

WIND BELL

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THE FIRST ANNUAL SOTO ZEN CONFERENCE

Soto Zen Buddhism is both a new and old religion in America. It is part of traditional Japanese culture, most of its scriptures or teachings are written in Japanese, and most of the Soto priests and masters speak only Japanese. These aspects are balanced by the facts that Soto Zen Buddhism is a very forward-looking religion, hoping to propagate its beliefs in America; most of its members are first or second generation Japanese who are trying to preserve aspects of their Japanese culture while at the same time participating fully in American life; there are a number of excellent priests and two masters in America, some of whom speak English; and the religion is attracting a sizable number of Caucasians who are interested in practicing meditation.

The problems which stem from this situation of being a relatively young religion in the West and at the same time an ancient and integral religious tradition of the Orient were at the center of the discussions by both the Japanese and Caucasian groups at the First Annual Conference of Soto Zen Buddhists in America held at Asilomar Conference Center, Monterey Peninsula, June 6 and 7.

Because the majority of the members are Japanese and the sessions are conducted in that language, the solely English speaking members formed a second group for discussion in English. A brief summary of the meetings follows.

- I. At the Ministers' Meeting the following were recommended:
 - A. To teach and emphasize to all Soto Zen Buddhists that their religion is based upon the practice of Zazen (meditation), a spiritual technique practiced by Buddha and the Patriarchs. A period of meditation at the beginning of all ceremonies and rituals is recommended.
 - B. To sponsor the training of a member from the second generation Japanese for the priesthood. This student should have a good command of English.
 - C. To expand and develop the religious education of the children, both Japanese and Caucasian. The instruction should be based primarily on the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha. In order to do this the teaching staff should consist of at least one English speaking instructor. It is recommended that sincere lay-Buddhists assist the teacher of Sunday School or Young Buddhist Association



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(YBA), and that there should be a seminar or study period for the teachers at least once a year.

D. Each minister should have at least a one-week vacation once a year. This period would be used for a retreat.

II. At the Men's Meeting the following were recommended:

The annual conference of Soto Zen Buddhists should be called "The Conference of the Adherents." Next year's conference (1965) will be held in Los Angeles. Some of the merits of the other Buddhist sects should be incorporated in Soto Zen teaching. Gassho (bowing) and meditation should precede each ritual. Chanting or speaking the name of Buddha should have greater significance. Buddhism should be practised and lived so that the younger generation will be encouraged to follow the religion and in some cases to train for the priesthood.

III. At the Women's Meeting nearly the same points as above were emphasized. YBA members should be encouraged to participate in each Annual Conference. The religious education of the children should be in every way encouraged. A slogan is needed to emphasize the importance of Zazen like "Zazen a little while each day" and "Let's stop for a short period each day to observe the need for tranquil mind."

IV. The English Speaking Meeting discussed a number of topics:

One of the most important was the problems posed by the language barrier. Two mutually complementing aspects of the language problem were brought out in the discussion; one side is that the difference in language is a barrier between the Caucasians and --the Japanese congregation-- most of the Japanese priests--and almost all of the written teachings, the most important being Shobogenzo by Dogen Zengi; while the other side is that the language difference is an opportunity for cultural enrichment, and a deeper understanding of Buddhism itself because of the direct confrontation of American attitudes with Japanese Buddhist culture. Although the San Francisco Zen Center members felt that the relationships between the Japanese congregation and Zen Center were very good, everyone felt that they could be better. One of the things said was that the grouping into racial and language groups emphasized and tended toward a self-perpetuation of the differences. It was generally felt that probably almost all the Japanese congregation understood English well enough so that the sessions could be conducted in English; but it was also thought natural for the Japanese people to want to have services, lectures, and meetings in Japanese because it is not only their family and traditional language, it is also the language of Japanese Buddhism.

To help improve the problems relating to the differences in language, it was suggested that Zen Center members as individuals should make greater efforts to learn Japanese and, of course, to continue to extend their good relationships with the Japanese members; and that Zen Center as an organization should make greater efforts to see that its organizational relationships to the other groups within the Soto Buddhist Church in America are reasonable and equitable. No one felt that the solution to the problems posed by language were easy or soon to be solved, but everyone felt that a great deal of progress had been made to date and that progress would continue.

The following are some of the main ideas, sentiments, and suggestions expressed during the discussions. It would be useful if Buddhism were strong enough in America to help all those people it can. The meditation groups should work toward making Buddhism strong enough to do this by continuing their cooperative participation with the Japanese congregations; by thinking constructively about ways to help the Church in Japan to help us, for example: how can we encourage the establishment of adequate training centers in America, how can we help to see that more priests learn English--could we possibly help pay to educate a priest (at some time in the future); and by developing within ourselves a better understanding of and deeper feeling for reality.

A booklet should be prepared for new members and meditation groups which explains ritual and practice at Zen Center as well as advice about personal behavior and habits. Next year it is hoped that the participants in the Conference who speak only English will be able to play a more active and official role in the Conference. Next year it would be very nice to be able to hold a week sesshin at some location on the coast which would have some of the aspects of a retreat from the city and which would be accessible to Los Angeles, Monterey, and San Francisco.

A great gratitude was expressed for the benefit we share by having as our teachers Reverend Suzuki, Roshi, and Reverend Katagiri. The benefit we obtain from this is immeasurable and the advantage we have because both teachers speak English gives us an obligation to develop and make strong Zen Center and our meditation.

V. Resolutions from All Meetings were:

A. The annual conference of Soto Zen Buddhists should be called "The Conference of the Adherents."

B. A second-generation Japanese member should be sponsored for the priesthood.

C. Each minister should be granted one week each year for a retreat.

D. Zen Center should be helped and encouraged to hold an annual one-week sesshin for all who desire to participate.

The priests at the Conference were Bishop Reirin Yamada, Reverends Shunryu Suzuki, Kenko Yamashita, Dainen Katagiri, Koshi Kowahara, and Dojyun Oki. 3

There were approximately 90 Japanese members from Los Angeles, Monterey, San Francisco, and other parts of California and the country. There were about 20 members from the meditating groups in Monterey and San Francisco as well as a few other interested persons attending.

Although this description of the Conference does not catch all the details of the Conference and certainly does not report all the aspects of the Conference discussions just as they occurred, I hope that it serves to give readers an idea of the scope and general areas of concern of the Conference. The report of the Japanese meetings was largely written by Reverend Katagiri. The notes on the English speaking meetings were taken by Pat Herreshoff.