan's family was native to the Kii peninsula. They had been samurai for at least two generations previously. When Shōsan was born in 1579, his father was twenty-four, married to a daughter of the Kuriu family, and living in the village of Asuke, about twenty-five kilometers northeast of Okazaki (in present-day Aichi). Since Okazaki was the birthplace and home-castle of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), three things were predetermined for Shōsan at birth: he would be a samurai, he would be serving under Ieyasu in the establishment of the new shogunate, and his initial religious faith would be Jōdo (Pure Land) Buddhism, the faith of Ieyasu.

#### *Shōsan's samurai career*

Shōsan was the eldest of seven children, five sons and two daughters. He was apparently "adopted" at the age of twelve, somewhat irregularly, by a member of a seventy-man horse-troop then stationed at Shioko in the Ibaraki region. From then on he travelled with the horsetroop which in 1590 was used by Ieyasu to "pacify" the Bandō area in the environs of Edo (present-day Tokyo). We do not know at what age Shōsan first took part in actual combat. That first mentioned by Echū is the Sekigahara engagement in 1600, in which Ieyasu gained effective control of all Japan. Shōsan was then twenty-one. He was also in the campaign for Osaka Castle in 1614–15, fighting under Lord Honda Izumo-no-kami who was directly under the Shōgun's command. For this he was rewarded, along with each of his brothers, with a little fief yielding 200 koku (1000 bushels) of rice.

Though Shōsan chose not to remain a samurai, his samurai training and career, especially his actual experiences in battle, exercised a dominant and pervasive influence on his mentality and religious attitudes for the rest of his life. We can scarcely hope to understand his approach to enlightenment, his attitude toward the body, his methodology of spiritual advancement or his overriding concern with death unless this samurai background be taken into account. Shōsan's Zen is always samurai Zen, and, indeed, he remained a samurai at heart up to the moment of his death.

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In Shōsan's biography, Echū puts it thus:

Of course as a basic principle [for a samurai] he was required to die in a brave, just, and loyal manner. Thus he disciplined his mind to abandon the body; and so, unconsciously he was devoting himself to the Buddha's valorous and concentrated [way of action]. Therefore it may be said: "Using a spearpoint-like attack he destroyed the passions, and making use of this method in every case, he reached enlightenment." [3]

Both before and after the Osaka battle, Shōsan used his military furlough to travel here and there to converse with various learned teachers of his day in the Aichi and Edo areas. Among those with whom Shōsan spoke were the Sōtō masters Ban'an Eishu (1591–1656) of Kiun-in temple in Edo, Ryōson Zenji of Tahō-in temple in Shimozuma, and Motsuge Zenji of Erin-ji temple in Utsunomiya, as well as the well-known Rinzai masters Daigu Shūchiku (1586–1669) and Gudō Tōshoku (1579–1661).<sup>2</sup>

Echū, from hearsay or Shōsan's own account, portrays Shōsan as something of a spiritual *enfant terrible*, a supposedly unlearned layman who confounds the experts by his penetrating insight into the meaning of koan. Thus to the koan, "A pure, practicing person does not attain to nirvana, nor does a monk who breaks the precepts fall into hell," Shōsan responded: "That's all" (i.e., "No more to say") [3]. Those who were there were astonished at his assurance and penetration. Shōsan himself later comments:

From the beginning when the crucial point came in discussion . . . my single word enabled us to get to the bottom of matter. . . . I, too, thought this very strange. However, this sort of intuitive mind was very strong in me from the first. [1. 43]

Among those mentioned several times in Echū's biography is the Sōtō master Ban'an. Sometime after the Osaka battle, when living at Surugadai

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<sup>2</sup> The Rinzai masters Daigu and Gudō both served as head of Myōshinji, Kyoto; Ban'an was one of the most active Sōtō priests of this period. Though intimate with these men, Shōsan was never a disciple of any of them. Cf. D. T. Suzuki's essay *Shōsan Zen no tokushoku* ("The special characteristic of Shōsan Zen") in *Nihon bukkyō* ("Japanese Buddhism"), *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū* (Iwanami Shoten, 1970), vol. 11, p. 452 ff.

in Edo, Shōsan had lengthy conversations with Ban'an about the essential meaning of Sōtō. And according to Echū, Ban'an, driven to a reassessment of his own understanding of Sōtō by Shōsan's sharp, insistent questionings, went into a mountain hermitage for a time, and then returned to renewed and vigorous teaching at his temple: "As a result of this the Sōtō line of transmission which had been interrupted, was newly energized. Thus it was that our Master said: '(The monk) Ryōson was the first to say that there were mistaken views in the Kantō region; and it was Ban'an who then corrected this (condition)'" [4]. It is obvious from this account and subsequent events that Shōsan was moving more and more into a completely religious orbit during this period of his life. Undoubtedly his military duties had been considerably lightened after the Osaka victory.

