

ZEN notes



THE MESSENGER OF HELL

SOKEI-AN SAYS

When I was a small boy, I sometimes went to a Buddhist temple, and there I saw the screen on which the picture of Hell was painted. It was a dreadful sight to a child--swords, broadswords, wolves, bloodhounds, fire. In those dreadful hells the lost souls suffer in endless torment, while the demons of Hell who are torturing the dead spirits look quite comfortable, smiling with great amusement as they torture the dead spirit of a human being. The demon had horns and its body was covered with scales like a fish or a crocodile, and he wore short trousers of tiger skin. He held an iron bar and drove a woman to the top of a tree of swords. The woman climbed in fear to the top of the tree, and then one branch, which was a sword, broke and she fell down from top to bottom and was cut to pieces.

I was the son of a Shinto priest and Shinto has no Hell, so I did not believe that such a place exists under the earth. I thought that this was a product of man's imagination. I mischievously thought of a question to ask the monk. When I met him on the veranda, I asked him, "Why do those demons of Hell not suffer while all those human souls are suffering?" The monk, knowing that I was the son of a Shinto priest, answered: "Son, you ask a good question, but you must know that these dead spirits still have a conscience and therefore suffer. The demons have no conscience and so do not suffer. If you do something bad, you suffer because you have a conscience. But those demons are bad men, born in Hell, and without a pang of conscience they never suffer." I came home and asked my father. He said, "Both good

men and bad men have conscience." I was much amused by my father's answer.

After I attained the wisdom of Buddhism I asked the same question of an old monk. He said: "There is an answer to that question in a shastra written by Asanga, who said, 'Those demons of Hell see no Hell. Hell can be seen by those who have committed sin. Hell exists subjectively. Those demons and the King of Hell may live in Hell but for them it is not a place of torment, because they did not commit any crime or sin. Their tormenting of the dead spirits of the sinful men is a sign of their compassion for those sinful people.'" I was a little puzzled--I could not understand it at first. But I think that all officers in jail believe that they are very kind to prisoners. They are living in jail but they do not suffer. Judges who convict criminals are not suffering, but the criminal is. I searched out that passage in Asanga and found that he explained that Hell exists in a man's mind only; it does not exist anywhere objectively. The struggle in men's minds is Hell.

But the King of Hell sends his subject to the human world and has him sentence one or another: "Your time is up; come down to Hell." And that one must go. Mara, the demon, whispered to Shakyamuni Buddha: "Tathagata, your time is up. You must enter Nirvana." And even Shakyamuni Buddha could not escape from that. He said to Ananda, "Mara has whispered to me and I must enter Nirvana in three months." And he uttered that wonderful Nirvana Sutra, and the first words are, "Mara has whispered to me..."

When Shakyamuni Buddha was in the Bamboo Garden, the Brahmacharis--they were followers of Brahman doctrine and

the Buddhists consider them to be heretics, but they were good friends--occasionally came to the garden and four of them lingered to speak about this subject with the monks. "When the Messenger of Hell comes to us, we cannot refuse. How strong and able must we be--what power must we possess, to avoid this promise when the Messenger of Hell comes for us?" (The old Buddhist scriptures describe everything in such a fashion. They were speaking about death and how to escape from final death.)

While they were talking about this, the Messenger of Hell came and whispered to them: "Your time is up; you can no longer stay in this world. I will wait for you at the entrance to your sepulchre." And then he disappeared. While they were discussing death it was approaching them every moment. Now there was no time to discuss it; they must decide immediately how to escape from it.

One Brahmachari escaped into the sky. He possessed the five mysterious powers: He could see the whole universe without hindrance. He could see through all phenomena and hear all the sounds of the universe, while ordinary men cannot hear the sound of the wind. He could hear and know the minds of all others--the deeps and qualities and wisdom and other natures of minds. This is one of the powers. And he could know his past and his present and his future. And he had real freedom of his willpower; while sitting on his chair he could stand upon the Himalayas, he could enter into deeps or fire. His upper body could produce fire, and his lower, waves. He could stop the sailing boat in the faraway ocean or the gong in the distant temple. He could produce millions of fish from one fish, stop the tempest, and walk upon water. He could make the dead live.

All Hindu teachers say that Brahmacharis must have these five supernatural powers. (I wish I could meet one, but I never have yet.) But Buddhists have one more power--the sixth mysterious power. This is the power of Nirodha, the power to disappear completely. One who has this power can never be found by any demon throughout Heaven or Hell. Buddha had this power. And this last power is the power of the Buddhist.

