

DANA FRASER

Dana Fraser is an American who has been studying Zen in Japan for the past eight years. In addition to his personal study there he is working on completing the translations started by Ruth Fuller Sasaki before her death in 1967. He came to the United States for a visit in the fall of 1969, spending some time at Tassajara and at the San Francisco Zen Center before he returned to Japan in January. The following is his account of life at Shokokuji where he is still practicing.

## RINZAI ZEN TRAINING AT SHŌKOKUJI

by Dana Fraser

Perhaps a description of the roles of the Zen monk, and that of the part- and full-time lay practitioners of Zen at the contemporary Rinzai Zen *sōdō* (monastery) of Shōkokuji in Kyoto, Japan, will interest you. I have spent the last five years in Kyoto as a full-time lay student of Rinzai Zen, and have been conducting my practice at Shōkokuji for nearly four years. From March 1965 through March 1966 it was my great good fortune to be permitted to live in the *sōdō* as a practicing layman. During that time, I participated in many of the daily activities of the monks, and gradually came to learn not only the schedule of events, but also some of the reasons behind them. The following are some of my observations about the schedule of the *sōdō*, and the roles of the monk and the layman there.

First of all, the yearly schedule at the *sōdō* is divided into quarters. The three months of May, June, July, and of November, December, January are "in term" periods (*seichū*) when all the monks are present. *Ōsesshin*, a week-long period of intensive *zazen* and *kōan* study, is held throughout the first week of each of these months, except that in January it is from the 16th through the 23rd. Two weeks of *sesshin* are held each month, one as a preliminary to, and another as a sequel to the *ōsesshin* which falls in between. During *sesshin* weeks, daily group *zazen* in the *Zendō* is held for about three hours in the evening, and individual *zazen* practice, called *yaza*, is held for an hour or more afterwards. During *sesshin* weeks the individual koan interviews with the *Rōshi* known as *sanzen* are held twice daily, once during the evening *zazen*, and again in the early morning. *Teishō*, the Zen discourse by the Zen Master (*Rōshi*) on an important Zen text, is scheduled for one hour in the morning on days of the month numbered 1, 3, 6, and 8, i.e. about twelve times in each of those months. As for the weather, May and November are usually pleasant and mild. With June come the mosquitoes and the humid rainy season starting about June 12, while July marks mid-summer with some of the hottest days of the year. In December, evening temperatures often drop to freezing, and January marks mid-winter. High humidity in Kyoto all year around intensifies the discomfort of the extremes of hot and cold.

The months of February, March, April, and August, September, October are the two "vacation" (*seikan*) quarters. In the *sōdō* during this period the *Zendō* is closed and no *teishō* is held, but *sanzen* (in Japanese only) is given



by the present Rōshi, Kajitani Sōnin, to those of his disciples who request it. He is resident in the sōdō throughout the year. Some of the monks will leave the sōdō and perhaps return to their home temples, or make a pilgrimage, etc., for all or part of these months.

The Rinzai Zen training at Shōkokuji sōdō is based on hundreds of years of experience in China as well as Japan. The sōdō is basically a temple, added to which are a *Zendō* (Meditation Hall) and certain other buildings. These provide the physical facilities for the training of the monks. The monks' training program consists of two parts: first, training to bring about personal understanding of Zen through zazen, sanzen, and teishō; second, vocational training as a Zen priest, which includes the learning of temple administration, conduct of various ceremonies, sutra memorization, begging, gardening, vegetarian cooking, etc. Though monks may come to the sōdō with a variety of personal aims, each one must participate fully in all aspects of the training. It is above all a "do it yourself" practice in which progress is gained through individual exertion, and not merely by spending time in the sōdō. Those who work hard and eventually gain insight into their true nature (*kenshō*) can be said to have made a start, for Rinzai Zen kōan study truly begins from there. For monks to gain even minimum competence in the training, three years in the sōdō is considered essential. To complete the basic training required of a Rōshi requires many more years.

