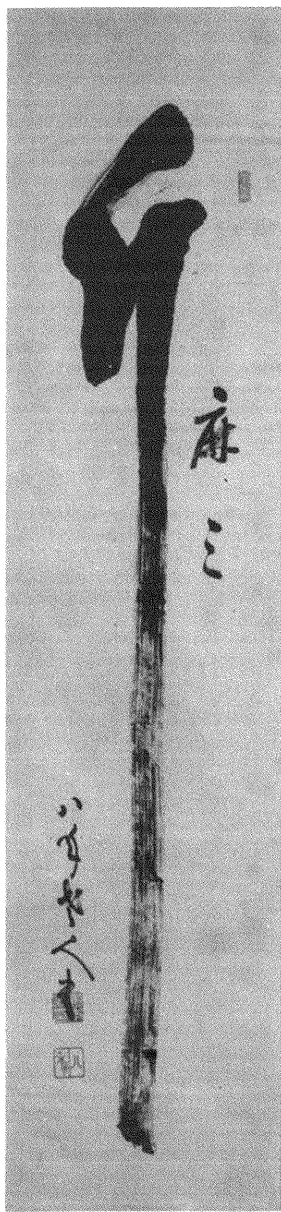



ZEN notes



# the zen

ON THE AGAMAS



## SOKEI-AN SAYS

### THE STAFF

Thus I have heard: Early one morning, when the Buddha was staying in Jeta's Grove, he went to the town of Shravasti to beg food, wearing a robe and carrying a bowl. He met an old Brahman.

The Buddha asked him: "Why are you, an old man, begging food from door to door, holding a bowl in your hand and leaning on a staff?"

The Brahman answered: "O Gautama, I gave everything I had to my son. After I found a bride for him, I left home. Now I am a Bhikshu, like you."

Today we think there is little use trying to find the meaning of life after having lived it. We feel we must think about life when we are young. But in those days economic conditions were such that to support a family was the man's main task. When he had brought a son or sons into the world and they had taken his place as householders, there was neither need nor place for the father in the home so the old man was both free and obligated to leave.

In extreme cases, when the father and even the mother became old, if they did not follow custom of their own accord, their children would drive them into the mountains to die. Sometimes it was the king's order to the householders to throw their old men and women into the desert or mountains.

A story is told of a young man who was helping on someone else's farmland to support his old grandmother. The king ordered all householders to throw out the useless old men and women into the mountains, because the country was about to be stricken by famine. There had been no rain for a long time; all the rivers were dried up and the whole surface of the rice-fields was flat.

The boy bore his old grandmother upon his shoulders and went into the mountains, taking his small remaining store of food so that she might sur-

vive as long as possible. The boy went so deep into the mountain to find some place where there was water for the old woman to drink that he lost his way. When he realized this, he told her that he could not find the way out. "Never mind, son," she said. "I dropped lettuce seeds, one by one, all along the way. When the moon appears, the seed will sprout and show a green line you can follow home."

The story had a happy ending, for the grandson was so touched that he carried his old grandmother back again, and the king, when he heard what had happened, was moved to send them both back to their home.

At an early age, the Brahman boy entered into Brahmacharya, the "pure life." Until he was twenty, he had to study the Brahman culture. Then he married and became a householder. At fifty, he was expected to renounce the householder's life and become an ascetic in order to solve the question of human existence. At sixty, he would leave his home, never to return. Bowl and staff in hand, such old Brahmins could frequently be seen begging for food, their foreheads painted with white clay, their skins smeared with ashes, long hair covering their faces and necks.

From the attitude of the Brahman in this story, we can imagine that his mind was somewhat uneasy. Perhaps he felt ashamed to meet the Buddha while he was begging, even though he, as a Brahman, was of a higher caste than the Buddha, and he was following the usual custom of the time. His was the attitude of a man who lacks conviction, who tries to explain why he is doing something almost before he has been asked. He was like the Zen student who, on meeting an unknown roshi on the street, feels he must say something to him, explain himself.

The Buddha said: "One who begs because he must is not called a Bhikshu. One for whom it is not necessary to beg but does so in order to attain enlightenment is called a Bhikshu."

The Brahman said to the Buddha: "O Gautama, how can I become a Bhikshu? As you say, I am not really a Bhikshu. I am here begging for my food because I gave all I had to my son. But I should like to be a real Bhikshu. How can I become one?"

