

A Zen Master

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 1, No.4. © World Wisdom, Inc.
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THE late Oda Sessô Rôshi was born in a little village on the Japan Sea coast. Oda was his family name, Sessô (snow window) his teaching name. Rôshi (old teacher) means, in the Rinzai School of Zen, somebody who has both satisfied his teacher that his insight, including that into the koans, is correct and who from his teacher has received permission to teach koans. The spiritual head of a community of monks is the Rôshi. Lay people have always been accepted as students.

Sessô Rôshi became a temple novice at the age of twelve. His own account of it is characteristic, for hidden in the simplicity, frankness, and humour is a deep point that anyone wishing to undergo religious training might well consider.

His mother used to go to the Shingon Temple in the neighbourhood, and on busy occasions also help in kitchen and gardens. As is the custom, she took the child with her. The little boy was fascinated by it all, especially the Sutra chantings, and he much wanted to become one of the temple novices whom he saw so often, sitting erect and quiet, chanting mysterious sayings. So when he approached the acceptable age, and his mother being agreeable, he asked the head of that temple to receive him as a novice. But the priest laughed outright, and told him, "You are far too lively a child, and with your mother living next door and coming here frequently, why, you would do nothing but be running to and fro, and that would not be at all good for you. But if you are really serious, and very much want to, and if it is not just the robes and the mysterious chanting and ceremonies that attract you here, there is a Zen temple far in the mountains, and you can go there. I shall introduce you myself." And he went there. And it is also typical that after he himself had become a teacher, he went back to that Shingon priest to thank him.

Sessô Rôshi was a man of few words, and relied on teaching by personal example. He never taught or talked abstract theories, but he embodied and lived them. And he was a master in making a point by means of homely, deceptively simple similes. Here are two of them:

We grown-ups with our opinionated views and tenacious clinging to them—we are just like little children at a fair. (At a fair in Japan, there are always goldfish for sale. The children take them home in plastic bags filled with water, to put them out in the little pond which almost every house has, or into the goldfish tub). We select and buy our fish and on the way home we hold up our bags and compete with each other: Mine is the best—the most golden—the most beautiful—the biggest etc. So we all praise ours, and soon we start quarrelling, until a stone is thrown, the plastic bag is smashed, the little glittering thing dies, and there are tears and rage and sorrow.

One afternoon he received me with: "Of course, the really important thing cannot be translated." I nodded, thinking he was referring to the translation of koans. He immediately shook his head—no, no, that's not it. Words can be used to express exactly—

yet can never convey what really matters. Again I nodded, my mind still caught on the koans. Seeing I had not got his point, he said: Think of a Shinto shrine. The people come to it, throw in a coin as an offering, and then they pull the big straw rope with the bell to summon the god. Then they clap their hand thrice to draw his attention, and in the Presence they bow with folded hands. You have seen all this, and you can accurately put it into words. But it is not that which really matters; nor does it matter here whether the god is there or not—he cannot be seen anyway. The important thing is the feeling in the heart of the believer as he bows in the Presence—that is the profound thing for which one can only be grateful.

As Zen Master, he was a father to his community, and an exacting teacher who allowed no short-cuts. But his great warmth of heart and his humaneness left an indelible imprint. His simplicity of manners and bearing, his unvarying calm and gentleness, his acute observation of people and situations, his very inability to give rise to feelings of vexation in himself or others and his inexhaustible patience were tempered by a great but quiet humour and were contained in a great warm heart that knew the human foibles yet would not judge them but rather try to transmute them through the filter of his own clarity.

His monks both loved and respected him. Only the other day, his head-monk paid him what I think is the highest tribute. "The community has had no father for a year. I expected the monks to scatter, to go elsewhere. But they all remained here, working quietly and diligently, helping to keep the place alive for the new teacher to take over. It is Sessô Rôshi who has kept us together."

Sessô Rôshi died in September 1966 at the age of 65. He had known of his approaching end. True teacher that he was, living he had shown how to live; dying he showed how to die. He was a rare teacher and a truly great man who carried in his heart that light of which he said that it radiates out by its own warmth and touches and moves what comes in contact with it.

Nine prostrations to the teacher. How can the pupil presume to do him justice?

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

Dreams and visions should not be incautiously believed. For the devil easily deceives those who lean upon them, seek them, and think much of them. It may even be that after many true visions the wicked spirit, under the guise of an angel of light, may at last, perhaps only once, mix himself in them, and overturn an imprudent man. Visions must be examined carefully according to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the writings of the saints, and if they perfectly tally they may be received, but if not they must at once be rejected.

Ludovicus Blosius