It was during this period that he wrote his first "book," a pamphlet or tract-sized work of about eleven pages titled *Mōanjō* ("A staff for the safety of the blind").<sup>3</sup> Having encountered a professing "Confucian" among his fellow samurai, one who found Confucianism more useful-practical in the world than otherworldly Buddhism, Shōsan was moved to try to persuade him that though Confucianism had its value, it was on a lower level than Buddhism, and indeed actually found its own fulfillment in Buddhism. Though this was not his most popular or influential work, its writing may have served to crystalize in Shōsan's mind his decision to become a monk and to devote himself completely to the renewal of Buddhism.

### *Shōsan becomes a monk*

Immediately after finishing his tour of duty at Osaka, Shōsan made the most important decision in his life: "Following this, when he had returned to Edo, he cut off his hair and left the world (i.e., became a monk). The Shōgun's cabinet informed the Shōgun who gave Shōsan his respectful approval and blessing" [4]. Though Echū thus makes it seem to have been a perfectly smooth affair, Shōsan's own account gives another version:

When I was over forty years old, there came a time when I intensely disliked the world. When a government official came

<sup>3</sup> 盲安杖 [49-60].

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to investigate, I said: "It is because I so strongly dislike the world that I have thus withdrawn." When he said, "This is unlawful," I determined in my own mind that if the court should pronounce sentence, I would commit suicide. Then I immediately took the tonsure." . . .

When an official in the employ of the Cabinet was told, "Kudayū (i.e., Shōsan) has really gone mad, so please pardon him," the official took pity and replied: "Well, now, what a strange thing you are doing! When you intercede for a man, you treat a man who is *not* crazy as though he *were* crazy!" But although saying this, he watched for a time when the mood of the Shōgun would be favorable, and on a (festive) occasion one night shortly afterward, he said, "Suzuki Kudayū has unexpectedly become a monk," not knowing what the Shōgun would think. Then with unusual compassion, he (the Shōgun) said: "As to this matter, don't say that he has become a monk, but just that he has retired." [III. 13]

There are a number of interesting facets to this account. Though he may have been considering the matter for some time, the actual taking of the tonsure seems to have been Shōsan's own unilateral and rather precipitate action, fraught with unpleasant possibilities. As the official said to him, strictly speaking it was illegal for anyone, especially a samurai, to forsake his calling, since it contravened the rigid system of social control set up by the Tokugawa regime. Shōsan himself felt this so keenly that he would have committed ritual suicide had the shogunate made it a matter of honor. Yet he appears to have gone ahead without waiting to secure official permission, perhaps feeling that a *fait accompli* would be the safest course, once he himself had determined on the step. The other consequence which might have resulted would have been the cutting off of Shōsan's family line. That this did not result was no doubt in part due to Shōsan's military service, particularly his valorous conduct at the battle of Osaka, where he served in the front line and directly under the Shōgun's command. Thus he was allowed to pass the heirship on to an unnamed nephew.

The only reason *he* ever gave was his great distaste for the world at that time—a reason which he later declared insufficient in the case of a young samurai who came to consult him about the same step [III. 13].

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However, he did go on to say to the young man: "If you think that you will go mad *if* you take the tonsure or go mad if you do *not* take it, however, then take it" [m. 13]. Perhaps it was such determination that persuaded the shogunate official that there was nothing else to do than to allow the "resignation" in Shōsan's case.

The monk to whom Shōsan went immediately after tonsuring himself was the already noted Daigu. Echū records the event thus:

(Shōsan) asked the abbot Daigu for a new (monk's) name. Daigu declined saying, "Your religious accomplishments carry great weight with the public; how can anyone think of making up a (new) name for you? So after considering the matter, (I find) your old name is a good one." Hence he was known as Shōsan. [4]<sup>4</sup>

Shōsan took his tonsure in 1620, being then in his forty-second year. For some time thereafter he travelled about as a pilgrim through the five districts adjoining Kyoto, "worshiping in all the Shintō shrines and Buddhist holy places." Thereafter he settled in at Hōryūji temple in Nara with a vinaya (precept) master, one Genshun (a Shingon master from Kōyasan), in company with the abbot Sesso of Buzen (in Kyushu), to study the vinaya monks' rules. There, from Genshun, he received the sāmanera (lowest-level) ordination as a monk in the Japanese vinaya tradition.

It is of interest to inquire somewhat further as to Shōsan's motivations in leaving the samurai life. We have his already-noted statement that he was incurably tired of the world. The other side of this, is, of course, that he apparently saw in the monkhood an opportunity to practice Buddhism in its purity. No longer would there be the mixed quality of his life as a layman with part-time military duty and part-time pursuit of his Buddhist interests. And perhaps there was the Pure Land sense of *this* world as a defiled world that one must needs escape. So much on the surface.