The Buddha said: "Can you remember a gatha that I will give you, and, when you return home, recite it before your children in the assembly?"

The Brahman said: "Yes, Gautama, I can remember it."

Then the Buddha recited a gatha:

## THE ORIGIN OF ZEN

MYOHON ON THE KOAN refers to the "Special Transmission of the Vulture Peak." Suppose you are a Zen student, or just curious. How would you go about tracking down the meaning of this reference?

If you are a Zen reader, you might go immediately to *ZEN FLESH, ZEN BONES*, Koan VI in the *MUMONKAN* (GATELESS GATE, "transcribed" by Paul Reps from the translation from the Chinese of Nyogen Senzaki.

### *BUDDHA TWIRLS A FLOWER*

*When Buddha was in Grdhrakuta Mountain he turned a flower in his fingers and held it before his listeners. Everyone was silent. Only Maha-Kashapa smiled at this revelation, although he tried to control the lines of his face.*

*Buddha said: "I have the eye of the true teaching, the heart of Nirvana, the true aspect of non-form, and the ineffable stride of Dharma. It is not expressed by words, but especially transmitted beyond teaching. This teaching I have given to Maha-Kashapa."*

I suppose everyone who has read a book on Zen recognizes the incident described as the "origin" of Zen. But what does this mean? Did the incident actually happen? Japanese writers refer to this as if it were a historical fact. Is it?

In 1955 Zuigan Goto Roshi wrote for *ZEN NOTES* (Vol. III. No. 9):

*Although the Supremely Awakened World Honored One attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree and for forty-nine years thereafter revealed his wondrous message by preaching far and wide throughout the land of India, the inmost recesses of his mind lay far beyond the reach of words. In the end he held up a golden lotus flower before the assembly on the Vulture's Peak. Arya Kasyapa alone understood his meaning and to him Buddha entrusted his True Dharma. This is the origin of our Zen sect. It does not cling to words and phrases; it does not adhere to written meanings. And because the transmission of this Dharma is only by Buddha-mind to Buddha-mind, the sect is also called "The Sect of the Buddha-mind."*

Chikudo Ohasama also notes this story in the first page of his Introduction to *ZEN, THE LIVING BUDDHISM OF JAPAN*. Translated by George B. Fowler from the German, this was quoted in *LETTER FROM KYOTO* (Vol. XII, No. 6). *One day, before the assembled multitude of his disciples, he silently held up a flower. In this moment of silence lay the deepest revelation of truth, for such a silence is all-embracing and the source of his whole doctrine. But no one understood him except Kasyapa, who was the Buddha's highest disciple. Kasyapa's face broke into a faint smile. Then Sakya-muni Buddha said: "I hold the complete, the all-embracing view of the real truth, the marvelous spirit of Nirvana, and the wonderfully delicate doctrine of the true form of the formless. I entrust all of this to you."*

*Guard it well." And the Buddha transmitted to Kasyapa his sacred gold-embroidered robe as the seal of the Buddha-mind. This straight entrusting of mind is the origin of Zen.*

From reading the three versions of the same story given above, certainly one might suppose they were meant to be taken factually. Yet Goto Roshi, when asked where this story originated, said that it appeared in one of the "forged" sutras, that is, works composed in hybrid Chinese-Sanskrit style and put out as being translations from an original Sanskrit sutra, but actually a Chinese product. From this, one might conclude that the action takes place in the world of dramatized doctrine rather than in the India of the Buddha's time. However, although this sutra, which was titled something like "Brahmadeva Questions Buddha and Clears His Doubts" is not in any of the recognized collections and is in any case not meant to be taken factually, the story continues to be told as if it were a fact.

Apparently, whether a story is factual or not causes no confusion in the Eastern mind. In general, the Westerner's preoccupation with proving that miracles do happen seems happily absent from the religious history of the East. There are miracles on every page of the Mahayana sutras, supernatural beings decorate every scene, yet one rarely hears their historicity defended or attacked. It seems to be understood that this is just a manner of speaking. Zen stories too, abound with the marvelous. But as Sokei-an frequently points out, the "mystery" is to be penetrated with the Zen Eye; no magic is involved.

Before the Zen student takes out his

special key that unlocks the "gate", however, he must dispose of another type of debris unless he has a "kind" roshi with a firm grasp of the languages involved and endless patience with the foreigners who wish to obtain a clear statement of the problems they are to handle.