The sōdō has a regular yearly schedule of activities which include ōsesshins, sesshins, teishō, morning and afternoon sutra-chanting services, days for bathing, washing, sewing, writing letters, etc., periods of work, days for going out begging (*takuhatsu*), days for holding various memorial services, and days for observance of Buddhist, National, and special sōdō holidays. In addition to such regularly scheduled events, there are also impromptu activities scheduled on short notice, such as going out on working parties to gather firewood, performing memorial services and/or partaking of a meal (*tenjin*) at the homes of certain lay believers, assisting with the conduct of a funeral service, etc.

New monks wishing to conduct their Zen training (*shugyō*) at the sōdō generally arrive in April. They must pass a severe test before they are allowed to enter the sōdō. For two days they must wait in the entrance hall in an attitude of supplication, and if they successfully manage that, must pass five days sitting in zazen alone in a nearby room. This is done to test the earnestness of their desire to enter, and their fitness for sōdō life. Some may find the test too difficult, and leave. This is actually a kindness, for if they give up it means they lack the ability to cope with similar difficult situations which will arise later on. The new monks who pass this entrance test to the satisfaction of the resident monks may be allowed to join the community. Such a newcomer is by no means an equal of the older monks, however. Any monk who has entered the sōdō before him, even a few minutes before him, is automatically his senior with respect to time spent in the sōdō. The new monks are under the constant surveillance of their seniors, who give them little or no verbal instructions in how to perform the thousand and one details of a life which is new to them, and who may roundly scold them for every mistake. The most difficult and odious jobs are theirs. They get little



sleep, have a poor diet, and must spend long hours in zazen or in work. They are given a kōan by the Rōshi shortly after they enter, and must exert every effort to find a solution to the seemingly impossible problem it poses. In short, for a time their life is hell. Either they learn quickly, keep every sense alert, exert themselves, and yet relax and keep their sense of humor in spite of countless difficulties that beset them, or they may become discouraged and leave. Those who do exert themselves, learn what is required, and make progress in their zazen and kōan study gain self-confidence, strength of character, patience, and a sense of compassion in a remarkably short time.

If the beginning monks can manage to make it through their first year, their lives will become a little easier. Subsequently new monks will have come, so that they will no longer be "on the bottom of the heap". They have become senior in their turn to the newcomers, and as time goes on, if they continue to develop their ability to sit in zazen for long periods, develop the quiet concentrated mind which is required for kōan study, maintain that concentration continuously in every activity of the day, and show proficiency in the way they perform assigned tasks, in another year or so the most able may be recommended by the senior monks for positions of responsibility in the sōdō administrative offices. These offices, which only qualified senior monks fill, are rotated every six months. By holding such offices, a monk gradually learns all aspects of administration, accounting, planning, fund-raising, scheduling, food budgeting, etc., which are essential to the smooth and orderly functioning of the sōdō. The practical experience a monk gains in these duties will be of great value to him when he later comes to manage a temple of his own.

Nowadays, most monks have had four or more years of college before they enter the sōdō. While it is true that during their beginning years in the



*The Ku-in, building for conducting monastery business and receiving guests, at Shokokuji.*



sōdō they have very little time for book learning, the more they advance in kōan study the more they will have to read. They should be able to read the teishō texts and the various texts which contain the kōans they receive from the Rōshi. They will spend long hours searching through the "Zenrin Kushū" or similar literary collections to find one phrase (*jakugo*) among thousands which expresses accurately the content of each koan which they have intuitively understood to the Rōshi's satisfaction. Unless and until their intuitive understanding of a kōan is matched with a clear intellectual understanding of it, they will not be allowed by the Rōshi to proceed to another kōan.

In summary, monks at Shōkokuji sōdō learn by doing, under austere conditions that develop character and resourcefulness, to perform all the varied activities of daily life. They develop concentration and a quiet mind through group and individual zazen, particularly in sesshin and the intensive ōsesshin weeks. This enables them to awaken understanding of the kōans, which express in the Zen way the truths of Mahāyāna Buddhism. To complete their formal Zen training may take many years, during which they will gradually have learned to handle with competence a wide range of duties. Their training is truly comprehensive.

