

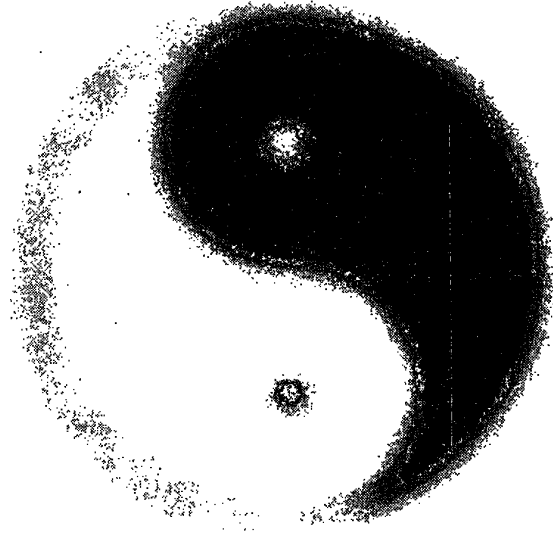


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## A ZEN MASTER FOR THE WEST: AN INTERVIEW WITH KOBORI SOHAKU

By Cliff Edwards\*

Yes and No are one. Japanese are often misunderstood and accused of lying because Westerners do not understand this. We do not say no to a person's face. If someone comes to borrow money from me, and I tell him that I will see if it is possible, he knows that I hesitate and cannot lend him the money. I do not say no. If a Japanese boy tells a Japanese girl that he is deeply in love with her, and she accepts that love, she does not say yes. She says, "No, No" and it means "Yes, Yes" on a deeper level than the ordinary yes. No in that case means yes more intensely than yes itself, because yes and no are finally one. Perhaps this is not so in the West.

Kobori-san spoke these words to me across his low tea-table at Daitokuji Temple in Kyoto, Japan. Perhaps it was his attempt to understand and to explain many misunderstandings he had experienced in his years of trying to bridge the gap between East and West in order to lead Westerners to some understanding of that gift of the East of most importance to him, Zen Buddhism.

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### *Zen Buddhism for the "Gaijin"*

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Kobori Sohaku is one of the few Zen Masters in all the history of Zen Buddhism with special responsibility for communicating the insights of Zen to Westerners. Apart from an occasional lecture tour, he pursues this enormous task in a quiet corner of the city of Kyoto, within the walls of Daitokuji Temple where interested Westerners come to seek him out.

Daitokuji Temple is on the north edge of the old capital of medieval Japan and is a world center for the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism. Rinzai is the form of Zen made known to the West through the writings of D. T. Suzuki. Daitokuji is renowned for its pioneering work in the instruction of Westerners in Zen. Ruth Fuller Sasaki directed the First Zen Institute of America at Ryosen-an, a sub-temple within Daitokuji's walls, until her death in 1967. There she instructed Westerners and organized a library and research staff for the study and translation of Zen texts into English. Since Mrs. Sasaki's death, Kobori Sohaku has had chief responsibility for meeting the needs of the "gaijin" or foreigners seeking Zen instruction. Without doubt Kobori-san is one of the leading figures interpreting Zen Buddhism to the West at this very mo-



ment when Western interest in Zen has matured to a new seriousness. His views, therefore, are a good indicator of the East's attitude toward and reaction to the West's attempt to encounter Eastern ways through Zen. The following are the circumstances of a recent personal interview with Kobori-san and, as faithfully as notes scribbled immediately after the conversation allow, a description of Kobori-san's reflections on Zen and its special problems and possibilities for the Westerner.

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### *Inside Daitokuji's Walls*

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Opportunity to meet and interview Kobori-san came through the help of an American actor who had just finished a samurai film in Japan and was now struggling to learn Japanese in the same Kyoto language school I was attending. When he learned that I was studying "Zen archery" at the nearby Imperial Palace grounds, he told me of his own serious interest in Zen. He was in fact doing Zen meditation or "zazen" at the "gaijin" temple at Daitokuji mornings and evenings, and counted Kobori-san as his spiritual father in Zen. He was anxious that I too might meet this Zen master to Westerners, and so made an appointment for me to speak with Kobori-san.

Early on the appointed afternoon we took a streetcar past Kyoto's old Imperial Palace grounds to the quiet northern edge of this city. Near Daitokuji Temple's walls, we stopped and followed a dirt road to an old temple gateway on a side-street. Through the gate we followed a rock and moss walk to a shaded porch and papered sliding doors. My friend struck a tiny bell hanging at the porch and a tall youthful Westerner with shaved head and dark robe appeared and invited me to take off my shoes and enter a simple matted room. I seated myself on a cushion at a low table in the center of the room and waited.