Noting the different readings of this story by the three writers so far mentioned, all of whom arrived at their understanding of its message from Soyen Shaku or his disciple Sokatsu Shaku (therefore presumably the same) I turned to *MUMONKAN* itself and re-examined my own attempts, some ten years ago, to ferret out its verbal statement from the Chinese and Japanese with the help of Iida Shotaro, at that time a Japanese language teacher, with whom I was attempting to read *MUMONKAN*. In addition to this, I have two unpublished rough translations, one by a Japanese Zen priest who has published a book in English, and another by a Roshi. I mention the background of the translators to indicate that all of them, by their training, are qualified to understand the traditional meaning of the passage. Comparing all of these, as I looked at the original Chinese and its Japanese transcription, and dredged from my mind all the comments I had heard made on the words used, I then made my own working translation, which follows.

#### *BUDDHA SHOWS A FLOWER*

*Buddha, long ago, when he was at Vulture Peak, picked up a flower and showed it to his monks, turning it around. All were silent. Mahakashyapa smiled. Buddha said: In me is the true Dharma-eye, the essence of Nirvana, the true formless form, the mysterious Dharma-gate. Not transmissible by words or scrip-*

*ture, it has passed to Mahakashyapa.*

Of course, if I look at this passage for a second from a literary view, a number of interesting considerations present themselves. For instance, the characteristic style of *MUMONKAN* called attention to itself in the catchy way the title is worded, and in the structure of the opening sentence. Anti-literary Zenmen tend to scoff at concern with literary excellence in the translating of Zen works or writings about Zen, or even attempts at accuracy of meaning, but I believe this to be a leaning-over backwards to avoid undue emphasis. So, though I do not dispute the dictum that where literary Zen flourishes true Zen declines, I hope to see better and more professional translations in future that try for the style as well as the content.

The great Japanese pioneers of Zen in America have worked to get the message across. A few Western students have worked to get it. Both labored under language difficulties only now gradually coming to light. Some notes on my choices may make the nature of the problem clearer. It will be seen that some of the difficulties will be very easy to avoid with a minimum of information. Others are almost impossible to overcome. Analysis of the different kinds of problems, should, I hope, lead to the solution of the easy ones and the recognition of the impossible ones.

To avoid confusion I have elected to use "Buddha" throughout rather than the variety of titles subject to my later finding out why the titles were used.

Mahakashyapa, variously identified in the translations I have available

as Maha-Kashapa, Arya Kashapa, Kasho and Mahakashapa, presents merely a spelling problem, unless he is meant to be a personified doctrine. I have used Mahakashyapa throughout, also just for convenience.

*MUMONKAN* koans usually begin with the name of the main personage, in this case Buddha. Then, if necessary, the circumstances of time, place, and so forth may be given in a modifying phrase or clause. I have followed this sequence in my translation, in order to keep with the form of the original.

The circumstances in this case are "long ago"--time, and "Vulture Peak"--place. There are a variety of readings of this place-name, which might be confusing to anyone unfamiliar with the sutras in general. In the versions I have, different choices have been made. In one, mention of the place is omitted altogether. The other versions all refer to the same place.

Then there is the flower. Sometimes it is called a golden lotus, sometimes just a flower. My text says flower.

The second word of the title which I have tentatively put as "shows" is untranslatable by any single word I have so far found. The word used for it most often is "twirled" but this seems to me to convey a wrong impression. The Chinese word indicates a "turning" of some sort, but to say "turns a flower" doesn't indicate it is in Buddha's hand. In the first sentence I add a modifying "turning it around" though it is the same word again, to indicate the action. For it seems to me that when a Zen story is in action, as in a moving picture, the nature of the action is just as much a part of the story as the dialogue. Here the action, from its description,

seems to be that the Buddha picks up a flower (in another version, he takes it from someone who has offered it) and shows it, turning it around. Several of the recounters of the story have omitted the "turning"; those who say "twirl" have emphasized it. "Pivots" has been suggested as an alternative, but the unusualness of this word in the sense required would attract too much attention to itself to be effective, in addition to being incorrect used as a transitive verb.

Ohasama, instead of repeating the story as it was originally told, has explained the meaning.

Volumes could be written (and some have been) on the doctrinal meaning of the four terms contracted into True Dharma by Goto Roshi. It is notable, I think, that the translators have used quite different words to express what are clearly the same terms.

