THE MASTER IN RINZAI (LIN-CHI) ZEN

By RUTH FULLER SASAKI

IT is the hour before dawn. All night long the snow has been falling. The distant mountains loom white even in the darkness, and in the garden from time to time the contorted branches of the pines drop with a soft "plop" the piled up whiteness that has weighed them down too far. Within the monastery darkness and silence reign. Even the single weak electric bulb in the meditation hall seems only to intensify the gloom and make still darker the shadows of the motionless monks sitting on the two platforms running the length of the hall.

Suddenly from a distance comes the sound of a bell struck vigorously and repeatedly. In the meditation hall a single sharp command from the head monk slashes the stillness. Already the monks have come alive, and in single file are following their leader through the covered passageways leading to the main hall of the monastery, only the slip-slop of their straw sandals on the tiles breaking the silence.

On the open verandah of the main hall the head monk kneels in formal fashion behind a large tongueless bell hanging from a wooden frame. Behind him the monks take their places in single file. Silently they kneel there, still and immobile. Only an occasional gust of the wind that heralds the dawn flutters their long sleeves and dusts them with snow flakes.

A small bell tinkles. The head monk strikes the tongueless bell twice with a mallet, then rises and noiselessly walks across the adjoining verandah toward a low building from which is issuing a dim light. As the monk kneeling behind him slips into his place before the tongueless bell, the entire line moves forward a little, then is motionless again.

Meanwhile, before the paper covered *shōji* of a room in the adjoining building, the head monk has knelt, then three times bowed his head to the *tatami*. Now he pushes apart the *shōji* and rising steps into the room. Again, just inside the entrance he kneels and bows three times. Then, rising and walking toward the seated figure at the end of the room, he once more kneels and bows in the same way. As he raises his head his eyes meet those of the old man seated before him. The grizzled head is shaven, the hands are hidden in the voluminous folds of a shabby dun-colored robe. A short stick lies before the old man and at his right stands a small bell. In the shadowy dimness of the room the figure is barely visible. But no dimness can conceal the brilliance of the eyes, eyes that pierce to the very marrow of the monk before him. For an instant the monk's eyes waver; then, bracing himself and returning the gaze, he speaks in short, clipped syllables. The old man's eyes bore through him. He speaks again and makes a movement. From the old man's throat comes a sharp retort, his left hand darts out to raise the short stick menacingly, his right hand seizes the little bell and rings it sharply. Immediately from the verandah comes the sound of two strokes on the tongueless bell. The monk bows his head to the *tatami*. Rising, he goes to the closed *shōji* and, standing before it, bows in the direction of the old man. Then opening it and going outside, he carefully closes it and standing before it bows again. As he silently walks to the end of the verandah, the second monk as

silently passes him. Slipping his bare feet into straw sandals, he returns through the covered passage ways, and takes his seat in the deserted meditation hall. When the last monk in the waiting line has returned to his place, the first rays of the sun will be coming over the mountain-tops, illumining the still hall with the pale light of morning.

Who are these monks? Who is the old man in the dun-colored robe? What has been taking place?

The monks are typical monks--though they might as well have been laymen[1]--in a Japanese Rinzai Zen monastery. The old man is a Zen master. What has been taking place is technically known as *sanzen* or *dokusan*, the interview between master and student in which the student attempts to actualize his understanding of the *kōan*, the cryptic Zen question, the understanding of which he must achieve through an intuitive realization.

These monks have come together at the beginning of November and will remain in the monastery until the end of January. During the following three months, most will return to their own home temples, leaving behind only such monks as are needed to carry on the affairs of the monastery during the vacation. The first of May all will assemble again, and the end of July most will return once more to their home temples. The majority of these monks will remain only a few years at the monastery, then, receiving their ordination as priests, go to take charge of a temple of their own in the country or in some town or city. A few will continue their monastery life longer before assuming the responsibilities of a temple priest. Still fewer, those who wish to penetrate Zen to the end, those who have a true religious vocation, or those who have been encouraged to remain by the master, whose eye has discerned in them possible " true vessels of Dharma, " must continue their study of koans for at least twelve or fifteen years.

