

ZEN notes



by S.H.
Charuma

A SOLITARY PERSIMMON

Leaves from the Life of Nyogen Sensaki

(PART TWO)



(Color drawing of camp by Sensaki)

*Children's kites fly proudly
Beyond the fence,
Above the sky
Outwitting the barb wire.*

Nyogen Sensaki

For those of you who missed part one of this article, the subject is the materials that relate to Nyogen Sensaki in the Institute archives. These letters, photos, and poems were collected by Mary Farkas, former editor of Zen Notes, who corresponded with Sensaki and three of his students and friends: Saladin (Paul) Reps, Samuel Lewis, and Norman Money. The letters and poems in part one took us from 1930 up to 1941. Here in Part Two I continue to invite the reader with an interest in American Zen history to follow the threads Sensaki's life revealed in these poems and letters and in the reflections of those who knew him well.

Senzaki and Sokei-an were both internees during WW2. Sensaki was first sent to a relocation center in Santa Anita, California, under executive order 9066. He was interned at a camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming with almost 10,000 other Japanese, some of them U.S. citizens. It was a tremendous financial and

psychological shock to the entire West coast Japanese community. Rick Fields, in How the Swans Came to the Lake, writes,

" [Senzaki] ... carried his floating zendo with him, and established a sitting place in the small cabin he shared with a family. Perhaps ten or twelve people joined him for most of his meetings and meditation. He continued to write and send lectures to his students."

Among his letters to Saladin Reps are almost fifty poems handwritten in both English and in Chinese characters.

Here is a postcard view of the camp with a poem by Senzaki floating in the desolate Wyoming sky. These poems always included Senzaki's seal and were sometimes done on the camp stationary, handmade silk screens created by the internees.



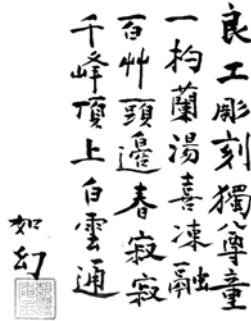


HEART MOUNTAIN, WYOMING

An evacuee-artist carved the statue of Baby Buddha.
 Each of us pours the perfumed warm water
 Over the head of newly born Buddha.
 The cold spell may come to the end after this.
 Some grasses try to raise their heads in
 While the mountain peaks put on the tardy spring,
 and off their veils
 of white cloud.

Nyogen Senzaki

Buddha's Birthday,
 Apr. 9, 1944.



A baby Buddha and paper flowers made at Heart Mt.



*Do you know what is my family tradition
 of bathing Buddha?*

*This morning I took hot coffee
 And I am warm and comfortable
 Throughout muscle and bone.*

Senzaki

About Senzaki's poetry Eido Shimano Roshi writes:

"During his (Senzaki's) lifetime he was able to write using various styles of Chinese and Japanese poetical forms. However he especially excelled in the 'shichigon Zekku,' a poem consisting of four lines each composed of seven Chinese characters. Throughout his career as a Zen teacher in America, Nyogen translated many Zen works, both classic and contemporary. However his real genius lay in his translations of Chinese poetry, since he himself was a poet."

Another of Senzaki's favorite poetic forms was the Japanese *uta*. These two *utas* express the desolation of his experience of Heart Mountain without any of the self-conscious religiosity or expressions of faith found in many of the others.

A sand-storm ceases howling.
Then a blizzard comes.
When the piling snow melts,
The wind raises dust again,
Till the snow takes its place.
With such repetition, winter reigns
the plateau.

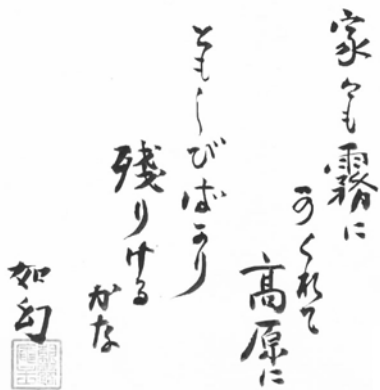
my *uta*
(Japanese ode) nyogen Senzaki

砂風がやめば雪ふり
雪消えて
また砂風と
くりかすかな
如幻

My uta (Japanese ode)

One night, all houses were
hidden in the mist,
And nothing but light remained
in the whole plateau.