My greatest difficulty was in finding a word that would satisfactorily express the "transmission" itself. I am not satisfied with my choice. At this point, you may well be complaining, if you have stayed with me this far, that not one word has been used in other than a tentative way. The meaning of each is involved in the meaning of all the others. That is, I think, the point I most want to make. If any word of a passage is off, the "atmosphere" of the whole passage is altered, not to mention the meaning of the story, which I am not considering at this time. For a sanzen student, where every tiniest point may prove a stumbling-block, this can be critical.

The Japanese masters (I haven't met any others) tell the student: "Don't stick to the words!" Of course they are right. But, not sticking to the words,

the Western student must somehow try to get past them into the meaning itself. All the translators have tried to present the material with this objective in view, I am sure. Some have tried so hard that, instead of translating, they have explained the word, as I did, when I added "turning it around", using four words to express one, or as Ohasama did when he described the point of the story rather than the story.

As I return to the feelings I experienced long ago when I would approach my teacher laden down with all the dictionaries I could find anything in and ask, does this word mean this or that, trying to fit each one into its proper place, the answer would more often be, "Oh, you have to decide that for yourself," and then I would remember "*ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*", where the problem was disposed of quite neatly.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."

"The question is", said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master--that's all."  
By Mary Farkas

Having begot sons your heart is re-  
 joiced;  
 You gather riches for them and marry  
 them to brides.  
 Then they abandon you and drive you  
 forth from home.  
 The brutish churl refusing to sup-  
 port his father  
 May be a man in form, but has a  
 demon's heart.  
 To forsake a venerable parent  
 Is like depriving of its fodder  
 The old horse outlived its  
 usefulness.  
 When the children are grown and  
 their aged sire  
 Must beg his food from door to  
 door,  
 To rely upon the staff is best.  
 It is not the affection of his  
 sons  
 Wards off from him the fiery bull,  
 Leads him in safety o'er the dan-  
 gerous path,  
 Protects him from the vicious dogs,  
 Or through the darkness helps him  
 on his way;  
 Nor from deep ditch or empty well  
 Or thorny jungle does it save him.  
 Depending upon the power of his  
 staff,  
 Upright he stands and does not  
 falter.

Some Buddhist doctrines are hidden in the words of the gatha. I shall point them out to you.

The Buddha was not very pleased to see the old man following the Brahman's custom of leaving home in their old age, to beg food for the remainder of their lives and die no one knew where. This way of life was certainly different from that of the layman in the Buddhist faith. From the Buddha's point of view, the children ought to look after the old folks. The Buddha felt there was something unnatural in the Brahman way. In the Buddha's teaching the elements of compassion and love are emphasized. From the Buddhist standpoint it is wrong to be a man of no affinity, of no love. There are some who devote themselves to knowledge only and care nothing about sympathy and compassion for others, but latter-day Buddhists who were heartless men did not have a true understanding of Buddhism.

The emphasis of this sutra is, of course, on the staff. "To rely upon the staff is best." The staff, looked at with the Zen Eye, is the symbol of Dharma.

The power of Dharma defends you against the "fiery bull" of destructive power. Following the laws of the Sangha, you can go safely over steep

and precipitous paths. Vicious dogs are notions, erroneous views. With the light of Dharma you can go through the darkness of ignorance. The deep ditch is philosophical entanglements. The thorny jungle is this world of desire.

The empty well is the erroneous view of annihilation or the abstract notion of Emptiness you think is Dharma. Unless you destroy your abstract notion of Emptiness you will never understand true Emptiness. When you take the emptiness that is your notion to be true Dharma, logically you think that there is no future, no reward, no punishment, that you are free to do whatever you want in this life. That there is no law, no morality, nothing at all in this world, will be your conclusion. The teacher of Buddhism must watch the student's step when he comes near this dangerous pit lest he fall into it. Emptiness is a medicine to clean your mind. Your mind must be clean, but it should not be falsely empty. Mind is man, the man is Buddha. Without Buddha there is no use to talk about Buddhism.

The Buddha's main point is condensed in this line: "To rely on the staff is best." I do not need to explain. If you are a Buddhist you will immediately understand the Buddha's hint: "Depending upon the power of his staff, upright he stands and does not falter." Through the comprehension of Dharma you can stand erect.

