



## ASHES CEREMONIES

During the first few of the twelve years Suzuki-roshi was here in America, he kept deciding to postpone leaving, then to stay for longer and longer periods, then to spend the rest of his life in America, and finally he asked to have his ashes scattered on a high mountain overlooking the monastery he founded here, and also beneath a stone in the valley of the monastery. The mountain where his ashes were scattered is the first and last place (and highest) from which the monastery, Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, can be seen going in and out over

*Cover: Gandhara Buddha, over one thousand five hundred years old, on the altar of the Buddha and Lecture Hall at Zen Center, San Francisco.*

the fourteen-mile dirt road. On its first peak in the summer of 1968 the ashes of Nyogen Senzaki, the first Zen monk to make his home in America, were scattered by Yasutani-roshi, Nakagawa Soen-roshi, and Suzuki-roshi. Yasutani-roshi and Soen-roshi had brought these ashes to Tassajara in a wonderful gesture of recognition of the unity of Zen in America. On the night of the full moon they and the Tassajara students went to the mountaintop, chanted the *Heart Sutra*, and danced holding hands in a circle on Soen-roshi's suggestion that "we form our own moon."



#### ASHES SCATTERING CEREMONY

On the full moon night of April 17, 1972, Baker-roshi, Mrs. Suzuki, the ordained disciples, and the Tassajara students went up to the mountain's second peak (next to the one on which Senzaki's ashes had been scattered). In the Tassajara valley, the weather had been calm, but on the mountain the weather and wind were so fierce we had to support each other in order to wend out to the peak. We almost gave up, but everyone wanted to try despite the complete darkness, the wind, dust, and fog which was shooting up on the far side of the peak and into the sky, threatening to obscure the not-yet-risen moon. When the moon did rise over the distant mountains through the streamers of fog, everyone chanted the *Heart Sutra* while Baker-roshi scattered the ashes. As Mrs. Suzuki remarked later, it was weather characteristic of Suzuki-roshi. She said, every time there was an important ceremony in Japan that he had to perform, there had been fierce weather like this. "It's just like him." Mrs. Suzuki wore Roshi's zoris (shoes) from San Francisco to Tassajara because during his illness Roshi had said he wanted to go to Tassajara one more time.

The following day, during the Ryaku Fusatsu Ceremony, Baker-roshi said, "Last night on the mountaintop, in the wind and with the full moon we scattered the ashes of our beloved teacher Shogaku Shunryu Daiocho and chanted the Maha Prajna Paramita Hridaya Heart Sutra in English and Japanese. Some of his ashes blew up into the air like a cloud, some settled into the earth. On that peak he chose, where you enter and leave Tassajara, Soen Nakagawa-roshi, Hakuun Yasutani-roshi, and Suzuki-roshi scattered the ashes of Nyogen Senzaki-roshi, their predecessor in America. Now we have chanted the Ceremony of Becoming a Bodhisattva as done since ancient times on full moon nights. Many times Suzuki-roshi said he was a cloud. May he be a cloud and a mountain and watch over us forever."

#### TRADITIONAL ASHES CEREMONY

The place Suzuki-roshi chose for the traditional ceremony and burial of ashes is a small, shaded clearing on the ridge at the upper end of the Tassajara valley. A ten-minute walk from the Zendo, it is a wonderfully quiet spot—the one place in the entire Tassajara valley where the sound of the creek can barely be heard. From this place, it is only a short walk to the top of the hill, where a hundred-foot waterfall can be heard and seen across the valley. After Trudy Dixon's death in 1969, Suzuki-roshi worked on leveling the site and then he laid the basic foundation stones for the spot for Trudy's ashes and the one for his own.

Suzuki-roshi had been the abbot of two temples in Japan, Rinso-in and Zoun-in, and shortly after he died, Mrs. Suzuki took half of his ashes to Japan. In February, 1972, a major ceremony was held at Rinso-in to bury his ashes next to those of his predecessors, the thirty-five former abbots. Besides the Suzuki family and the members of the congregation, the ceremony was attended by many of his dharma-brother priests, other priests of the Soto school, and several Zen Center students who were in Japan. Other portions of the ashes went to the Suzuki family and to Zoun-in, of which Suzuki-roshi had been the twenty-eighth abbot.

