

The Zen Center

A Buddhist Community



Ven. Philip Kapleau, Abbot

February 17, 1986

DEAR YAMADA-SAN, the copy of your letter to David Skates, addressed to Rochester, has been forwarded to me here in Mexico. I don't know why you sent me the letter, but since you have it does give me the opportunity to correct a number of errors of fact in it.

1) You told Skates I did not complete the Blue Rock Record koans. You are mistaken; I finished all of them with Yasutani Roshi. But I can see how you could have been misled into thinking otherwise. When Yasutani Roshi went abroad you were kind enough to give me dokusan. I saw this as a chance to review a few random koans in that book with you that I was unsure of. You didn't ask me how far I had gone in the Blue Rock Record and I didn't tell you that I had been passed on all the koans by Yasutani Roshi but that I had only wanted to review some of them with you. Also, you are evidently unaware that when Yasutani Roshi came to America, I went to several week-long sesshin with him and also had dokusan with him at other times. In the course of those sesshin we went over quite a few of the precept koans. Since you were not in the United States with him you could not have known about these things; furthermore, Yasutani Roshi on his return to Japan would not have communicated that to you because, as you know, dokusan is confidential and what transpires there is not to be revealed to anyone.

2) You also wrote Skates that I am not a dharma heir of Yasutani Roshi. I never pretended to be one. I have only said he gave me permission to teach, and that is true. The first year he came to Rochester he gave me permission to hold daisan. He told me I could do that until he returned to the United States the following year, at which time he would have a public ceremony for me if everything went all right in the meantime. Unfortunately, everything did not go all right in the interim. Many things happened involving Eido Shimano, who was living in New York at that time. As a result of Eido's behavior, when Yasutani Roshi came to New York the following year I phoned him and told him not to bring Eido with him to Rochester. This was a foolish thing for me to say to the Roshi and he obviously resented it, because when he came to Rochester to hold a 7-day sesshin later on he was angry with me. I don't blame him. But I did apologize to him at the time. In any case, he refused to hold the ceremony.

You should also know that before I left Japan Yasutani Roshi gave me a certificate saying I could act as a missionary teacher for his sect of Zen. You know of course that he broke away from the traditional Soto sect in Japan and formed his own religious organization. Not only did he give me this certificate but he also gave me one of his robes and bowls. I interpreted this as evidence of our deep relationship at the time as an ordained disciple of his.

7 Arnold Park, Rochester, New York 14607

Telephone: 716-473-9180

3) You also say in your letter that I did not finish all the books of koans demanded of a dharma heir. That is true, but I wasn't a dharma heir. Furthermore, you must know that teachers under certain circumstances do permit students to teach regardless of how many koans they have passed or even if they have passed none at all. In this connection, Nakagawa Soyen Roshi himself told me that he did not even have kensho when Yamamoto Gempo Roshi appointed him his successor. When Yasutani Roshi gave me permission to teach he told me that since in America at the time there were no Soto sect teachers, to his knowledge, who had the training in koans that I had had, he felt that it was all right for me to teach, as I have indicated.

4) You say that Yasutani Roshi was very pained over what happened between him and me in Rochester. I knew that to be true and that is why I apologized to him not only during the sesshin but also publicly when I wrote the book Zen: Dawn in the West. You also wrote Skates that the Roshi had sent me a strong letter about all of this and that if I could have read it I would have known how he felt. The letter he sent me was in reply to a letter I sent him resigning as his disciple, yet thanking him for all the help he had given me over the years. I did know what was in that letter because your son Masamichi, who was in Rochester at the time, translated it for me. What the Roshi said no fair-minded person would call harsh or strong.

