

Translator's friend  
George Stanisci  
Translator  
James Yamamoto

In this interview D. is David Chadwick, B. is Halpern, and A. is Roshi's answer told by the translator.

Between  
Dec 15  
and  
Dec 20  
1969  
+  
Jan 2  
1970

B. Why did you come to America?

A. Doctor Harmon desired to study Zen so he wrote a letter to Myo shin-ji Temple in Kyoto and Myo shin-ji Temple in Kyoto appointed Roshi to come here.

B. When was that?

A. 1962. The letter came in 1961. Up until that time I had no dreams whatever of coming to the United States and further more the temple which I belonged to was so poor that they couldn't entertain any such ideas. However, Myo shin-ji said that I would be very useful in the United States so suggested I come here. Myo shin-ji is the head temple of my group, the Rinzai sect. We consider it the highest and the head of the Rinzai group. Among others under Myo shin-ji is Ryutakuji, famous Ryutakuji Temple.

D. Could Roshi describe the development of your Zen group, how it started and how it's come to this building?

A. It's been seven years and six months up till now so it would be considered quite a long history. Can you sit for one hour to practice the equivalent of seven and a half years of Zen sitting? It would be about as simple as that. After being asked to come to the United States, I thought the thing over for six months, particularly not knowing any English. Finally I did arrive in the United States in July of 1962. In my left sleeve I carried a Japanese-English dictionary while in my right sleeve I carried an English-Japanese dictionary. I studied as

much as possible while in Japan. I gained three hours in my life because I left Tokyo at nine o'clock that morning and arrived here that same day at six o'clock in the evening. Upon my arrival I was greeted by Doctor Harmon and Mrs. Gladys Wisebart, my two sponsors and three other people. Coming into a strange land, I was assured by the presence of these people. However, as much as I tried, I couldn't bring about to say "How do you do?" I lost my courage since I realized Americans speak such excellent English compared to my limited knowledge. I had some doubts upon arrival. My reluctance to put much effort into learning English might be similar to the American people in their reluctancy and hesitancy to learn Zen. Too late to turn back, I thought: "Well, I'll do what I can while here in America. Perhaps I can become friends with a few of them. I settled in a small cottage which had been previously rented by my sponsors in Gardena. First I was very much perplexed as to where..on simple things such as where to post my mail to Japan. First two years, my sponsor, Doctor Harmon, daily visited me to answer some of my questions and help me. I am very grateful, therefore, to Doctor Harmon, who has assumed so much responsibility. Even the fact you are able to be here and ask me questions was a credit due to my sponsor.

On November 17th of the same year, I developed some pain in my stomach. Up to that time, I taught only required posture and practice of zazen. Due to my sudden illness and that I had only stressed sitting, I seemed to have lost many adherents. Therefore on December of that year I began not only the practice of zazen but I also started sanzen.

With my little English, for the next year and an half, I did what little is possible to convey my ideas, but I believe that this was very much limited. If my memory serves me, of those whom I still see today that came at that early period are Doctor Harmon, George Dunichin, and Ron Olsen. Later on, others came, such as Steve Sanford... Steve Sanhill. Without advertising or any effort towards getting people, in about three years many, many new people..different people came to the Zen and Zen practice. About that time, a complaint was raised by one of the neighbors to the effect that it is bad for the neighborhood to have a Zen Center there. Their reason was that the automobile traffic had increased so much that it threatened the children living in the neighborhood. Also, they didn't quite go for the hippy-like appearance of some of the people. So I tried to alleviate this complaint by asking the members to park elsewhere. However, I couldn't out-of-hand reject a hippy-like appearance of some of the members since Zen is an institution which welcomes every one.