But this first Brahmachari hid in the sky and died there. He hung himself like a cocoon in the sky and died a miserable death. This sutra is hard to interpret, but one can analyze it in modern terms by saying that this Brahmachari was a materialist. He thought that all phenomena could be reduced to ether. After death he would become that element, so by becoming an elemental body now he would live forever. But by becoming air he became mindless, he lost his soul. Today scholars say that all human activity is electricity. So we might say that he disappeared into electricity and died in it. This is the death of the materialist.

"Sky" means elemental existence; it is different from our elemental body of Dharmakaya. To this Brahmachari this element is materialistic.

The second Brahmachari hid himself in the water and died there. Water means "power" in Oriental symbolism. He thought that the cosmos is all energy. "So if I become a power, then I will exist forever." But although it is easy to settle on this idea of "dynamic" and to say that all is vibration of the dynamic power, religion limits its own life there; it has no more power as religion--it dies there.

The third Brahmachari sought to save himself by disappearing into fire, and

Dear Everyone:

I have been in Kyoto for twelve consecutive New Years. This autumn I decided that I would spend the thirteenth New Year elsewhere for a change. The New Year in Japan, is, as I have often remarked in these letters, a formidable occasion. Preparations begin from December fifteenth, and the festival comes to an end only with the morning of January fifteenth. During the intervening weeks nothing is done that does not have some connection with the New Year to come, and no one in any line of work or activity can be inveigled into attending to anything else.

For the two weeks before the night of December 31st, the kimono makers and foreign-style dressmakers are working night and day on New Year finery; the futon makers are overwhelmed with orders for new bedding; the tatami makers are making new mats for the front entrances and parlors; the carpenters are repairing the inside and outside of the houses; the roofers are renewing the roof-tiles; the gardeners are trimming, planting, and sweeping the gardens. Housewives are frenziedly cleaning all the corners neglected since the summer and washing the woodwork inside and outside the house; windows grimy since autumn are made to shine and glisten; old newspapers and magazines and the accumulated rubbish of six months are put out in the street for the trash collectors; the benjo cleaning wagons and the ox-drawn "honey-carts" are to be seen everywhere throughout the streets of the town.

The most feverish energy is reserved, however, for the buying of presents. December is the month for the year-end bonus and, with the present good times, this can be unbelievably large, since it depends in large part upon the profits made during the year by the company. No one expects to have a single yen of the year-end bonus left when the holiday is over. But how to spend it so as to indicate to the neighbors how big it was, and to give the right presents in the right places so that the utmost return can be expected from them during the coming year? The department stores are more than willing to help. They are open from morning well into the evening. Their decorations are gaudy and fantastic; gay music greets the customer the moment he enters the store, or lures him in even before he puts a foot over the threshold; loud speakers blare out the locations of the bargains. And the crowds swarm in so that by noon it is almost impossible to move about in the aisles, let alone shop with any discretion. But too much discretion would be neither good business nor good fun.

If you are staying in town, life is complicated these days by Christmas. The children all want Christmas presents as well as New Year presents. Heretofore Christmas parties were usually limited to the night clubs, with special features for men only, such as a galaxy of hostesses, strip-tease shows, and the like. But this year the hotels and restaurants are advertising Christmas family parties at several thousand yen a head, with suitable special features and presents for all. And, if you would

keep up with the Joneses, you must take all the children, from two to eighteen, and Aunt and Granny as well.

Christmas out of the way, you now direct your more or less depleted energies to the final New Year preparations. All the year-end calls must be made in semi-formal dress, and loaded down with the gifts to be presented at each house. The stereotyped formulae of thanks for kindnesses received during the past year must be repeated ad infinitum. Then comes the final shopping for the New Year delicacies and their preparation in advance--sufficient food for the family for at least the first two days of the New Year, to say nothing of what must be prepared and arranged for the probable guests. All this devolves upon Mama. Papa, except for the Christmas family party, is consistently absent every evening at year-end parties--class reunions, business parties, parties of individual groups in the office, parties for any and every reason that can be thought up for a year-end party. Papa stumbles home late for the office in the morning! But what matter. Everyone else is late for the office, too.