Nyagen Senzaki



Senzaki and Sokei-an shared a love of America in spite of the discrimination they experienced, but in his first letters to Reps in June, 1942 from Heart Mountain, Senzaki rages against modern politicians and gold demons, whom he holds responsible for the failure of the constitution, the free press, and the conditions in the camps. Then he writes: "Japan adopted me when I was a mere baby and gave me Buddhism which is my only treasure now. I adopted America as my own country when I was thirty years old, and I am going to give Buddhism to America in exchange for salvation and death."

Reps writes back: "I wish you and Gandhi would drop this nonsense... for Japan never gave you Buddhism nor did Buddha, and a live Zen master is better than a dead Buddhist priest."

Senzaki replies in ink on Reps typed letter: "My heart aches not for Japan but for America... This country is betrayed by it's politicians ... babies and aged people drop off like autumn leaves, in this hot summer. I may be one most any day. Army furnishes the burial expenses so I will not trouble you or any others."

By October 1942, Senzaki has calmed down a bit and writes Reps: *"We are in Heart Mountain now... As I told you before when journalism lost its independence, a nation cannot win any achievement. Tears of Lincoln and Washington patter my window here."*

In a letter to Reps dated Nov. 28, 1943 Senzaki writes: *"The Buddha actually witnessed his country perish as no sage or arhats can change the effect of the law of causation... Uncle Sam is dead long ago-- here is his portrait (a pasted-in clipping of the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States)... This is only my private talk to you. I did not realize how much I love this country until these days."*

Among the dozens of letters and poems to Reps are some to Norman Money (Morin), a thirty year friend and student of Senzaki's

Dear Morin,

Oct. 5, 1942

This plateau is 4,000 feet above sea level and the air is rarified and one has to suffer breathing it until he gets used to it. Water is sulfuric and we must educate ourselves to enjoy it. Afternoons I stay in bed. (To stay warm)

Senzaki

Many of the poems from Heart Mountain are written for Buddhist religious holidays and frequent funerals.

Commemorating the Buddha's Realization Dec. 12, 1943

*The frozen clouds of the winter,
Stubbornly hang around the Himalaya mountain.
The dawn, however, came to Gaya
And the effulgent light illuminated the surroundings.
It is not strange that a mediocrity became the Buddha.
Lucifer and Vesper are merely two names for Venus.*

Dear Morin San:

Nov. 27, 1944

I have not been feeling well ever since the summertime, but tried to keep up my Japanese lecture morning and evening, neglecting most of my correspondence. Then I became a real sick person. I was under a doctors care, but the hospital had no room, so the Sangha took care of me. I start to write the Book of Equanimity. Write often...

Faithfully yours,
Nyogen Senzaki

Leaving the Heart Mountain Camp.

*Bodhidharma preferred North to South in the old days.
He left Liang and went to Wei.
One of his descendants was destined to move
From North to South in the present time.
He had to leave Wyoming and return to California.
Zen out wits time and space.
In this day of commemoration, the fifth of October
The two meet face to face.
Words are unnecessary in this family.
The monk raises his eyebrows
To warmup the old relationship,
Still fearing to receive a frown for his exuberances.*

(Pasadena) Oct. 5, 1945

Commemorating the Buddha's Realization

*This world is the place of enlightenment.
In his place, each person is a hero,
Striving for what he would attain.
You may have ideals, as many as forty-eight.
Those ideals are dispersed like early stars.
Look at the new moon which rules the heavens!
If you do not realize truth at this moment,
It is nobody's fault but your own.*

Nyogen Senzaki Dec. 4, 1945

*Man sees off the old year
And welcomes the New Year,
Making the demarkation himself,
In the same playful manner,
Man takes off the mask of delusion
And puts on the mask of realization.
Such a make believe is not agreeable to this monk.
He enjoys eternity in his limitless hut,
As he does not wear any kind of mask,
Everyday is new and happy to him.*