That same spring, work to prepare the burial site at Tassajara was begun. Continuing Suzuki-roshi's earlier work, the clearing was enlarged slightly and a stone wall built against the hillside. As Roshi wished, his resting place was to be a natural unmarked stone. Suzuki-roshi loved working with stones. He would spend hours looking in the creek bed for good stones, and whenever he had a spare moment he would be in his garden moving and placing stones. Students who had worked with him knew of several large stones in the creek that he especially liked, and one of these was chosen for the burial site. It weighed over two tons, and it took many days of vigorous effort—using winches, pulleys, sleds, and lots of muscle—to move it up the hill and into place.

The formal Ashes Ceremony, held on April 29, was attended by over two hundred fifty people, including more than thirty members of the Japanese congregation of Sokoji, and other representatives of the San Francisco Japanese community. It was the most developed Buddhist ceremony ever performed by Zen Center, and was possible only through the many years of experience working on and doing Buddhist ceremonies with Suzuki-roshi, the Japanese congregation, Katagiri-roshi, Chino-sensei, and many others. Chino-sensei was especially helpful in the preparations for this ceremony.



*Mrs. Suzuki and disciples*

The large densho bell began ringing early in the morning, and was struck one hundred eight times at regular intervals until the beginning of the ceremony at two in the afternoon. The ceremony began with a long procession of the ordained disciples, led by Baker-roshi carrying the urn of ashes in a white cloth suspended from his neck. As the procession arrived at the stone, people were already waiting, standing or sitting among the live oak, manzanita, and wild lilac all around the clearing. During the ceremony Baker-roshi, then Mrs. Suzuki, Suzuki-roshi's son Otohiro, and then each of the ordained disciples and a few older lay disciples one by one carefully lifted a piece of the ashes with special chopsticks, held it in the incense smoke for a moment, and then placed it into the opening that went under the stone. Then everyone went up to pour spring water from a bamboo dipper over the stone. Gradually the stone, with its patches of brilliant green moss, came glisteningly alive in the sun, while the *Heart Sutra* was chanted over and over until everyone had offered a dipper of water to Suzuki-roshi onto the stone.

The ceremony lasted for over two hours and had a feeling of intense concentration and power, especially as Baker-roshi stood facing the stone and for several silent minutes made signs and mudras to consecrate the stone as Suzuki-roshi's own body and dwelling place, a natural pagoda. Afterwards there was a buffet dinner in the Zendo garden at which many old Zen Center people were able to be together with a deep mutual feeling of connection and gratitude to Suzuki-roshi for the many tiny and great ways he brought our lives together.

Our Teacher left us alone, but so carefully, that the mountain and the stone and the whole earth is his great body.



*During the Ashes Ceremony there were a number of audible statements made by Baker-roshi. Here are parts of several of them.*

*Opening:*

Suzuki-roshi said, "Which do you prefer, the whole earth or a small stone?" And then he answered himself, "I rather prefer a small stone which we can carry or move."

Suzuki-roshi! We have assembled the disciples, assembling your Great Body. We have moved here for you this favorite stone. But we know your true stupa is hard to see, that your Great Spirit is reflected everywhere.

*Middle:*

This stupa is the body of the Tathagata. Do not try to see it! If you desire to see Shogaku Shunryu-roshi's body: Look here! Just in front of you! By your own Great Vow you will hear his Lion's Roar.

Suzuki-roshi, from now on make this rock your peaceful home. Receive the offers that are flowing from every direction, returning from your own kind heart. Please protect endless generations of practice here.

*End (Eko):*

We have offered light, incense, flowers, something from the sky, something from the earth, something from the sea to this mountain stone, this formless tree, your pure body that we may continue to serve you. Farewell. May we meet you always before us in the light of your wisdom that shines from everything.