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<sup>4</sup> Shōsan's original name appears to have been Jūzō 重三. The character *jū* 重, also pronounced *shige*, was popular in the given names of the Suzuki family. To the shogunate he was known as Kudayū. Nakamura Hajime views this retention of his layman's name as a deliberate indication of Shōsan's valuation of the secular world above the religious one. Cf. Nakamura Hajime, "Suzuki Shōsan, 1579-1655," *Monumenta Nipponica* xxii, 1-2 (1967), p. 12. Echū, however, attributes the initiative to Daigu.

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But we may plausibly conjecture other motivations. Perhaps he hoped to find in the monastery a kind of spiritual discipline to match the secular discipline of the samurai calling. Indeed might not the monkhood be a kind of *religious* samuraihood? In this connection it is interesting to remember his *sāmanera* ordination was taken under *vinaya* auspices, wherein the observance of the strict precepts of "original" Buddhism was stressed. Perhaps too he had some sense of wishing to reform contemporary Japanese Buddhism from within—though it may be his strong sense of the need for its reform came to him only after he had been a monk for some years. And finally it must have been that with the country in 1620 pacified under Tokugawa rule, Shōsan began to view his samurai profession as socially useless.

Another period of time immediately after Shōsan became a monk was spent in retreat in Chidori mountain, Aichi, where, in 1623, he practiced the rigid austerities he had just studied about and undertaken to observe as a *vinaya* monk. Though Echū says nothing about this or else gives a variant account,<sup>3</sup> Shōsan himself related the matter as follows some thirty years later:

Furthermore, I paid no attention to what anyone said about whatever I did. As I have said before, upon becoming a monk I made pilgrimages in all directions, slept in the fields and mountains, and was sparing of food and clothing. And later for a time, while I was a *vinaya* monk, I drove my body. I was at Chidori mountain in Mikawa during the time of *vinaya* practice, and lived my life subsisting on rice gruel and barley. While I was doing this, because my body was exposed to rain and wind, and because of my coarse food, my stomach and spleen became disordered and I became ill.

Even though I tried many medicines I did not recover and was given up by many doctors. I too became fully convinced that I would die. . . .

My younger brother, who was a kind of "doctor," hearing of

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<sup>3</sup> Echū speaks of Shōsan once having a serious illness, because "some poisonous substance from the mountain atmosphere penetrated (his body) so that the plain, coarse food burned his stomach. Yet by his meritorious practice, he nourished his mind, and at last made a recovery" [7]. But he specifies no time, and includes it quite late in his biography of Shōsan.

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this came and said: "I do not give medicines at all; just dietary care will be good." Therefore, when I asked him about this way of healing he said: "You should eat meat." I said to him: "I won't argue at all; for health's sake I would eat the flesh of a corpse and put it to use!"

Two years later I had completely recovered. Having become well without using medicines, from that time up till now I have eaten a pure (i.e., meatless) diet. But during that time people said I was doing a very bad thing.

And then he adds, perhaps ironically:

Though I came very close to dying, being completely shameless, Shōsan nourished his own life. [III. 13]

Later on when Genshun, his vinaya ordainer, met with him, he reproached Shōsan for having gone back on his vinaya vows. But Shōsan who "paid no attention to what anyone said about whatever I did" would brook no criticism of what seemed to him to be perfectly justifiable conduct, in which life was put before rule-keeping.<sup>6</sup>

And years later, when a monk brought him a report that Genshun, through keeping all 250 vinaya precepts had "died badly," Shōsan remarked: "Vinaya monks cannot but be full of faults. Because they carry about a Buddha-like dignity, men think of them as Buddhas. Now the mind that is not Buddha-like, when it is esteemed by men to be Buddha-like, becomes a very sinful mind. For such, the time of death is bound to be bad" [I. 156].

During this period, and perhaps before he was completely recovered, Shōsan set himself up in a hermitage. Echū's romantic, almost ecstatic, account of it is worth quoting in full:

In 1624 he found a dwelling place in the deep valley Ishi-no-taira and constructed a hermitage for himself there. He was settled and steady in studying the Way. Monks from everywhere, men and women from far and near, came to him like grasses bending in the wind, and gathered round him, studying at his place of

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<sup>6</sup> See *Shōsan* 正三 by Fujiyoshi Jikai, *Nihon no zan goroku* 14 (Tokyo; Kōdansha, 1977), pp. 25-26.

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learning. . . . This place, named Sekihe-zan,<sup>7</sup> was located about twelve miles north of Okazaki Castle. And what kind of a place was it? It was ringed round by four mountains and hidden in a deep, gloomy forest. Behind it to the north rose mountain peaks; to the south smaller peaks stretched away below. From the eastern heights spring waters came rolling out boisterously; and to the west, lotuses blossomed delightfully in a pond.