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### *Talking about the Tea is not the Tea Itself*

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I had waited perhaps five minutes when Kobori-san swiftly but quietly crossed the room, bowed to me and seated himself on the cushion at the other side of the table. His head was shaved and he wore a simple black robe. He appeared neither young nor old, and gold and silver shone from his teeth as he spoke. His Western assistant brought bowls of tea and a plate of rice cakes and left us alone. Kobori-san had already been told that I was a professor of Religious Studies in the United States, had read much in Zen, and that I was especially in-

terested in his views concerning Zen and the Westerner. He needed neither encouragement nor questions, but spent most of the following half-hour thinking aloud in my presence about his interests, questions, and the problems and possibilities he saw in the encounter of Zen with the Western mind.

We began by carefully lifting our tea-bowls and drinking the green whipped tea in rapid, audible Japanese fashion. Kobori-san held his old rust-colored pottery tea-bowl before his eyes and spoke slowly in excellent English:

Reading much about Zen is one thing: the theory. Certainly such reading has its place. But what can one finally say, for instance, about this bowl of tea? People say the tea-ceremony expresses Zen. Yes, I agree, but how? Talking about tea is not finally the tea itself. There is the knowing with the two eyes, but in Zen we talk about another eye: the third eye of religion. It is the third eye that knows the tea as tea. Some say that this knowing with the third eye is mysticism, but it is not; it is simply knowing the tea itself. I was interested in some mystics, but I don't think this knowing with the third eye is mysticism.

Kobori-san put down his tea-bowl, which until now had provided the focus for our attention. He commented that my interest in the art and literature of Japan as a means of approaching Zen did not correspond to his own interests. He relaxed, gazed toward the wall, and thought aloud about his own particular interests and their connection with Zen:

I am more interested in psychology than in philosophy or literature as of promise in leading to an understanding of Zen. Particularly I am interested in the thought of such men as Fromm and Jung. If Jung had had more of a grasp of the significance of nature and of the two ways of seeing he would be even more helpful.

Lately we have been reading more and more of Chuang Tzu here (3rd century B.C. Taoist successor of Lao Tzu). He is of more interest to us now than Lao Tzu, who is so much more difficult to interpret (supposed 6th century B.C. author of the *Tao Te Ching*). Chuang Tzu is a guide to finding nature within oneself.

At this point I broke in to ask whether he knew that the Roman Catholic monastic, Thomas Merton, not long before his death had made a paraphrase of Chuang Tzu (*The Way of Chuang Tzu*, New Directions, 1965). This led Kobori-san to comment on his own interest in Merton:

Was Merton also interested in Chuang Tzu? I am happy to know about that. Yes, I myself was to meet Merton after his visit to India. But he was accidentally killed and never made it to our meeting. Merton was religion. He was not talking about religion. He did not talk about something beyond himself, but something that he lived.



## "Clear" with "Vague" in Parenthesis

Kobori-san's words about Merton were warm and enthusiastic. He stared into space for a moment as if imagining the planned meeting Merton never attended. Then Kobori-san turned his attention to me and asked whether I had done any writing. I told him of a commentary I had written on the Greek text of two New Testament books and this led to his next question:

Can you answer a question I have regarding the Bible text? Do you know the words, "I am that I am?" What is its meaning?

I remembered the long discussion in theological school over the meaning of those words recorded as God's self-revelation to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). I told Kobori-san that there was considerable argument among the theologians as to the exact meaning of the words. Apparently Yahweh, the name of the God of the Exodus, is being explained as derived from the verb "to be." God is the one who "is" or perhaps even in the future tense, the "I will be" or in the causative, "I cause to be." I conclude by admitting there was a vagueness to the expression and its meaning. He smiled and thought aloud:

Vague? Yes, such vagueness is good. But is it vague with clear in parenthesis or clear with vague in parenthesis? No means Yes, Yes and No meet. What is Buddhism? What is the meaning of Bodhidharma (Indian

Buddhist who carried "Zen" to China) coming East? I do not know. I do not know. I do not know equals I do know. Because I admit that I do not know I in fact communicate that I do know.

## Repairing the Roof

Time allotted for our interview was almost over, and Kobori-san apparently wished to end on the note of "practice" rather than "theory." His final comments turned to meditation training:

For Zen, there must be more than reading and more than discussing of course. For Zen there must be sitting (zazen, the disciplined practice of seated "meditation"). Philip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen* is good as an introduction to this practice. I believe Kapleau himself is doing a good work in Rochester, New York, introducing students to the practice of sitting. But one must be convinced he needs sitting first. Otherwise it is not worth the pain he experiences in the beginning. Sometime, if you wish it, come to me for instruction in sitting. Now I must do some of my outdoor work for the day. I am supervising the repair of a roof with my students.

By now we had gotten to our feet and were talking together on the shaded porch where I had originally left my shoes and entered. As I thanked him, put on my shoes, and started through the quiet garden toward Kyoto's busy streets, I looked back and saw Kobori-san already with his students planning the repair of the tile roof of one of Daitokuji's buildings.