

Rōhatsu Notes

Rōhatsu is a week of intensive meditation and training held in winter in Zen temples, usually in the first week of December. It is held then because Shakyamuni Buddha was supposed to have attained enlightenment at dawn of the eighth day of the twelfth month, though whether the twelfth month of the ancient Indian calendar corresponds to December is a doubtful point. I have attended *rōhatsu* for seven years at a temple in Wakayama belonging to the Rinzai branch of Zen. The temple holds what the *roshi*, or Zen master, who heads the temple calls a "family-style *rōhatsu*," which means the schedule is less rigorous than that enforced in temples that have a *Sōdō*, or training center for monks. The most important difference is that we are allowed to get a regular night's sleep, whereas the more rigorous procedure followed in many temples all but prohibits sleep. Being in my fifties, I am sure I could not make it through a week of the strenuous kind. The following notes relate to my experiences over a number of years, though I have arranged them in the form of a single year's account.

Friday, November 30

I arrive at the temple about 5:30 in the afternoon and put my belongings in the big tatami room where most of us will sleep. The daily schedule for the *rōhatsu* period is posted and it looks like a good one.

A young monk named Ryūkō will be our *jikijitsu*, the man in charge of activities in the *zendō*, or meditation hall. He did it last year and was good. He does not keep us

sitting for long stretches without a break, leads us in *kin-hin*, or walking exercise, from time to time, and does not hit too hard with the stick. Also he gives us a goodly amount of *samu*, or work, around the grounds. *Samu* is always a great relief during *rōhatsu* because it gives you a chance to exercise your legs and get rid of some of the aches and cricks that come from long sitting.

We have had various types of *jikijitsu* over the years I have been coming here—young ones who were eager but inexperienced, old ones who were just plain lazy. In particular I recall Chōgen, a little middle-aged monk from another temple who was staying here temporarily. He was a good *jikijitsu* except for two things: (1) a sitting period customarily lasts about thirty or forty minutes, after which the *jikijitsu* gives you a few minutes rest to stretch and move around in your seat before the next period begins. But Chōgen tended to go much longer without a break, and once kept us sitting an hour and a half before he broke the session. If your legs are troubling you, that can be pure hell; (2) the *keisaku*, or stick, is ordinarily administered only to people who request it, though the *jikijitsu* may beat people who are drowsing or otherwise at fault, or as a form of friendly encouragement. But Chōgen beat in anger, something I had never seen before or since. On the morning of the fourth day he began yelling hysterically at a student who had been in bed for two days with a stomach upset, accusing him of malingering, and gave him eight or ten hard blows on each shoulder. Then he screamed at a young monk for his careless attitude and beat him the same way. Finally he beat another student, for no apparent reason at all. It was an ugly performance and one that gave me second thoughts about traditional Zen training methods, though perhaps I overreacted.

The moon is nearly full and when I go to the meditation hall around 7 it is racing in and out of big billowy gray

clouds. The temple is still, dark, and cold, as usual on the night before *rōhatsu* when people have not yet arrived. And, as usual, I begin to have dark feelings of anxiety and foreboding and ask myself why I get myself into situations like this. But later Ryūkō arrives, along with several other laymen like myself who will be here for the week, and I feel less apprehensive.

I took a bath after leaving the meditation hall at 9. At first I used to bathe every day, since it is allowed at this temple during *rōhatsu*. But last year it dawned on me that, though the bath helps to ease the pain in legs and shoulders, when one returns to the meditation hall after a bath, the pain is worse than ever. Why? Obviously because the hot bath stimulates circulation and all the offended nerves begin to scream. So it should be likewise obvious that the thing to do is not to bathe or otherwise stimulate the nerves, but let them get as nearly numb as possible from the cold. I followed this procedure last year, not taking a bath all week, and found it a great improvement. So this will probably be the last bath I take until the final night. These little tricks help so much to ease one through—it's too bad one has to discover them all for oneself, and that it takes me, at least, so long to do so.