It was serene and elegant, far distant from the dust and smoke of the world. One breathed in the pure winds from afar, and as far as one could see there was a rare beauty, a truly splendid environment, removed from the world.

During the daytime our Master preached the direct way to enlightenment eloquently and intimately (i.e., in person-to-person fashion) according to the capacity of his hearers. At night he usually did zazen [with his disciples] in the meditation hall, observing the ancient rules with great strictness. His only thought was to make the original intention of the Buddha and patriarchs clear, and thus enable sentient beings to approach the right path. Those who knew him spread the report from one to the other that the long extinguished right Dharma was now in this mountain in brilliant radiance. Filled with joy they praised him everywhere they went. [4]

### *Shōsan as wonder-worker, reformer, teacher*

After reading Echū's description it might seem that Shōsan was fulfilling that deep desire to escape the world and become a solitary hermit which he had in becoming a monk. Sekihe-zan of course did not actually embody the ideal of a lonely hermitage because Shōsan began to accumulate disciples. Echū tells us, just before his lyrical description of Sekihe-zan, that "Daigan and Honshū, two monks, came to him as disciples" [4]. And despite his words about being "far distant from the dust and smoke of the world," he also notes that many persons from that world came to see Shōsan even here. Even so, one might have expected that Shōsan would have been contented to remain here for the rest of his

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<sup>7</sup> Sekihe-zan was headquarters from 1624-1630, as well as part of 1632 when Onshin-ji was built, and 1644-1648 during which time a temple bell was installed.

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life, training his disciples, talking to those who came to seek counsel, and pursuing his own meditative efforts to achieve enlightenment. However, he was a man who could not spiritually leave the world, even having physically left it. Perhaps semisolitude did not have the attraction he thought it would. Perhaps his personal connections made as a samurai were too much for him. But most of all he was a vigorous man of action who felt that he must do something to renew Buddhism in Japan, to make it an integral part of the life of Everyman.

*The wonder-worker.* No doubt Shōsan would have objected to such a designation, for he repeatedly affirmed that the Dharma of the Buddha was not a matter of cheap, delusive miracles. Yet in keeping with popular Buddhism of the day, he believed that the continuous reading of sutras had marvelous powers. Thus, very shortly after his settling in at Sekiheizan, the people of the nearby village of Noda reported that the burial mounds of their ancestors were glowing with (phosphorescent?) fire. According to Echū:

Hearing of this our Master said: "The reason for this is the intensity of the karma of (their) agonized suffering in the hells." And deeply moved by compassion he went there and for seven days recited sutras. The fire in the mounds went out almost immediately. The villagers marveled at this as they talked together. The burned soil became reddish in color and lumps of it were sent near and far. [5]

A year later there was a *healing* by the same means:

The next year the Lord of Akechi, a member of the Tōyama family, was suffering from a serious illness. His distress was very great and healing medicines had no effect. So the Teacher was asked to grant the benefit of his prayers. He said: "This is a case of retribution from karma long past; also the spirits of both friends and enemies of former times have come to torment him." Then he read sutras for seven days. The sick man was refreshed and his illness was soon healed. [5]

Echū suggests that this was the beginning of a notable career of this kind of healing, in which "people would come to our Master and he would perform the transfer of karmic results [of sutra chanting] and remove them

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from the power of the spirits," but does not specify any more cases. Whatever the extent of such activities, so far as Shōsan was concerned, such results as these were only manifestations of Dharma-karma power and had nothing "miraculous" about them.

*The reformer.* Most men of intense spiritual awareness have a sense of the religious degeneracy of their own times, and Shōsan was no exception to this. One of his fixed views about the life in temples and monasteries—a view which became ever more confirmed by his observations—was that even in Zen there was altogether too much of doctrinal wrangling, wordy cleverness, an addiction to supposedly high states of realization, and to traditional forms of experience and expression, but little of genuine, gut-wrenching practice. He wrote, contemptuously, that "those who nowadays give an easy Dharma are many" [I. 57]. The young monks in the monasteries were careless of the most elementary forms of reverence: for example, they handled the sacred scrolls after urinating or defecating, without washing their hands [I. 21]. He found everyone wishing to gain worldly benefits rather than being dedicated to slow but steady spiritual progress:

Whether you intend to go to the east or to the west, if you advance one step at a time you will arrive at your destination without fail. Yet there is no one, in doing his Dharma practice, who is willing to go curling along like the inchworm. All of them have been captured in their minds by this corrupt world. [I. 27]

Or again in very vivid terms:

The monks of these present days have an ingrained *gaki* (i.e., hungry ghost) quality of mind. From the time you are young monks you covet the name of "man of wisdom"—such are wisdom-greedy ghosts. Then there are among you hungry-to-be-leader ghosts, fine-robe-and-rank-seeking ghosts, temple-coveting ghosts, Dharma-banner-desiring ghosts,<sup>a</sup> and pleasant-peaceful-retirement-into-fine-quarters ghosts. [I. 5]

The preaching of the day had become "mild and meek, pious and polite, disinterested." Not a single one of the preachers "calls forth for practice the energy and force of a vengeful ghost" [I. 1].