During the summer and winter terms the mode of life followed by these student-monks[2] accords with rules formulated in Japan in the 17th century; some, however, go back as far as the T'ang and Sung dynasties in China. Many hours each day are devoted to meditation, many to physical labor in the fields or gardens that provide much of the monks' food, or in taking care of the buildings and grounds. The daily fare is poor, merely enough to sustain their bodies. Several times each week, wearing their big straw hats, they go in groups of three or more into the town or nearby village to beg. Several times each week they listen to the master's *teishō*, " lecture on a Zen text, " and at least once each day must meet him face to face in such an interview as has been described. Four times during the winter term and three times during the summer term a week of intensive meditation called *Ō sesshin* is held. During that period all unnecessary activity is suspended and all unnecessary speech forbidden. Meditation begins at three or four in the morning and continues late into the night, broken only for the interviews with the master--sometimes as many as five a day--for the master's daily lecture, the frugal meals, and the occasional periods of relaxation.

The community of monks is self-governing. At the end of each term, from among the older members are chosen those who, during the following term will fill

the administrative offices--general director and bursar, head monk in the meditation hall, chief cook, and instructor of young monks.

The heart of the monastery is the master. Though he is most often the Dharma-heir of the previous master and has come into his position by succession, theoretically he is the honored guest of the community of monks and as such takes no active part in the management or direction of monastery affairs. Nevertheless the master's personality in large part determines the character of the monastery while he is living in it. Depending upon whether he is a man of literary bent, one who emphasizes *samu*, "manual labor," in Zen practice, one who, being of a more mystical nature, urges his monks on to deeper and deeper meditation and koan study, one who devoutly reveres his religion and the masters of the past through whom it has been transmitted, one of more social bent who enjoys ceremonies and guests and ceremonial tea, or one with a modern outlook who travels abroad, interests himself in world problems, and attempts indirectly to infuse new life into the old forms, so the general atmosphere of a monastery will to a considerable degree reflect the master's nature.

Outside the sanzen room the master's personal contact with his monks is limited. If the community is large, there will be little individual contact with other than the older, office-holding monks; if it is small, a certain degree of familiarity may gradually come about as the master works beside the monks for a short time each day in the garden, occasionally shares their meals, or joins in the preparations for a special ceremony or monastery holiday.

Each term two younger monks are assigned to wait upon the master continuously. They accompany him whenever he leaves the monastery--to attend ceremonies at other temples, to make formal visits to other priests, to travel, to lecture elsewhere. The attendant monks clean and care for the master's quarters, usually a separate though connecting building within the monastery walls, they care for his robes, assist him to dress for ceremonies, admit and serve his personal guests, grind the ink he uses for writing or painting, and in many temples prepare and serve his meals. To be the master's attendant is a position longed for yet feared by all young monks. Upon their heads falls his wrath for the slightest infraction of monastery rules or etiquette. Yet the position affords an indispensable opportunity to observe the master's comportment under all kinds of circumstances, including the most intimate, and to study his character as a human being as well as an enlightened man, and thus to be provided with a pattern to follow, or not follow, when they themselves become temple priests or masters.

In addition to their activities at the monastery, all Zen masters have lay-followers who are devoted to them. Some of these lay-followers come to the monastery more or less regularly to sit with the monks . Usually these lay-students participate in the special weeks of meditation, some coming in the early morning and the evening, others living in the monastery for the entire week. The relationship between the master and these lay-students is often close, and it is not unusual for them to consult him about family matters and to follow his advice in the

conduct of their business affairs as well as in their daily life. In addition, almost all Zen masters periodically address groups of laymen outside the monastery, in their own city or town or even, during the vacation periods, in distant places. To such groups they may go once a month, giving a sermon or somewhat simplified lecture on general Buddhism or on a Zen text. At the conclusion of the lecture the master hears the sanzen of the more serious members of the group. During the summer or winter vacation periods, the master often holds week-long meetings for such groups, meetings which consist of daily lectures or sermons and long periods of meditation followed by sanzen. The lay group will usually arrange for these meetings to be held in a local temple, and the regulations those participating must follow conform more or less to the rules of the monastery during its meditation weeks.