Saturday, December 1

Up at 4 with the big bell, then *chōka*, the morning service of sutra chanting. Then, because this is the first of the month, we race around in the dark to several other parts of the temple and compound for special chanting services. This over, we go to the meditation hall. Other years we have had a *dokusan*, or private interview, with the *roshi* at 5, but he is getting old and is not very strong, so this has been eliminated this year. We will have *dokusan* at 7:30, 10, and 4, with *sōsan* at 8. *Sōsan* is almost the same as

dokusan except that, whereas *dokusan* is optional, everyone must go to *sōsan*.

Weather damp and chilly. In work period we clean up litter where pine trees have been cut down. Practically all the pines on the temple grounds have been killed by the *matsukui-mushi*, an insect that is wiping out the pines all over Japan. One after another the beautiful old trees, some of them hundreds of years old, have to be cut down, leaving the grounds stark and devastated. But there seems to be nothing that can be done. One can only hope the other trees will grow up quickly to fill the emptiness.

Pain in my back at late afternoon sitting session, probably due to the fact that I am not yet accustomed to the yard work and the routine in general. I'm reminded of how quickly the mind becomes foggy with prolonged sitting, particularly when one is fatigued. One is constantly forgetting even a short, simple koan, and in its place come all sorts of ridiculous and unrelated words and phrases to lead the mind astray and block concentration.

Bad evening, more pain in back. The regular evening *teishō*, or lecture, by the *roshi* is on the *Zenkai ichiran*, a collection of Confucian axioms and pronouncements arranged like Zen koans. In addition, as in other years, the *roshi* is reading from Tōrei's instructions for *rōhatsu*, an Edo period text in classical Japanese that makes next to no sense to me when read aloud. *Roshi* is having trouble with his eyes and takes a long time at the reading. He always tells us jokingly that *teishō* is a good time to take a little nap, and with material like this, I would have to agree with him.

A few local people come for the evening sitting session, *teishō*, and *sōsan*. This year there is a nurse, a young man

from the shipyard, and some school teachers. Also a number of people have come from Osaka for the weekend. After the evening schedule is over, we gather to drink *amazake*, a very mild, sweet home-brewed sake, and tea.

Sunday, December 2

Cold and very windy, wind howling through the meditation hall. Koan still going very badly—I am apparently not coming anywhere near the right answer and can't tell why or how to change my approach. I was afraid my legs would be a problem in the last hour before lunch, but then suddenly I reached one of those wonderful plateaus of calm. It's not that the pain ceases, but that you recede from it, you move up a little higher where you can look down on it and say with confidence, this much I can handle. I hope I can get there again this afternoon. Ryūkō has been going around the hall and giving everyone a beating with the stick, but impartially and without emotion, as it should be. Some people make a very impressive smack, but I just sound like an old sofa cushion. Is this because I have on so many layers of clothing, or just because the blows sound different when they are at a distance from you?

Yesterday at *samu* someone pointed out some *shii*, or pasania nuts, that had fallen on the main approach to the temple and showed me how to eat one. Today I went and picked up some more and ate them. They are very small, brownish-black, and the kernel tastes something like a filbert. Eating them makes me think of Bashō and Ryōkan and other Japanese writers who talk about pasania trees and nuts, and it pleases me very much to think that now I too have eaten of the fruit of the pasania.

Monday, December 3

A clear, still morning. Many people had come from Osaka to attend the sessions on Saturday night and Sunday, but they have all gone back to Osaka. We are down to just six, including Anne Marie, a French woman who teaches in Kyoto, and old Mr. Yamagiwa, a retired company president in his seventies who sits in the meditation hall with a little lap robe over his knees. (He is the oldest member of the group; the youngest is the twelve-year-old son of one of the businessmen from Osaka.) I am wearing a heavy kimono and *hakama* skirt that wraps around my legs, so I manage to keep warm most of the time, though on very cold mornings I sometimes get the shakes.