<sup>a</sup> Ornamental pennants indicating a temple's prosperity and popularity.

His own recipe for the curing of this condition was an intensive, thrusting attack upon the passions and passion-ruled ego by means of a meditation that had in it all the fierceness of a samurai attack upon the enemy. He was therefore uncompromisingly direct and incisive in his impatience with all Zen-style estheticism of wording, and with all evasion of the existential realities of the meditator's own spiritual situation. One of his early efforts was the evangelization of the Zen monasteries.

Thereafter, having arrived at Edo, he visited around among the Zen monasteries everywhere to give guidance to younger monks. Because corruptions of the true Dharma, and wicked heresies, were flourishing at that time, they did not truly understand his thought. . . . He longed deeply for a renewal (of the right Dharma). But even though this was the case, the time had not arrived and the situation was not yet ripe. So though he went roundabout through the monasteries there was no real meeting with responsive persons and he returned to Mikawa. [5]

Given Echū's usual portrayal of Shōsan's unqualified successes, this evangelizing tour must have been a near-total failure. Later on, in his biography, Echū reports, though in quite general terms, more successful expeditions in which he "everywhere helped monks and laymen, the noble and the humble" [7], and that "young and old, noble and humble, followed him like clouds and faced him like stars" [8]. Whatever the truth of these statements, it does seem that he had a definite influence on a number of the ranking monks of his day. He saw Ban'an several times and at his request wrote *Fumoto no kusawake* ("Parting the grass at the foot of the mountain")<sup>9</sup> for the guidance of beginning monks. So too in 1648, when he had been a monk for a little more than twenty-five years, "Chōsui of Tentoku, Bankyu of Kensō, Donkai and Shunrei of Kai-an, and others, built a hermitage in Kōji-machi, and asked our teacher to talk to them" [8]. And there are recounted as well, several instances of prominent men from the secular world coming to interview him.

Besides this personal evangelism, there was a different type of effort on the part of Shōsan to encourage the efficacy of Buddhism in Japan. Two examples of this had to do with semigovernmental matters of public

<sup>9</sup> 麓草分 [72-93].

administration and involved his brother Shigenari, who was a rising Tokugawa administrator. About 1632, visiting his brother who was then in the Osaka area, he learned that a local official of the Fushimi area (near Osaka) had sentenced some women tax evaders to death. Shōsan remarked that this was an extremely severe sentence and that "if such a deed is now done for the first time, it will be an eternal misfortune, and will be disloyalty (to the Shōgun). Even if you (Shigenari) should be sentenced to death, there ought to be an appeal" [6]. His brother agreed, and after the third appeal, the women's death sentence was revoked. Upon Shigenari's suggestion for "assisting the spirits of those who have already been put to death," one Amida and twenty-five bodhisattva images were made and placed in a temple, for "none is equal to Amida for saving evil human beings," said Shōsan [6].

The other instance of such action also involved Shigenari, and is of considerable interest since it inspired one of Shōsan's writings, his *Ha kirishitan* ("Refutation of Christianity").<sup>10</sup> By this time, 1645, Shigenari had become a government official in Higo, near the battlefield of Amakusa (in Kyushu), where a rebellion of mostly Christian believers had been defeated some years previously. Shōsan was now about sixty-seven years old. Then, Echū relates:

The Master took his pilgrim's staff, travelled there, and said to Shigenari: "This is the place where the evil teaching (Christianity) once flourished. If we construct Buddhist temples and propagate the right Dharma, we will thereby put this heretical teaching to rest."

Shigenari agreed and made an appeal on this matter to the government. Thereupon he was presented with (rice-land producing) 300 koku annually. When the thirty-two temples were built . . . there was one Jōdo temple among them and herein were set up two tablets, one for Ieyasu and one for Hidetada. The remaining temples were all of the Sōtō sect.

Then the Master wrote a book entitled *Ha kirishitan* and presented one copy to each temple, vowing that he would cut off this heretical teaching forever. He remained here for three years, journeying about (in this territory). [8]

<sup>10</sup> 破吉利支丹 [131-137].

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This last incident points to a lifelong desire and overriding concern of Shōsan: the reform of Buddhism by governmental enforcement of Buddhist standards of behaviour, and of sectarian unity of endeavor.

