

# ZEN NOTES



## SOKEI-AN SAYS

**NIRVANA** The Buddha lived eighty years. He taught his disciples for forty-five years. He left his home when he was twenty-nine years old and attained the highest wisdom after six years of meditation. The number of his monks and nuns was 2500, and there were also lay followers. His teachings were promulgated in his lifetime through the valley of the Ganges River. Two hundred years after his death his teachings were promulgated eastward to Ceylon, Burma, Siam, northward to Kashmir and Turkestan, westward to Syria and Alexandria. And Buddhist disciples were also in Athens. Five hundred years after his Nirvana, Buddhism came to China and then to Korea, and from Korea to Japan. Buddhism is the oldest and the greatest religion which is still existing on earth, still living.

The Buddha revealed Nirvana to us and we saw his Nirvana. Everyone sees Nirvana. When your father dies, in his casket you see him in Nirvana. You see that he is in another state. He will not speak to you; he will not smile at you; he is in the depths of something. Your naked eye actually can see it. But your mind cannot reach there. It is almost tangible. You almost feel the state where your father is resting. Your fingertip almost can feel it and your eye fathom it and your ear hear that eternal sound of Nirvana. And your intuition knows that immobile infinite state. But, alas, your mind cannot reach there.

Buddha is now in that state. To us the state of Nirvana is existing Buddha. When we take refuge in Buddha, it is the Buddha who is in the state which is not imagination, not hypothesis, not theory. It is actual fact. We know he is there. Enlightened mind directly reaches there and knows that state. Your eye can see him, your ear hear him and your hand touch him. But to unenlightened mind he is remote, distant. He was living 2500 years ago, but he is not existing here. You cannot see him, hear him; your hand cannot touch him.

Nirvana is clear, but Nirvana is mysterious. I shall tell some stories which are related to the Buddha's Nirvana. There are many famous stories of the Nirvana of Buddha. I shall tell all of them through the future; each year I shall tell a different one for Nirvana Day, February 15th.



There were two giant disciples, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, who entered Nirvana before the Buddha's death. And the Buddha's foster-mother, Mahaprajapati, who was the head of the nuns in the Buddha's Sangha, saying she could not bear to see the Buddha enter Nirvana, also entered first, and five hundred nuns followed her. After the Buddha's Nirvana, all those monks who were not enlightened lost their hope and jumped off the cliffs, like geese in the sky, following one after the other. The dead bodies of nuns and monks covered the shore of the nearby river because the Buddha's 2500 monks and nuns lost hope and followed the Buddha. The Buddha's Nirvana was not, therefore, just the death of the Buddha himself, but it was also the death of the Buddha's Sangha. It was a great tragedy.

Mahakasyapa, the oldest disciple, said: "Brothers and sisters, do not follow the Buddha, follow the Buddha's teaching. We must promulgate his teaching to the world, not follow his Nirvana." Three weeks later he gathered five hundred monks and composed the first scriptures of Buddhism. Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant and cousin, recited the Buddha's teaching from his memory: "Once the Buddha was in Sravasti with five hundred monks, and he said....this...and that....thus have I heard." Ananda imitated the Buddha's attitude and voice so closely that some of the deeply moved disciples screamed and fainted as he spoke. When you think of the Buddha's death--no ordinary death--you must think of that excitement and discouragement and tragedy in connection with it. The Buddha's Nirvana was the greatest death of any religious teacher who ever lived on earth.

The Buddha's monks were divided into five groups, five hundred to a group. Some stayed in the Bamboo Garden, some on Eagle Mountain, and so on. Mahakasyapa was living with one of the groups of five hundred monks about 120 miles from where the Buddha was staying when one night one of his monks had a dreadful dream. In the morning he came to tell Mahakasyapa: "Light filled my cave and blossoms fell from heaven. This must be a sign of the Buddha's death. We must go there."

The monks immediately equipped themselves in traveling outfits, fastening their bowls to their fronts, tucking up the skirts of their robes, tying back their sleeves behind their backs. With their bowls in one hand, their staffs in the other, they hurried off to Kusinagara Castle, where the Buddha was, not stopping day or night. Mahakasyapa, who was then an old man, the same age as the Buddha, they carried. On the way, it is told, they met a student of the naked sect, carrying a white flower, obviously not an earthly, but a heavenly flower. Mahakasyapa asked him: "Whence have you come? From where did you get that heavenly flower?" The man answered: "I saw the Buddha enter Nirvana seven days ago and apsaras and devas were offering incense and flowers to him. This is one of the flowers I took and brought along with me." When Mahakasyapa realized that the Buddha was indeed dead he threw himself on the ground and



wept. The monks who were with him cried: "O Tathagata, why did you stay so short a time on earth? You came only yesterday and now before we have enlightened ourselves you have left us. Why, O Tathagata, enlightened one, light of the world, did you vanish?" And they beat their chests and, crawling on the ground, wailed.