Senzaki January 7, 1947

Dear Eryu-San (Ruth Sasaki):

Jan 2, 1948

*Many thanks for your kind letter and donation for Zendo.
I will write several introductions or reviews for "Cat's Yawn". ...
About "101 Zen Stories", I will show your letter to Paul Reps. I
never wanted to publish anything on Zen, but Reps always asked
me to do and he really started to print a few of my manuscripts. I*

do not know any such thing as Zen, why should I display my poor English... I am doing flute story comments for my students. You have enough work to publish your teachers work and which will help American thinkers a hundred times better than "101 Zen Stories". Just because I cannot speak English freely I make manuscripts, but I have no wish to leave them after I am gone. Ever since I became a monk 53 years ago, name, title, sect, and others are nothing to me. Zen? What is it anyhow?

Yours Truly, Senzaki

A Farewell Visit

On June 14, we had a surprise visit from Niwa Roshi and 14 of his monks. Niwa Roshi was a Dharma-successor of Isshu Miura Roshi who taught at the Institute in the early 60's and on whose account our present building was procured. This was to be Niwa's last visit to America and he was visiting the places where his teacher had taught. Georgette Siegal, a former member of the Institute and a long time student of Isshu Miura accompanied Niwa and was taking care of his travel arrangements.

They all sat in our Zendo for a short period and then we all gathered in the Library for an exchange of gifts, tea, lots of strawberries and anecdotes. Afterwards the monks wisked off in their big bus to have their fill in an all-you-can-eat restaurant.

We were happy to have Niwa Roshi visit and thank him for his generous donation. May his remaining years in Japan be fruitful in the Dharma.



Gift exchange between Michael Hotz and Niwa Roshi

SENGAI STORIES

Part 2

Sengai and the Mosquito Net Thief

One summer day two old women from the village came to visit Sengai at the temple.

"My, my!" they exclaimed when Sengai appeared, "What are those red spots all over your face?"

"Oh, those," said the Master. "They're mosquito bites."

"Yes, but why should the mosquitos be biting you so *much*?" the old ladies asked.

"To tell you the truth," the Master said, "I've already had my mosquito net stolen three times."

"Three times?" the women exclaimed. "You've been robbed three times?"

"That's right," the Master confirmed. "They took all my mosquito nets. What a headache! Every night I pull the bedding over my head for protection, but a mosquito always manages to hide inside and chew me up while I sleep. It itches like crazy!" he told them, grimacing.

The old women both expressed great sympathy for the Master.

"Ladies, if you're willing," Sengai proposed, "I have a plan. Could you make me an all-white mosquito net?"

"Yes, certainly," the old ladies agreed, and pooling all their rainy-day funds, they made up the white mosquito net just as the Master had requested and brought it to him.

Sengai was overjoyed, and immediately taking out his brushes and ink set to work on the net. He covered its sides with depictions of death's heads and ghosts and its top with a terrifying picture of the thunder god and lightning goddess. At its corners he painted overturned lanterns and gravestones,, ghastly hands and funerary objects. When he was done he hung up the net and stood back to admire his work. "Well, that should do the trick!" the Master announced with a laugh.

That very night, two thieves snuck up to the temple carrying lanterns. The Master was already sound asleep inside his new mosquito net. He had closed the *shoji* but left open the shutters.

Sliding aside the *shoji*, the thieves slipped into the Master's room. But when they shined the lantern on the mosquito net, they beheld a ghost standing before them. Trembling with fear, but greedy for the net, one of the thieves approached and prepared to cut it from its hanger, when Sengai suddenly began banging his metal wash basin and bellowed, "The god of thunder is here before you!"

Terrified the two fled screaming into the night.

Hearing all the commotion, the temple monks and the nearby villagers came running. When Sengai told them what had occurred, everyone exploded with laughter. When they entered the Master's room and looked around, they found that the thieves, in their desperation to escape, had dropped a towel, a tobacco pouch, and a pipe.

* * *

Out Today

The Master would close his gate, and on it paste a sign that read "Out Today," meanwhile plainly sauntering back and forth in his front yard.

