

## IN MEMORY OF SHIBAYAMA ZENKEI (1894-1974)

By Kudo Sumiko

from *The Eastern Buddhist* 8,1 (May 1975), pp. 149-154, with minor revisions

On August 29th, 1974, Abbot Shibayama Zenkei of Nanzenji closed his life of eighty years. As the last poem he wrote reveals, he devoted his life to the work of compassion:

Carrying snow and filling the well,  
For eighty-one years I have lived.  
Truly there is nothing special –  
I sleep with limbs outstretched.

If one tries to fill a well with sand, however small the amount of sand one carries each time, the well will one day be full. If, however, one tries to fill it with snow, his efforts will never be rewarded, however hard he works. Still, such a sacred fool is the ideal image of man in Zen, and Shibayama Roshi actually lived the life of filling a well with snow, trying to transmit Zen both in Japan and abroad.

Shibayama Zenkei was born in a village near Nagoya in 1894 as the first son of the Shibayamas, landowners of the area. He spent a happy childhood with good and considerate parents. While in elementary school his ambition was to be a general, a dream a great many boys had in those days. But he was not strong enough physically to enter junior military academy. One of his uncles was the Chief Abbot of Myoshinji in Kyoto and he must have impressed the young boy as a great man, for he decided that if he could not become a general, the next best thing would be to become a Zen abbot. Because he was very fond of learning, his mother, who was a devout Buddhist, thought it might be a good idea for her son to be a Zen monk. So when he was fourteen years old he was sent to a nearby Zen temple as an apprentice monk.

When later he entered the Rinzai sect's college in Kyoto (now Hanazono University) and studied Zen, everyone thought he would turn out to be a good monk. As he grew older, however, he became critical of various aspects prevalent in the traditional Buddhist organizations in Japan, and found he could not just naively follow the usual course in becoming a monk. He began to study Christianity, and entered a Christian college. In those days there was a Christian movement led by Kagawa Toyohiko which advocated helping the poor by living among them. He agreed with this movement, and was ready to join them. It was partly due to physical reasons that he did not, but it was mostly because of his mother's earnest pleas against leaving the priesthood.

Shibayama Roshi was against the old sectarian interpretations of religion, and was interested in Ludwig Zamenhof's advocacy of one world with one language. He studied Esperanto, and became one of the best Esperanto speakers in all Japan. But such ideas were considered dangerous in those days, and his name appeared on the black list of the Secret Police. As he was searching various spiritual avenues in this way, he happened one day to hear a talk by a Zen abbot, Mamiya Roshi, in which he said: "If one could cover the whole world with calf leather, it would certainly be wonderful. Then you could go wherever you wanted without dirtying or hurting your feet. As an idea, it is wonderful, but in actuality, quite impossible. Rather than talking of leathering the whole world, why don't you put a good pair of shoes on your own feet. Why don't you train yourself and perfect your own personality? Then you can go to any corner of the world wearing good shoes, and work to save your fellow beings." It was this talk that made the young Shibayama decide to enter a Zen monastery and become a monk. He said it made him realize how foolish he was, just talking about the idealistic impossibility of saving the whole world unaware that he in fact had neither the power, the ability, nor the wisdom to actually accomplish it.

In 1916 he entered Nanzenji Monastery, and for over ten years went through hard training under Abbot Kono Bukai, noted as a very severe master. Finishing his monastery training, he turned to the academic study of Zen, later becoming a professor at Hanazono University, and also at Otani

University as a successor to Suzuki Daisetz. In 1948, after ten years of university teaching, he was invited back to Nanzenji Monastery as Roshi, Zen master in charge of training monks, and in 1959, he was elected the head abbot of the Nanzenji organization of temples. In that capacity he was widely respected as one of the leading Zen masters of contemporary Japan.

Shibayama Zenkei was a rare example of a Zen man in whom refined personality, penetrating insight, profound experience, and high learning were all wonderfully combined. He was a compassionate and understanding religious teacher who awakened love and peace in the hearts of all who came in touch with him. He was a strict Roshi who guided his disciples always from the genuine Zen standpoint, never yielding to any immature understanding, whether intellectual, psychological, or emotional. As a scholar he was one of the few Zen monks with a philosophical basis and creative thinking based on long and diligent study.

