

Kokoro – Sensei and I – Parts 1 to 9

Natsume Sōseki – 1914

Book One - Sensei and I

1

I always called him Sensei. Herein, therefore, I will write of him as Sensei and not use his true name. It's not so much that I fear how the world may judge him, but rather that it feels to me more natural. Whenever I think of him, the word "Sensei" immediately forms on my lips. As I take up my pen, the same feeling arises. To use an initial, or some such detached term, would be to make him a stranger.

It was in Kamakura that I first met Sensei. I was a student then, still in my youth. I'd received a postcard from a friend who was at the seaside for the summer. He invited me to come join him, so I scraped together some money and departed. It took me several days to secure my funds. Then, not three days after my arrival in Kamakura, the friend who'd invited me was suddenly summoned home by telegram. According to the telegram, his mother was ill. My friend, however, doubted this. He'd been pressured for some time, by his parents back home in the country, toward a marriage match in which he took little interest. In this modern day, he was too young for marriage. On top of this, the all-important other party was not to his liking. This was why he was summering outside of Tōkyō, instead of returning home as usual. He showed me the telegram and asked my advice. I didn't know what to tell him, other than that if his mother really were ill then he must, by all means, go to her. In the end, he decided to go. As a result, I was left on my own.

The start of classes was still a long way off. I could stay in Kamakura or I could go back - the decision was mine. I decided to stay put, at least for the time being. My friend was of a wealthy family in the Chūgoku region, and he was never wanting for money. Nevertheless, he was a student like myself, and young like myself, so our styles of living were not dissimilar. Accordingly, I could remain on my own there without the trouble of seeking a lesser room.

My inn was in a remote quarter of Kamakura. Playing billiards, eating ice cream, or other such fashionable engagements, required a long walk through the fields. Rickshaws were available, but the fare was twenty sen. Nevertheless, there were a number of private villas scattered here and there. The sea was close by, so the situation, for bathers, was quite ideal.

Every day I set out for the sea. As I made my way past old, soot-darkened thatch roofs and descended toward the beach, I would wonder at the multitude of city dwellers residing here to escape the heat. Atop the sand was a mass of men and women in motion. At times, the sea itself was packed with dark heads, much like a bath house. I knew not a soul among them. Amidst by this vibrant scene, I enjoyed myself immensely, lazing on the sand, breaking the waves with my knees, or jumping about in the surf.

It was within this throng that I first spotted Sensei. At that time, there were two beach-side tea huts. I had come, by happenstance, to frequent one of the two. Unlike those in the grand villas of Hase, the vacationers here did not have access to dedicated facilities and were reliant on shared changing rooms. At the tea huts,

in addition to relaxing over tea, guests could launder their bathing suits, wash the salt from their bodies, and check personal items such as hats or parasols. I didn't own a bathing suit, but I was concerned for my belongings, so before swimming I would check them all at the tea hut.

2

When I first saw Sensei at the beach-side tea hut, he was just disrobing in preparation for a swim. I, myself, was doing the reverse, having just returned from the water, the breeze cooling my wet body. There were numerous dark heads in motion between us, obstructing our line of sight. Under normal circumstances I would never have noticed Sensei. However, in spite of the crowd, and in spite of my own wandering mind, I did notice him. The reason I did was a Westerner in his company.

The skin of this Westerner was conspicuously fair, and it caught my attention as soon as I entered the tea hut. He'd been dressed in an authentic Japanese yukata, which he'd dropped neatly onto his stool. He then stood there with arms folded, surveying the sea. He wore his undershorts, the same kind we wore, and nothing else. This struck me as curious. Two days before I'd ventured to Yuigahama. I'd crouched on the sand for a long while and watched the Westerners bathe. My spot was slightly elevated and close to the hotel's rear entrance. As I'd crouched there, numerous men had emerged and headed for the surf. All had covered torsos, covered thighs, and covered arms. The ladies concealed their flesh even more so. Most wore rubber swim caps of maroon, navy, or indigo that bobbed distinctly in the waves. After witnessing such a scene, this Westerner standing here before us, in nothing but his undershorts, was truly novel.