The food always tastes so good at *rōhatsu*! It's amazing that you can work up such an appetite just doing *zazen*. Of course the work sessions around the grounds and the regular schedule help the hunger. For *shukuza*, or breakfast, we have been having rice gruel with sweet potatoes in it, which is delicious. Today for *saiza*, or lunch, we had some particularly good *udon*, or wheat noodles, that someone brought from Shikoku. They are served in big pots of boiling water and eaten dipped in a sesame-flavored sauce. Aside from eating, the other great pleasure at *rōhatsu* is the wonderful feeling when you crawl into bed at the end of the day and stretch out your weary legs, knowing that in a moment you will be sound asleep. But of course one really shouldn't be going to bed at all during *rōhatsu*.

Good afternoon. I washed my clothes so I will have a clean change of underwear and shirt to put on the last day. Had bad pain in my back in late afternoon sitting session, but then recovered. Just a little shift in the arrangement of your cushions or posture can clear up the pain. *Remember* this. The pain does not necessarily get progressively worse

with time—it sometimes goes the other way. *You will not be tried beyond endurance.*

Tuesday, December 4

A rainy morning. Our work session consists of indoor jobs mopping corridors, cleaning toilets, mending paper panels that have become torn. As I sit in the meditation hall afterward, I can smell the *karin*, or Chinese quince, that grows just outside the window. This time of the year it has big waxy yellow fruit on it that gives off a lovely spicy odor, as though the tree were trying to cheer us along in our endeavors. There are several new people in the group, including a Mexican who is studying Japanese at Tenri University in Nara. He doesn't seem to have had much experience sitting and looks as though he's having a hard time. I am reminded of the time some years ago when a young American who was teaching English in Wakayama showed up for *rōhatsu*. I don't think he knew just what he was getting into, and I suspect he had quite a lot of pain, but he gamely stuck it out to the end. One day at work session he confided to me that he wasn't making much progress with his koan. "I told the *roshi* that I didn't find it a very meaningful question!" he announced. I gulped. "And what did the *roshi* say?" I asked. "He said 'Talk to Watson about it.'" I told him that if he found the question so meaningless, why didn't he try giving a meaningless answer. I don't know how it came out.

If there is one thing the participants in a *rōhatsu* loathe and detest, it is visitors to the temple who disrupt the schedule. Of course in a very strict temple, *all* visitors are turned away during *rōhatsu*, but for various reasons it is impossible to do that here. So people at times come in and take up the *roshi's* time and throw the schedule off. To a bunch of cold, hungry people sitting in the meditation hall

with aching legs, even a ten- or fifteen-minute delay in the bell that signals *dokusan* or the gong or clappers that call us to meals can be agonizing. Meanwhile the tinkle of the visitor's carefree laughter carries across the compound to our ears, while we sit with our lapful of pain and curse the intruder.

As usual at *rōhatsu*, much of the *roshi's* conversation when we see him at *teishō* or tea-drinking time consists of accounts of how tough the *rōhatsu* routine is at this or that temple, where they beat people the most, where the snow comes right in the meditation hall, etc. This is the kind of talk Zen people seem to relish, like old soldiers or sailors exchanging stories about which assignments or bases are toughest. The other type of talk most often heard from the *roshi* is of former *roshis* who were famous for the rigorous training they underwent, their youthful zeal, or their contempt in later years for power, authority, position. This seems to sum up the Zen ideal as it has been handed down, something that you feel has a living connection with the past. But it is the kind of ideal that will never have much popular appeal. Zen people have always known that, of course. They repeatedly say that one can never expect to find any more than a handful of real Zen men or women around at any given time. I suppose that's why they make so little effort to proselytize. There's a feeling that the people who are really suited for Zen will somehow find their own way to the religion, and that there is little point in talking to the others.

