

DEDICATION OF ZEN STUDIES SOCIETY ZENDO

from a description of the ceremony sent by Brother David

September 15 was a silent, sunny Sunday morning in New York. The remodeling of the zendo building was not complete, but far advanced, and the dirty backyard of a few weeks ago had been transformed into a beautiful little garden. Chairs were set up in the zendo for about 130 people. One knew more or less everybody, and there was a certain feeling of belonging together.

On the altar was the Buddha statue Soen Roshi had brought with him as a gift—a wood-carved, four-foot standing gilded figure that came from China to Japan probably in the 13th century. Soen Roshi calls it "The Buddha of Endless Dimensions Universal Life." In front of it stood a wood-carved figure of Bodhi Dharma. (It looks like a statue of St. Benedict. I guess they had more in common anyway than merely being contemporaries.) The main statue was flanked by a figure of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, carrying a sword, and by Fugen, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, on an elephant. There was also on the altar a photograph of Nyogen Senzaki, the man who had introduced Zen practice to western America and whose successor is Soen Roshi.



While we were silently waiting, one could catch glimpses of the garden whenever the soji-screen behind the altar opened a little. When the preparation bell rang—it was a recent gift and this was its first official use—another bell answered it and was in turn answered by a bell that seemed a great distance away. This dialogue of bells opened up whole eons and enormous depths of space.

To the sound of a bamboo flute the four guest priests entered: Josu Sasaki Roshi of Los Angeles, Rev. Hakuyu Maezumi of Los Angeles, Rev. Kan of the Buddhist Academy in New York, and Rev. Boris Erwit of the Buddhist Fellowship in New York. Suzuki Roshi and the West Coast Sangha were

represented by a beautiful rock they had sent. It arrived the day before the opening and at first we wanted to place it on a cushion amidst the visiting priests. It ended up near the altar and looked wonderfully alive and fresh from the water that had been poured over it. The moss was as green as if it had come right out of Tassajara Creek.

Soen Roshi, who had been fasting in preparation for this event since the beginning of the month, came in radiating something which is hard to describe—that “after the bath” feeling which we all know, comes closest to it. He offered ceremonial tea to the Buddha in perfect co-ordination with the sound of the bamboo flute and with marvelously powerful gestures.

Then Tai-san went out (like an arrow in slow motion) to bring in Yasutani Roshi. The Roshi approached the altar, offered incense and recited the following poem:

Three-story brick building changed into a Zendo.
Let us now continue the true Dharma.
Who knows the real meaning of today's dedication?
A new flower opened in the midst of New York.



*Eido Tai Shimano
Sensei
at Tassajara*

His voice sounded ancient but powerful, and the last word *naka* (in the midst of) came out with the thrust of a bud in early spring or with the impact of a meteorite.

Then everyone began chanting the Heart Sutra and all the priests offered incense. Yasutani Roshi bowed three times to the ground, and Soen Roshi pronounced the dedication, starting with The Buddha of Endless Dimensions Universal Life. Next the ashes of Nyogen Senzaki Sensei were enshrined permanently on the altar. During the dedication the playful and singing voices of children came in from the street. There was no sound of cars in Midtown Manhattan on this Sunday morning; only these joyful shouts in the distance, a background of spring-like promise.

After the dedication Henri Leighton introduced Tai-san as the "man who dreams for others and whose dreams come true" and Tai-san in a muted lion's voice gave a sermon. He thanked all who had made this day possible; he outlined the history leading up to this event, from the time fifteen years ago that he became Soen Roshi's pupil, and later was sent to Hawaii, then came to New York in 1962, became an American citizen, and started the first and second zendos. This is the third.

He said: This zendo belongs to no one in particular, to no sect, neither Soto nor Rinzai. It is dedicated to Buddhism and just that. It is not a hall of tranquility, but a furnace-room in which we work with all our might on the combustion of our egoistic delusions. We vow to save all things—*all* things. *Save* means, negatively, not to waste (for instance water, energy, time). Positively it means to affirm the value of that which one saves, the absolute value of all things—of dust, of suffering even. Our life is a chain of millions of moments and the meaning of each moment is that we offer ourselves and so fulfill our vows. This zendo is to be a place dedicated to the practice of this attitude, to earnest and intense practice.

Next Mr. W. H. Johnstone spoke as friend, advisor and helper of the Zen Studies Society. On the background of the fleetingness of time he brought out the significance of today's event as cutting across time. He referred to the history of this building, this Buddha statue, and this five hundred year old gong which still says everything it has to say in one word. Then Henri Leighton spoke a few concluding words of thanks as a member of the Board of Directors and a representative of the Sangha. All guests received gift packages containing incense, printed cloth, a little book of daily sutras, and a calligraphy by Soen Roshi; also a copy of Yasutani Roshi's poem.

Chester Carlson, to whom the New York zendo owes so much, had come in for the ceremony. A few days later he suffered a fatal stroke. The day before he died he went across the street to buy a balloon in the park. Right away he let it fly and followed it for a long time with his eyes—smiling. If this gesture was a beautiful anticipation of his death, it is also a non-verbal expression of what Yasutani Roshi may have meant when he said: "Who knows the real meaning of today's dedication?"