He finally turned round and spoke a few words to a Japanese man who was stooping nearby. The Japanese man was picking up a towel that had fallen in the sand. As soon as he had it, he tied it around his head and proceeded toward the sea. This man was Sensei.

Out of sheer curiosity, I watched as the two of them walked, side by side, down to the water. I watched them proceed directly into the surf. They traversed the shallows, passing through throngs of boisterous bathers, reached a relatively deserted space, and began to swim. They swam toward the open sea, and I watched as their heads grew smaller. Then they turned and made a bee line back to the shore. Again in the tea hut, they wiped themselves dry without rinsing, dressed, and promptly departed.

After they left, I went back to my stool, sat down, and had a smoke. As I smoked, my mind, somewhat vacantly, wandered back to Sensei. I couldn't help but think that I'd seen him somewhere before. Try as I might, though, I failed to place him.

By that time, rather than carefree pleasure, I was feeling a sense of tedium. The next day, I took it upon myself to return to the tea hut again at the same hour. The Westerner did not show, but Sensei arrived, wearing a straw hat. He placed his glasses on the table, tied his towel around his head, and walked briskly down to the water's edge. Just like the day before, he cut past the boisterous bathers and began to swim out alone. As he did so, I was seized with the urge to follow. Kicking up water as I splashed through the shallows, I proceeded out to the depths. Once there, I began to swim arm over arm toward Sensei. Unlike the prior day, however, Sensei cut back toward the shore in an unexpected arc. Thwarted in my effort, I failed to

catch him. When I came up from the water and entered the tea hut, still shaking the drops from my hands, Sensei had already dressed. We met in passing as he made his way out.

3

The following day I was back at the beach at the same time, and again I saw Sensei. The day after that, I repeated the same routine. No opportunity arose, though, for greeting or exchange of words. Sensei's demeanor, in fact, was very much aloof. He arrived and departed like clockwork, all the while in a world of his own. However lively the scene around him might be, he appeared to pay it no mind. The Westerner, who was there the first time, did not return. Sensei was always alone.

On one occasion, Sensei walked up from the sea in his signature brisk manner, grabbed the yukata he'd tossed aside in the usual place, and found that, for whatever reason, there was a good deal of sand on its surface. He turned around and shook it several times. As he did so his glasses, which he'd placed beneath the garment, slipped between the planks and fell to the ground. Sensei donned his yukata, which was white with splashed accents, and tied his waist cord. Then he noticed his glasses were missing and immediately began to search. I ducked my head under the bench and picked up the glasses. Sensei thanked me as he took them from my hand.

On the next day, I followed Sensei into the surf. I swam out after him in the same direction. About two hundred meters out, Sensei turned back and greeted me. The two of us were alone out there, floating on a wide blue canvas of open sea. Intense sunlight bathed the sea and surrounding hills for as far as the eye could reach. I splashed about in the open water, a feeling of freedom and joy coursing through every muscle. Sensei, for his part, suddenly ceased all motion and rested on his back on the waves. I followed suit. The blue of the sky rained down in intense color, dazzling my eyes. "It's wonderful here," I called out.

After a while Sensei, as though waking in the middle of the sea, righted himself. "Shall we head back?" he suggested. Not lacking for stamina, my preference was to remain longer and enjoy the sea. However, at Sensei's suggestion I readily acquiesced. Together, we retraced our path and returned to the shore.

This was the start of my friendship with Sensei. I still didn't know, though, where he was staying.

Several more days passed, and I believe it was the afternoon of the third day. When I saw Sensei at the tea house, he turned to me and asked, out of the blue, if I intended to stay a good while longer. With no specific plans, I was ill prepared to answer his question. "I'm not really sure," was all I could manage. When I saw the grin on Sensei's face, I grew somewhat abashed. "And yourself, Sensei?" I felt compelled to ask in return. This was the first time I addressed him as Sensei.

