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Excerpts From Interview With Kyozan Joshu Sasaki Roshi

By THE NEW YORK TIMES
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Kyozan Joshu Sasaki Roshi, a 100-year-old Buddhist Zen master of the Rinzaï school, does not often meet with the press. But during a visit in November, from his main California temple, to the fall training retreat at his Bodhi Manda Zen Center in Jemez Springs, N.M., Joshu Roshi — known to followers as Roshi, or “venerable teacher” — sat for interviews, through a Japanese interpreter, with Ralph Blumenthal of The New York Times. Following are excerpts of the interview, as recorded by The New York Times:

Q: *How has Buddhism changed in your lifetime?*

A: Very difficult question. But not so difficult. Everybody is born in the same way but how everyone receives their life is different from each other. Everybody that was born 100 years ago was born just the way I was born and we who study Zen in the transmission within our tradition, this is what the Buddha taught: that everybody is born in the same way — so there's nothing difficult at all.

Q: *Does a teacher ever stop learning? Where is Roshi in his own development or enlightenment?*

A: What I'm learning right now is that before I was born I was right together with the Buddha. Yes, I'm always learning.

Q: *What happens after death?*

A: We're not there yet.

Q: *You said you wouldn't die until you finish your enlightenment, but if you never finish enlightenment, you'll never die, right?*

A: You took all the trouble to be born here right now. Please don't die yet.

Q: *In the West we are taught to develop ourselves, to get the best job, be the best that you can. Is that counter to Buddhist thinking? Is it bad to want to develop yourself to the highest level of achievement and attainment?*

A: All these ways of education and thinking agree in the great process if you think of it. All these different ways have been born in the present. That present cannot be denied. We all have a responsibility to make a choice and in order to make changes we need an ideal and in Buddhism the ideal that is suggested to us is all of our ideals should be to manifest the complete self.

Q: *Americans speak of the pursuit of happiness. That is not the goal of Zen Buddhism?*

A: Buddhism does not reject anything. Buddhism hugs and embraces everything. We don't reject any jot of the present moment. We are treading upon the present moment in all of its aspects right now.

Q: *So it's not antithetical?*

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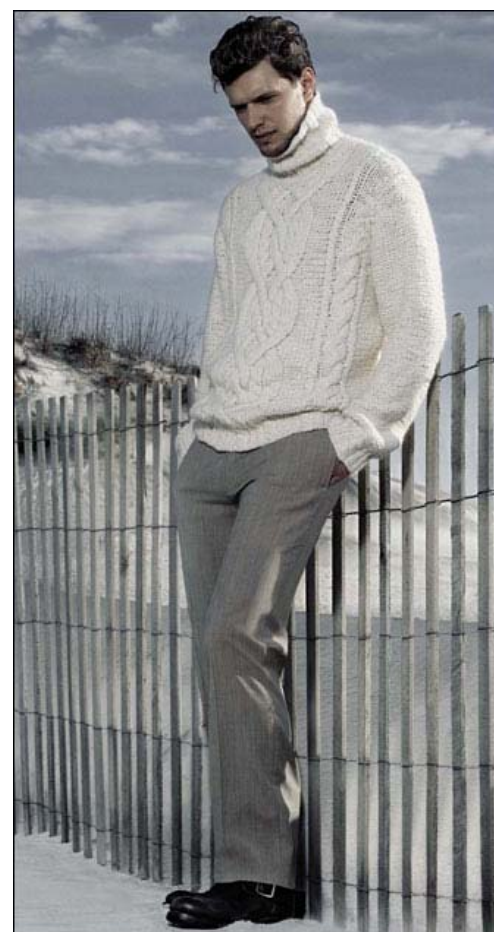
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A: We have to recognize there is perfect happiness and imperfect happiness. If you're a child and you meet with your mother, it is at the moment of meeting you're happy and no matter what kind of wife you get, when that wife is determined to stay with you as a husband you're very happy. When you look upon your wife, how do you recognize her? From the start Buddhism teaches that this present day culture phenomenon we are marching upon — we have to determine: is it good or is it bad?

Q: *You tell me.*

A: When we're doing the living activity we can't limit ourselves just to the present. We have to think about the future. Tomorrow, will this be O.K. tomorrow? Will this still be all right?

Q: *Is there a required course of study to reach enlightenment, or can you reach it suddenly without study? Some can study all their lives and not reach it and others not study and reach it?*

A: Enlightenment? I don't like the subject at all. Yes, there are people of both kinds but the question really is, what is satori in the first place? About satori, I believe you can find all sorts of different descriptions of it in the bookstore if you go there and I feel a lot more coming to the bookstores, a lot more different descriptions.