Now the Dharma, bequeathed to us through the practice and tears of blood of our ancestors and former leaders, has declined because there has been no governmental decree. . . . Without such a decree from the shogunate, there can be no correct Buddha Dharma. It is my cherished desire to present a legal petition, perhaps over and over again, saying: "I humbly request the shogunate that the correct Buddha Dharma shall be established. . . . The public form of Buddhism can at once be corrected by just one single word (i.e., decree)."

Then a monk asked: "Now of what sort would this 'one word' be?" And the Master replied: "Let all the sects work unitedly for Buddhahood." By this one edict the correct Dharma would at once be insured. . . . Being required to teach and practice meditation, straightway they would develop the correct Dharma. This I wish to request; it is my heart's one desire. [1. 9]

This may seem somewhat naïve and unrealistic on Shōsan's part. When has government decree ever been able to bring about religious reform, except of a few external trivialities? And who should know better than he the importance of the truly internal-external transformation of which he was always speaking? Yet he thought he found its warrant in the Buddha's words.<sup>11</sup> And it must be remembered that Shōsan, as an ex-samurai who had helped put the shogunate into power, probably found the Tokugawa order of a rigid, functionally-defined class structure, a deliberately adopted Confucian morality, and an officially approved and controlled Buddhism somewhat to his liking, even if not absolutely perfect. Why should *not* the shogunate be both able and interested to reduce the sectarian strife within Buddhism and sternly direct it to its true spiritual task of making men Buddha-like? It may be that Ieyasu's religiousness impressed him as embodying the permanent character of the shogunate. Finally, given the shogunate's tight control of all society,

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<sup>11</sup> Probably in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* ("Sutra of Golden Light") which teaches that four guardian deities protect the king who in turn properly rules the country.

especially its control of the purse strings even of Buddhist institutions, what other power in all Japan was capable of reforming Buddhism if not the shogunate?

*Shōsan as teacher.* One of the most interesting aspects of Shōsan's career is his quality as a master of disciples, and the spiritual counselor of those who came seeking his advice. It might well seem that this bluff, intrepid samurai would produce only simple, stereotyped methods and advice. And in one sense this was the case: death-awareness was his own prime instrument of spiritual progress, and was frequently recommended. But at the same time there was a surprising variety of advice and device in his dealings with others.

There was to be sure a rough side to his tongue. He was never one to spare the bitter medicine if he thought it necessary. One day a man who had just become a monk came to take leave of the Master, saying that he was going on a begging tour of the whole country. The Master spoke to him plainly and severely:

This plan of yours, which I have heard about confidentially is an outrageous and reckless whim. . . . Your intention to practice (the Way) is a very recent thing. And now, having no plan and having no knowledge of (religious) ways and means, you wish to make a vain aimless pilgrimage through the whole country. I completely disapprove. . . . You would go about here and there and everywhere, confusedly and at random. You would become a churlish rogue, and having no resources, would turn to stealing . . . and become a degenerate, corrupted monk. . . . I have had enough of such fellows and even hate to hear rumors of them. If you will listen to my objections you should stay here; if not, then hereafter you will no longer be welcome here. [1. 12]

And again, observing how vigorously his monks could work at some physical labor, he remarked somewhat sarcastically: "Is it indeed easier for you monks to do this (rather) than to chant sutras? By doing such work you should be able to fully realize that the short time you spend in chanting scriptures and the like cannot be considered wearisome" [1. 23].

But his salty advice was not limited to monks. Shōsan could be equally

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blunt with laymen who came to him, especially samurai bullies:

One day a samurai who was getting on in years came and said: "Even though I have become old, whenever I wish I can still push down the heads of the young fellows of these times. I can swallow them down at a single gulp!" . . . The Master reproved him: "In this there is the mind of a beast that wishes to take a bite of this one and that one . . . going around eating and frightening those that are inferior. . . . Your mind is identical with this (beast's); it is not the mind of a human being." [1. 22]

But on the other side of the ledger there are instances of sympathy and even tenderness in the midst of his spartan rigor. He tries to nurse needful spiritual awareness along, using whatever the person has on hand, helping him to interpret it and strengthen it. Thus when one monk reported that, upon becoming separated from his friends on a pilgrimage, he "suddenly became listless and melancholy," Shōsan advised him:

If a temporary separation is like this, then indeed how much more will you have suffering when dying, when you are left alone to go on your journey to Hades and set out on that still unknown road to Emma (King of death). It is something which should be realized in advance. . . . If there is only the Great Matter (of life and death present to your mind), then by means of it you can do all things. [1. 46]

When an elderly monk came to him asking about the essence of the Dharma, Shōsan, judging from his perceptions of the man, prescribed a somewhat elementary form of spiritual discipline: "You should retire to a small hermitage and there spend the rest of your life reciting sutras and dhāraṇī, and in praying for those in the world of the unmourned dead." The old monk says that he now prostrates himself before the Buddha images three times a day, to which Shōsan replies that he ought to increase these prayerful prostrations to the limit of his endurance, "driving on body and mind to perform 500 or 1000 acts of such worship, thus exhausting your karmic hindrances" [1. 26]. Why does he not give him the gospel of the death-thought? Apparently in Shōsan's judgment an arduous routine of prostrations and chanting was all this old monk could manage.