That evening, I called on Sensei at his lodgings. He was not at a typical inn, but rather in a villa-like structure that was built on the vast grounds of a temple. I learned that he was staying as a guest there, having no family connection to the site. Each time I addressed him as Sensei, it seemed to elicit a forced smile. I had to explain that such was the way I always addressed my elders. I asked about the foreigner from the other day. Sensei talked of him for a bit, telling me, among other things, of his eccentricity and of how he had already left Kamakura. Sensei then added that, given his limited fellowship with his own countrymen, it

was curious that he'd made the acquaintance of a foreigner. At the end of the evening, I turned to Sensei and divulged that I thought I knew him from somewhere, but couldn't say where. Young and hopeful, I expected that Sensei should harbor a similar feeling. I eagerly awaited his answer. Sensei, for his part, pondered in silence for a moment and then replied, "You don't look at all familiar. It must have been someone else." My anticipation gave way to disappointment.

4

I returned to Tōkyō at the end of the month. Sensei had vacated his own summer place a good while earlier. On parting from Sensei, I'd asked if I might call on him from time to time. In a curt manner, he replied merely that, yes, I was welcome to stop by. I felt we'd developed a strong bond, and I'd expected something a little more heartfelt. His tepid response took my confidence down a notch.

In many such cases, I met with mild disappointment. It's possible that Sensei was aware of this, or it could be he had no idea. Through all these minor disappointments, I was never inclined to end our association. On the contrary, in fact, each brush with insecurity drew me further along. Up ahead, I believed, whatever it was I hoped for would appear before my eyes, and all would be right. I was in my youth. However, I was not inclined to expend my youthful energy on just anyone. I didn't know what it was, but something about Sensei warranted my engagement. Now at last, after Sensei's passing, I've begun to understand. From the very start, Sensei never disliked me. His occasional curt reply or cool demeanor were neither expressions of displeasure nor intent to drive me away. Sensei, wretched in his own being, was wont to hold others at arm's length. Believing himself unworthy, he fended off all who approached too near. Sensei's aversion to intimacy, rather than rising from disdain for others, was rooted in disdain for himself.

When I returned to Tōkyō, I had every intention of calling on Sensei. There were still two weeks before the start of classes, and I thought to go once in the interim. After being back for a few days, though, those feelings from Kamakura began to fade. The mood of the vibrant city, and the excitement of re-engaging in its rhythms, fully occupied my mind. As I saw the streets full of students, I felt anew the aspirations and apprehensions of a coming school year. For a while, I thought no further of Sensei.

After a month of classes, I was starting to feel drained. I walked the streets with a certain air of displeasure. In my room, my gaze wandered wistfully from one thing to another. Visions of Sensei came to mind. I wanted to see him again.

The first time I called at his home, Sensei was away. The second time, as I remember it, was the following Sunday. It was wonderful weather, the kind of day where the clear sky cleanses the soul. This time, too, Sensei was away. In Kamakura, Sensei had told me himself that he seldom went out. He'd even described himself as reclusive. Having failed twice now to see him, I recalled these words, and I was seized with a vague feeling of discontent. I lingered in the entryway, looking with some hesitation at the maidservant. The maidservant, who had taken my card on the previous occasion, bid me to wait and went back inside. A woman, presumably the lady of the house, appeared in her place. She was quite beautiful.

She kindly informed me of Sensei's whereabouts. Every month, she told me, he visited the cemetery in Zōshigaya to place flowers at the grave of a certain departed soul. "He just left, not ten minutes ago," she

said with a look of sympathy. I thanked her and stepped back outside. After walking a block toward the center of town, I decided I should stroll through Zōshigaya. Part of my thinking was that I might see Sensei. I turned on my heels and set off in the new direction.

5

I entered to the left through a nursery that fronted the cemetery, traversing a lane with maples planted down both sides. From a tea house at the end of the lane, a man resembling Sensei emerged. I moved nearer, close enough to see the sun reflect off the rims of his glasses. Without further hesitation, I called out, “Sensei!” in a loud voice. Sensei stopped in his tracks and turned my way.

“How did ... ? How did ... ?”

Sensei repeated these words twice over. Their tone, as he repeated them, rung heavy in the midday calm. I found myself at a loss for an answer.

“Did you follow me here? How did ...?” Sensei’s demeanor was perfectly relaxed, and his voice was perfectly restrained. However, a shadow of some sort seemed to pass over his countenance.