From earliest times in China the role of the master has been paramount in Zen. There have always been many Zen "believers"--devout men and women who attend ceremonies, listen to sermons, and generously support temples, monks, and masters. But while lay-believers have always been indispensable for the existence of the Zen Sect, from the beginning Zen itself has been pre-eminently a distinct method and practice for leading to enlightenment those who will follow this method and practice this practice. The pursuit of this unique way demands on the part of the monk or the layman deep religious commitment as well as opportunity and time. But above all it demands a master. Without him to guide and direct, without his refusal or his acceptance of the student's realizations there can be no assurance of true progress toward the goal.

The authority of the master to be the sole and final judge of the student's attainment rests upon his having received the Dharma Seal from his master before him. The transmission of the Dharma Seal from master to disciple has been continuous through the centuries up to today. This flowing of correct Dharma from generations of masters to generations of disciples has been the life-blood of Zen. No other school of Buddhism has carried on the transmission so scrupulously and no other school depends so completely upon authenticity of transmission for its very existence.

Historically, this transmission began in China when the Indian monk Bodhidharma handed his robe and bowl to Hui-k'o.[3] Hui-k'o was a man of forty when he first met Bodhidharma. In his youth he had been a student of the classics and the works of Taoism; later, after his ordination as a monk, he as assiduously studied the Mahayana doctrines and practiced meditation. But his insight had not been verified, and it was this verification that he sought from Bodhidharma. According to a late apocryphal legend, however, the transmission originated with Śākyamuni Buddha himself. One day, sitting among the assembly of monks, the Buddha held up a golden lotus flower. Only his great disciple Kāśyapa understood his meaning and smiled. Then, addressing Kāśyapa, the Buddha said: "I have the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, the Subtle Dharma Gate, which does not set up words and phrases, and is a separate transmission outside the scriptures.

This I entrust to you, Mahākāśyapa."

By the early part of the ninth century a direct line of patriarchal transmission beginning with Kāśyapa had been devised in China, a line that listed Bodhidharma as the twenty-eighth patriarch of Zen in India and the first patriarch of Zen in China. With Hui-k'o, known as the Second Patriarch, four Chinese patriarchs successively handed down to one of their disciples the robe and bowl of Bodhidharma, symbols of the transmission of the true Dharma. With the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng[4] the handing on of the robe and bowl came to an end.[5] Hui-neng is said to have given the Dharma Seal to some thirty disciples, though his line of Zen was transmitted to posterity through only two. Thereafter, the masters had sometimes several Dharma-heirs, sometimes only one, according to circumstances and the times. Today, most masters hope for five, in order that through at least one heir their Dharma may surely be handed on.

The old Zen books recount many instances of men who, though they had long studied Buddhism and practiced meditation, sought out an authentic master in order to receive in turn his authenticating seal. Many more, of course, from the time of their ordination as monks, came to the great monasteries presided over by famous masters, and lived and practiced there until, if they were successful in attaining their goal, they, too, received the Dharma Seal.

Unfortunately we know too little about how the masters taught their disciples. In the early days of Chinese Zen, when the number of disciples around a master was relatively few, the master could be in intimate contact with each of his monks and, by putting a seemingly simple question to him, one that related to their mutually shared daily life, could test the depth of the disciple's understanding or awaken him to deeper realizations. Also, at the conclusion of the master's lecture or sermon, resident disciples or visiting monks were free to ask questions, and it was on such occasions that the famous mondos of Zen largely took place. The master took advantage of such occasions to demonstrate the Absolute Principle, to awaken the questioner to deeper levels of understanding, or to destroy his pretensions. Many of these mondos are difficult to understand today; they were often verbal sparring matches in the colloquial language of the time, containing many slang expressions and many allusions to current happenings then known to everyone, but now long forgotten. In Sung times, when the community around a famous master would number several thousand monks, the best known and most pertinent of these mondos, now known as koans, would be used by monks to question the master or the master to question his monks. Though, on the whole, these verbal encounters took place in the presence of the assembly, as had earlier been the case, it would appear that the masters instructed and tested their most promising disciples in private as well.