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### *Last days and death*

Shōsan was active in his teaching, journeying, writing until within a few months of his death at seventy-six. Before detailing these last days, one important question must be raised: Did Shōsan finally regret his leaving the profession of samurai? Such is the opinion of Nakamura Hajime:

Shōsan, when he shaved his head and forsook the world, was sincerely seeking the Buddhist way. It was the result of great experience that he finally came to stress secular Buddhism. But at this juncture it was already impossible for him to return to his former life. . . . And Shōsan found himself in the contradictory position of disparaging rejection of the world and preaching respect for the secular life while he himself practiced the opposite.<sup>12</sup>

And if we then ask how he rationalized this situation to himself, we have his own comment:

I, Shōsan, shaved my head simply because of my karma. Probably I was predestined to become a monk. It was of necessity that I got my head shaved.

There is considerable to be said for this viewpoint. For example, in a passage in which Shōsan says that he was at first attracted to the life of a mountain hermit, he adds that, "formerly I thought it would be good to live in the mountains, but now in my thought it is bad. . . . Liking to live in the mountains (as a hermit) is the liking of a vainglorious mind for an eccentric living style. It is precisely the same mind as that of the layman who develops a bit of ground (into a garden) and adorns a guest room" [1. 40].

We have noted earlier that he found the Buddhist establishment of his day to be degenerate. And it must be acknowledged that he did try to persuade several individuals not to enter the monkhood. One notable example is that of a young man from a professional military family, a hatamoto (standard-bearer) who was directly under the Shōgun, who came to Shōsan requesting tonsure. Shōsan brusquely tells him that he never gives tonsure to anyone and advises him to think long and carefully

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Nakamura, *op.cit.* p. 13.

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before taking the very radical step of becoming a monk, and then being unable to return to a secular life, save as a lowest-level samurai. He further points out the difficulty of making a living as a novice monk: he may end up begging food from various relatives "who by means of their little grant (from the shogunate) are barely keeping alive in the world; this will be cowardly." It would be better for him to submit his body in service to a lord, for "in such a case there would be no one-sided obligation." But the young man was enamoured of the ideal of self-denial that monkhood typified, and persisted. Then Shōsan drew his radical conclusion:

Moreover, do you think that cutting off your hair is abandoning the body? As to tonsure, on the contrary, it is a seeking of pleasure for the body. Even desire for the afterlife (in paradise), is not this a desire for the benefit of the body? If the body is to be thrown away, why don't you work for the present shogunate? To throw away the body is to do something you don't like. Truly, as to practicing discipline with a strong, determined mind—this is better done as a samurai than as a monk. The reason for this is that in serving one's lord there is no opportunity for carelessness. [m. 13]

On the surface it is hard to escape the conclusion that Shōsan is saying that the strict service of a lord by a samurai is *always* a better spiritual discipline than the slack regime of the monkhood. And it is noticeable that most of those he sought to dissuade from monkhood were samurai.

But there are qualifying factors—at least in this instance. It develops in the course of the conversation that this would-be monk had meditated till he could "see a little light," which his teacher assured him was seeing the light of the Dharmakāya. He hoped to cherish this light-experience in the monkhood, where he could meditate for still longer periods of time. Yet he confessed such meditation left him so depleted in strength that he was unable to bear "even the sound of things being rubbed in a mixing bowl." Shōsan, seeing this as a false spiritual goal and the way to madness, advised him to stop his search for quick enlightenment, and in the end dissuaded him from seeking monkhood. But this dissuasion is clearly because he found the man himself unstable and with false goals, and therefore unsuitable for the monkhood; it is not *per se* a general discrediting of monkhood itself. Clearly the young man was not one to go mad if he

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did *not* enter the monkhood, for he did not persist.

Further, Shōsan was highly suspicious of the motives of many young men from samurai families who were turning to the monkhood: "These days the sons of the samurai are becoming monks; there are many such fellows who make their living by stripping the skins off dead men (i.e., being paid for memorial services)" [I. 38].<sup>13</sup> He scathingly describes such men as "those who are falling into hell by their *use* of the Dharma." But again, this is a condemnation of the unworthy monks, not of monkhood itself. Indeed, after noting that laymen actually seemed to be more earnest than monks, and that the samurai's profession is especially suitable to cultivate the essential death-awareness, he concludes: "Nevertheless, so far as men of great integrity are concerned, the monk has greater opportunity for merit" [L. 110].