I explained to him how I’d come to be there.

“Did my wife tell you whose grave I came to visit?”

“No, that she didn’t say.”

“I see. -- I expect she wouldn’t, having only just met you. There’s no reason she should.”

Sensei seemed finally assured. The meaning of this all eluded me.

On our way back out to the boulevard, Sensei and I passed among the grave sites. There were graves marked ‘Isabella so-and-so’ and ‘Login, Servant of the Lord.’ Nearby stood a grave post inscribed with ‘All Living Creatures are Endowed with the Essence of Buddha.’ Another grave read ‘Minister Plenipotentiary so-and-so.’ I stopped in front of a small post engraved with ‘An · Toku · Retsu’ and asked Sensei about the reading of the characters. “They intended, I suppose, that we read those as André,” he replied with a wry smile.

Sensei, it seemed, did not share my interest in these diverse grave markers and the irony of their mutual proximity. I pointed out a round grave stone here, or a column of engraved granite there, and offered my opinion on all. Sensei listened patiently for a while, then finally said, “You’ve never thought seriously of the reality of death, have you?” I fell silent. Sensei said nothing further.

At the edge of the cemetery stood a single large ginkgo tree whose vast canopy blotted out the sky. When we were underneath, Sensei looked up into its high branches. “It’ll be beautiful here. In a short while the leaves will turn and fall to the ground, carpeting it with gold.” Once each month, Sensei passed beneath this tree.

In the distance, a man was smoothing the ground for new grave sites. He rested his hoe and looked our way. We proceeded on and turned to the left, emerging onto the main thoroughfare.

Having no particular place to go, I simply followed along with Sensei. He was more taciturn than usual. His silence didn't put me off, though, so I ambled comfortably at his side.

“Are you headed home now?”

“Yes. I've no other particular errands.”

“Is your family grave site there?” I broke the silence again.

“No.”

“Whose grave is it, then? -- a relation of yours?”

“No.”

Sensei gave no further response, and I stopped questioning. After we'd walked a bit, he abruptly came back to the subject. “The grave is that of a friend.”

“You visit your friend's grave once each month?”

“Yes, I do.”

6

After that, I called at Sensei's house from time to time. I always found him at home. As my visits grew in number, so too did their frequency.

Sensei's manner toward me though, even later on in our friendship, showed little change from the time of our initial encounter. He was always reserved. Sometimes he was too reserved, almost withdrawn. I'd sensed from the start that he was somehow a hard man to approach. At the same time, I'd felt most keenly a need to approach him. I was perhaps, in all the world, the only soul who felt this way toward Sensei. However, this instinct of mine was later vindicated by the course of events. It's a source of both pride and comfort to me now that, despite being deemed naïve or foolish, I trusted my inner voice. A man capable of love, in fact incapable of not loving, yet unable to embrace those whom he would cherish -- such a man was Sensei.

As I've mentioned, Sensei was always reserved. He was always composed. However, a peculiar shadow would at times cross his countenance, like the dark shadow of a bird as it passes a window. Almost before one noticed, it was gone again. It was at the cemetery in Zōshigaya, when I'd called out abruptly to Sensei, that I first observed this shadow on his brow. In that brief, unnatural moment, the ebb of my heart had lost a touch of its usual verve. It was just a momentary lapse, and soon enough I was fully myself again. I thought no more on that dark shadow till one evening in late autumn, when suddenly it came back to bear.

I was talking with Sensei, and in my mind I suddenly pictured the large gingko tree he had pointed out to me. Sensei's monthly visit to the cemetery, I reckoned, should be three days hence. My schedule was light that day, with classes concluding by noon. I turned to Sensei and asked, "Do you think that gingko in Zōshigaya has lost its leaves?"

"I expect it won't be fully bare just yet." Sensei looked me in the eye as he answered. For a moment, he didn't divert his gaze.

I continued. "Next time you go, may I accompany you? We can stroll the grounds together."

"I go to pay my respects. I don't go to stroll."

"But isn't it perfect for strolling as well?"