Wednesday, December 5

Funny how the different days of the seven-day period have their distinctive "feel," depending upon their place in the order. After the hush and loneliness of the 30th, one is happy to be launched into the first day. The second day can

be very tiring as one is adjusting to the new hours of sleeping and rising and the daily routine. At this point it is all *noborizaka*, or “uphill climb,” as the *roshi* constantly reminds us, and he himself is accordingly tough in the way he treats us. One sees the days passing but hardly ventures to look ahead at how many are left. Then on the 4th you go “over the hump,” and there is a mood of restrained elation. By this time it is apparent that you are going to be able to make it to the end. With this realization comes a kind of letdown—is this all there is? At the same time, discipline seems to grow a little laxer and the *roshi* becomes a bit more benign. Now we are into the 5th, which means that the end is approaching. More and more one finds oneself thinking about things one wants to eat or drink or do when one gets on the “outside” again. It’s not so much that one misses such particular items of food or drink. What one misses is the opportunity to exercise the will, to decide for oneself what one will eat or do. Now that I’ve given up smoking, about the only opportunity I have to make a choice during *rōhatsu* is when I decide whether or not to have a drink of water, and that’s not a terribly exciting decision.

It finally happened—what I’m always fearful of: we got caught in a session that ran overtime and reduced us—or me, at least—to the state of a painful cripple. It happened, as these things usually do, because the schedule got a little off. Ten o’clock *dokusan* didn’t begin until around 10:15, which meant we got back to the meditation hall about 10:40 instead of 10:30. The remaining time until lunch at 11:30 should have fallen into two sessions with a break in the middle. But because it was late, Ryūkō decided to run it all together into one 50-minute session. At another point in the day that might not have bothered me, but coming at the end of the morning, it did me in. I have said that one is not tried beyond endurance, and I will stick by

that. But one is at times pushed a lot nearer the borderline than one would like to be. Toward the end, a kind of numbness set in, but I’m very disappointed in myself that I can’t seem to get better control of the pain as I have in previous years. It rained throughout the morning, and it is usually delightful to sit in the meditation hall and hear the soft rustle of the rain. But when you are in pain and listening intently in hopes you will hear the *jikijitsu* picking up his bell and clappers to signal a break, the sound of the rain can be cruelly deceiving. The drops pocking from the eaves seem to be speaking to you, and what they say is nothing nice.

And out of all this ache and fret comes a splendid discovery. When I had calmed down from my outrage, I began to wonder why I should have so much more pain than at times in the past. When I went to the meditation hall for the 1 to 2 sitting, I tried putting my right leg not high up on my left calf, as I ordinarily do at home or when sitting for short periods, but farther over into my crotch so the right ankle bone is not resting on my left leg. Result: the pain is cut at least in half, if not more. Why didn’t I think of this earlier? Why can’t someone teach me these things? Again the point to remember is that a very slight change in posture or sitting arrangement can make things enormously easier at times. Be prepared to bear up when there is nothing else you can do, especially when caught in a bad posture in the midst of a session when movement is out of the question. But at the same time never stop experimenting to see if there isn’t a better, more comfortable way to sit. Now I feel I can face the rest of the day!

This afternoon we worked up back of the main garden, cleaning up more pine mess. The maples around the upper pond have turned a very beautiful color this year, almost

making you forget the ravaged pines. In addition, the *tsuwabuki* are in bloom, low-standing plants with dark shiny green leaves and stalks of yellow aster-like flowers that seem to glow in the shadows.

While we were working, a very friendly white dog appeared and frolicked around where we were. When we finished and went to the meditation hall, he came right along and wanted to climb up on the platform. Our stern shouts and commands to get out were taken as a joke and he only bounced around all the more, until we finally had to drive him out and shut the doors of the hall. Then Anne Marie, who had been working somewhere else around the grounds, came along and, not knowing what was going on, opened the doors and in no time our friend was bouncing around the hall again.

