



Participants in the Hokubei Sesshin

East Meets West at Tassajara

Last fall at Zen Mountain Center, thirty Soto Zen teachers from Europe, Brazil, Japan and the United States met at Tassajara for a two-week intensive training sponsored by Sotoshu Shumicho, headquarters of the Japanese Soto Sect. Termed *Hokubei* or "North American" Sesshin, this historic meeting was the first time Western representatives of Soto Zen lineages met officially with their Japanese counterparts outside of Japan. Three earlier month-long *Tokubetsu* or "special" Sesshins were sponsored by Sotoshu in Japan in 1986, 1988, and 1990, designed for Westerners whose training had been entirely outside of Japan.

Whether in Japan or America, these gatherings have demonstrated the benefits of face-to-face meeting. The Soto Zen tradition has been flowing to us from Japan for nearly a century now. The open-hearted offering of the Dharma by Japanese teachers was received here with "beginner's mind." Still, the parent generation in Japan and the Western practitioners have felt some natural distancing. This difference in outlook and perception was confronted at Tassajara, both sides offering, both receiving. Participants sensed that the meeting was a historic moment.

The group of teachers and senior monks included two Europeans, nine Japanese and sixteen Americans. The chief lecturer was Taizan Maezumi Roshi, Abbot of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, who gave nine lectures on *Gakudo Yojinshu—Points to Watch in Observing the Way* by Dogen Zenji. Other lecturers were Tsugen Narasaki Roshi of Keijoji Temple in Japan, and Tozen Akiyama Sensei, Abbot of Milwaukee Zen Center, and our Abbots, Tenshin Anderson and Sojun Weitsman [Abbot Sojun's lecture follows this article].

Participants followed the practice period schedule of zazen, oryoki meals, study periods, lectures and work. Tassajara witnessed much informal interchange, as Westerners from different groups and the Japanese participants shared styles of serving meals, playing drums and bells, and chanting. This intimate exchange helped to ground the training and simultaneously to liberate it from cultural stereotypes.

The question of certification of Western teachers and training centers has been a background issue in these gatherings, and time was scheduled for continued discussion. Priests at Zen Center have not been certified within the Sotoshu system since Suzuki Roshi's death. Western teachers and representatives of Sotoshu have been working to create some new criteria for certification, which would have many benefits, including allowing ordained Westerners to be recognized as such when studying in Japan, and providing verification from outside the individual groups. A new proposal to the Sotoshu Shumuchō was unanimously approved at the meeting.

The Hokubei Sesshin was a new but natural step in the march of Soto Zen brought to the West by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Dainin Katagiri Roshi, Hakuun Yasutani Roshi, Kodo Sawaki Roshi, and so many others, and the depth of our gratitude to the early teachers was vigorously underscored in the talks. One day all participants and practice period students made the climb to the ashes sites of Suzuki Roshi and Katagiri Roshi for a monthly memorial ceremony. In the words of Tassajara Ino Setsuan Gaelyn Godwin, "That morning we all gathered in the warm October air and walked in a slow, cheerful procession up the hillside to the memorial site. The *inkin* led, followed by Narasaki Roshi, his two attendants, Zen Center's Abbots, Maezumi Roshi and the rest of the sixty people, in a long snaking line. At the site, Narasaki Roshi spoke to Suzuki Roshi and to Katagiri Roshi in Japanese. It was profoundly moving to stand in the midst of this rare gathering, simply acknowledging the tremendous effort that had been made on our behalf in Japan, and the many decades of devoted effort in this country to teach us and to help us stand up. Tears were falling all around."