Sensei gave no reply. After a pause, he added, "No, I go in earnest to pay my respects." He seemed intent on separating his visitation from the idea of a stroll. Perhaps it was just a pretext for going without me. His behavior at the time struck me as eccentric, even childish. I wanted to press the matter. "We'll make it a visitation then. Take me with you. I can pay my respects as well."

To me, a visitation and a stroll were more or less one and the same. At this point, Sensei's brow darkened. A strange light shone in his eyes. He seemed beset by some ill-defined unease. One could distill it down to neither annoyance, nor contempt, nor fear. The memory of that moment in Zōshigaya, when I'd called out to him, came back to me in a flash. The look on his face was exactly the same.

"There are reasons ..." Sensei started. "There are reasons that I can't explain to you. My visits must be my own. Even my wife never comes with me."

7

I thought this peculiar. However, I was not there to scrutinize Sensei, so I simply let it pass. As I look back now, the approach I took toward Sensei is a point of pride. I believe it instilled our relationship with warmth and humanity. Had I probed in the least at Sensei's psyche, had I sought to analyze him, the bond of fellowship between us would have snapped then and there. I was young, of course, and not at all conscious of my own comportment. Perhaps that renders it all the more praiseworthy. I shudder to think of all that I could have done wrong, and of all that would have been lost. Even as things played out, Sensei stayed ever vigilant, even anxiously so, with respect to his privacy.

I came to visit Sensei regularly. I was at his door two or three times each month. One day, when my visits had come to be frequent, Sensei suddenly turned and asked me, "What draws you so often to visit a man like me?"

"What draws me? I can't say it's anything in particular. -- Do I impose on you?"

"I didn't say you impose."

Indeed, there was no indication from Sensei that I was unwelcome. I was aware that Sensei kept very limited company. I knew that of his former classmates, two or three at most resided in Tōkyō. Once in a while I shared the parlor with students from Sensei's home region, but it was clear to me that none were as close to him as I was.

"I'm a lonely man," Sensei confided. "That's why I appreciate your visits, and that's why I wonder what draws you here so often."

"But why should you need to ask?"

Sensei didn't answer the question I posed in return. Instead he looked at me and asked, "How old are you?"

To me, the dialogue that followed seemed unrelated to the subject at hand. For the moment, though, I left it at that and pushed no further. However, within four days I was back at Sensei's door.

Sensei smiled as soon as he entered the parlor. "Back already, are you?"

"Yes, I'm back."

Such a welcome, from anyone else, would have left me offended. Coming from Sensei, though, the effect was reversed. Far from feeling offense, I felt delight.

"I'm a lonely man." That evening, Sensei again spoke these same words. "I'm a lonely man, and I wonder if you aren't lonely too. I'm on in years and set in my ways. Your situation is different. Youth has a need to test itself. You'll want to make your mark somewhere ..."

"I'm not at all lonely."

"There's nothing so lonely as youth. If you aren't lonely, then what draws you here so often?" Sensei repeated these same words yet again. "My company, I'm afraid, will not relieve your loneliness. I don't have the power to grab it for you and pull it out by the roots. You'll have to reach out to others, and once you do, you'll be done with me." Sensei ended with a wistful smile.

8

Sensei's prognosis, happily, did not come to pass. But within his prognosis was a clear message that, at the time, lacking in experience, I failed to grasp. I continued my visits. Before long, as a matter of course, I was joining Sensei for dinner. This necessitated, naturally, that I converse with his wife.

Like any other man, I was not indifferent to women. However, I was young at that time and had little experience forging any real ties with the opposite sex. Possibly on this account, my interest was merely passive - musings over unfamiliar women seen on the street. Sensei's wife, when I'd met her before in the entry hall, had impressed me as quite beautiful. On each subsequent meeting, I was impressed again by her beauty. However, beyond that there was nothing that struck me as noteworthy.

This is not to say that Sensei's wife was dull. It should rather be said that she had no occasion to show me her personal side. I came to regard her as a mere extension of Sensei. She, for her part, graciously received me as a student who called on her husband. Apart from Sensei as a common touch point, there was no connection whatsoever between us. From those early encounters, the only impression that remains with me is the impression of her beauty.