Thursday, December 6

The temple is very lively today, as this is the day the local farmer-parishioners bring rice and daikon radishes as their contribution to the temple. This temple serves various functions and various different groups in the community, so activities like this have to go on even though it is *rōhatsu*. (One year we had an elaborate funeral right in the middle of *rōhatsu* when an elderly parishioner died suddenly.) The contributions are brought to the big entrance hall, where the donors' names are written down in a book. The daikon are neatly tied in bundles of three or four radishes each. This afternoon at work session we will rig bamboo poles under the eaves of the shed behind the kitchen and hang the daikon on the poles, where they will dry for a few days before being put into barrels for pickling. The rice donations will be carted off by a man from the local rice store who has come with his truck. He will store the rice for the temple and bring it when it is needed.

At *yakuseki*, the evening meal, we had some of the daikon that was brought today, boiled in broth with fried bean curd. It tasted indescribably good, particularly as it is a cold evening. If you tried to fix it at home it would never taste this good. I think one reason the food at the temple tastes so good is that everything is cooked in big batches, enough to serve twenty or thirty people. You never know when people may turn up unexpectedly at mealtime, so there has to be plenty of food on hand. And if there are leftovers, they are all dumped in together and taste even better the second day.

Since the *rōhatsu* is almost over, and since tonight, unlike so many other nights, I do not have to spend time looking up a *go*, or capping phrase, to take to *dokusan* in the morning, I decided to do a little *yaza*, or "night sitting." It is optional, but if one is really earnest in his *rōhatsu* practice he ought to be doing it every night for several hours or more instead of going to bed, either on the veranda or in the garden or meditation hall. But I'm the kind of person who works at things slowly and steadily rather than in great bursts of activity—in my college days I never stayed up all night studying for an exam or finishing a term paper—and anyway I'm afraid if I do *yaza* I may be too tired to get through the following day properly. But tonight I was feeling a little guilty, as I know that others of our group do *yaza* each night in the meditation hall, so I went off to join them for a while.

It was bright moonlight outside, but the hall was very dark, with only the two small altar lamps burning at the rear of the hall. I could make out the dark shapes of several sitters but it was impossible to tell who they were. The night was extraordinarily still—no trains going by, no cars, no planes, and more unusual, no owl hoots or other bird or animal noises. I sat for about thirty minutes. I would like

to say that the experience was moving or mysterious, but I'm afraid spooky is about the best I could say of it. When I left around 10, the others were still in their places, leaving me feeling as guilty as I had been to begin with. One good effect of the *yaza* was that I got quite chilled, so that the bed felt even better than ever when I crawled in.

Friday, December 7

The final day, when we will have the "last" of everything—last morning service, last morning work period, etc. The chanting at the morning service, incidentally, has been going a little better for me these last few days. The monk who sets the pace usually goes so fast I can barely keep up, particularly on the Kannon chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, the longest piece, which comes right at the beginning when I'm still only half-awake. But someone must have spoken to him, as he has slowed down the tempo a little.

By this time one is so accustomed to the routine that one no longer has any great desire to see the *rōhatsu* end. But of course it does, and the last day is usually marked by various interruptions and changes in the schedule and the departure of people who have a long trip home and must be at work tomorrow. After many tries, I have at last gotten the right capping phrase to wind up the koan I have been working on and am now started on a new koan.

Afternoon work session back of the kitchen, the last day of *rōhatsu* rapidly fading away. We were weeding and cleaning around the back steps, a flight of rough stone steps going down the slope from the kitchen garden, a sunny spot, just right for a cold day like this. The sky was superbly clear and blue and the view out over the valley was very lovely. The rice has long since been harvested and the fields are planted now with winter crops of lettuce, beans, and garlic.

I wonder why all through the week I have thought repeatedly of New York, New Jersey, scenes in the Hudson Valley, riding on the Jersey Central and watching the little towns go by—in the days when the windows of the Jersey Central were clean enough to see out of. I don't especially wish to be in those places right now, but somehow it is indescribably pleasant when sitting in the meditation hall to have memories of them come floating up in my mind. Particularly memories of New York as it was when I was a student, drinking beer in the San Remo, shopping for green vegetables and Italian sausage on Madison Street near my apartment, the way the Third Avenue El came clattering down from Chatham Square, stooping to get under the Brooklyn Bridge. Perhaps sitting helps to release these happy recollections from the past.