This sutra has more to it; there is a second part. The rest is that the old man went to his home city and recited the gatha in the assembly. His son, hearing this, came out from the crowd. Kneeling on the ground, before the old man, he expressed his regret. Then, taking him by the hand, he led him back home. There the old man was once more worshiped as master of the house.

But one morning as the aged Brahman leaned on his staff to step out of the house, he opened the eye of his mind. He said: "I have enlightened myself reciting the gatha of the Buddha. Now I understand what it is to be a Bhikshu." And he decided there and then to follow the Buddha as his disciple.

Shakyamuni's teaching is clear though the Brahman did not understand the deep meaning. Nor did his son come to know true filial piety. He was just terribly ashamed to have the neighbors hear when his father recited the Buddha's gatha in the assembly.

This sutra was written in an old collection and was entitled "The

Great Staff." It is Hinayana teaching, but as primitive Buddhism it is very interesting. When you read a Buddhist sutra, your eye must penetrate the paper to find its deepest meaning. It seems to me that the monk who wrote this must have understood the deep meaning of the gatha and that that is why this sutra is called "The Great Staff."

In the Zen school, the staff was a familiar sight. Some of the Zen masters of China carried a staff which they "showed." Usually the staff is portrayed in art as a long stick of natural wood. It may have an ornament on the top that makes a sound as the master walks along. It is such a staff that the master "showed" when he was asked, for instance: "What is the cardinal principle of Buddhism?"

When Unmon "showed" his staff, he said: "This staff has become a dragon and swallowed the universe." The Anja of the Lotus Peak also carried a long staff and showed it, drawing a line from left to right in the air. He said: "When anyone comes here why does that one not stay here?" By his attitude you can grasp that he meant the highest attainment of Zen practice. As no one could answer him, it is said he then shouldered the staff and went into the deep mountains, never to return.

I cannot say that there is any relation between the Buddha's designating the staff as a symbol of Dharma and a Zen master's using the staff as Dharma itself, but it is an interesting coincidence.

When the monk in the sutra says, "To rely upon the staff is best" you can realize that the Buddha was not talking about a material staff. What is the best, the most precious thing in the world upon which you can rely? Do you rely upon God, upon Buddha, upon money, upon your father, upon business? Perhaps you have forgotten what you are relying upon?

The most precious organ of your body is the eye, but all five senses rely upon consciousness. The staff that supports you, upon which you can rely, is the staff of your own consciousness.

Without your consciousness you will never know where you are. Do you know where you are in the deep night of sleep? In the morning, when you find yourself on your bed: "Ah, here I am, yes." But in the fathomless consciousness of the darkness, where are you then?

If you were to think, when you go to bed at ten o'clock at night, that

you were about to enter eternal darkness--no space, no time--you would feel quite uncomfortable about this, wouldn't you?"

Many of those who thought they had attained the highest enlightenment, at the end of life, see yawning before them the eternal darkness of hell. "I thought I would enter Nirvana at the end of my life, but now it seems to me it is hell I am about to enter. Shakyamuni Buddha told me a lie."

Throughout his whole life a man may have studied Buddhism--thirty, forty years--but if he has been relying upon a wrong conception, in his last moment, the great doubt will come. I think that must be a very fearful experience, to conceive this doubt just one moment before death. Shakyamuni Buddha did not lie. But it will be too late for you, too, if you come to the great question only at your last moment. Why not finish with this problem now?

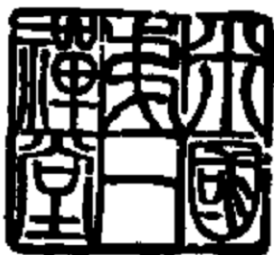
On what can you rely? Consciousness is the staff that supports you. Meditate upon consciousness with your own consciousness. Then you can realize Reality. It is the best way. At the end of your life, you will not need help. There will be no question, no doubt, in your heart. With your staff in hand, you can die tranquilly. "To rely upon the staff is best." To rely upon your own consciousness is better than to depend upon the affection of your children. In the last moment, your wife, child, money will not help you. Only your own consciousness will help you through the darkness of ignorance.

*"The Staff" is a composite reconstructed by M. Farkas from three lectures of Sokei-an given in 1935, 1939, and 1942. The gatha is taken from the reading version of the 1942 lecture prepared by R. F. Sasaki and M. Farkas.*



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**Founded in 1930 by  
Sokei-an Sasaki**



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

美國禪一第協會