



What is the Mentorgarten?

by

Nyogen Senzaki

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Opening Day Address by Nyogen Senzaki

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very glad to meet all of you this afternoon. We are going to continue our weekly study class in Buddhism in this new home. The monthly meetings and other gatherings will also be held here. As all meetings will be held under the auspices of the Mentorgarten, I will tell you what this strange name stands for. I coined this name some ten years ago and gave it to my meetings. Whether it would be a class for lessons in languages or a meeting to study literature, philosophy, psychology, or Buddhism, I call each one by the name of Mentorgarten. Therefore the Mentorgarten is a sort of club for studious people, rather than a school or church with exclusive meaning.

The name was adopted, because I am very fond of the theory of Froebel's Kindergarten. You see, my dear friends, the whole world is a beautiful garden where many dormant seeds of happiness lie. They would blossom and bear fruit if cultivated and I am only too glad to be a faithful gardener and offer my service for this great Kindergarten.

Generally speaking, I am a Buddhist but I do not belong to any sect of the churches. I call myself Zen-Buddhist because Zen is the essence of Buddhism and I am satisfied with the teaching as far as I have studied in the past years. I do not belong to any Zen church and it is not my wish to work as a Minister from certain Zen churches in Japan or of any other country. I am contented as an earth worm—such a creature! Such a fat and awkward book-worm! I mean to say that I am satisfied as a free citizen of the world, and America is good enough for me. Some Californians do not love Japanese, but I love Californians—all of them, and adopt them as my fellow-students. Since I have lived in this city for more than twenty years, I certainly feel at home in foggy San Francisco.

You see, ladies and gentlemen, when you get out of the sectarian idea, you can enjoy a real care-free life. There you may not see any difference between Christians and Buddhists from the point of view of brotherhood. You will admire and respect them both, if they are devoted to their own religion. Let us have this Mentorgarten as an ambassador between Christianity and Buddhism, and have mutual understanding and clear-to-the-bottom investigation among ourselves for unhampered research into every religion.

This is an attitude of Zen, and no modern thinker will deny it, if they are honest truth-seekers. Prof. William James once said that his philosophy, Pragmatism, is an old thought with a new name. Now, I would like to say that Zen is a new thought—an up-to-the-minute idea, with an old name.

I can see the future of our thinking people as they realize and actualize the naked truth of the universe, not in faith nor in belief, but through experience, as a product of human intelligence.

Thus, the Mentorgarten welcomes every thinker who is sincere and earnest in finding the true source of humanity. There is no such thing as membership. As a free citizen of the world, you should be able to come or go whenever or wherever you please; for the whole world is a beautiful garden and no one should hinder you.

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I have developed the educational part of Mentorgarten work since 1915, the religious part since 1922, and I am going to continue the same, if possible, with a Zen-Master from Japan; if not, then single-handed. Please come into our Buddhist library and Meditation Hall any day of the week, and every Thursday into the study class. That is if you are satisfied with my ways as host and wish to visit with each other.

You are requested to practice your Buddhism right here in this home. Meditate together and send your thoughts of loving-kindness to the friends present and also to the whole world. This alone makes it worthwhile to have our meeting here. Besides we can warm up our friendships in meeting here: getting acquainted with new friends and renewing kind feelings towards old friends of ours, for you see, we are dwelling in such a harmonious atmosphere now. We may exchange our knowledge and refined tastes which each of us has been fortunate enough to acquire from other sources. I prefer not to enter into any discussion, argument or debate in this Zen-home; and I especially implore you not to consider other's faults with harsh judgment. You may not be right after all.

While teaching in a girl's high school in Japan, I was always annoyed with complaints such as: "If she comes here, I will not come tomorrow," and the like. No one has the right to exclude others, but I actually saw in the other meetings that some of my old pupils—those almond-eyed girls—reborn among so-called white people in San Francisco. I recited Mantras and deported them to the land of nothingness. I do not care to do this sort of a job.

Here is the key-note of our meditation this afternoon. It is an original Chinese poem translated into English. It reads:

"Bamboo shadows sweeping the stairs, but no dust is stirred.
The moon-light penetrates deep in the bottom of the pool, but no trace is left in the water."

Friends, Mrs. Ijichi and Mrs. Kobayashi have prepared the Japanese vegetarian dinner for us all. Let us enjoy it together and see if we can linger around the palace of emancipation as the writer of this poem did.

Nyogen Senzaki, 1928
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