Once a certain samurai official of his acquaintance passed by, and noticing the Master, went to open the gate and greeted him. "Your Reverence!" he called out, "I haven't seen you in some time. How have you been?"

In reply Sengai merely pointed to the sign, and told the samurai, "Please read what it says."

"But your Reverence," the samurai pleaded, "You're here, aren't you? You must just be kidding."

Sengai dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "That sign," he reminded the samurai, "says I'm out. It's true as anything can be." And he refused any further conversation.

On another occasion, a farmer who was a devoted follower of the Master, came to visit him at the temple carrying a load of Sengai's favorite sweet potatoes. The Master was indoors wearing a sleeveless jacket and cooking up some rice.

“Hello!” the farmer called out from the gate. “Is your Reverence in?”

“I’m out! I’m out!” Sengai called back from inside.

“You’re out?” the farmer repeated. “But I’ve brought your favorite sweet potatoes...”

No sooner had the Master heard the words “sweet potato” then he flung open the shoji, stuck out his head and shouted, “No, I’m in! I’m in! Just me.”

The Master was known to be immensely fond of sweet potatoes, and people, it’s said, would often use them to lure him out.

* * *

The Mischiveous Samurai

(Ghosts and ghost tales were a fixture of popular culture in Sengai’s Japan, an interest that may be reflected in the following story--ED)

From the time the Master became abbot of Shofukuji, he would use any spare time he had from the temple’s affairs to sit down under a tree or on a rock to practice zazen. One night a mischiveous samurai of his acquaintance was passing through a pine grove near the temple when he noticed the Master deep in meditation on a rock under one of the pines, looking just like Bodhidharma.

The next evening when the samurai passed by the spot, there was the Master again, seated in meditation.

“People say that for such a runt of a man, the Master’s got plenty of guts,” the samurai mused. “Well, this looks like a perfect chance to find out!”

The next day at twilight, the samurai went to the pine grove, climbed a pine next to the rock where Sengai did zazen, hid himself, and waited for the Master to appear.

Sengai, with no idea of the trap being laid for him, arrived and plunged into deep samadhi, sitting cross-legged as usual on the rock. No sooner had he begun to meditate, then the samurai, in the tree above, reached down and grabbed the Master’s head. But instead of being alarmed as the samurai had expected, Sengai just went on meditating, still as a stone buddha.

Next, the samurai tried roaring, "I'm going to get you!" But this, too had absolutely no effect. Finally, feeling ashamed, he crept down silently from the tree and went off.

The following morning the samurai went to visit Sengai at the temple. He asked to be conducted to the Master and was promptly shown into the abbot's private quarters. The instant he stepped through the door the Master shouted from the shadow of a half-opened shoji: "Aha! The ghost!"

"Wha...!" exclaimed the samurai, grabbing for his sword.

The Master nearly split his sides laughing and remarked, "It's a bad business when one ghost is scaring another!"

The samurai, red in the face, slunk off.

* * *

An Executioner's Guilt

Among the Master's followers was a man who served the domain's daimyo, Lord Kuroda, as official executioner.

One snowy day when the man came to visit the temple, Sengai asked him: "You make your living cutting off people's heads. What about giving up this kind of sinful business?"

"But your Reverence," the man explained, "His Lordship, the daimyo, can command even my *own* execution--I'm completely blameless in this."

The Master did not reply, but changing the subject said, "Right now it's the end of the year, and I have to get the temple grounds cleaned up. I hate to ask, but could you go into the thicket over there and cut down the bamboo?"

"Certainly, your Reverence!" the executioner instantly agreed, and entering the thicket proceeded to cut down the bamboo.

No sooner had he begun, however, than all the snow that had piled up on the bamboos' branches hurtled down with a crash on the executioner's head.

"Oh, it's cold!" he protested, brushing off the snow and returning to the Master's quarters.

Sengai told him, "The snow on the bamboo should have fallen on me, who asked you to do this; but instead it fell on you. Tell me, then: Who is guilty when you cut off someone's head? I want you to consider this carefully."

At these words, the executioner went away.

