

ZEN NOTES



SOKEI-AN SAYS

THE BUDDHA'S DEATH was not essentially different from the death of any other human being, but later his disciples observed their master's death as a mystery and produced many canonized stories about it.

Buddhists do not call the Buddha's death "death"; we say the Buddha entered Nirvana. If the Buddha's death is entering Nirvana, then everybody's death must be entering Nirvana also, but we observe this objective death subjectively. When a fish dies, it rises; when a flower dies, it drops; of human beings, we say "they passed away." There are many ways of observing death. To us, the Buddha revealed his Nirvana in his death, so Buddhists canonize this and call it Nirvana. I shall speak about this canonical Nirvana from a description in the Agama sutras.

Why must we canonize any incident with the terms of religion? To introduce a fact that has been observed by any awakened one, to an awakened one, we do not need canonized stories. But to introduce a fact that has been observed to a sleeping spirit, in Buddhism we do not speak mythology, but canonized stories. We do not deceive the student, but for sleeping ones, we must mention the inner meanings of fact, how we feel.

A famous patriarch of the Soto School of Zen gave a lecture to an audience that had come from all over Japan to hear him; they stayed in the mountains and slept in the forests while waiting for him.

He said: "Did you sleep well last night? Did you have your breakfast? Was it good? I do not think so." With this, he ended his talk.

He had spoken the truth, actual Reality. He did not canonize anything. If he had wished to canonize his statement, after he had asked, "Did you sleep well?" he might have gone on, "But you are still sleeping now. Your soul has been asleep from the beginningless beginning. You have not awakened yet. You see the blue sky and the shining sun but your soul does not see this. You see this sun, but you do not see the real sun, for you see only with your physical eye."

After asking, "Have you eaten your pablum?" he might have added, "There is pablum for the physical body but there is also pablum for your mental body." And so on.

Some of you would enjoy such a speech. All religious descriptions are somehow canonized. The student must understand that true religious speech and canonized speech are different. And do not argue or make useless discussions about canonized descriptions, trying to measure them with science or analyze them in philosophical terms.

I once heard a Christian minister who had studied science trying hard to interpret the Bible from the scientific standpoint. "Why the immaculate conception? Why the resurrection?" I thought, "Well, here is a blind religious teacher just like those in my own country." If you were to speak in rhyme in your own home, what would your family think about it? Prose and verse are different. Canonized descriptions and true speech are different. Trying to analyze such descriptions by science is like trying to find the bone in a jellyfish. Modern religious students should not waste their time on such foolishness.

The Buddha's Enlightenment is canonized in the Avatamsaka teachings. During the first three weeks after it, he is said to have addressed himself only to invisible bodhisattvas.

After the Buddha had been teaching for forty-nine years and had reached the age of eighty, one day he said to his attendant and beloved disciple: "Ananda, make my dying bed among the horn-shaped shala trees." Obeying, Ananda made his bed and spread a mattress. In pictures and sculpture,

it was not a mattress, but like a hammock or canvas hung by the four corners to the four trees, so that, as it was raised from the ground, everyone could see him from a distance.

Then the Buddha said: "At midnight, I shall enter the Nirvana with no remainder."

He told his disciples they might question him before he died, so one by one they came to ask. The unenlightened ones were weeping and crying all through the woods. For before this, they could ask anytime, but now that it was their last chance, they were very upset. Many laymen came also. Finally, the Buddha said: "Stop the questions. I am now going into Nirvana"--and he entered.

To the Buddha, death was just as any gentleman would go to the office from his house in the morning. He is eating breakfast with his wife. It is eight o'clock, and he says, "Well, goodbye dear."

He lay down on the bed on his right side, with his head toward the North. (It is natural to animals to die with their heads toward the North, so Japanese sleep normally with their heads to the South. Superstitiously, they fear if they sleep with their heads to the North, they might not come back from the "sleep-death.")

He took the formal Buddhist position for sleep, looked at his hands, his feet, then, keeping one concentration in his mind, entered Nirvana. This center of concentration is Zenjo, the strength of meditation. If you come next to a person with this center, you feel his quietude. It is like standing beside a tree with deep roots.

The Buddhist keeps this concentrated attention in everything he

does. You know how to meditate in the sitting posture, but there are three others we use also: walking, standing, and lying. We call these the four dignities. In India there is a memorial place where the Buddha practiced walking meditation for many years. It is about a hundred paces long. In standing meditation, one must stand strong and put the hands flat on the chest. Monks wait for a teacher to enter a temple in that posture.

As soon as the Buddha entered Nirvana, the shala trees burst into white blossoms in offering to him.