Instruction in the master's room seems to have been the method used in Japan from the earliest days of Zen. And it is punctiliously followed now. What takes place during a sanzen interview is considered a matter of absolute privacy to be shared only between master and monk. To divulge what the master has said to the student or the student has said to the master is an unforgivable breach of monastery eti-

quette and rule. But this much may be said about it. Each master has his own particular style. Some are kindly, some are irascible, some are terrifying. Some almost never raise their stick, some consider beating of benefit. But whatever may be the attitude of the master, no student, however long he may have lived in the monastery and however accomplished he may be in koan study, enters the master's room in other than fear and trepidation. For every student, the figure sitting there before him looms up to enormous proportions, filling the entire room. This is no longer a man, no longer even a master; this is Truth incarnate. Before this Truth every pretension, every hidden thought, every frailty is mercilessly revealed. Naked one stands before it, to be slaughtered on the spot or awakened to eternal life.

How does a master bring a student to *satori* or "awakening?" There seems to be no particular technique for this. If the student is intensely alert during sanzen, the master's single word or single movement may be pivotal. Or during his lecture, the master may speak to one ear alone. Unfortunately, too many monks consider *teishō* a good time for napping. The usual method, however, if method it can be called, is continuous refusal to accept the student's successive realizations. By the best and most orthodox masters these are never discussed in the sanzen room or even commented upon. Whatever the student says or does to convey his understanding of a koan is invariably and instantly brought to a halt by the ringing of the little bell. Day after day and even hour after hour thrown back upon himself, the student must perforce plumb the depths of his own mind, until, by his own effort he penetrates it. Strange! When you really reach this place you know it. Then you stand immovable. No tricks the master may bring into play--and at this point he will undoubtedly try them--shake your certitude. You know, that is all. And the master will know that you know.

From the numerous translations of the old Zen mondos to which the West has been treated, it would appear that satori was experienced as the immediate result of a master's word or blow. Of the two, in all probability the blow was the more effective, for by it a "frozen" mind can be instantly released. Too often, however, the words "then he attained satori" have been a careless translation of words that more meticulously rendered would be "attained some understanding." Furthermore, wide reading of the biographies of the old masters indicates that as few attained awakening while sitting in meditation as attained it at the public assemblies. The beam from the meditation-hall lantern shining through the bamboo screen first awakened Hui-leng;[6] for Wu-men Hui-k'ai, the boom of the great drum in the Dharma-hall brought eight years of struggle with his first koan to an end.

Nor has it been different in modern times, as the accounts of the first satories of two modern Zen men, in later years to become masters, attest. Nanshinken, as a monk, studied at Kokeizan in the mountains of Gifu Prefecture. For over two years he had meditated upon the koan "MU" without success. Finally, at the beginning of one of the meditation weeks, he took up a small statue of Kwannon that he treasured and addressing it said: "Please, I beseech you, help me succeed in this O sesshin."

Then more forcefully he continued, " If I don't succeed, I'll know that you're powerless and I'll throw you in the river and smash you." His pleas were in vain. The morning following the conclusion of the meditation week, in a despair that was tinged with anger, he seized the little figure of Kwannon and ran to the cliff overhanging the Kiso River. As he raised his arm to throw the statue into the water, his wooden *geta* struck a pebble. At the sound, suddenly he knew! He turned and ran back to the monastery. On the way he met a monk who said: " Where have you been? The Master wants to see you." Breathless he entered the Master's room. " Well, how about it?" asked the Master quietly.

And Sokei-an Rōshi,[7] speaking about his entrance into what he called " the transcendental world," said: " How did I get into it? Well, one day I wiped out all notions from my mind. I gave up all desire. I discarded all the words with which I thought, and stayed in quietude. I felt a little queer, as if I were touching some power unknown to me. I had been near it before, but each time I had shaken my head and run away from it. This time I decided not to run away, and Zut! I entered... I came to my teacher. He looked at me and said, 'Tell me about your new experience, your entering the transcendental world.' Did I answer him? If I spoke, I would come back into the old world. If I said one word, I would step out of the new world I had entered. I looked at his face. He smiled at me. He also did not say a word."