* * *

The Ruffian Samurai

One day when the master was in front of his temple weeding the garden, two samurai appeared.

"Is Master Sengai in?" they demanded.

"He's out," Sengai replied.

"None of your lies!" they barked at the Master together. "You're Sengai, aren't you?"

Each samurai then grabbed one of the Master's arms and dragged him inside, where as a crowning indignity they ordered him to produce for them a piece of calligraphy. It was just the same as highway robbery!

The Master, however, remaining perfectly calm, brushed a painting of a copper coin, beside which he inscribed the following haiku:

*Two "knights"
dragging away a monk
--It's a hold-up!*

* * *

Sengai and the Penis Contest

Once when Sengai and the Zen master Don'ei of Sufukuji were invited to the home of an old established Hakata family, they noticed that the alcove was adorned by a magnificent potted orchid. Both of the masters begged to have the plant.

Their host told them, "You both want it? Then we'll have a penis contest, and whoever wins will take the orchid home."

Sengai immediately announced, "They say, 'Small man, big pecker'--so I win!" And triumphantly tucking the orchid under his arm, he went off.

THE SUTRA OF PERFECT AWAKENING

TWENTY-SIXTH LECTURE

Saturday, January 20th, 1939

"O Obedient One! Through every state the nature of Reality is pure; hence the body is pure. Because the body is pure, all varieties of bodies are pure. Because all kinds of bodies are pure, the innate capacity of the sentient beings of manifold directions to awaken is pure.

O Obedient One! Because the world is pure, the various worlds are pure. Because the various worlds are pure, throughout the empty sphere of the sky and throughout the three existences, everything is pure, uniform and immobile.

O Obedient One! The empty sphere is thus uniform and immobile; you must therefore know that the innate capacity to awaken is also uniform and immobile (undisturbable)."

SOKEI-AN SAYS:

(I make that "undisturbable" instead of the Chinese "immobile.")

The Sutra of Perfect Awakening is one of the difficult Mahayana scriptures. The period of this type of sutra was about 700 years after the Buddha's death. This was before the birth of Nagarjuna who was called the second Buddha (born about 800 years after the Buddha's death), and after the death of Asvaghosa in the second century C.E. The Buddhism of Northern India developed under the protection of King Kanishka, and slowly developed into different phases. It was in the interval between Asvaghosa and Nagarjuna that this was written.

Buddhism was planted by Gautama Buddha, but through 2500 years the doctrine of this religion continued to develop -- changing in accordance with the period or with the influence of the country in which it was promulgated. But it is called the Sutra of Northern Buddhism.

"O Obedient One!" -- the original text of this sutra is not

handed down to us. It was written in Sanskrit and it disappeared in the early period of Chinese Buddhism. The Chinese translated it from the Sanskrit, and I am translating from the Chinese text. The Bodhisattva here called "Obedient One" is Samantanetra (All-seeing Eye).

In Chinese, this is Zennanji. Shumitsu, a famous Zen Master of the Kego sect, gave a commentary on this Zennanji: "He is called "good man" because he obeys the law of the universe, of nature, and of man. Knowing the law of the universe, nature, and man, he knows how to make obeisance to the law. Therefore he is called "good man." Without knowing the law, a man can be good -- but it doesn't mean anything!

"Throughout every state the nature of Reality is pure;" -- Usually we think that there are no "states" in Reality -- that it is just one -- but the Buddha says there are many states. A queer conception of Reality!

I was reading a book by a modern physical scientist about electron and proton. He said: "The table I lean on can be seen in two aspects: as a table of wood, smooth and immobile -- but from the other aspect we can see it as a conglomeration of electrons and protons, always moving, scattering into the air, and about to disappear. The miniature solar system is existing under the elbow!"

Well, the Buddhist can agree to that. A table is in the state of a table and in the state of molecules or atoms, and can be called Reality in two different states. From the Buddhist standpoint, both can be called Reality. Also, both are states of phenomena. This is not reality by itself; it can be seen by the naked eye or through an apparatus.