Finally they came to the gate of the Castle of Kusinagara. Ananda had come to meet Mahakasyapa there. Flinging himself in Mahakasyapa's lap as an injured child throws itself into the lap of its mother, he, too, wailed and cried. As this was going on an old monk came. This is one of the stories which is used as a koan. "Stop crying!" he told Ananda, "While the Buddha was living he was always telling us 'Don't do this and don't do that.' Now the Buddha has gone we can do anything we want." At this point a deva is reported to have heard his word and tried to strike the old monk. But Mahakasyapa held back the deva's arm and said to the monk: "We lost everything we were relying upon by the death of the Buddha. We have nothing to rely upon now that the Buddha is dead. All are crying. But you are so happy because you are an idiot." When the old monk heard this the bottom of his mind dropped off and he attained enlightenment. Of course, the meaning of the story is very deep. The old monk was not an idiot, so when Mahakasyapa, with his profound understanding, pointed out the truth of the matter to him, he was enlightened.

The citizens of Kusinagara, the Mallas, were preparing the cremation ceremony. According to the descriptions, the body of the Buddha was washed in perfumed water and wrapped in cloths round and round from the shoulders to the feet. Then the body was placed in a golden casket and this golden casket was placed in an iron casket and the iron casket was placed in a sandalwood casket. Of course such descriptions are greatly exaggerated, but it is always told that the body was concealed in three caskets. And flowers and the barks used for incense were placed on top of the threefold casket, and the casket was set on the funeral pyre.

A young leader of the Mallas, holding a long torch, tried to start the pyre burning but it would not catch. Then his father took the biggest torch and tried to set it afire but his torch was extinguished immediately. This happened three times.

Then Aniruddha said: "Stop, stop! The Buddha cannot be burned by a fire kindled by man. The devas are waiting for Mahakasyapa to arrive."

And Mahakasyapa and his five hundred monks arrived at exactly that moment! Wading the river, they swept up the shore like a flood, then ran and dashed toward the pyre, which they circled three times. This ritual is still handed down to us. Blowing seashell horns with a sad tone, holding long staffs, reciting the favorite sutras of the Buddha, they went three times round his coffin.

Then Mahakasyapa asked Ananda: "Can we see the Buddha once more before we cremate him?" Ananda said: "No, you cannot see the Buddha before he is cremated because he is in the three-fold casket." Mahakasyapa

Dear Everyone:

TODAY is the day after Christmas. Since early morning it has been raining softly and the lovely mist for which Kyoto is famous--partly because it makes bronchitis patients of so many of its citizens--has been creeping through the garden and softening the severity of the temple roofs. On my desk are roses cut only a day or two ago from my own garden. You see how late our real winter comes. But we always hope for a first snow on New Year's Eve to add to the beauty of our city that night.

As I sit here this afternoon, still conscious of the warm glow of our Christmas in which Japanese and Americans both participated so happily, I have been thinking of the time ahead when our Zen will partake of the two cultures. But if, and when, Zen does come to the West, it is bound to be changed, outwardly at least, in many ways. What will the changes be and how will they show themselves? Though this is a question for the future, it is also a question for today. Today is the seed which will produce the future. This very moment, even, is the moment when the future is being conceived. We must never forget that.

A number of years ago I visited Shogen-ji, a Sodo belonging to Myoshin-ji. After supper that evening I was asked by the Roshi to address the sixty monks then in training there. In the course of the evening one of the older monks, a good English student, asked me: "What part of Zen are you going to take back to America?" "All of Zen, of course," I replied. "Certainly all of Zen is not suitable for the West," he said. "Perhaps not," I replied. "But you must give us all of your Zen and let us decide for ourselves what is suitable and what is not."

This is a very important point which we must watch carefully. Japanese people universally have a tendency to feel that they know what foreigners ought to be given of their traditional cultural disciplines; they are equally sure that they know what we like and want in our own way of life. As a consequence, much unnecessary and boring sight-seeing is choked down the foreign visitor's throat and too often, also, the cold fried pork

cutlets and mashed potato salad that is believed to be just what he most delights in eating.

It is so in Zen, likewise. The average educated Japanese is quite certain that all the foreigner is capable of understanding of Zen can be gained through a superficial acquaintance with tea-ceremony, gardens, flower-arrangement, Noh drama, and sumi painting. That all these are primarily aspects of Japanese culture that have received Zen influence is confused in his mind with the idea that they are themselves Zen. And these are Zen for far too many Japanese, unfortunately. They cannot see or understand that Zen is a great religion to which these cultural activities have related themselves. How to gain admission to the heart of Zen, or any other Japanese art for that matter, is a problem which every serious foreign student in Japan finds facing him after the first enthusiastic reception has died down. It goes without saying that we must each earn the right to penetrate further by our sincerity, understanding and devoted practice. But we should not expect that, in most cases, even these will be speedily or readily recognized and the way made open to us.

From earliest times Japanese culture has been an extremely powerful force acting upon every cultural element coming into the country from outside. That Japanese culture has much assimilative power, I somewhat doubt. Rather, it seems to me to have had during successive cultural eras the tendency to envelop and enwrap these importations in layer after layer of Japanese garments, garments of exquisite gauze, if you will, so that the original is never totally invisible to the discerning eye, but garments which, because of their beauty, cause us to take them for what they cover.