5) The most bizarre contention in your astonishing letter to Skates is your statement that you and Kubota-san are the true authors of The Three Pillars of Zen, that I merely arranged the form but that the essence of the content represents your work and his. The truth is that you and I collaborated only on these portions of the book: Bassui's Sermon and Letters, the Iwasaki Letters, the Oxherding Verses, and the extract on "Being-Time" from the Shobogenzo. If you consult The Three Pillars of Zen you will readily see that these portions add up to only 51 pages out of a total of 200 in the book. As for Kubota-san, he and I collaborated on Yasutani Roshi's teisho on the koan Mu and two of the enlightenment stories. This adds up to 21 pages out of a total of 200. Neither you nor Kubota-san had anything to do with Yasutani Roshi's Introductory Lectures, the Dokusan material (which Yasutani Roshi gave me permission to include), the Enlightenment Stories, the lengthy Introductions, the extensive Glossary, and the questions and answers on postures. All of these sections add up to 128 pages. It is true that on occasion I did solicit your opinion on a few quotations from Dogen-zenji, and you were kind enough to help me interpret them. It is also true that you and Kubota-san, being Japanese, naturally did the primary translations from the Japanese. But surely you remember that you and I (and also he and I) went over these preliminary translations again and again. Your limited written and spoken English at that time was no better than my poor written Japanese. You say that my spoken Japanese was like a baby's. I must have been a precocious baby to be able to interpret for Yasutani Roshi when his foreign students came to dokusan. I had studied the Chinese characters, but I must admit that while I understood the meaning of a number of them, my ability to use them left much to be desired. It seemed more important to me at the time to do zazen for long hours rather than spend that time studying the kanji. But that may have been a mistake. Nevertheless I am grateful to you and Kubota-san for your valuable contributions, for which I gave you both credit in my Introduction. Those labors of yours and Kubota-san's, as well as those of others who contributed to the book, have brought thousands of readers to Buddhism, a fact of which you should be proud and happy but evidently are not.

Since you had such a relatively small part in the writing of the complete book, I'm at a loss to understand your resentment in not having your name on the cover of The Three Pillars of Zen. Actually, when the hard-cover edition was first published, my name appeared on the cover as the Editor. But when the rights to the book were transferred to other publishers, the word "Editor" was dropped by them, not by me.

It passes my comprehension how you could write to a complete stranger like Skates the kind of letter you wrote him. Surely it must have been obvious to you that he is an unstable character. Skates, for your information, was a member of the Rochester Zen Center for only two years in the 1960's. He then disappeared and only recently re-appeared at the Center. He knows absolutely nothing about what went on or goes on in the Rochester Zen Center. He doesn't represent anybody but himself. He has claimed to have permission to use the names of certain members. But when they found out what he was doing they called me and said he was using their names without their permission. When he came to the Center not long ago he was welcomed by those members who remembered him. And then, for reasons none of us can fathom, he called me and said he was very disturbed by things he saw when he visited the Center. A doorknob was broken and this kind of thing never happened when he was at the Center in the 1960's; in fact it made him cry to see such neglect. You might also be interested to know that he was recently divorced by his third wife, by whom he has children, and that this no doubt contributed to his disturbed mental state.

I showed the copy of your letter to Skates to one of my senior students, who commented: "How can someone like Yamada Roshi, who has passed many koans, belittle an ordained Buddhist priest, in violation of the precept not to speak of the shortcomings of others? How can someone who has had as much training as this man presumably has had carry around with him for more than 20 years, like a hot rice cake stuck in his throat, grievances against you? Where is the non-attachment Zen training is supposed to develop? Where is the compassion and the forbearance? It makes one wonder about Japanese Zen Buddhism, doesn't it?"

I am sorry, as much for you as for myself, that you have seen fit to carry on your crusade against my character, not only with Skates but with others as well. In spite of that I bear you no ill will. That is my karma and I must expiate it. As for your karma, that is something for you to think about. All this aside, I am still grateful to you and Mrs. Yamada for your many kindnesses when I was living in Japan and I wish for you both the best of health.

Sincerely,


Philip Kapleau

Yamada Koun Roshi
1-6-5 Hase
Kamakura 248
Japan