In a short time the complaint was taken to City Hall and a city attorney issued an order to cease and desist. For awhile the city did not immediately press the order, however, later on, perhaps due to the pressure by the complaining neighborhood..neighbor, we had to transfer the Zen practice center to another location which was a place owned by the city. It was a community center of Gardena. And later on, Doctor Harmon gave us the use of the medical center which he owned which served our purpose for over a year. For the next year and a half, on Sundays we would have our meetings in a memorial park, and on weekdays, due to the kindness

of Doctor Harmon, my sponser, we held meetings in his clinic's vacant offices. One thing led to another and the tenants of this clinic building began to voice complaints because they would hear chants and sounds of bell. After hearing the third complaints from the tenants, he decided we must find a place where we could be more or less permanently situated, and in the first part of 1968 we moved over to our present location here on Cimeron Street.

Returning a bit back to my 1962 period, the Zen group started as an association. And I thought it appropriate to name our location the Zen Center of the United States. I believe up to that time noone has used such a name or place.

D. What year was that? (1962, answer.)

D. We started in '60.

B. But not Zen Center of the United States...Zen Center San Francisco.

A. When we moved to our present location, we assumed the name of Rinzaiji Incorporation..Incorporated, and we just named this the Cimeron Zen Center of Rinzaiji.

Since our arrival here, we have been relatively free of complaints and other problems. Neither did I hear anyone objecting to my being in the United States. Please accept my statements.

B. May we ask some questions now? What general plans do you have for the future of Cimeron Zen Center?

A. ~~I~~ have no plans whatever. Just people come here and practice zazen. If a situation arises where we have too many people here, I will confront those problems at that time. Since Zen is no

business venture for me, my interest is solely in teaching Zen, not building temples or neither have I desire to enlarge. Even a center as large as this is not necessary. It is only because of increased students that a larger place is necessary.

B. Now that there is an increase in students, would you like an assistant priest or helper coming from Myoshinji or from Japan?

A. Not at the moment. Even if one were to arrive from Japan, it would take such a long time for that help to be of much use to me. It seems to me it would be better to pick somebody locally. If someone desires to come here from Japan to learn Zen, that's a different matter. Neither am I thinking about any successors from Japan.

D. I understand, from Justin Stone, that one of Roshi's students is opening up a temple as a teacher. Or is it that Roshi will be the teacher of that temple and this man will more or less just run it? I don't know if this is true. I'd like to know about that.

A. Yes. I have plans to allow one of my students to open his own Zen branch. (As a teacher?) Yes, he will be trained as a teacher.

D. Will he give sanzen?

A. Sanzen can only be performed by a Roshi, Zen Master. The Zen confrontation can only be done by a Roshi, not a Zen teacher.

D. Does Roshi have successors in Japan who continue teaching there?

A. None at his country temple, Shozu-an.

D. What sort of practice is there here? Do all students take koans? Is it necessary to take a koan?

A. There seems to be two types of students and I treat them in the appropriate manner: those who are interested merely in the historical Zen and the Zen methods, and the others who actually are interested in Zen training and practice. The latter I will give koans, and they of course must confront me in sanzen. Did you understand that? Those who are merely interested in listening to lecture and reciting the Sutras can be compared to certain Indian practices. So the true Zen practice includes, of necessity, sanzen and the koan. So if you will merely listen to my talk and chant the Sutra, no matter how much you keep that up it will not foster the true Zen practice. You must confront the Rōshi in sanzen with your koan. That is why I often hesitate and do dislike somewhat this academic and the "Zen curiosity." I wouldn't say these things to you if you were merely a newspaper journalist, therefore I wish to ask you if you are just academicians and journalists or are you students? You might be dead in one hour so I wish a correct answer from you.

B. We came here because there is a Buddha here.  
 A. I am not a Buddha. You must know historically the Basso Zen...Basso was a student of the Sixth Patriarch. This priest was asked, "What is a Buddha?" Basso's answer was: "Not mind; not Buddha." I don't like people who are looking for Buddha here. You are hooked onto Buddha and you must be free from even such ideas. You have been entangled in that word, 'Buddha'. You will be no more than a 'believing' Zen student. You must be free to accept or throw away Buddha. That is the only true Zen student. Maitreya Buddha often declared: "I am a servant of man." Now, who is this servant? The attitude should be that you will neither affirm nor deny Buddha or God, free from any such notions.