As early western Zen students, one of our important problems is first of all to push aside these wrappings and penetrate to the essential heart of Zen, that is, Shakamuni's Buddhism dyed by the Taoist-steeped mind. When we have done this through long study of the words of the Chinese masters and the koans which they have left for us--and how grateful we should be to Japanese Zennists for having preserved them for us so careful-



ly and so unchanged--we should turn our attention to the Japanese garments in which it is presently encased. Some are so extremely particular that they are utterly unadaptable either to modern life or to the West. But there are others that should not be discarded. These must be kept and treasured for the very reason that they are universal in their beauty and value. For us in the West they are especially important because often they represent values we have not placed stress upon.

One of these is, in Japanese, *on*, "gratitude," especially that gratitude which is felt toward those who have done us some great kindness, a kindness we have not the capacity to repay--the sense of a debt of gratitude. Throughout the East this sense of gratitude, particularly in relation to parents and teachers, has always been emphasized, but nowhere, I think, to so extreme a degree as in Japan.

Young people in our own country--this was true even in my own youth--are too prone to say, "I don't owe my parents anything. I didn't ask to be born." Yet the gift of life by one's immediate parents and, more distantly, by all one's forebears, is the greatest gift that can be bestowed. Stop a moment and think! Supposing you had never been born, supposing you had never existed. Life is not easy for any one, nevertheless I think no one would really want not to live. Living, living awarely, is the ultimate experience. We must think deeply of the debt of gratitude we owe our parents for this supreme gift. When they are living we can express our gratitude. When they are gone, that gratitude must continue to well up in our hearts as long as we are alive.

To those of us who are Buddhists, our debt of gratitude to our teachers is as great as that we owe our parents. Shakamuni is our first teacher, and through the centuries those who have handed down his teaching generation after generation successively, are also our teachers. We must never forget our debt of gratitude to all of them. For us present Zen students, our gratitude is especially deep toward our particular Zen teacher, he who has opened for us our spiritual eye. How can we repay him for the gift of awareness of eternal life!

I was once asked by a Buddhist scholar how I would propagate Zen in America. (He had just suggested that building a large Zen temple in Central Park and teaching there tea-ceremony, archery, flower-arrangement, etc., would be the quickest way.) I replied "I know of no other way than through my own body." He was dumfounded. Likewise, I know of no other way to repay one's gratitude to one's immediate teacher or one's past teachers than through one's own body. That is, making this body--body, mind, and heart--a living expression of Buddha's teaching.

I wish every western Buddhist could have a shrine in his home, no matter how small or how simple. Perhaps just a corner of a shelf in a bookcase. He need not even have an image in it, only a place and a small incense burner will do. I wish that every morning before he sits down to breakfast he would stand before that shrine, palms together. With his mind quiet and collected, let gratitude fill his heart, gratitude to his parents past and present, to his teachers past and present, and to all sentient beings past and present who have contributed and are contributing to sustain his existence. Let him bow to all these to whom he owes a debt of gratitude impossible to repay. Then let him light an incense stick and, still standing with palms together, recite in his heart or with his lips the Four Great Vows. The fulfillment of these, to no matter how infinitesimal a degree, is the truest expression of his gratitude that any Buddhist can be capable of.

Such a moment as this will become a precious moment, a moment that will make of each day a special kind of day.

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asked three times; three times Ananda refused.

The "three-fold casket"--the outside of sandalwood, the middle of iron, and the inner of gold, refers to the Buddha's Three Bodies. His transformable body, Nirmanakaya, is made of earth; his body which is his soul, Sambhogakaya, is made of fire; his omnipresent body, Dharmakaya, is made of ether. But he is in Nirvana, he is not in these Three Bodies.

Ananda therefore said to Mahakasyapa: "You cannot see him!"

Mahakasyapa turned his head to the coffin. The coffin opened from the inside and Buddha showed him one foot--in some sutras it is said he showed him two feet. And the apsaras and devas saw this but human beings failed to see it. Then Mahakasyapa clasped Buddha's foot and pressed it to his brow.

As Mahakasyapa recited a poem he made spontaneously, fire burst forth from the Buddha's heart and burned through the caskets and kindled the wood piled underneath. The fire spread in every direction and no one could stop it. The multitude, disconcerted, called for water, for the fire found no boundary--how were they to stop it?

Then Aniruddha said: "The fire will cease naturally." And the trees surrounding the funeral pyre vomited their leaves on the fire and stopped it.

Here is a teaching, too. The Buddha was not burned by fire kindled by man; he himself kindled the fire from his heart of Nirvana. The gold, the iron, all existences were burned by the fire which annihilates all and makes all the world into one existence.

It means that you, standing in Dharmakaya, can consume everything--the iron casket, the golden casket, and the fragrant wooden casket.

Then all those kings came to divide the Buddha's relics. They almost broke out into battle, and Ananda stopped it. But that is another story.

*Reconstructed by ENEN*

For Mahakasyapa's poem and another of the stories of the Buddha's Nirvana, see ZEN NOTES, Vol. IV, No. 2, February, 1957.

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