How the Swans Came to the Lake

A Narrative History of Buddhism in America

"A thorough, intelligent, and very valuable account."
—Peter Matthiessen

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THIRD EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

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In Los Angeles, by 1967 Maezumi-sensei's group had moved out of Zenshuji and rented a house on Serrano Street in the Wilshire district. For a time there was talk of their joining with Suzuki-roshi's group, but in the end they remained independent, and in 1968 they incorporated as the Los Angeles Zendo (now Zen Center of Los Angeles). Yasutani-roshi also began to hold sesshins at the Los Angeles Zendo, the first being held in 1967. Shortly after a visit from Maezumi-sensei's brother, Kuroda-sensei, the Los Angeles Zendo was registered as a Soto temple and sodo with the name Busshinji—"Buddha Truth." During 1970 Maezumi-sensei made two extended trips to Japan in order to continue his training with Yasutani-roshi. Maezumi-sensei received inka from Yasutani-roshi at the end of the second extended visit.

Meanwhile, another Zen master, Joshu Sasaki-roshi, had arrived in Los Angeles. All these men—with the exception of the peripatetic

Nakagawa Soen-roshi and Hakuun Yasutani-roshi—had one thing in common: they had all come to stay.

When Joshu Sasaki-roshi had left Japan, in fact, he had undergone the traditional ceremonies of permanent departure—like Senzaki he said that he was going to bury his bones in America. He had been a monk of a Rinzai Zen temple of the Yoshenji line, and then the resident monk of a small mountain temple, Shoju-an in Nagano prefecture. He arrived in Los Angeles in June of 1962, apparently because two people, a Dr. Harmon and Gladys Weisberg, had asked for a Zen teacher.

Joshu Sasaki-roshi was then—and still is—a short, round man with a pugnacious nature and a full belly-deep laugh. He arrived in Los Angeles with a Bible in one sleeve of his robe and an English dictionary in the other. He must have looked at the Bible because he has been especially active in teaching zazen at Catholic monasteries, but he soon decided that he was too old—or busy—to do much about learning English, and he still, eighteen years later, delivers his teisho in Japanese—a Japanese that is, according to his present translator, Shinzen Young, immensely difficult to translate. As Sasaki-roshi said, "If you want to explain enlightenment, you have to make up a new language." Writes Young,

> A perfect knowledge of Japanese and a thorough familiarity with the Sanskrit and Sino-Japanese Buddhist technical vocabulary are necessary but not sufficient requisites for translating Sasaki-roshi, for he has created his own 'idiolect,' a unique personal language. . . . One must always be aware that he employs both everyday words and Buddhist technical terms entirely idiosyncratically. For him words become synonyms with bewildering ease. . . . To appreciate this mode of expression one must be able to break former associations to words and listen many times without struggling to make it make sense.

Sasaki-roshi first lived in a tiny one bedroom frame house in the Los Angeles suburb of Gardenia. The garage served as zendo and the bedroom as sanzen room. The roshi himself slept on a mattress in the living room. With no experienced students to help, he had to run the whole show himself. He was jikijitsu during zazen, roshi during sanzen, and, often, *tenzo* (cook) in-between. As more people came out to Gardenia, he ran into a peculiarly American problem: the neighbors complained that the streets were blocked by cars and they had no place to park. For a while, meetings rotated between various students' homes, until 1966 when the roshi established Cimarron Zen Center in the mission-style compound of a Los Angeles former estate.

Sasaki-roshi used traditional koans in an untraditional way—or to be more precise, he transformed traditional koans into the American idiom, "How do you realize Buddha nature while driving a car?" for example. He used an interpreter in teisho, but not in sanzen, where his limited but direct English served its purpose. His Zen was active. He translated shunyata, emptiness, as zero, but he did not stop there. As he said when he first arrived in Los Angeles, "It was the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, who discovered that Zero exists through the *activity of Zero*. This Zero-activity is also called the activity of emptiness."

When he first came to America he saw the country as "ripe for spiritual revolution, since the young were not prisoners of tradition." But he also worried that many of the students who came to him were "social failures," and that though they were bigger than the Japanese "their navels are much more diminished." Certainly none of them laughed as he did, and he recommended standing up and laughing out loud, from the belly, first thing in the morning, and once, when he was asked why he came to America he replied, "I let other people do the teaching. I came to have a good time. I want Americans to learn how to truly laugh."

To a certain extent, the Zen Buddhists of the sixties presented a united front. But just beneath the smooth surface, none of it ever becoming public, there were stirrings of scandal, disagreements, rivalries, hints of incompetence. This man, fresh from the monastery and used to the conventional morality of Japan, had been swept off his feet by the freedom of American women, and had slept with one or more of his students. Someone else was not really qualified to teach. This one knew nothing of koans, that one nothing of shikantaza. Lurking in the background were centuries-old traditions of sectarian rivalry between the Soto and Rinzai schools in Japan, a rivalry that most of the men who came to America had very little patience for, but which seemed, nonetheless, to have a strong influence on how they thought. A major controversy was the running skirmish between those who emphasized going straight for kensho and those who stressed that "practice and enlightenment were one."

Most of this was rather unsettling for American students to discover.

Of course, Buddhism had always been rather argumentative within itself. "Dharma combat" was a tradition in Zen especially; one which, it was fair to say, kept the teaching alive and everybody on their toes. Still,

not everything said was on the level of the battles recounted in the old koan collections, and it was sometimes shocking for wide-eyed Americans to discover that the man with whom their friend was training was thought by their teacher to be, say, "a Zen teacher passing around a bar of iron claiming it is gold." American students had been universally praised for being open, fresh, without preconceptions. That much was agreed. But what was not said in public, but must often have been said in private, was that these same wonderful innocents were also perhaps rather too naive about the whole business. Buddhism has no central licensing agency, no pope, no board of elders. Each school had its own system, but even so, "permission to teach" could mean many things, and one man's enlightened master was another man's fool, or worse yet, charlatan.

And yet, shocking or disillusioning as it may have been, it made for a certain liveliness. Once, when Joshu Sasaki-roshi, a pure Rinzai man, gave a public talk at the University of California in Berkeley, he was asked in the question period if there were anywhere in the Bay area where one could study Zen. The roshi said no, not as far as he knew, and invited the questioner to visit him at the Cimmaron Zen Center down in Los Angeles. There was a surprised, audible reaction from the audience, many of whom were students and friends of Suzuki-roshi's San Francisco Zen Center, which by then had more than one branch in the Bay area, and Sasaki's translator, a Japanese-American doctor, hastened to add, "The roshi means that there is nowhere else where one can study his particular line of Zen," which was true enough. But it certainly appeared—to some at least—that the roshi had rather enjoyed the stir his blunt answer had caused.