It is strange but true that when one enters Nirvana, the whole universe offers its flowers. If you close your eyes to meditate, though you try to enter Nirvana, you are still outside, but the moment you enter true samadhi, the whole universe offers you everything. You realize that you are not alone, separated from the universe, but that it offers everything to you. It is like the flowering of the shala trees. This realization is an important part of Buddhism. If you have had the experience of entering the universe you will understand this part. Philosophically, it cannot be described, so it is canonized.

When the time came for the Buddha's body to be cremated, his disciples gathered from all directions. Mahakashyapa was five days away. He, you will recall, was the one to whom the Buddha's Buddhism is said to have been transmitted first when the lotus was raised, and he alone smiled. The second transmission was the Buddha's sharing of his seat. Now we come to the canonized story of the third and complete transmission.

When Mahakashyapa and his five hun-

dred disciples arrived at the funeral place he asked Ananda: "Can we see the body of the Buddha?" "No." Ananda replied, "The body of the Buddha we cannot see again." For it had been wrapped in five hundred lengths of cotton cloth and placed in a golden coffin in an iron casket in a sandalwood box and covered with piled up wood and grasses.

Then Mahakashyapa approached and said sorrowfully: "Today we do not know the direction of the Buddha's head nor of his feet." As he said this the bier opened and he saw the Buddha's feet thrust forth. Kneeling down and taking the Buddha's feet in his hands, he pressed them to his brow.

Those present had tried to set fire to the Buddha's funeral pyre many times but the Buddha's coffin would not burn. Now a flame burst out of the Buddha's heart and consumed the golden coffin from inside.

The body of Tathagata ("the One who comes exactly as That") was wrapped in five hundred shrouds. The one next to the body and the outside layer were not burned, but all else was reduced to ashes. Alaya consciousness was the shroud next to his body; his Dharma was the outermost. "After my death, deliver this to the future Buddha," was the Buddha's direction to Mahakashyapa.

Mahakashyapa held this golden shroud not made of physical material when he entered Nirvana. He is still holding it. It can never be destroyed by fire, nor can the other that is alaya consciousness.

See ZN Vol. IV, No. 2 for complete account.

In the Agama sutras there are many teachings that came from the Buddha's golden lips. Some are quite fantastic. When you understand mythology, however, the significance of those teachings in Buddhism is not so strange.

There is one named *Ogha* in Pali. In Sanskrit, the meaning is like *tatha*. Dr. Suzuki translates this *tatha* "suchness." There is a word in this country, "isness." I cannot find this word in the Webster dictionary, though it is used in philosophical writings, so I think this is not an authorized word though I have heard it used many times. Perhaps some theosophist made it up. In the Sixth Patriarch's Record there are some lines that explain it.

In speaking about my own face, I must recognize that I have two eyes, one nose and one mouth. That is "isness."

You see my stick. You say it is "red." A scientist might say it is a wavelength or etheric vibration. But by whatever name you call it, this is (strikes gong with it) this. You have snatched at the word "red" which we use and say: "Why must you speak in such a fantastic fashion as wavelengths and vibrations? It is red. Red is red. That is enough. Red is "isness."

In the beginning of Zen study, you destroy your previous conceptions. You are not observing everything truly. You think you are, but you are not observing things as they really are. When you study art, you realize this. You make a sketch of a tree in Central Park at noon. You bring it back to the teacher at the studio. The teacher

asks: "What is this? Where is the shadow of the sun?" You realize, "If there is no shadow there is no light. Next day a new sketch you make shows both light and shadow. The teacher asks you: "What time is it?" You do not know--two, three o'clock. The shadow of the tree does not tell the time.

When I studied music some seventeen years ago (1918) from a Japanese teacher and I started to sing, the teacher said: "Make your voice come from your throat." Where was my voice? I could not make it come from my throat. After I studied for two or three months I realized my mother and my cousins were not speaking from their throats. This is very plain, but until you really understand you don't see it. You are not living it. You are living in your own or someone else's conception. You do not see "isness."

This sutra is very short but it shows "isness" clearly. You realize that frequently Mahayana Buddhism was really present in the Buddha's mind. You might say his mind was pregnant with Mahayana.

When the Buddha was in the Jetavana at midnight a beautiful angel or deva (in Sanskrit Devaputra) came into his meditation and stood before him. A deva is a pure being, one of the five ways--naraka, preta, tiryakyon, manu, deva (ashura is sometimes counted as the sixth way of being, but in earlier Buddhism only five are listed).

Buddhism has no ego so we don't count this upright human being as manu (man). Manu is a state of consciousness, not entity. In the dog there may be the element of manu, as in man there may be the element dog. The cat usually has elements of preta (hungry spirit) and deva. The "shape"

of dog, man, and so forth has no value to the Buddhist. The Buddhist observes these conscious (perhaps we today would think of these as subconscious, ED.) elements in a sentient being and notes his incarnation from this point of view. For instance, here is a beautiful woman with a gracious manner. Observing her carefully we see the *tiryakyon*i (beast) or *deva* is predominant in her. We observe the human being as the sum of such subconscious elements. Man's form and cat's form do not mean anything to us. When we see a man who has a horse element in him, it IS the horse we see, not man, when that element is prevailing in his mind. We return all sentient beings into the state of these original elements of consciousness and observe whatever element is prevailing. So when we say a *deva* came into the Buddha's mind and stood before him, we mean it was the *deva* consciousness as an element that entered his mind.