The scientist's reality is in entirely different terms. According to the scientist Eddington and the philosopher Kant reality is undemonstrative -- cannot be apprehended by our five senses; we cannot prove it by debate or demonstrate it to the five senses! In Buddhism it is called "abstract reality."

The Buddha spoke about it many times, saying, "It is a notion, not a state of Reality. It is in terms, in your mind -- not in the state of Reality!" Without giving it a name, the Buddha would accept that state. Thus, it is not abstract Reality -- and what is concrete Reality, you can grasp with further study!

This "pure" is that state of Reality which has no element of thought in it -- absolute emptiness. From the abstract notion of Reality, you come into this pure state (amala).

To attain this state of Bhutathata, original being, you practice Buddhism. Many Buddhists renounce the world -- but this is not the main stream of Buddhism! Of course, to concentrate, you must disengage yourself from many activities -- but many Buddhists stay at home and attain Reality in their daily life!

These lay disciples of the Buddha's time are called "Bodhisattvas," which originally meant "enlightened gentleman." We have two ways of speaking of this state of Reality: Dharmadhatu and Dharmakaya -- place and nature of Reality

"... hence the body is pure." -- In Chinese, *"isshin"* -- one body. How this body can become Reality is a great problem! It is as if you asked Eddington, "You say that this is a conglomeration of electrons and protons -- then how can it be a table?" So why cannot this body be Reality? It is invisible and intangible but, nonetheless, it is concrete Reality! Perhaps you do not know what I am talking about? It is very difficult to give a commentary on this!

"Because the body is pure, all varieties of bodies are pure." -- Body of a monk, body of a beggar, body of a butcher -- all are pure. Pure and impure are the products of your own thoughts! It has nothing to do with the actual body.

"Because all varieties of bodies are pure, the innate capacity of sentient beings of manifold directions to awaken is pure." -- "To awake" in Japanese is "satori," in Chinese it is "wu", and in English we say "to be enlightened" or "to attain realization." In Sanskrit it is "sambhodi."

By your thinking about the state of Reality, it is as though far away -- outside of the universe -- but you must meditate! In meditation, without entertaining any notion in your mind, you will all of a sudden realize what it is! Whence does it come? If it were not there it could not be here. Your mind may slowly awaken to "that" -- or it may come at any moment!

I am not a Christian, but I have read that Christ in the Garden of Gesthesemane said to his disciples; "Can you not watch with me for one hour?" I heard this from Christian missionaries when I was young, and I have never forgotten it!

All sentient beings have this capacity to awake from their sleep; this nature belongs to all and it is undisturbable! You cannot destroy it -- as you cannot destroy a crystallization; the capacity to awake is undisturbable! This is the innate realm of all sentient beings, manifested in everything.

The little root of my ivy keeps its life a long time; it reaches to

the light and stretches its tendrils for ten-twenty feet, comes to the window and stretches its little hands to the sun. It manifests the nature to come from darkness to light. Buddha, the Awakened One, is there.

"O Obedient One! Because the world is pure, the various worlds are pure." -- The Kamadhatu, Rupadhatu and Arupadhatu -- all are pure. Of course there are many worlds in the Buddhist's mind -- invisible and semi-invisible worlds.

"Because the various worlds are pure, throughout the empty sphere of the sky and throughout the three existences, everything is pure and uniform and immobile." --The three existences means past, present, and future. From this pure state, you observe everything as having the same quality, the same nature. This is the Buddhist understanding of non-ego. We believe that all consciousness is uniform, but that it takes different appearances according to time, space, and circumstance. Like H₂O -- it is sometimes liquid, vapor, or solid. But water is always water. It is "uniform" and "immobile" -- you cannot destroy that nature!

"O Obedient One! The empty sphere is thus uniform and immobile; you must therefore know that the innate capacity to awaken is also uniform and immobile." -- The Buddhist sometimes confuses this state of emptiness with the mental state of emptiness. Return all things to the original emptiness!

