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YASUTANI HAKUUN ROSHI - A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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MA Thesis in Asian Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara,
USA

by Paul David JAFFE entitled:

"The Shobogenzo Genjokoan by Eihei Dogen, and Penetrating Inquiries into
the

Shobogenzo Genjokoan, a commentary by Yasutani Hakuun"

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This electronic material by the Coombpapers SSRDB is intended to draw
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to the existence of P.Jaffe's largely unknown pioneering work and to
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it's eventual printing. It also hopes to aid scholarship concerning the
history
of Zen Buddhism in the West.]
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[...]

Yasutani Hakuun Roshi (1885-1973) was a fiery and controversial figure in
20th century Zen Buddhism. He was highly respected for his deep
realization

and compassionate teaching, but was also criticized for his polemical
stand

against "one sided" teachings and his severe manner of expressing
himself.

We can see within a few pages of his writings what seems a strange
mixture

of harsh criticisms of certain teachers as having degraded the Buddha way
and a sincere gratitude for their efforts in guiding him.

It seems that both his early life and his training under Harada Sogaku
Roshi

(1870-1961) contributed to his synthesis of the practices and insights
emphasized in the Soto and Rinzai sects respectively. He was especially
vocal

concerning the point of kensho, seeing one's true nature. He spoke more
openly about it than anyone of his times, going so far as to have a
public

acknowledgement of those who had experienced kensho in a post-sesshin [4]
ceremony of bowing in gratitude to the three treasures.[5] He was
sometimes

criticized for his overemphasis, but according to Robert Aitken Roshi, a
successor in Yasutani's lineage, "I think that Yasutani Roshi's hope was
that

people could get a start, and with that start they could deepen and clarify it through koan study. I think that actually Yasutani Roshi placed less emphasis on kensho than the people who are criticizing him, because the people who are criticizing him are regarding kensho as some sort of be-all and end-all, and he didn't look at it in that way at all." [6]

Yasutani was so outspoken because he felt that the Soto sect in which he trained emphasized the intrinsic, or original aspect of enlightenment-- that everything is nothing but Buddha-nature itself--to the exclusion of the experiential aspect of actually awakening to this original enlightenment. His dharma successor, Yamada Koun Roshi, has written, "His main purpose was to propagate the indispensable place of kensho, Realization of the Way, in Zen." [7] On the other hand, he criticized the tendency in the Rinzai sect to become attached to levels and rankings, - and of absolutizing the efficacy of koans without adequate regard to the realization of emptiness, to which many of the koans point.

In 1954, some ten years after his dharma transmission, and after certain post-war restrictions were lifted, Yasutani established his organization as an independent school of Zen. The group, Sambokyodan (Fellowship of the Three Treasures), broke with the Soto school in which he was ordained, asserting a position of direct connection with Dogen and no longer recognizing the authority of the sect's ecclesiastical leaders. Such an action had been strongly advocated by his teacher Harada Sogaku. [8]

Yasutani Hakuun Roshi's early background sheds some interesting light on his subsequent development. There is a miraculous story about his birth: His mother had already decided that her next son would be a priest when she was given a bead off a rosary by a nun who instructed her to swallow it for a safe childbirth. When he was born his left hand was tightly clasped around that same bead. By his own reckoning, "your life . . . flows out of time much earlier than what begins at your own conception. Your life seeks your parents." [9] "It is as if I jumped right into this situation since while I was still in her womb my mother was contemplating my priesthood." [10] When he studied biology in school this story seemed ridiculous, but later he wrote, "Now, practicing the Buddha Way more and more, understanding many more channels of the Buddha Way, I realize that it is not so strange but quite natural. My mother wanted me to become a priest, and because I was conceived in that wish and because I too desired the priesthood, the juzu [rosary bead] expressed that karmic relation. There is, indeed, a powerful connecting force between events. We may not understand it scientifically, but spiritually we know it is so." [11] So, in time he came to fully accept this

story and treat it as a concrete symbol of "his deep Dharma affinity."
[12]

The family he was born into was quite poor; he was adopted by another family when he was very young. At the age of five he was sent to a country temple named Fukuji-in near Numazu city. His head was shaved, and he was educated by the abbot, Tsuyama Genpo. His training at this time was very strict and meticulous, but also very loving, and left a deep impression on him throughout his life. At the age of eleven he moved to a nearby temple, Daichuji, which like Fukuji-in belonged to the Rinzai sect. After a fight with an older student, however, he was forced to leave. When later he was placed in another temple, this time it was one of the Soto sect, Teishinji, and it was here that he became a monk of the Soto sect under the priest Yasutani Ryogi, from whom he took his name. At the age of sixteen he went to study under Nishiari Bokusan Zenji (1821-1910) at Denshinji in Shimada, Shizuoka prefecture and served as his attendant. Nishiari was well-known both for having served as the leader of the Soto sect, and for his Shobogenzo keiteki (The Opening Way of the Shobogenzo). [13] The Keiteki is a record of his lectures on twenty-nine chapters of the Shobogenzo and is generally considered an important and authoritative work. In the preface of the work here partially translated (Shobogenzo sankyu: Genjokoan) Yasutani says of this Keiteki:

However, beginning with Nishirari Zenji's Keiteki, I have examined closely the commentaries on the Shobogenzo of many modern people, and though it is rude to say it, they have failed badly in their efforts to grasp its main points. . . . It goes without saying that Nishiari Zenji was a priest of great learning and virtue, but even a green priest like me will not affirm his eye of satori. the resulting evil of his theoretical Zen became a significant source of later events. . . . So it is my earnest wish, in place of Nishiari Zenji, to correct to some degree the evil which he left, in order to requite his benevolence, and that of his disciples, which they have extended over many years.[14]

Further, he tells us that during this period of his life, when he was sixteen or seventeen, he had two questions. The first was why neither Nishiari Zenji nor his disciples gave clear guidance concerning kensho when it was obvious from the ancient writings that all the patriarchs experienced it. The second concerned what happens after death. He was unable to receive clear answers or come to an understanding.

Through his twenties and thirties Yasutani Roshi continued his training

with several other Buddhist priests. He also furthered his education, going to a teacher training school and then beginning a ten year career as an elementary school teacher and principal. At thirty he married and started raising a family which was to produce five children.

In 1925, at the age of forty, he returned to his vocation as a Buddhist priest.

Soon after, he was appointed as a Specially Dispatched Priest for the Propagation of the Soto sect, travelling around giving lectures.

"However,"

he wrote in 1952 in the epilogue to Shushogi Sanka (Song-in Praise of the Shushogi), [15] "I was altogether a blind fellow, and my mind was not yet at

rest. I was at a peak of mental anguish. When I felt I could not endure deceiving myself and others by untrue teaching and irresponsible sermons any longer, my karma opened up and I was able to meet my master Daiun Shitsu, Harada Sogaku Roshi. The light of a lantern was brought to the dark

night, to my profound joy." [16]

Harada Roshi was a Soto priest, educated at the Soto sect's Komazawa University. His sincere searching brought him to study with Toyota Dokutan

Roshi (1841-1919), abbot of Nanzenji, the head temple of the branch of Rinzai

Zen known by the same name. After completing koan study and becoming a dharma successor, Harada became abbot of Hosshinji, a Soto temple, transforming it into a rigorous and lively training center. [17]

Yasutani Roshi sat his first sesshin with Harada Roshi in 1925 and two years

later at the age of forty-two was recognized as having attained kensho. Some

ten years later he finished his koan study and then, at the age of fifty-eight,

received dharma transmission from Harada Roshi on April 8, 1943. [18]

Yasutani Roshi's career as a Zen teacher was devoted and single-minded. He

was head of a training hall for monks for a short while, but gave it up and

applied his efforts primarily toward the training of lay practitioners. His

years leading a family life and working as an educator no doubt both influenced him in this direction and prepared him for the task. During the

next thirty years he held over three hundred sesshins, led numerous regular

zazen meetings, and lectured widely. In addition, he left almost one hundred

volumes of writings. [19]

Already in his late seventies, Yasutani Roshi first travelled to the United

States in 1962, at the instigation of some of his American students. He held

sesshins in over half a dozen cities, and due to an enthusiastic response made

six more visits continuing through 1969. He has exerted a profound influence on the budding American Zen tradition through direct contact

with many students and through his relationships with several of the leading Zen teachers in America today. Yasutani has also become widely known and indirectly influenced many people through the book *Three Pillars of Zen*, compiled by Phillip Kapleau and published in 1965. It contains

a short biographical section on Yasutani Roshi and also his "Introductory Lectures on Zen Training," "Commentary on the Koan Mu," and the somewhat unorthodox printing of his dokusan interviews with ten western students.[20]

Kapleau was the first westerner to study with Yasutani Roshi. This was in 1956 after Kapleau had studied for three years at Hosshinji under the guidance of Harada Roshi. After some twenty sesshin with Yasutani, the Roshi confirmed Kapleau's kensho experience which is one of the cases set down in *Three Pillars*. It was Kapleau who first suggested to Yasutani Roshi

that he visit America. In 1966 Kapleau founded the Rochester Zen Center, which now has several hundred students in Rochester as well as several affiliated sitting groups in Canada, the United States and Europe. [21]

Another of Yasutani's early American students was Robert Aitken, who first

sat with him in 1957. Aitken's steadily deepening interest in and practice of

Zen started when he was picked up off Guam by the Japanese during the Second World War, and found himself in the same internment camp as R. H. Blyth, the author of *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*. Aitken,

along with Kapleau, was instrumental in arranging Yasutani's original journey to the U.S. and on that and subsequent trips through 1969 hosted him

for sesshins at Koko-an, his small Zen center in Honolulu, and in 1969 at the

newly established Maui Zendo. Aitken says of Yasutani, his only teacher during this period, "He devoted himself fully to us. We felt from him the importance of intensive study, of dedication and also something of lightness." Aitken further characterizes- him as "like a feather but still full

of passion," and having "a ready laugh." [22] Aitken studied further with Yasutani Roshi and his successor Yamada Koun and received transmission from Yamada in 1974, making him the first westerner to become a dharma successor in the Yasutani/Harada lineage. Aitken Roshi's Diamond Sangha now includes two practice centers in Hawaii and about 100 students, and he

periodically conducts sesshin in Tacoma, Washington; Nevada City, California; and Australia.