It is as if one morning you are thinking about fighting with your father. In your mind, you begin screaming. You study this: "Well, that is the beast in me." You might also, in a dream, see this beast element as a tiger. You would call this a thought, or daydream. To the Buddha, the *deva* was an entity, a living being that entered his mind and bowed before him. The Buddha said: "I saw an angel stand before me"--something.

In studying sentient beings, when you do not pay attention to the actual physical shape but observe the sum of the elements of consciousness, human life will be for you a more interesting world; it will also be not only more complicated and subtle, but more nearly complete.

In the sutra, when the *deva* appeared to the Buddha, the whole *Jetavana Vihara* shone. This is a beautiful description. The *devas* usually appeared at midnight or at dawn.

It is quite strange to note that the Buddha did not discriminate between inside and outside. He thought all life was within him. There is some line in a sutra that says: "When I look at you, I do not see with my eye; I look directly at your face--there is no threshold between me and you. Therefore you are living within me." Yes, I remember that line.

The Buddha felt that the one standing before him was his own life, so all that he saw, all that existed, was to him his own life, his own consciousness, his own conscious elements, man, *deva*, or beast. If one lives in such understanding, his life must be very interesting, and, if anyone stands before him, he feels it is himself.

The *deva* asked the Buddha a question: "Oh, *Bhikshu*, can you cross a swift stream, a river?" An interesting question. The Buddha answered, "Yes, dear *Devaputra*."

The *deva* asked, "Can you cross a swift stream, a river, without holding on to anything, without being supported by anything, without relying upon anything, without standing upon anything?"

The Buddha answered, "Yes, my *deva*."

The *deva* looked directly at the Buddha's face: "Did you understand what I just said--without relying on anything, without holding on to anything, without standing upon anything, can you cross a swift stream?"

The Buddha said, "Yes, my *deva*, I understood what you mean."

"Tell me," the *deva* said, "what did I mean and how can you do this?"

The Buddha said: "My deva, I carry this suchness, I proceed through suchness, therefore water cannot carry me away. If anyone does not embrace this suchness, if anyone does not go through this suchness, he will be carried away by the swift stream. This is what, my Devaputra, I understood by your words 'not relying upon anything, not standing upon anything, and crossing the stream.'"

The deva said, "I was looking for a wise one for many years. Now I have attained Nirvana. There is no more fear in the world and I realize my emancipation."

Having said this, the deva vanished.

This is the whole sutra. Of course, anyone who has passed the koan: "Without depending upon anything, manifest your mind" will already have understood this "suchness and not being carried away by the stream" but I shall say a little more in case someone listening who is living in symbols or conceptions, not knowing Reality, might be carried away by the stream.

Not everyone is living in Reality. There are two ways of observing Reality. One is as Reality; the other is as actuality. Of course, both are Reality. The first koan, "Before mother and father, what is your original aspect" is Reality, but if you are thinking about it, that is thought, not Reality, and the water will carry you away. If you realize Reality, you don't need to think about it. If you actualize Reality, the water cannot carry you away.

"A swift stream," the deva said, "can you cross a swift stream?"

The deva meant the swift stream, the great flood that ends the uni-

verse. The swift stream does not refer to the Hudson River or the Ganges River. It means the destruction of the universe.

There are four catastrophes in Buddhism.

The first is the earthquake. This destroys hell and the places upon which man and beast live, but it does not destroy the deva loka (place).

The great fire at the end of the universe annihilates the first and second dhyana lokas. All beings that can escape to the third dhyana loka. When the ten suns appear, the fire rages. The second dhyana loka is fire, but the tongues of its flame cannot reach the third dhyana loka, so it dies down without destroying the third dhyana loka.

Then comes the deluge. The element of water covers the entire universe, including the third dhyana loka, but it cannot reach the fourth dhyana loka.

It is a huge wind, the hurricane, that wipes out the fourth dhyana loka, leaving nothing.

One who depends upon nothing crosses the swift stream of the deluge that wipes out the third dhyana loka and enters the fourth dhyana loka.

You must realize that when you pass the koan, "Without depending upon anything, manifest your mind," you cross the swift stream. You are in the fourth dhyana loka. I think you will like knowing this. In Buddhist philosophy this state is in rupadhatu, near arupadhatu, but in actual realization, the fourth dhyana loka is not in thought, dream, or material existence, or even the human realm, but the realm of the deva. There you find entire freedom.