Any mention of Shibayama Zenkei must include reference to the overseas activities in which he was engaged towards the end of his life. I was fortunate enough to accompany him on these trips as his interpreter. It is said that "Silence is more suitable to Zen than eloquence." Every year since 1965, Shibayama Roshi flew to the United States with the wish of transmitting Zen to the West. For this, speech and eloquence were not suitable. "Zen is not something that can be explained and understood; a talk or two on Zen in the United States would mean nothing," he said as he traveled the American continent from west to east, north to south, giving talks on Zen at various American colleges and universities. Although he was warmly received with goodwill and friendship everywhere, for an aged Roshi over seventy years old, three months of travel from one school to another with changes of climate and different food was not easy. It was certainly the picture of an old sacred fool trying to fill a well with snow.

When the late Suzuki Daisetz was over ninety and he realized that the task of introducing Zen thought to the West was becoming too strenuous for him, he recognized that there was more and more need for an authentic Zen master to go abroad and provide practical guidance. Thus he turned to Shibayama Roshi. While agreeing that the idea was a good one, Shibayama

Roshi felt that he was too old for the job, and, when a trip was proposed to him by the Hazen Foundation, he had misgivings about not being enough of a scholar to deliver the required lectures. Yet in January 1965, he left Japan on his first trip to the United States, unable to refuse any longer the earnest requests of Dr. Suzuki and the Foundation members.

On this first occasion we visited the University of Hawaii, Claremont, Carleton College, Earlham College, Atlanta University, Duke, Colgate, and Wesleyan University, with the Roshi giving talks on such subjects as "Characteristics of Zen," "Freedom in Zen," "Training in Zen," and "The Ideal Image of Man in Zen." We stayed at one school from a week to ten days, during which time Roshi delivered public lectures, held seminars, and talked personally with many students and professors.

The lecture hall was usually full, and the hour-long talk, including translation, was always followed by a period of lively questions and answers. Seeing learned professors, authorities in the field of religious studies, raising their hands high in the very first row together with the students, Shibayama Roshi was at first rather surprised, as this was something he had never experienced in Japan. He disliked by nature pedantry, pretension, Zen-monkishness or anything of that sort. Without any ostentation, he would give true Zen answers. His attitude, or personality, naturally impressed the audience. The sincere but initially slightly stiff atmosphere of the hall was soon a congenial gathering of friends, as the audience got in touch with the essence of Zen in the person of the Roshi, not as a concept or as philosophy, but as a living fact.

One student said, "I don't know much about Zen. If, however, it is Zen that has produced such a man, it must be a great religion." Another, from the Middle West, telephoned us after a lecture, and said, "During the last war we heard a lot about the Japanese people, which made us form an image of them as an uncivilized, cruel people. Today, watching you talking on the stage, I realized that here is someone talking and living Truth. Here is a true human being in whom there is no distinction of American and Japanese. I am calling because I wanted to tell you this."

Thus Shibayama Roshi's first trip to the United States was

successful. Many thought it would be extremely difficult to transmit the essence of a religion or a philosophy with Zen's long tradition to people of a different cultural background, especially if this had to be done using an interpreter. Shibayama Roshi overcame all barriers with real Zen insight. He received many invitations to return to the States, and he found himself making annual visits for eight years. Yale, Southern Methodist, Vanderbilt and others were added to the list of schools.

When he first went to the United States it was still the time of a so-called Zen boom. "Zen" was a favorite term of avant-garde artists. At the beginning many must have come to his talks curious to see an Oriental "Zen master." Soon, however, such students decreased in number. Audiences came to listen with a sincere and genuine aspiration. They wanted to know what Zen really was and to find if it had any significance for their own lives.

There were many more requests for personal interviews than Roshi could accept in spite of his desire to see them all. Faculty interest increased as well, and special study meetings with specialists in the fields of religion and philosophy were held, where a Zen Roshi and authorities on Christianity, theology, and Western philosophy would have heart-to-heart talks and try to understand each other correctly. Though this was exhausting for him, he was very grateful for these opportunities, as he learned a great deal from them. We realized that when we thought we had come to the point where we could really understand each other, it was in fact the time we were made aware of our differences – how differently we feel, think, and react.