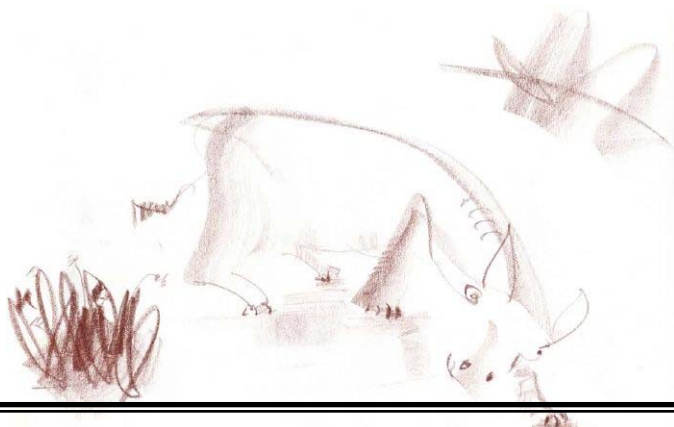
But now you return to your own mind -- all is attributed to the five senses and can be reduced to your conceptions. This mind will be reduced into unconsciousness and return to original consciousness; and this consciousness you will realize as an intermediate existence. It is like a mirror: if consciousness is wiped out, all reflection is wiped out. This Alaya consciousness is basic consciousness -- pure emptiness. It was first conceived by Nagarjuna, and emphasized by Nasubhandha.

So objective reality is uniform and immobile -- and therefore the innate capacity to awaken is also uniform and immobile. This is the basic doctrine of Bodhisattva Samantanetra -- to realize this phenomenal world from its base. The Buddha explains it here.

Editor's Note

The cover Dharuma was a stroke of pure inspiration by Sandy Hackney, a former resident of the Institute and a long time supporting member. I was practicing brush strokes in my room, 1968 or so, Sandy walked in, looked curiously at the well-inked papers scattered about my floor, grabbed my brush and swish! swish!... there was Dharuma back from the Tang Dynasty. Such a short but promising art career.

Neither cat nor dog...Am I in the right place?
While they still argue who is next
I'll scrounge around for tasty bits of Original Nature.
Sarely they had some...or was it Buddha Nature?
Hmmm....



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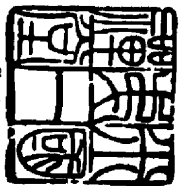
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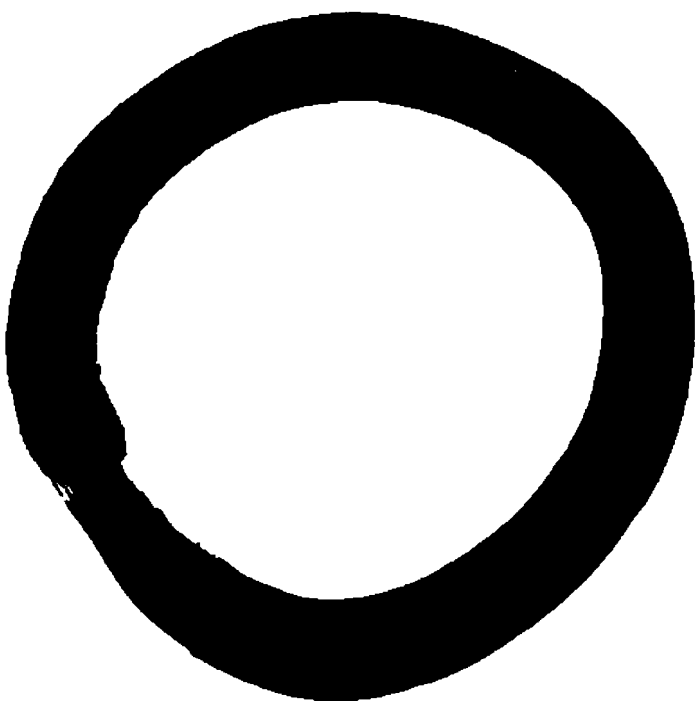
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Editor, usually anonymous artist, poet... Peeter Lamp

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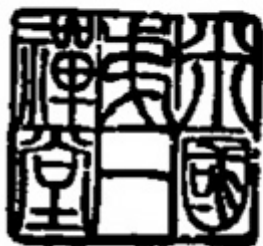
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