Reconstructed by Frances Reiter

Ringier Reed

Brothers, you must endeavor to attain right view so you can go your own way and not lose your head no matter how such charlatans distract you. When you stop trying to be something other than yourself, you will be worthy of respect. Nothing artificial is necessary, just be yourself. You are always running around, asking questions, looking for someone to give you a hand--this is wrong.

One of the eight principles of the Way is particularly important to us as students--to make right effort to attain True Understanding or Right View. The system of Buddhism is a device to trap students into philosophical entanglements, and to take them into True Understanding gradually. We in the Zen School do not need this device. In meditation we realize that we have everything within us. Passing through the stages of meditation, we come to Reality.

In the first stage, we free ourselves from desire. This is a necessary device. If we wish to reach the other shore, we use a boat; cessation of desire is such a contrivance--by this boat we can reach the shore. When you attain this, you know what desire really is and it exists no more. You have an eye that can see through the whole universe; you are no longer trapped by the torture of color and form as are those who desire to grasp everything. When you have exterminated this desire for a while, you will pass that stage (perhaps in thirty years) and you will see everything without the desire to grab it. I am a man, so when I go to a department store I can look at ladies' garments without desiring to buy them even though I see their beauty. A lady, on the other

hand, can look at the best baseball suit without desire. When I was a woodcarving student, one day when I was looking at my teacher, he said to me: "You are trained to see everything as insentient. Be careful. I am not wood." It was true. I saw everything as wood and stone.

Next we enter the stage to which we give no name, or perhaps we call it Nirvana. In the West this is temporarily called noumena. However, this is just one aspect of essential existence. To enter into Buddhism, you must enter the stage in which there is nothing but consciousness.

In the third stage, consciousness perceives time and space--that there is nothing in it--two mirrors are reflecting each other. Consciousness has no object to perceive, so you cannot prove consciousness. There is no ego, no self. All is one and that one is the whole universe--a universe that is as small as a pinpoint, but the pinpoint is as large as the universe and one moment is as a million years. We call this the "body of commandment." If you reach there, you realize the body that has all the commandments written in it. "Do not kill." To deny the existence of the universe--that is killing. To deny God is also killing.

In this stage of emptiness, shunyata, we can perceive consciousness but we cannot prove it. However, since from this emptiness the whole universe will be re-created, after the future kalpa fire destroys all and reduces it to the eternal atom, this is not nothingness. But as it is impossible to conceive in that stage we call it nothingness. If we could conceive it, it would not be real nothingness.

If you think all this is existence-- I exist, you exist--then you are stealing. In the third stage, nothing belongs to you, nothing belongs to me. The universe is one body. In this shunyata, you cannot keep anything in your hand, cannot attach. Nor can you give anything away--such indulgence is committing adultery. This emptiness is not a void, it is really the conservation of energy--everything is in it. If you try to call it by the name of Buddha, God-- you are lying.

The fifth commandment forbids indulgence in intoxicants. Ignorance is intoxicating. If you believe that there is something called ego that is really opposing the true nature of the universe--you are in darkness, avidya. In this intoxication you do not know where you are, you do not know light, dark, east or west. This is the first darkness from which we all come, the bosom of the mother. Anyone trying to carry his own soul in that stage is intoxicated.

All these commandments are really written in this essential body. When you enter the desireless, nameless stage, you will find the essence of all commandments written in yourself.

Do you want to go East? You can. If you wish to enter into any entanglement, you can do so without danger.

Those who wish to distract you are teachers who teach untruths, who do not know the real body of commandment, do not realize the real body of the universe. Their eyes are not enlightened, they have learned from a book, not their own experience, so they do not know what they are talking about.

If you attain the stage of Reality, you will come back once more to form, color, and so forth. Then you will step out further. Before, it was desire, now it is great universal love that takes you out. You give and take without desire because the ego is exterminated. The realization of the universal spirit can manifest in your everyday deed; the spirit on earth will come from heaven. "The power to digest food is not my own--the power to see and to hear is not mine." Nothing is done with selfish desire. At this stage there is nothing further to study, nothing further to prove. The million laws of the universe are written in yourself.

"You will be worthy of respect." You are a true aristocrat. You do not need a castle. If we enter into Nirvana, we are really the precious one.

Nothing artificial is necessary, just be yourself. It is not necessary to do anything, to use any device to make yourself appear great. You realize that this body is the eternal atom which has existed from the beginning and that your consciousness is the eternal consciousness of the universe. Then why be artificial? Be natural and everything will manifest naturally.

Book? Teacher? Church? You will find nothing there but fragments of knowledge. Truth is not a mosaic, but a spring. It springs out from your own heart--that is where to seek it.

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Mary Farfas, Editor
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