Eido Tai Shinamo (1932-) first met Yasutani Roshi in 1962 when he was a

young monk who had spent about two years in Hawaii. [23] His own teacher Nakagawa Soen Roshi took him to meet Yasutani one day. Soen Roshi was planning a trip to the U.S. and invited Yasutani to join him, which he agreed

to do. Then he invited Eido to go along also. Shortly before the trip Soen

Roshi cancelled his plans due to the illness of his mother. Eido was left to

accompany Yasutani as his attendant and translator. The following year Eido

again accompanied Yasutani to America and they continued on around the

world together. On Soen's request Yasutani guided Eido in his koan study. Later Eido wrote, "During his seven times teaching pilgrimage, from the very beginning to the end, I was fortunate enough to serve him as an attendant monk and as an interpreter. I received great teaching from him in many ways." [24] "He was a brilliant master." [25] Eido Roshi, who received dharma transmission from Soen Roshi in 1972, is now the leader of the New York Zendo in Manhattan and the Dai Bosatsu Zendo in the Catskill mountains of New York state, and has affiliate groups in Washington D.C., Boston and Philadelphia. Altogether some 300 students are guided by Eido Roshi.

Maezumi Taizan Roshi, who came to America in 1956, has become a dharma successor of Yasutani. Originally having come to the United States to serve in the Soto Zen Mission in Los Angeles, it was here in 1962 that Maezumi first met Yasutani Roshi. Maezumi, a young priest at the time, had, perhaps, a particular affinity with Yasutani. In addition to having been born into, raised, educated and trained in the Soto tradition, he had also done koan study with Osaka Koryu Roshi, a lay master in the Rinzai school. When Yasutani Roshi came to Los Angeles, Maezumi started to do koan study with him. Between Yasutani's several trips to America and Maezumi's trips to Japan to continue his study, the two developed their relationship further. On December 7, 1970, Maezumi received the seal of dharma succession. Since he is also a dharma successor of Kuroda Hakuju Roshi in the Soto tradition, and Osaka Koryu Roshi in the Rinzai tradition, Maezumi Roshi holds a unique position.

At the Zen Center of Los Angeles which was founded by Maezumi in 1966, Yasutani Roshi's approach of integrating the emphasis of the Soto and Rinzai schools seems to be taking root in America. The fact that this community of about 100 people affords the possibility of a family-based practice also reflects, in part, Yasutani Roshi's emphasis on lay practice. The community includes several families with children; there is even a cooperative child care program. The Zen Center of Los Angeles has over 200 members who practice under the guidance of Maezumi Roshi.

This background of Yasutani Roshi's role in Zen Buddhism shows him to be an important figure in transplanting it to a new continent.

[....]

NOTES

[... Notes 1-3 have been omitted from this document... - the Coombspapers]

zazen. In Japan five days or a week is the most common length of time.

5 Three treasures (Skt.: triratna; J.: sambo): Buddha, dharma and sangha.

In Zen the three terms are also taken respectively as symbols of oneness, multiplicity and the harmony between the two.

6 Rick Fields, *Buddhist America*, unpublished manuscript in progress.

7 Koun Yamada, "The Stature of Yasutani Hakuun Roshi," in *Eastern Buddhist*, n.s., 7.2 (1974): 119.

8 *Ibid.*, 120.

9 Hakuun Yasutani "My Childhood," trans. by Taizan Maezumi from *Zen and Life* (Fukuoka: Shukosha, 1969). in *ZCLA Journal*, 3.3 & 4 (1973): 34.

10 *Ibid.*, 32.

11 *Ibid.*, 32-34.

12 Yamada, "Stature," 118.

13 Nishiari Bokusan ***ideographs***, Shobogenzo keiteki ***ideographs*** ed. by Kurebayashi Kodo ***ideographs***, 3 vols. (Tokyo: Daihorinkaku, 1965).

14 Yamada, "Stature," 116-117.

15 Shushogi ***ideographs*** is an anthology of selections from Dogen's writings compiled in 1890 for use by followers of the Sot8 school.

16 Yamada, "Stature," 109.

17 Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi and Bernard Tetsugen Glassman, *The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment* (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1978), p. 194.

18 Japanese Buddhists celebrate the Buddha's birthday on April 8.

19 Tetsugyu Ban, "Dharma Words," in *ZCLA Journal*, 3.3 & 4 (1973): 26.

20 Dokusan ***ideographs*** is a formal, private interview between the master and the student, usually conducted during periods of zazen.

21 Figures for students in this section are necessarily rough. I have gathered information primarily from conversation with members of these various centers.

22 Personal interview, May 8, 1979.

23 The relationship between Eido and Yasutani is described in Nyogen Senzaki, Soen Nakagawa and Eido Shimano, *Namu Dai Bosa* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1976), pp. 182-188.

24 Mui Shitsu Eido, "White Cloud," in *ZCLA Journal*, 3.3 & 4 (1973): 50.

25 Ibid., 51.

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