

# ZEN NOTES

the zen 

WHEN the Buddha had passed into Nirvana in the Twin Sala-tree Garden, in accordance with his request, the Mallas, one of the many tribes who made up the united India of that time, returned to Kusinagara to arrange for the cremation of his body. Kusinagara, the citadel of the Mallas, was not the Buddha's birthplace. He died in an alien country and his funeral was being celebrated according to alien customs.

The Mallas prepared the coffins and the wood and fragrant grasses for the funeral pyre and brought them back to their shrine, a temple called Makuta-Bandhana on the bank of the Hiranyavati River. In the temple of Makuta-Bandhana, the Mallas bathed the Buddha's body with warm and perfumed water, swathed it in fresh cotton, and wrapped it in many lengths of fine cotton cloth. They then placed the body in a golden coffin and poured over it perfumed oil. The golden coffin they placed in an iron casket, and this iron casket in a box made of fragrant sandalwood. Then upon this they piled many other fragrant woods and grasses to make a pyre. Among the Hindus this was the customary way of cremating a holy man. While these preparations were being made many people were dancing and singing songs around the coffin, as was usual at a funeral ceremony. They spread flowers on the ground, they brought precious foods and incense and wine, they played musical instruments, and they sang and danced, preparing for the burning of the sacred body of the Buddha.

Then the prime minister of the Mallas, whose name was Roja Malla, a friend of Ananda from the days when Ananda was still a layman, took the torch and laid it on the fragrant grasses and the piled up wood. But the wood did not kindle and the grasses did not burn. Then Maha Malla, the patriarch of the Mallas, approached and, seizing the torch, held its flame to the grasses and the heaped up wood, but the pyre still did not catch fire.

Thereupon Aniruddha, a cousin and disciple of the Buddha, said to the Mallas, "Stop, stop! You are unable to kindle the fire under the Buddha's coffin because of the will of the devas."

"Why do the devas not wish us to burn the coffin?" the Mallas asked.



"The devas are waiting for Mahakasyapa and his five hundred disciples," answered Aniruddha. "They have left Pava and are now on their way here to see the Buddha's body before it is cremated. The devas know Mahakasyapa's mind. For that reason the fire does not burn." "We shall certainly obey the wish of the devas," the Mallas said. And they ceased trying to kindle the pyre.

In ancient days a funeral had some meaning; with its dignity and solemnity it was certainly part of the activity of the human mind. And men waited for the kin to come. These days we send dead men to a concrete house and scorch them with electricity. We smell no burning of fragrant grasses, we see no dancing, and we hear no music. We have left nature, the nature of matter and the nature of man. We have left earth. All of a sudden a human being disappeared before our eyes. We do not see that human being going.

At that time Mahakasyapa and his five hundred disciples were coming from Pava in the direction to which they felt drawn by their mind. One night Mahakasyapa had dreamed the dream of bad omen and in the morning had seen a strange cloud. He thought, "The Buddha is now passing into Nirvana. We must go at once." So with five hundred disciples he dashed along the road to Kusinagara.

Mahakasyapa had been living at Pava with his five hundred disciples. At that time Buddhism had spread over a wide area and the giant disciples stayed in separate places with their own followers. One of the reasons for this was that the country could not support too large a group of monks.

Mahakasyapa and his five hundred disciples traveled five days and five nights to reach Kusinagara. On the way they met a heretic. He was a Nirgrantha--you call them Jains. This Nirgrantha was coming along the road holding a white mandara blossom in his hand. From a distance Mahakasyapa saw him and, approaching him, asked, "Whence have you come?"

"I have come from Kusinagara," the Nirgrantha answered.

"Do you know my master?" Mahakasyapa asked.

"Yes, I know him," the Nirgrantha replied.

"Was he still living?" asked Mahakasyapa.

The Nirgrantha sighed and said, "He passed away seven days ago. All the devas came, bringing heavenly flowers and heavenly incense to the dying Buddha. I took this heavenly flower from there."

Having heard this Mahakasyapa lamented greatly, and the five hundred disciples wailed. But Mahakasyapa encouraged the monks. They tightened the robes on their bodies and fastened their bowls to their girdles and rushed on to the Twin Sala-tree Garden to see the Buddha's body before it was cremated. They waded the Hiranyavati River and finally arrived at the temple Makuta-bandhana. Ananda came forward to receive Mahakasyapa and the five hundred monks, came forward about a mile or more. They greeted one another with profound salutations. Even at such a moment they did not break their traditional attitude on meeting after a long time.

Then Mahakasyapa said to Ananda, "Can we see the body of the Buddha?"

"No," Ananda answered. "Though the Buddha's

## MAHAKASYAPA' S GATHA

Buddha is a vehicle  
To carry us  
O'er the depths of life  
and death  
Bearing us to Nirvana!

Buddha is a boundless light  
That's thrown across  
The darkness of ignorance  
For the sake of human-kind.

Buddha has great compassion,  
Buddha the Just!  
Numberless lives he saved.  
Now he lies tranquil.

O manifest unto us,  
Most gracious one,  
Through the force of your  
great virtue,  
The light of your pure body!

Suffer deva and manu  
To make greater  
His measure of happiness  
According to his merit!

Buddha has opened to us,  
To all beings,  
The law of the Universe  
All benefiting thereby.

The wheel of life and death  
We all can stop.  
Understand true conception  
And attain enlightenment.

Indebted to your favor  
Your feet we clasp;  
But in deep sorrow our souls,  
We see your golden bier!

