

## NOTES

### *My Memory of Ruth Fuller Sasaki* Irmgard M. G. Schloegl

Ruth Fuller Sasaki died in Kyoto on October 24th, 1967, at the age of 75. Since I only knew her during the last eight years of her life, this is merely an affectionate memory rather than a proper appreciation of her life's work.

Her strong personality and clear mind combined in her ability to express precisely what she had to say. She insisted on this preciseness in all her work. But she was fundamentally a very warm-hearted person, with her feet planted on the earth. For her, we "new" Zen students were all "boys and girls" even if we were in our forties, and she looked after us like a mother, even giving us a solid meal every so often.

Most foreign Zen students learned their *zazen* in the meditation hall she had built in her temple, Ryozen-an. Its atmosphere was perhaps of equal importance for those who could stay for only a short time. Only recently I had a letter from someone who had done *zazen* there about eight years ago. He said that things were going rather well with him, but what he missed was the atmosphere of Mrs. Sasaki's Zendo.

A keen observer and a good talker, with her long stay in Japan, her practice, and her scholarly attainments, she was a compendium of information. To foreign inquirers about Zen, arriving with a head full of notions, she was a veritable treasure, never mincing words. She herself told me the following story. Two new arrivals informed her enthusiastically that they were going to stay in Japan for three months, "get Satori," and then return home to "teach Zen." Had she any suggestions as to the most conducive approach?

Mrs. Sasaki — I believe with her characteristic chuckle — replied to the effect "get yourselves thick, firm cushions. Sit assiduously on them for three years. After that we can begin to talk." Apparently both left in high chagrin; but as it turned out, one of them ended up by doing exactly as she had advised. Who will carry on this side of her work, rather than — and I have a recent book in mind — discussing learnedly what enlightenment is, or how it can be recognized — thus adding one more head to the muddled one of the inquirer.

I had for a long time heard that Mrs. Sasaki's indefatigable work — with a team of scholars endeavoring to render Chinese Zen texts accurately into English, as well as making available a training establishment in Japan for foreign students, to enable them eventually to transfer to a monastery

for further training along traditional lines — was governed by a promise she gave to the late Sokei-an on his death-bed. I once asked her directly whether this was true. Her answer was typical of her: "I cannot contradict it."

Seeing not only what she had created in ten years — the temple she rebuilt, the meditation hall, the library, study and research facilities, her books and pamphlets — but also the amount of work she set for her daily penum, one cannot help reflecting whence she derived her sheer energy. Even at her advanced age she would often work until late at night. Was this also connected with that promise? I believe so.

Her work is there for all to see, appreciate and make use of. The translation work continues; and the meditation hall is open for practice, under an experienced leader and life-long friend of hers and Sokei-an's. There is, however, something else which was implicit in her life, and which beholding the visible fruits of her efforts one might perhaps overlook. I believe it is this which made her great, and which is also a lesson to all, Buddhist or otherwise — a life that has found an unselfish meaning and a purpose, which of itself supplies an energy and momentum beyond the grave, and gives a sense of fulfilment capable of transcending the toil and complexity of that life.

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