This is quite difficult in the United States. People in the United States need a symbol such as a God-savior or a Buddha. Likewise it appears that you people came here seeking Buddha, like you were a Christian seeking God. That is one of the reasons why my Zen appears severe to others and it might be fifty years before it will take any roots here. Generally speaking it is very difficult at this time for the American students to grasp this idea. It seems to me, presently and historically, about all I can expect is the Zen doctrine or theory to be accepted and for some to believe in it. And along side of that, the meditation seems to progress only about as far. But I suppose that's about all one can expect. One thing I learned very well in America is the difficulty of the American people to go very much farther than just what I have just described. Therefore this year I look forward perhaps feebly; there might arise out of my effort a truly enlightened Zen teacher. As long as you depend on someone from Japan, your Zen will remain weak. (I think that's about enough, isn't it?) *translator's comment*

D. What is your name please?

Translator: Yamamoto, Jim. *did 99% of the translating*  
 (another translator:)  
 George Stamicchi. Any more questions?

B. Yes. You want to continue the Japanese form of separation between priests and laymen?

A. Instead of naming this a Zen temple to carry on the Japanese separation of priests and laymen, I have purposely named it Zen Center, thereby having no difference between priests and laymen, men or women. So it is with that attitude that I named it Zen Center of the United States. To allow even cats and dogs to come here and practice Zen, I named it Zen Center rather than Zen Temple,

with its attending hierarchy. So I welcome all, particularly hippies. However, the time just may come when the temple system may be required in America, at which time I will again confront that problem. I will not transplant the Japanese Zen hierarchy in the United States, however I will always include many of the practices and disciplines which I think are very appropriate over here.

D. Such as....?

A. You will know that immediately if you come here during the one week sesshin.

D. Roshi, would you like some of your students to go to Japan to study?

A. Other than to go to Japan to <sup>learn</sup> physically and historically the Japanese Zen methods, I see no necessity for anyone going to Japan. Since World War II, some of the Zen practices in the temples in Japan have deteriorated, therefore, if only the desire is to study the methods and academically observe the situation, it might be all right. However, it would be suggested good if after a thorough grounding of Zen practice here, one were to go to Japan to observe the practice as its done over there. This I think might be a good idea. Not being thoroughly grounded in Zen, to go to Japan would only bewilder the average person.

D. I have only one question left here that I wrote down, and that is a certain curiosity about why Roshi is going to New York; what is there in Vancouver; what does he have outside of the Cimeron Zen Center here?

A. Roshi has been asked to go to these places by people who are in Vancouver and New York. And also he would like to study the possibility of Zen leaders in the United States. Roshi does



not<sup>want</sup> to be limited to Los Angeles only. People in California seem to have moss growing on their heads. They might become angry at me for making such a statement.

D. What happened to Doctor Harmon? Is he dead?  
Translator: He was here an half hour before you people came.

B. Do you want to stay in Los Angeles?

A. A Zen master never thinks about such things. I might be dead in a few hours. If, however, you people will put up a temple for me and invite me, I will certainly go there.

D. If he is dead in a few hours, what happens to Cimeron Zen?

A. Such things don't concern me one bit. Some things have been taken care of just in case of such emergencies. I suppose the students here will ask for another Roshi.

*Another person says:* I am eagerly awaiting the day for a Roshi to arise out of the American people.

B. Can you do anything besides await that? What are you doing now besides waiting for the American Roshi?

A. Teaching zazen. I am twenty-four hours thinking HOW to make people become enlightened Zen students, whether by pulling their noses, hitting them, pushing them. I have just combed my brain trying to find ways and means to produce such students.

D. Are there any particular difficulties which American students have that he did not mention earlier when he was talking about attachment to Buddha or a God figure?