Buddha has now transcended!  
For those who doubt,  
Calm serenity he has  
Omnipresent is he!"

body has not yet been cremated, you cannot see it because it has been bathed with warm and fragrant water, and swathed in fresh cotton, and wrapped in five hundred lengths of fine cotton cloth and placed in a golden coffin and anointed with perfumed oil. The golden coffin has been placed in an iron casket and the iron casket put into a sandalwood box, and all have been covered with piled up wood and fragrant grasses. We cannot see the Buddha's body again.' Three times Mahakasyapa asked Ananda the same question, and three times Ananda gave exactly the same answer: "The body of the Buddha we cannot see again."



Thereupon Mahakasyapa approached the pyre and said in a sorrowful voice: "Today we do not know the direction of the Buddha's head or of his feet." But as he spoke the bier opened and he saw the Buddha's feet thrust forth. Mahakasyapa knelt down and, taking the Buddha's feet in his hands, pressed them to his brow.

This is a story so important that it must be told many, many times. Such a place in the sutra you must not overlook. You must pay attention to such lines. Ananda said, "The Buddha's body was bathed with warm and fragrant water, and swathed in fresh cotton, and wrapped in five hundred lengths of fine cotton cloth, and placed in a golden coffin, and covered with perfumed oil. The golden coffin has been placed in an iron casket and the iron casket put into a sandalwood box, and all have been covered with piled up wood and fragrant grasses. We cannot see the Buddha's body any more." Then how could Mahakasyapa see the Buddha's feet? And how could he make obeisance to those feet? If Mahakasyapa discovered the Buddha's feet outside the coffin, why could Ananda not see them? You must ask that question of yourself? What are the feet? Why the Buddha's feet? Why did he show his feet? With your Zen knowledge can you not comprehend some hidden meaning here? This description is written very carefully. Though the meaning is not disclosed, the secret teaching is not hidden.

Everyone always laughed at Ananda because he was so slow. He had heard all the Buddha's teachings, for he attended the Buddha and was always at his side; but though he remembered all the Buddha's teachings, they were just words to him. He did not apprehend the Buddha's secret teaching, which was Zen satori, sudden enlightenment. That was why Mahakasyapa later threw Ananda out of the grotto. Ananda attained enlightenment after the Buddha's death.

There is a koan which you will observe about this episode. To gather the Buddha's teachings and to compose the sutras, Mahakasyapa called an assembly of five hundred arhats. Among them he discovered Ananda. Since Ananda was not an enlightened man, not an arhat, Mahakasyapa threw him out of the temple cave. Broken-hearted, Ananda went astray in the woods. At dawn, in fatigue, he tried to pillow his head on a fallen tree. All of a sudden he was enlightened. "I understand! Mahakasyapa was very kind to me," he cried. He went back to the grotto and knocked at the door. Mahakasyapa said, "If you are enlightened, come in through the keyhole." So Ananda went through the keyhole and appeared before Mahakasyapa. A queer koan.

When Ananda was asked by Mahakasyapa if he could see the Buddha's body, Ananda insisted that he could not. The Buddha passed into Nirvana two thousand five hundred years ago. Though covered with space and time, Buddha's body is existing and we can see it.

Now think about this perfumed water with which his body was bathed. Is it not *samskara*; is it not fine consciousness? And the two metal caskets, are they not the mind and the body? And the sandalwood box, does it not mean the box we are living in, our five senses? Now the feet are something on which you stand. They mean "that upon which you are standing." Consciousness is that upon which you stand; consciousness, *vijnana*, is the feet. Two feet is a man. Mahakasyapa knew; Ananda did not know.

Then as Mahakasyapa stood before the coffin, fire burst forth from the breast of the Buddha and burned everything from the inside. All the devas and the manus wailed. But Mahakasyapa walked around the burning pyre reciting a gatha.

Then the Buddha was cremated.

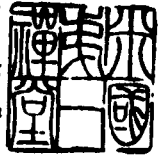
OF THE HUMAN BEING, Sokei-an says: In his youth the Buddha thought this human world a most obnoxious place; he hated this human life and left his home to become a monk. He thought the human being, as a being, was very negligible, but he had no particular idea what to do about it. According to the Hindu conception, he tried to escape from this human consciousness. Finally he annihilated the concept of the human being and found that there is no such particular being as that we call human.

According to the Buddhist way of thinking the human being consists of six different beings: *naraka* (hell-dweller), *preta* (hungry spirit), *tiryakyon*i (beast), *asura* (demon), *manu* (man), and *deva* (heavenly being). Every moment this so-called human being appears in different terms: one moment the demon takes its place in the human body, then the *deva* or god, next death or *naraka*; then the body is possessed by the *tiryakyon*i or beast. Once in a while from among these, the being which is called *manu* or man appears and possesses the human being. Only then is he truly a human being.

OF DEVAS, Sokei-an elsewhere says: Western scholars translate the word "*deva*" as divine being or angel. According to the meaning of Buddhism *deva* is a pure being. Why is a *deva* pure? Because those beings who live in the state of *deva* have no agony in their minds. Those who in previous lives were acquiescent to all virtuous rules and behaved themselves perfectly in body, mind, and speech, when they increase this behavior are born into the state of *deva* and maintain their lives in it. *Devas* are those beings who are living in heaven and are most beautiful. From the experience of meditation the state of *deva* is a state of mind, not a physical state. It is not in material space, but exists in the mental space conceived of in our meditation. Of course this is just analogical speech. In a correct sense you must experience it in meditation.

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**First Zen Institute of America**  
113 E30 Street  
New York, New York 10016  
(212)-686-2520  
[www.firstzen.org](http://www.firstzen.org)

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