All the sitting and *teishō* and *sōsan* have come to an end and it is time for the *jōdōe*, or Attainment of Enlightenment Ceremony that commemorates Shakyamuni's enlightenment and brings the *rōhatsu* to a close. A little after 9 in the evening we file into the Hattō, or Dharma Hall, the main hall of the temple, and line up in two rows facing each other at right angles to the altar and the tall dais at the back of the hall upon which sits the statue of Shakyamuni Buddha in the center with attendant statues on either side.

The *hōku*, or Dharma drum, begins to sound. It is a large round drum that rests on a stand in the northeast corner of the hall. The beater stands in front of it and beats it with two drumsticks. The beating is quite elaborate, alternating between thumps on the head of the drum in a syncopated pattern of te-tum-tum-tum-tum that increases in speed, and a wild rattling noise made by passing the drumsticks rapidly over the round metal knobs that

decorate the rim of the drum. The alternating clatter of this and the resounding bongs from the head of the drum create an atmosphere of tension and excitement. The drumming continues until the *roshi* and his attendant enter the hall.

The *roshi* stands facing the altar in front of a large square of cloth that is spread on the tile floor. After a bow, he walks around the cloth and up to the incense burner on the altar. The attendant stands beside him, his head bowed low, and with a great flourish of his arm removes the lid of the lacquer box of incense he is carrying and holds up the box. The *roshi* takes incense and drops it in the censer.

The *roshi* and attendant move back to their former position in front of the cloth. Two men in robes of *komusō* monks begin to play on vertical flutes of the kind called *shakuhachis*. Everyone chants the *Daihi Emmon Bukai Jinshu*, a Sanskrit text that pledges devotion to the Three Treasures—the Buddha, the doctrine, and the religious community. The *roshi* removes his *zagu*, a piece of cloth that is folded over his shoulder, spreads it out on top of the larger cloth, steps out of his big red-and-white pointed Chinese shoes, and performs three prostrations on the cloth. At his age it is hard for him to get up and down. We watch apprehensively, wishing there were some way we could help.

He goes to the altar again and burns more incense. He returns to his former position and in a loud, drawn-out voice intones a Chinese poem in seven-character *chüeh-chü*, or quatrain form, that he has composed for the occasion. He says he does not like the job of composing such poems in Chinese because the prosodic rules are so exacting. From what I can get of the words, the poem seems to say something about the light of the Buddha's great achievement shining down over the centuries to us.

The *shakuhachis* begin to play again as the *roshi* and his

attendant withdraw. Then we file forward one by one to bow before the statue of Shakyamuni.

Because the images in a Zen Dharma hall are placed so high up above the floor, they tend to look more remote and aloof than the images in many other types of Buddhist halls. They are not hidden away behind doors and curtains, as are many of the images in temples of Esoteric Buddhism, but neither do they loom down on you in an awesome manner as do the giant images in the old Nara temples. They just seem rather far away, not to be taken particular notice of, which is perhaps appropriate in view of the nature of Zen teaching.

But on this one night, perhaps because of the repeated offerings of incense made to him, the music, the poem, all in his honor, Shakyamuni seems to come to life, to glow in his gilt and take on an air of solemn importance. It is *his* accomplishment we are celebrating, *his* example we have, in our meager way, been attempting to emulate all week, and as I look up at him sitting there, I am suddenly moved. I guess it is the only point in the whole *rōhatsu* procedure when I have a specifically religious, or at least pious and reverent, feeling and it only lasts a moment. Yet I look forward to it each year, and come away with a sense of having been in touch momentarily with something of immense value and significance.

I am back in the room where we sleep and the clappers are sounding to call us to the party that comes at the very end. We will have *oden*, a stew made of bean curd and assorted vegetables simmered in broth, and beer and sake to drink. Tomorrow I will take an early train back to Osaka.

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