A. The Western mind is well developed in gathering data and logically using the mind to manipulate the data, which amounts to a split between subject and object. Thus, you have wonders in the field of science. You can easily see the birth of psychology and philosophy in the Western mind. That type of

mental activity places an objective and a goal immediately. However Zen has no object or goal. Even a koan is not an object, not a problem. So it is known as a koan. Some think that a koan is a problem, even some Zen leaders. Thus when I say God or Buddha is formless, colorless and soundless, it cannot be made into any kind of problem. Something that cannot be made a problem is made into a problem for the sake of manifesting yourself. That is the Zen practice. Without even this basic understanding, Zen seems to have spread in the United States, everybody popularizing Zen. Different from other disciplines and religious thinking, Zen is something in action. Without activity, there is no Zen. In Zen there is ideas as well as philosophy and psychology; however, uppermost and the most important is the activity and the practice of Zen. Thus when I say you are one with God, never separated from God...that falls into a category somewhat of psychological and philosophical consideration. This also falls into the study category of the Buddhist system. So if you are one with God, how do you realize that through the practice of Zen? Simply stated, just to listen to a pleasant talk or habitually sounded Zen Mogukyo... that is not the practice and activity of Zen. To be totally and completely free of the problems of life and death, and to manifest yourself in your true nature...just to obtain well-being, euphoria.. you can obtain that by going to a good entertaining program or studying Shinsu, which is modern Buddhism, or studying some Indian practice. Zen is not limited to that only. The Shinsu, here is stressing believing in a satori experience, just as Zen stresses this fact, and is somewhat different from the Christian belief and worship. This you

must be very careful with in making a differentiation between the two beliefs.

D. What about Sutra study? Does Roshi feel this is important?

A. Zen must include all, among them the Sutra reading and the Sutra studying in order to fulfill the completeness of it all. It is not limited. It does not leave a thing out or stress something one-sidedly.

D. Is a little bit of journalism okay?

A. You must include that, but you must arrive at the point where you must confront yourself and realize the necessity for what he has been talking all evening. At that point, your chanting the Sutra will merely affirm the fact that you know you are manifesting yourself. Then the chanting the Sutra takes on a far different meaning.

D. Has there been any effort here to put Sutras into English or is there intention to do this?

A. Since it has no meaning whatever, it is not necessary to make it in any specific language. To want to read any of the meanings or to want to translate any of the Sutras means that you're quite not understanding the means for manifesting yourself. To chant the Sutra out loud with no meaning whatever is the good practice. It is good Zen practice to imitate the sounds of animals in a loud voice.

Another translator: He was saying that it would be better to do that than to chant the Sutras without having any belief.

A. Its better not to think that one <sup>must</sup> understand what one reads. As you chant: Kan ji zai bo without the meaning that is good. Chanting the Sutra must create the belief that one is manifesting oneself. The standpoint of Zen is that I am manifesting myself through chanting of the Sutra. While not

fully understanding, adhere faithfully to whatever one is doing no matter what you are doing whether cooking a meal or other chores, to realize one is manifesting oneself in these activities as well as when one is chanting the Sutras. While it is very important to manifest oneself, still one must go out into the secular world to earn a living. Then the much more full type of Zen practice begins. One recognizes that one is related to and a part of the social human being. Some of the difficulty of Zen practice in the doctrine is that one is apt to become isolated from the world of social responsibility. Here one must manifest oneself in affirmation of the relatedness between oneself and the world of social beings. There might be some points in Zen which appear to contradict some of the laws and practices of the social world. However a fuller understanding of the Zen tenets will make one realize that there is no disharmony between Zen ideas and the social world externally. Since the self does not exist, in whatever situations and environment you find yourself in you can harmoniously work with it. The Zen student should also be able to realize the need for some changes in the social structure and to creatively bring that about. Instead of going off into an isolated mountain hide-out or refuge, a Zen student must go out into society combing over the people, to point out if there are any errors in that society. I myself think that the hippy movement has its good points. In many respects I agree with the hippy ideas, since perhaps there are some practices and habits within the American society that need adjusting. Opposition just for the sake of opposition I do not think is a good thing. To point out the

defects in a society without becoming obstinately opposite for sake of opposition, I think should be the goal of these hippies. (So, I guess that just about answers all your questions?)

B. We do have some more. Do you think that Zen practice in America can be improved or helped if students go study with other teachers in America?