The student's own mind is the ground in which the seed of awakening lies dormant; fortified by faith, questioning, and determination, he spends long hours in meditation upon the koan, cultivating the ground and encouraging the seed to sprout; the master provides the rain, the dew, and the sunshine that stimulate the sprout to mature; some extrinsic circumstance---a blow, a word, a sound, a silence--brings forth the bud. For a true satori in Rinzai Zen each of these elements is indispensable.

But note, thus far only the first bud has shown. For the full flowering many, many years of practice must follow and many more satoris. Lin-yün[8] only after years of meditation and years of wandering, some thirty years he says in his poem, one day chanced to see the peach flowers in full bloom. And Tung-shan[9] had already received the Dharma Seal from his master Yün-yen[10] when the sight of his own reflection in a running stream brought him to full enlightenment.

During these many years, whether they be spent in the monastery or in distant places, it will always be the master, sometimes physically present, sometimes not, whose silent tongue continues to instruct by not instructing and whose invisible hand continues to guide by not guiding. The master is indeed the heart of the monastery, but truly he is the living heart of Zen.

FOOTNOTES

1 - Laymen who are experienced in *zazen*--the practice of Zen meditation--and are studying koans with the master, are usually permitted to sit with the monks in the meditation hall during the meditation periods and to take sanzen at the same time and in the same way as the monks.

2 - It should be understood that in present-day Japanese Rinzai Zen the only persons termed *unsui* or "monks," are those who are living and studying in a *Semmon dōjo,* "Hall for Special Training," or *Sōdo,* "Monks' Hall," two terms popularly translated as "monastery." Monks who have already received their ordination as temple priests often continue living and studying in the monastery until such time as a suitable temple is available to them or for other reasons. Once they are in charge of a temple they are known correctly as *jūshoku,* "superior" or "chief priest," and familiarly called "*oshō,*" a title not unlike the Christian "Father" in feeling.

3 - *Jap.* Eka, 487-595

4 - *Jap.* Enō, 638-713

5 - Though the robe and bowl ceased to be transmitted in early T'ang, from later T'ang on it was customary for a master to give to his immediate heir some tangible evidence of the transmission. Huang-po Hsi-yün (Jap. Ōbaku Kiun, d. 855?) gave Lin-chi I-Hsüan (Jap. Rinzai Gigen, d. 866) the arm-rest and the back-rest of his master Po-ch'ang Huai-hai (Jap-Hyakujō Ekai, 720-814); Wu-men Hui-k'ai (Jap. Mumon Ekai, 1183-1260) gave his Japanese heir Shin-ichi Kakushin (1207-1298) his portrait inscribed with a verse, one of his own robes, and a copy of his koan collection ***Wu-men kuan*** (Jap. ***Mumonkan***) which he himself had written out; Nanshinken Rōshi (Kōno Mukai, 1864-1935) received from his teacher the short stick or *nyoi* of Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1769) which had been handed successively down from that great Japanese master. Present-day masters continue to follow his custom. A Dharma-heir may be presented with a painting by the master on which has been inscribed a cryptic verse hinting at the transmission, a robe previously worn by the master, or a signed certificate of transmission. In some cases all three have been given.

6 - Ch'ang-ch'ing Hui-leng (*Jap.* Chōkei Eryo, 854-932)

7 - Sasaki Shigetsu, 1882-1945.

8 - Lin-yün Chih-ch'in (*Jap.* Reiun Shigon, n.d.).

9 - Tung-shan Liang-chieh (*Jap.* Tōsan Tyokai, 807-869)

10 - Yün-yen T'ang-sheng (*Jap.* Ungan Donjo, 78? -841)

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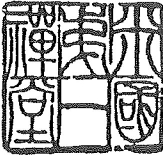

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