New Year's Eve arrives with everyone completely exhausted. Papa, at home tonight and *otonashi*--meek and submissive--keeps an eye on the children while Mama and Aunt and Granny, in a last flurry, put the final touches to the flower arrangements, push the overflow of clutter into the already bulging cupboards, dust up a forgotten corner, and prepare the broth for the New Year morning soup. Then everyone to the bath in turn, Granny last because the water is softer and cooler after all the others have been in, even if a bit scummy. But already Mama and Aunt and the girl children have gone off to the hairdresser for a last *perma*--permanent wave--and a set. (The hairdressers are open all night New Year's Eve.) When they return, in the early hours of the morning, there is quiet at last around the family table and bowls of steaming buckwheat noodles. The longer the noodles the longer everyone will live.

But New Year morning arrives almost before the last gulp of noodle juice has been sucked up. Papa puts on his striped pants and cutaway, if his position in the company warrants this, his old-fashioned silk *hakama*--divided pleated skirt--and *haori*--heavy black silk coat--discreetly emblazoned with the family crest, if he holds to the old ways. The smell of moth balls pervades the house for a time. Next the children: the little girls in bright kimonos, butterfly obis and big brocaded ribbon bows in their hair and pink or green or yellow dyed catskin cravats around their necks. Little *botchan* gets into long trousers, a loud checked coat, red cap, and stiff new shoes. The eldest daughter has a new kimono, she mustn't be seen in last year's. This year's style is a white ground with a deep floral pattern at the hem in shades of red and pink and brown. She mustn't wear a *haori*; only a white wooly shawl coat--of thick and shaggy material in pink or white or cream color. For Mama and Aunt, however, *haoris* are the mode, but they must be pale pink or dusty rose this year, with a few threads of silver woven in if we can afford it. Granny gets an *oba*, of the same shaggy material as eldest daughter's, but brown or grizzly bear color.

Now off to the shrine. Crowds are already waiting in line at the bus stop. This year we can afford a taxi. But so can everyone else. So the taxis fly by, loaded

with families who can also afford a taxi this year. The wind blows the dust from the road, the waiting crowd gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Let's settle for the bus. It's already jammed, but, if we push, five or six more can surely squeeze in without breaking the door hinges. Off we go at last.

The avenue leading to the shrine is broad and happily accommodates the thousands already there and the thousands arriving. Botchan must have a helicopter or a wooden sword, and the little girls a willow branch from which numerous bright trinkets dangle. And all the children must have all-day suckers to redden their mouths and sticky up their fingers. These from the booths lining the approach. Now we reach the main shrine and our turn comes to give a tug on the great rope that sends the copper gong jingling and notifies that god that we have arrived. We clap our hands together three times and announce our petitions for the New Year: lots of profit for Papa's company, a good husband for eldest daughter; success in the exams of our oldest boy; no sickness in the family. But we must be doubly sure. Well, the shrine office sells all kinds of little *mamori*-talismans-to wear tucked under the clothing, and one to paste up in the kitchen to keep the house from catching on fire. And the eldest daughter can shake for her fortune. Too bad, no husband this year! But see! All the *mamori* and fortunes say to have faith in the shrine god. Even if things don't come out right, have faith in the shrine god and he-or she-will bring good luck and good fortune in the end. Oh, don't forget to buy a book of fortune for the year! Only one hundred yen, and then we'll know what days are lucky, what unlucky; what days to travel east, what days to travel west; whether to add a room to the house this year or wait until next; when Granny's going to get ill and if she'll recover this time or not. All for a hundred yen!

There, someone's just getting out of a taxi! Grab it first. Never mind if many others have been waiting longer or whether it will hold us all or not. Just pile in!

Home at last! Take off the topmost finery and loosen the obi strings. Let's warm up the stomach with some hot sake, eat sweet beans stewed with sticky rice cakes and relax. The first day of the New Year is over.

But the second day comes. Back into the striped pants and cutaway coat, back into the white kimono, back into the pale pink or dusty rose haori. Granny can stay home and look after the children; botchan flying his kite and the younger girls in tight trousers playing shuttle-cock and battledore in the streets. But we elders must pay our New Year calls on all those on whom we earlier paid year-end calls. How we hope most are out paying calls, too. But not Tanaka San and his new wife for we hear they have made over their *o zashiki*--parlor--in foreign style and bought a big new televi set, and a stereo also. Spiced sake, all kinds of fancy dried fishes and seaweed, and more sweet bean gruel, and cakes, and thick tea, and coffee, and whiskey, and port wine, and soup with tiny white fishes in it that stare you in the eye when you take the cover off the bowl. Tomorrow we'll stay home and show off what we have that's new and fine. And we've ordered a big *tai*--red snapper--from the fishmonger. Funny there was none at the Tanaka's. But they're pinch penny, people say. And Mama'll rustle up some *sukiyaki* for supper. The meat shop at least is open for business on January third, and *sukiyaki* takes no time to prepare.