A. That depends on the student and also it depends on what you mean by "would it help" the students. Sometimes the students going to other teachers will realize many, many things and very often return here. Sometimes people without understanding, by listening to a teacher who is likewise without understanding, come to the realization that both lack understanding and therefore....such as a middle-school student will not be able to understand philosophy or psychology. Until one becomes quite grounded and has grasped the basic Zen situation, one may be perplexed and confused by this conflict in wandering.

If you have a little high-class scotch, twelve years old, it will give me renewed strength.

I am very appreciative of Tassajara and the San Francisco effort towards helping the American people, and impressed.

At this point the translator asks them to ask more personal questions of the Roshi, because he doesn't like the journalistic and historical ones.

B. Roshi, in coming here from Tassajara to ask you about your teaching, do you think our attitude should be like in sanzen with you?

A. It doesn't make that much difference to me. I don't know you well enough. You might not be Zen students. On the other hand you might be talking to me as in sanzen confrontation. How

This is a very interesting question. It is a question of whether or not we should have a Zen practice in America. I think the answer is yes, but it must be a practice that is based on the Zen tradition. It must be a practice that is based on the Zen tradition. It must be a practice that is based on the Zen tradition.

do you feel about these things?

B. This is sanzen.

A. That's your opinion? That's very good. I am very gentle with people who don't quite understand it all, but if I feel that you're at a point where you could stand a little confrontation, I may hit you with a stick. I am more gentle with people who come without knowledge and don't profess to be authorities. And if they do have a little more advanced stage that they might show in their speech and all their attitudes, then I'll be more harsh with them.

D. Tell him he can be harsh with us even though we don't understand Zen.

A. Tonight I wish to not hurt my hands. If I think you need to be struck I will strike you even if my hand becomes painful. If I thought that with a few bold strokes it would advance you into a real good Zen student I wouldn't hesitate. One student grabbed my nose like this, but he never showed up again! Oh, Roshi twisted the student's nose.

D. Aren't you sleepy, Roshi?

A. I am in sleep all this time. Don't worry about any tiredness in me; talking to you people I can, in an half drowsy mood, carry on with you.

B. Do you want to develop here at Cimeron Zen Center a more monastic practice, or develop somewhat a monastic situation? I mean twenty-four hour practice under monastic rules, restricted?

A. This is a Zen Center and everyone is welcome... laymen. It can't be considered a monastic situation. Only during the one-week sesshin do we observe somewhat a rigid discipline. We just finished the 21st to the 28th of December, five sansasen per day, one teisho. Each day has been an eleven hour effort on my part so the Zen student had to sit zazen an even longer period.

In addition to that there are three meals and tea. We neither shave nor have bath.

D. If a student comes here wishing to study, is there any housing near here or communal living or does he have to find an apartment and come to zazen? What sort of provisions are there? What sort of variety of opportunity for working and non-working people?

A. Since its a Zen Center, only the residing monks stay here and have their meals here. There are only six here who act as caretakers, serious students training to become Zen priests. Other than that we have no co-op houses. I have turned down many students who came here wanting to study Zen and live on the grounds here or a near-by co-op house, but no such arrangements are made, mainly because of the lack of funds. And noone has yet started a communal living group on his own.

D. Can people sit in chairs?

A. Beginners and very aged persons can but others sit in half-lotus or full-lotus and they are discouraged from moving .

B. Do you encourage the students in any other outside practices concerning their work or what to eat, or do you limit your teaching to senzen and vital issues of practice?

A. All my effort is for correct zazen practice. I am only interested in teaching Zen and bettering Zen practice. This morning one student came here after having a fight with his spouse asking for advice. And I suggested to continue to fight until you reach a resolution.

D. The diet is vegetarian, isn't it?

A. During sesshin it is, but a normal evening we have pork, chicken. I am only responsible for the spiritual training, and for the other technical details, that is up to Jiki-jitsu and Shoji and Roshi will agree. Since the Roshi is a little bit insolated from the outside world, he cannot