

On Tuesday, October 24, the great Mrs. Ruth Fuller Sasaki died in Kyoto, shortly after returning from America. As the first American woman Zen priest and the founder of the American Zen temple in Kyoto, she had befriended and taught nearly all the American Zen students who passed through or lived in Kyoto for the past twenty years. The Prajna Paramita Sutra was chanted in her memory at the morning services at Zen Center and Zen Mountain Center on November 3rd.

She and Suzuki Roshi met for the first time the evening before she returned to Japan. They talked of the fundamental similarities between Rinzai and Soto Zen, and of his Zen teacher whom she had met at the teacher's temple in Yaizu, Japan, when she was in quest of a valuable commentary on a sutra. This delighted Suzuki Roshi. The temple later became Suzuki's own temple and his teacher's library is still preserved there. At his next lecture he spoke of how impressed he was by the clarity of her thinking and her freedom from unnecessary discrimination.

The following article appeared in Japan the day after her death. We print it in tribute to this remarkable American Zen Buddhist and because facts about her life are not generally known.

*LIFE OF LATE RUTH SASAKI DEDICATED TO ZEN PURSUIT*

By Masahide Honda, *The Mainichi Daily News*, October 27, 1967.

"... Zen is a religion, ... Zen is a kind of existentialism; Zen is a kind of mental therapy; Zen is a discipline in which blows and conundrums are used as teaching devices; Zen advocates a humble, retired mode of life, the main activity of which is the practice of meditation; Zen aims at the attainment of *satori* and with *satori* comes total knowledge and understanding; Zen is everyday life; Zen is complete freedom; the man who has attained the aim of Zen, that is, *satori*, is beyond law, beyond the regulations laid down for human society." —from *Zen, A Religion* by Ruth Fuller Sasaki.

The life of Mrs. Sasaki, who died Tuesday in Kyoto at the age of 74, was dedicated to the pursuit of Zen. As the chief priest of the Ryosen-an Temple within the precincts of Daitokuji, one of the seven headquarter temples of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism in Kyoto, she helped Westerners who visited the sanctuary in the study and practice of the Oriental religion.

Her death is a great loss and is deplored by Japanese and foreign followers of Zen alike. Her funeral services will be observed at the Ryosen-an Friday at three p.m. with Priest Isei Fukutomi, general secretary of Daitokuji, acting as the chief mourner.

During her 50-year-long study of Zen since her student days at Chicago University and Harvard where she majored in Sanskrit, Mrs. Sasaki distinguished herself as an outstanding Buddhist scholar. She wrote several books which are now considered as basic reading materials of those foreigners who study Zen.

Professor Yoshitaka Iriya, dean of the Chinese literature department of Nagoya University, praised Mrs. Sasaki's inexhaustible efforts in the translation of esoteric Zen texts into English, reminiscing of the sixteen years he worked

with her. "She never compromised in the quest of truth. Our work is now confronted with insurmountable difficulties with the passing of Priest Jokei," he said.

As the resident priest of the Ryosen-an, Mrs. Sasaki lived a quiet and secluded life, which was strictly governed by the precepts of Zen. She did not seek publicity, which was something foreign to her.

Born to the family of a wealthy Chicago businessman, she turned her attention to Rinzaï Zen when she met the late Dr. Daisetz Suzuki in Japan in 1930. Two years later, she again visited this country to receive Zen training at Nanzenji Sodo (monastery) in Kyoto under the guidance of Master Priest Nanshinken.

After returning to New York, she continued her studies under Master Sokeian, alias Shigetsu Sasaki from 1938 until his death in June 1944. Priest Shigetsu was in the United States to spread the teachings of Rinzaï Buddhism. He opened the Sokei-an Temple at East 65th Street in New York City on December 6, 1941, the eve of World War II. With the outbreak of the war, he was sent to a concentration camp.

Ruth married him to take him out of the camp. Suffering from failing health, her husband died at the age of 64 only two months before the termination of the Pacific War.

Shortly before his death, Priest Shigetsu left a will to his American wife, directing her (1) to go to Japan and build a center for American students of Zen Buddhism, (2) to invite a Japanese Zen master to the United States and (3) to translate Zen texts into English.

Mrs. Sasaki came to Japan as soon as circumstances allowed her to, and stayed at the Daitokuji. She made her residence at the site of the defunct Ryosen-an. In 1956, the First Zen Institute of America decided to establish a branch in Kyoto. With permission from the Daitokuji authorities, a library and meditation hall for foreigners were constructed in the compound of the Ryosen-an. Their construction was mostly financed by Mrs. Sasaki.

Meanwhile, the first American woman Zen "Anshu" (chief priest of a temple) was created when Mrs. Sasaki was ordained Anshu of the Ryosen-an by Chief Abbot Daiki Tachibana of the Daitokuji. He gave her the priest name of Jokei.

The Kyoto institute for foreign Zen students at the Ryosen-an has the dual purpose of aiding Western men and women in undertaking the study and practice of Rinzaï Zen under Japanese masters and of publishing in English translation the major Chinese and Japanese texts.

The publications issued by the institute so far include: *A Dictionary of Zen Terms*, *An Index of Zen Biographies*, *Cat's Yawn—A Zen Miscellany*, and *The Development of Chinese Zen*.

The greatest project now being undertaken is the translation of Rinzaï-roku, or Linchi lu, the most important textbook of Rinzaï Zen. It is now 90 per cent finished. Professor Iriya says that he and his colleagues will forge ahead with its completion, but the death of Mrs. Sasaki has deprived the staff of the Kyoto Zen institute of an indispensable collaborator.