Today is the fourth. How about a *bura-bura* down the main street of the town. Papa doesn't have to go to the office until the fifth. Today his business suit will do, but Mama and Auntie and Granny and eldest daughter must get back into the white kimono, the dusty pink haoris and the grizzly bear coat. Taxis are still at a premium, but we're a little late getting out today, so there's a better chance. How about a snack of *o sushi*--vinegared cold rice and raw fish--before the movie. And a little sake or beer to wash it down. The movie is jammed; not a seat to be had and the aisles filled with squatting people. Never mind. We can push in and the children can sneak under the legs of the standees. Two hours of standing, but at last we can find seats. Another two hours of laughing and crying and eating peanuts and oranges. What a lot of fun!

Let's walk down Kawaramachi to the Chinese restaurant beyond Shijo. The sidewalks are jammed and we can only move with the stream. What a pretty *maiko*--young geisha--and how handsome the boys outside the patchinko parlor. Skin-tight pants in light blue or yellow, long sideburns, well-greased front hair brushed down over their foreheads to their eyebrows and black leather zipper coats. But no room inside for Auntie to try her luck at patchinko. Well, how about a cup of coffee at this little shop, and a cut of that chocolate cake with the thick cream icing and the pink and green flower decoration. Granny and Botchan want an orange drink, the kind that's especially sweet. Finally the Chinese restaurant. Completely full, and people waiting, but we can wait, too. Oh! Botchan looks green! where is the benjo!

At last it's the fifth. Papa stumbles off to the office, and the children go off to school. The house is in complete disarray, the kitchen a mess. Papa's clothes must be put away for next year. Let's hope they'll do, but even this year he had to leave the top buttons of his pants undone and the vest barely covered his tummy. Kimonos and haoris must be folded and wrapped each in its own paper cover. A week's laundry to be done. Thank goodness for the washing machine. Plenty of left-over food for supper tonight. In a day or two life will go on as usual again. What a let down and what a relief. But how dull it will all be, nevertheless, when life goes on as usual again. But not just yet as usual for Papa. He is again away late into the evening for every year-end party must be matched with a New Year party. More stumbling home late, more noisy sleeping, more addled head in the morning.

January fifteenth. Last night the boys took all the decorations out and burned them. This morning Mama gets up early to make the rice porridge with red beans we must have for breakfast. The New Year is at an end. Ah, Happy New Year!

It was to miss even a greatly modified form of this festive activity that Washino San and I journeyed to Matsue in Idzumo, the Land of the Gods, for the New Year of 1962.

(To be continued)

Ryosen-an
Daitoku-ji

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he died in the fire. This one died a thermo-dynamic death. To him heat was the reality. To European scholars all is nothing but heat--a compost of heat. When a man gathers more heat his brain becomes more active. Everything that has velocity has heat; all speed is really heat itself. And so the Brahmachari became fire--and died in the fire.

The fourth Brahmachari hid himself in stone. In Oriental symbolism "stone" is like number, and this Brahmachari died a Pythagorean death. For the Pythagorians the universe is number; there is nothing but number. He hid himself in the number zero like a cocoon, and died in it.

Buddha, with his supernatural eye, observed these four Brahmacharis and their strange deaths and he made a poem.

It is neither sky nor sea nor stone
That you can enter to save your
life.

If you give up the idea to enter
into anything

You can escape from death.

You cannot enter anyway, for every-

thing is transitory. Enter water--it turns into steam and the demon catches you. Enter steam--it turns into ice and the demon catches you. All life is agony; you cannot enter into a place that is not agony.

You think, "I AM," and you look up and there is someone above you. You go to the top of a skyscraper and there above you is the window washer.

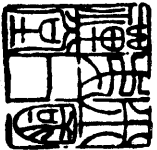
Really, you do not need to enter anywhere. You can disappear where you are now. You can save yourself. One Messenger of Hell said to a monk: "Reverend Sir, your time is up. Come down to Hell." The monk said: "I am so busy; I must do many things. Wait three days while I am meditating." The Messenger of Hell said: "Well, in three days I will be waiting for you at the entrance to your sepulchre." He went back to the King of Hell and told him. And the King of Hell said, "Fool, go back right away and get him or he will disappear." The Messenger of Hell went back. The monk had disappeared. You can save yourself from death.

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