Q: *So there not one enlightenment, there are infinite variations?*

A: There's only one and yet there are many. When mother and father and child are in one embrace there's no need to think. In other words, subject and object have both simultaneously vanished. That's one satori and Buddhism teaches that husband and wife are always manifesting these different positions of subject and object. However, whenever both subjective and objective positions disappear that means the I am self has also disappeared. That means there's no need to assert the I am self. But when the state of satori is manifest, husband and wife, subject and object, have both gone — vanished. So everybody will experience this state of subject-object, wife-husband, disappearing and find peace of mind in that. But we all must look forward to tomorrow and looking forward to tomorrow is just going from eyes closed to eyes open. Eyes open is looking toward tomorrow and when the eyes are open there's a new wife and a new husband. They have to go on another honeymoon.

Q: *At last, I don't understand.*

A: That state of not knowing is when you're totally in love with your wife, and that state of understanding on the other hand is when husband and wife have separated from each other and then for the first time you start thinking, this is a good world, or this is a bad world. So when you open your eyes, that's when you start thinking this is a good world, this is a bad world — this is enlightenment. When subject and object are again separated from each other, when husband and wife are separated from each other, then you're in a state of eyes closed. You don't think of any of those things.

Q: *Which is better?*

A: I want to ask you. We can't abandon either. We are experiencing both of these states right now. We're standing on the culture of the present moment. It's not whether it's good or bad. You have to open your eyes. If you're attached to the state of I accept you'll never be able to see the new world. So both are necessary, the sleeping state and the eyes open state.

Q: *The eyes open state — is that an impediment to satori?*

A: Actually the eyes open state is enlightenment.

Q: *That's what I got wrong.*

A: Both are necessary. The opposite of the enlightened state is the unenlightened state.

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Whenever people think, I must get enlightened, they attach to one or another of the worlds. For example, here is Cleopatra, the most beautiful woman of the world who has just appeared in front of us, and to look at her and think, Oh, Cleopatra!, that's good because you totally forget yourself when you're looking upon Cleopatra. So that's fine, but when you attach to that, then the trouble starts. Then you become incapable of seeing the new Cleopatra. So enlightenment is fine but don't attach to it.

Q: So Roshi is saying we must not strive for full time enlightenment? We have to compromise? I don't get it.

A: Don't worry, nobody in America understands. All Americans are attached to American culture and American way of life and Americans are attached to American democracy as well. That's why I always angrily yell at my students, if you're attached to American democracy you'll never become the leaders of the free world again.

Q: Can you be Zen and Christian, Zen and Muslim, Zen and Jewish?

A: It has to be possible, but it's difficult because everybody has strong egos. When the ego dissolves, then true democracy appears.

Q: Is there something in the practice of other religions that is tied up with ego that gets in the way of Zen Buddhism?

A: Ego is not the problem. Ego is not an obstruction. The problem is imperfect ego. When complete ego is manifest then there's no need to assert ego and then ego dissolves. American people and the American government will not become followers of true democracy until they think of the one people.

Q: I don't understand.

A: The whole world has to become one country. It's already one country. Because people haven't given birth to that consciousness, there's endless fighting.

Q: You have seen countries do terrible things, [Japan](#), Germany, Russia.

A: Yes, you're right — everybody has done horrible things. So I was very happy with the formation of the [U.N.](#) In the beginning it was just hobbling along. Now finally it's getting a little bit strong. So for my way of thinking, if peace ever comes to the world it will be through strengthening of the U.N.

Q: It sounds like Roshi follows the news closely.

A: As my students know, I subscribe to the Asahi Shimbun but they also know I'm too busy to really read it. I read it very quickly and I can tell a lot of the time in the newspaper the truth is not written because the newspaper people have ego.

Q: Change of pace here. Where does God fit into Buddhist thinking?

A: Very good question, good and difficult. Many Americans seem to be God-believers but from my point of view they have not grasped — caught — the true body of God. If there is a God and you truly catch God just like you truly catch Cleopatra, you've manifested the state of perfect love.

Q: Are you saying God is a woman?

A: God manifests when subject and object both become one. When I get into this it gets quite complicated. There's lots of different ways you can talk about it but I want to say simply here that when true love is manifest that is when the true ego and the true God are manifest. But there is another thing that Buddha teaches and that is when true love manifests then there are really two true loves. Here comes the complicated part: there are times when the man is taking the lead in action and those times the woman is the object. In those times the subject world, the male world, manifests. And then those times the object, the wife, disappears into the belly button of the husband and has no need to resist

the husband's activity and then the perfect world of the subject, the complete subjective world, is manifest. And then there are also the opposite cases in which the wife, the female activity, is taking the lead. And so it that's why it says there are two manifestations of perfect love. But nobody really understands this yet.