Well then, what about the laymen? There are two associations of laymen at Shōkokuji. One is called the "Yuima-kai" (Vimalakīrti Association). It has about thirty active members of both sexes and various ages. They meet on the second and fourth Sundays of each month at the Shokokuji Honzan, or Headquarters Building. Meetings begin at 9:30 a.m. with about an hour of zazen, in twenty-minute periods, with sanzen available once with the sōdō Rōshi, followed by a teishō of about an hour. Shōkokuji's Chief Abbot (*Kanchō*) and the sōdō Rōshi alternately give teishō. Afterwards tea is served. Few of the Yuima-kai members are kōan students. The ten to twenty young men who are resident in "Hannyarin", a Zen-style dormitory located nearby and supported by the Honzan, are all members of the Yuima-kai.

The second group of laymen is the "Chishō-kai" ("Wisdom-Attesting Association"). At present it is composed of about fifteen young Japanese men, most of whom are college students, and myself, the only Westerner. We meet every Sunday from 9:00 a.m. until noon, at the Honzan together with the Yuima-kai on the second and fourth Sundays, and at the nearby sōdō Zendō on the first and third Sundays of the month. Meetings begin with zazen in thirty-minute periods, then sanzen, teishō, a period of work cleaning in the Zendō or the surrounding gardens, and end with a meeting over tea. Members of the Chishō-kai may upon request participate in the sōdō ōsesshins. A few may decide to live in the Zendō for the whole week, but the majority generally come for the evening zazen hours only. Most of the members are kōan students. Since the students have their college studies and the working members their jobs as their main concern, their Zen practice is on a part-time basis. When the students graduate from college and move away from Kyoto, they usually drop out of the group. A number of the new members who join each year also drop out before long, resulting in a consistently large turnover each year. Members of the Chishō-kai are treated as guests at the sōdō and encouraged to participate as much as they wish in the zazen, sanzen, and teishō held for the monks themselves.



Since I came to Shōkokuji with the intention of devoting myself to a period of full-time Zen practice as a layman, I found the program of the Chishō-kai to be insufficient for my needs. My first desire was to learn the value of the Zen life in the sōdō as experienced by the monks, who after all are professionals. During the year I lived in the sōdō, I found that although laymen are welcomed as Zen practitioners there, they have quite a different status from the monks. They are regarded and treated as guests, never as newly-arrived monks. Laymen are the junior of every monk, have no authority in the sōdō, and are never appointed to any of the administrative offices there, no matter how long they may live within the sōdō. Laymen are expected to devote themselves to zazen, sanzen, and teishō, but not to the activities which form the monks' vocational training.

The fact of being a Westerner also made it necessary for the monks to make certain exceptions for me. I had come to Japan, like so many others, practically ignorant of spoken and written Japanese. Almost daily language study and two or three hourly lessons per week with a language instructor was a necessity. Everything about the Japanese language was difficult, being as nearly the opposite to English as one can imagine. I made steady progress, but even so it was two years before I could manage a halfway decent conversation, and my speaking and reading ability is still limited after five years. Kajitani Rōshi, being a diligent scholar himself, knew it was important for me to keep studying Japanese even while in the sōdō, so as to better understand sanzen and teishō. The hours of each day I spent studying Japanese further limited my participation in the monks' daily life. Japanese language study was and is a requirement for me, but there was no provision for it in the sōdō schedule.

During my year in the sōdō, I came to understand that as a full-time Western Zen student, unfailing participation in the sōdō zazen, sanzen, and teishō, as well as Japanese language study constituted the essentials of my practice. I found that such a practice was different both from that of the monks in the sōdō, and from that of the lay members of such groups as the Yuima-kai and the Chishō-kai.

Brief though it is, perhaps the above account is sufficient to convey some idea of the role of the monk and layman at Shōkokuji, and the nature of their Zen practice.