As to his attribution of his own monkhood to karmic predetermination, this need not be seen as merely a weary resignation to what had become inescapable for him. He was apparently one of those who *would* have gone mad if he had *not* become a monk. And though contemporary monkhood as an institution seemed slack to him, he made his own monkhood fully as demanding as his samurai service. His statement about karma can be seen as only a way of acknowledging the tremendous depth of his desire. And with his own strong belief in the efficacy and general justice of karmic consequences, he would have felt that in a very positive, meaningful sense he was destined to become a monk. So, too, whatever his second thoughts about entering the monkhood, they did not keep him from vigorous, determined activity as a monk, right up to the end of his life.

His work for beginning monks, *Fumoto no kusawake*, as well as *Ninin bikuni* ("Tale of two nuns") and *Nembutsu zōshi* ("Notes on nembutsu"),<sup>14</sup> were written in his middle or late fifties. During his later sixties he took staff in hand and travelled all the way to Kyushu to help Shigenari root out the remaining traces of Christianity. Upon his return to central Japan, he was invited by various monks to come to speak to them, to inspire them with new hope and vigor in their meditational practice and under-

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<sup>13</sup> This expression arises from the myth of the woman who stands by the river of the Three Crossings after death and forces everyone who crosses there to surrender his clothes.

<sup>14</sup> 二人比丘尼 [93-105] and 念佛草紙 [106-131], respectively.

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standing of the Dharma. And if we believe Echū, he was still writing within a few years of his death when he brought together into one the pieces comprising *Bammin tokuyū* ("The meritorious way of life for everyone").<sup>15</sup> In short, wherever and whenever we find him, right up to the moment of his terminal illness in the spring of 1655, he is strenuously pursuing activities intended for the spiritual benefit of both monks and laymen. If this indeed were his karma, he embraced it with generous enthusiasm, not with begrudging, disillusioned passivity!

Nor is it entirely certain that his recommendation of the secular life as a truly Buddhist life was necessarily a derogation of the monk's life. Monkhood was not included within the four classes of the Tokugawa era; it was to some extent above and beyond them—though, of course, the shogunate did keep it carefully in place with a firm hand on its temporal affairs. Now Shōsan was doing his determined best by both sacred and secular orders. Monks and nuns he exhorted to unsparing concentration on their own spiritual advancement, and on being worthy of the alms that the lay people gave them. But to those in the lay orders of life, who traditionally—and with Buddhist encouragement—thought of themselves as outside the realm of significant progress toward enlightenment, he tried to say that their work was Buddha-work as much as that of the monks and priests. He was radical in his insistence on the religious worth of "secular" work, in emphasizing its genuine sacredness. But he did so in order that *every* man, wherever his karma had put him, could be encouraged to begin sincere and devoted endeavors toward enlightenment in the place where he was. The strength of his radicalism here was to endeavor, as did St. Paul, that all men might by some means be saved. Therefore, in thus praising the sacredness of secular work, he was not necessarily secularizing and spiritually disfranchising the spiritual orders of society.

Whatever the truth of the matter, Shōsan died as a monk. We read in Echū's account that "from the spring of the first year of Meireki (1655) our Master was indisposed." Apparently, despite some well-meaning statements by some of the disciples that Shōsan would soon recover, everyone including Shōsan recognized that the end would be soon. Hence "assembling all the disciples, he left with them his last words about the necessity of the two benefits (for oneself and for others) and the way

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<sup>15</sup> 萬民適用 [61-72].

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to revive the Dharma." To evade the numerous people who came to see him, he was moved to a more private place in Surugadai in Edo. Even here it was hard to escape those who wanted his "last word." To one such he simply said: "For thirty years now I have been speaking." And then to those around him he voiced his great concern about the disorder in contemporary Buddhism: "In everything (else) it is thus: all the ways (i.e., crafts and skills) have their own authoritative (standards). Why is only Buddhism not this way? The situation is that priests and monks, making their own private dharmas according to their liking, not only harm themselves but also injure others. It is when I think of this that I am sorrowful" [12]. Finally, all visitors were turned away, but when the Master heard that a samurai of the Baba family had come, he said: "The time of my death has surely come and there is no point in my meeting with people. However, of this man I have a request to make." So he came in and the Master said: "I ask that you transmit to the governor the same proposition which I have openly made for the revival of the True Dharma." The samurai respectfully agreed to do so [12]. This proposition of course was his plan for the shogunate to call a universal council of Buddhist sects and tell them to get on with the main business of seeking enlightenment.

These were his last public words. Early one morning he asked whether or not there were "auspicious omens in relation to the Buddha Dharma." Then "at the hour of the monkey (3-5 PM) on the twenty-fifth day of June 1655, he died peacefully. He was seventy-six years old and had been in the monkhood thirty-six years" [13]. He was duly mourned the next day and night, and on the following day he was cremated. "On the third day the cooled ashes were cleared away. The bones of the body were pure like ice" [13].