On one occasion Sensei and I drank saké together. Sensei's wife joined to serve us. Sensei seemed in unusually good spirits. "You have one too," he said, draining his cup and handing it to his wife. She received it reluctantly, and not without some protest. Knitting her fair brows, she lifted the cup, after I'd filled it halfway for her, and put it to her lips. The following exchange then occurred between husband and wife.

"What's the occasion? You never ask me to drink."

"Only because you don't like to drink. But you should try it sometimes. It's good for the soul."

"I'm afraid it only torments mine. You seem quite jovial, though, from a little saké."

"Sometimes it does the trick, but I can't say that's always the case."

"How about tonight?"

"Tonight I'm feeling fine."

"You should drink a little each night."

"No, that won't do."

"Why not try it, if it works to cheer you?"

In Sensei's household were only the couple themselves and a maidservant. It was always quiet when I called. Never once did I hear the sound of laughter. It often felt as though Sensei and I were the only ones there.

"It would be nice to have children." Sensei's wife turned to me as she said this. I politely echoed her thought, but I did not, in fact, share her sentiment. Having no family of my own yet, I regarded children as an annoyance.

"Shall we take one in?" Sensei asked her.

"Adoption? Oh, I don't know." She turned my way again.

"We'll never have one of our own," Sensei replied.

His wife was silent. "Why is that?" I asked in turn.

"Divine retribution," Sensei said, and laughed aloud.

To the best of my knowledge, Sensei and his wife were a happy couple. I was not a part of their household, and I wasn't, of course, privy to their intimate dealings. However, there were times when I sat with Sensei and, having need of something, he would call for his wife rather than the maidservant. (His wife's name was Shizu.) "Hey there, Shizu," he would call out, turning toward the partition. There was a gentle sound to his voice. His wife would answer back, and then appear, in a manner most deferential. When we dined together on occasion and she joined us at the table, this bond between them was clearer still.

Sensei would sometimes take his wife to a concert or the theater. As I recall, it was also not unusual for them to take short trips together. I still have a picture postcard from their visit to Hakone. From Nikkō, they sent me a maple leaf by post.

This was the relationship between Sensei and his wife as I saw it at the time. There was but a single exception. One day, I arrived as usual and was about to announce myself from the entry hall, when I heard the sound of voices from the parlor. Rather than normal conversation, they sounded contentious. The parlor in Sensei's house was just off the entry hall, so standing before the partition I could well discern the tones of a quarrel. The raising of a male voice told me one of the parties was Sensei. The other party was more subdued, and I couldn't be sure, but I sensed it was Sensei's wife. She was possibly in tears. I lingered for a time in the entry hall, wondering what had happened, then quickly departed and returned to my lodgings.

A strange unease washed over me. I tried to read but couldn't concentrate. An hour passed, and Sensei appeared below my window and called my name. Surprised, I opened the window. He asked from below if I'd walk with him. I took out my watch, which was still tucked into the folds of my sash, and saw that it was a bit past eight. I was still dressed as for my visit, so I immediately went out front.

Sensei and I drank beer together that night. Sensei was not a heavy drinker. If the first few drinks didn't cheer him, he wasn't one to double down by drinking more.

"It's no use tonight," he said with a forced smile.

"The drink's not helping you?" I asked with some sympathy.

For my part, the earlier incident had been weighing on my mind the entire time, making me anxious. It was akin to a fishbone stuck in one's throat. I would think about speaking to Sensei frankly, then reconsider and decide not to. These inner vacillations, no doubt, presented themselves outwardly as an odd sort of restlessness.

"You seem out of sorts tonight," Sensei broached the subject. "The truth is, I'm not myself either. I suppose you've noticed."

I had no answer to give.

"I quarreled with my wife earlier. I let petty emotions get the better of me."

“Why did you ...” I couldn’t bring myself to voice the word quarrel.

“My wife misunderstands me. And when I try to tell her so, she refuses to listen. I got cross with her.”

“In what way does she misunderstand you?”

Sensei did not respond directly to my question. “If I were the kind of man she thinks I am, then I’d have no need to suffer so.”

The nature and extent of Sensei’s suffering were entirely unknown to me.