



*Zen Center's
original home,
Sokoji Temple,
on Bush Street.*

Sokoji, and the Other Half of Our Practice

by Ananda Dalenberg

I often think of the early beginnings of Zen Center at Sokoji Soto Zen Temple in San Francisco. Sokoji was very important to us in those early days, and I think it remains symbolically important for us even today. In fact, the role of Sokoji in the development of Zen Center has become a kind of koan for me.

In those days Zen Center occupied only a corner of Sokoji. It was, however, adequate for our size, and we felt quite at home in sharing space with the Japanese-American congregation there. We also shared in having the same teacher, Abbot Shunryu Suzuki, who was the head of both Sokoji and Zen Center. There was then some inner sense of unity between the two groups.

As Zen Center grew, our differences became greater, and the two groups separated. The reasons were various, but I would say it was mostly because of a difference of views in regard to practice. At Zen Center we were very enthusiastic about zazen, and it was very difficult for us to conceive of real zen practice as being anything else.

The Japanese-American congregation at Sokoji, on the other hand, seemed to share almost none of our enthusiasm for zazen. They instead emphasized religious ceremonies and temple social life. Nor were they unique in this respect, since their practice was actually representative of the average Soto temple in Japan.

Sokoji practice was then quite different from our own. In general we didn't really understand what it was all about, nor did we really appreciate it.

Nevertheless, there seemed to be good reason to believe that the Sokoji side of practice represented at least half of actual Soto Zen. What that other half was all about became quite a koan for me.

My koan was greatly reinforced because our teacher, Abbot Shunryu Suzuki, obviously felt some really fundamental concern not only for zazen, but also for the Sokoji side of practice. Very important to him too was his home temple in Japan, where again there was little zazen. At least half of his life was devoted to a practice of which most of us had little appreciation or understanding. For such reasons, I felt that I understood only some of the zazen half of his teaching.

In struggling with my koan, I kept on expecting some revolutionary insight appropriate for the New Age generation. After quite a few years, I have come up with a not at all revolutionary answer. In fact it is so simple, I can't help wondering if maybe I am very slow in understanding what was very obvious to almost everyone else from the very beginning.

What then is the other half of our practice? The Bodhisattva Way, just as simple as that. At root that is what Sokoji is all about. I'd even go so far as to say that is what most of Soto Zen in Japan is all about.

The answer to a koan is of course a very individual thing. My answer is only one among many, and it may not be very meaningful to anyone else.

It is no doubt true that Soto Zen temple practice in Japan is mostly a matter of religious ceremonies and such. But what is the one great fundamental ceremony that gives a depth and context for everything else? Obviously it is the great ceremony of Jukai, initiating one into the Bodhisattva Way by receiving the sixteen Bodhisattva precepts. Also Jukai is something meant not just for a few, but for everyone, including both lay person and priest.

All this should be quite obvious. Perhaps I was so slow in seeing it because of my own pride and arrogance in regard to our practice — a common affliction of all too many of us. Some of us were even so proud as to dream of re-awakening Japan to the true spirit of Zen, which of course was our kind of zazen. We also thought that our teacher should at least be called "Roshi", if not some title considerably greater. Actually however he preferred being addressed by the much more modest term "Sensei". Occasionally he would be asked if he were enlightened, and he would reply that he was not. That too did not fit in at all with our own grand notions about ourselves. The practice at Sokoji, on the other hand, was very modest and not at all pretentious.

Over the years I have come to appreciate more and more the depth of such modesty. Certainly, Zen these days would benefit from a very large dose of it.

One might at first think that the teaching Suzuki-sensei gave us emphasized zazen

so much that everything else became secondary. But that would be to forget that he also gave us the Bodhisattva Way in the form of the great ceremony, Jukai, and the sixteen Bodhisattva precepts. With both zazen and the Bodhisattva Way, I feel I really begin to understand something of his life and practice.

Apart from my koan, or any koan, it is obvious that the Bodhisattva Way is fundamental in Buddhism. The Bodhisattva precepts of course do not appear as some exciting New Age invention, but are rather as old as Buddhism, and are, perhaps in some sense even older. Such things as helping others, and refraining from falsehood, avarice, hatefulness, and self-pride may not be very fashionable these days, but in Buddhism they are obviously fundamental.

In taking on my koan, I was not at all prepared to end up with sixteen koans instead of one, but this seems to be the case. Each precept is in itself said to be not only an endless practice, but also a deep and profound koan. Take the precept "Not to kill" for example. What does it mean in a world where "all sentient beings" also includes animals and plant life, and life exists by consuming other forms of life? What does it mean in terms of war and pacifism, and the defense of innocent peoples from slavery and aggression? And if our planet Earth is a great living being, how does that apply?

The Bodhisattva precepts are deep enough to fill a lifetime of practice, or rather, many lifetimes. I would also say they are so deep they include the true spirit of zazen.

When the two sides of practice are included within each other, I think my koan will mostly come to an end.



A conference on Zen Buddhism in North America was held on June 14-19, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Teachers, scholars and practitioners from diverse backgrounds met with each other, traded experiences and discussed common problems. May the Dharma flourish!