Q: *Does Zen Buddhism have an explanation for the creation of the world?*

A: Very clear about that. If you want to call anything truth or reality, that is when the two essential mutually opposing functions have become one. When the male God and the female God become one, that's reality. And as one provisional expedient way of naming it we say that is the source condition of the origin, the source of all, the ultimate truth. There are a lot of different books out there. But the moment someone says the truth or God is an object or takes it as an object, that is already a mistake. God is neither object nor subject. The moment you say any little thing about God, you're already making an object of God and Buddhism cautions you about that. At that moment you're making an idiot out of God, you're making a fool out of God.

Q: *What little I understand of Zen Buddhism, the concept of the universe being made up of plus and minus seems analogous to a computer with its zeros and ones. Did Zen Buddhism invent or prefigure the computer?*

A: I don't know anything about computers. The Bodhidharma taught that our hearts have both plus and minus activities as their content. I've been doing lots of Zen practice and over all these years I've come to the conclusion that, yes, Bodhidharma was right about that and that the two essential activities of plus and minus are the content of everybody's heart.

Q: *Are plus and minus the equivalent of yin and yang?*

A: Yes, there are lots of different philosophical expressions that are used for the same activity, male-female, yin-yang.

Q: *Is that another way of saying good and evil?*

A: Not yet. Not yet. Not yet. That mind that thinks about good and evil — where did that mind come from? Do more zazen [meditation practice] and come back.

Q: *That came later, good and evil?*

A: The Buddha taught that though zazen we can all experience a state where the two mutually opposing essential functions aren't acting any more so you will come to manifest the wisdom that knows that these two mutually opposing functions actually never stop moving. The minute that you think they're back to back they turn around and are embracing front to front. The moment you think they are unified in embrace they're back to back again without any rest and that back to back, front to front repeats over and over again and a unique phenomenon called the heat of feelings is manifest and the Buddha taught that through the manifestation of the heat of feelings separation occurs between the two essential activities.

Q: *And you break free and enlightenment occurs?*

A: Not yet enlightenment. That's the activity of nature. It's not a human willful activity.

Q: *Change of pace. How do you feel about designating a successor?*

A: Very complicated. There are things that I cannot announce. There are things that are joyful to announce but I haven't yet decided about my successor. If someone would turn up who can totally abandon their ego and that can manifest that zero state that is neither subject nor object and that is a complete unification of plus and minus then I think I would make them a successor. However such a person has not yet appeared, a person that knows that true democracy is a manifestation of true love and that the manifestation of true love is the manifestation of the state that is neither subject nor object. If such a person did, then

I could finally take a break and be happy about that.

Q: *Maybe you have too much perfection in mind?*

A: Who is it that thinks it's too perfectionistic? People with strong egos think, Oh, it's too perfectionistic, or who think of their I am particular self. There are two points of view. About half my students say one and half say the other. One half thinks democracy is based on throwing away yourself totally, the more you throw away yourself the closer to true democracy you get. And the other half thinks that the more adorable you think the self is, the more you love the particular self, the more democratic you are.

Q: *Buddhism enjoyed a big vogue here in the 60's. Has it declined in popularity?*

A: I don't really know that much about American society. From my experience what has gotten less is this idea of ladies first.

Q: *What has that got to do with the popularity of Buddhism?*

A: I understood the question right to begin with. I don't know about the popularity of Buddhism but I know the ladies first idea has gotten less popular.

Q: *Did you personally suffer during the war?*

A: I didn't experience any bombing myself but my aunt, for example, was killed by bombing in her neighborhood. I pray that America will never have to go through the hardships of what it was like in Japan to lose a war. It's probably never going to be the case that America would lose a war but I think it's the most miserable experience. I have received my personal residence visa. Last fall I think I got it. So now that I have that visa I'm among the many who worry about America's future. I well understand the world situation in which Christians and Jews and Muslims are always fighting endlessly with each other because they're getting caught up with individual concerns. When you look for the causes of all the world conflicts you'll find them in religion.

Q: *Not including Zen Buddhism?*

A: If anyone were to appear and say, Zen Buddhism is Number One! Zen Buddhism is the best!, they would be just as bad as everybody else.

Q: *Zen is not a religion?*

A: Of course, but it's not religion. Religion means a teaching based on the belief in God. But Buddhism is Shukyo, which doesn't include the belief in a world-creating God. When the Buddha died, he didn't say believe in God. He said make the dharma activity your teacher.

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