One of the most significant experiences during these trips was the special student *sesshin* (intensive training period) at Colgate University. As the interest of students changed from mere curiosity to genuine spiritual quest, their wish for Zen training and some glimpse of Zen experience became greater. At their strong wish, Zen training was included in Colgate's Special Study Program.

When we arrived at snow-covered Hamilton, New York, on January 7th, 1970, twenty-five students, who had spent the first week of January in reading assigned books on Zen, were waiting for us. The second week began with the first student *sesshin* led by Shibayama Roshi. Each day there was

three hours of Zazen and a *teisho* (Zen talk) in the morning, afternoon was for individual studies and personal interviews with Roshi, followed by two hours of Zazen in the evening. For three weeks all the members stayed in their dormitories and could not leave the campus. Although this was not in accordance with the ordinary temple sesshin in Japan, still it was not an easy schedule students with casual interest could join. Zazen, especially, was difficult for the American youths unaccustomed to the full-lotus sitting posture. Yet they came to the Zen Hall in the Chapel House on the top of the hill, cheeks red in the freezing morning temperatures. There were no dropouts throughout the three weeks. Every morning Shibayama Roshi would give his *teisho* on the *Mumonkan*, give practical instructions on Zazen, and personally correct their Zazen postures.

A Zen *teisho* is completely different from a lecture, if a lecture is thought of as being for the purpose of philosophically or conceptually explaining Zen. In a monastery, *teisho* is an occasion for a Zen master to present his Zen experience and spirituality directly and concretely before the students, so as to inspire strong spiritual searching. The students listened to the living *teisho* of a true Zen master, forgetting themselves and the pain in their legs.

When the three-week sesshin was over, and the time for Roshi to leave the campus came, a student said, "Having known that a man like you actually lives among us, I now have hope and trust in human beings." Another said, "This sesshin is certainly the highlight of my life so far. I am glad I came to this university, so I could join the sesshin and come to know you." They asked Shibayama Roshi to leave his *teisho* in the form of a book so that not only they but many other students in the West might share the opportunity with them. At their earnest requests and the persuasion of Dr. Kenneth Morgan, who promised that he would spare no efforts in helping him complete the book, Shibayama Roshi finally agreed to write *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, a complete translation of the *Mumonkan* with his *teisho* on each of the forty-eight koan.

Though busy as Chief Abbot over some five hundred Zen temples, for three years he worked at this translation, concentrating on the work

during winter months on the island of Hawaii, and for a month in summer in the mountains of Japan. Together with the *Hekigan-roku*, the Mumonkan has been studied and treasured by Zen students as an authentic text for training. There are many books about Zen in English, but no translations of classic Zen texts with Zen masters' comments have so far been available in English. We worked on it day and night. Ambiguous or random translations would never do, a grasp of every sentence, and every word, was required. It was like having *sanzen* (Zen interview) with Roshi everyday. What makes *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* most significant is Shibayama Roshi's own teisho on each koan and on Master Mumon's commentary. He could not give the usual teisho he would give to the monks at a Japanese monastery using traditional Zen terms. Readers would mostly be American students, highly intelligent but with a completely different cultural background and way of thinking. His constant concern was how Zen could be correctly transmitted to such readers. The work lamp burned until after midnight. Often, I would wake up after a few hours and find the light on in his room. Quietly opening the door, I would see him already working at his desk at three or four o'clock in the morning. The three winters we went to Hawaii he did not go out for sightseeing even once. The best I could manage was to take him out for an hour walk in the evenings.

The manuscript of *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* was completed in January 1973, with the unstinting help of Dr. Morgan. Receiving the first copy of the beautifully completed book in May 1974, Shibayama Roshi looked happy, and said, "It turned out nicely. This will be the greatest work of my life. I am grateful for all who helped me to complete it." Soon after this, he was taken ill and had to be moved into a hospital in Kyoto. In June he underwent two emergency operations, but to the great dismay of his disciples and friends, he passed away on August 29th, 1974, at the age of eighty.

Shibayama Roshi was certainly a great man, and uniquely so. Yet he was an "ordinary man," who attained his Zen personality only after long and diligent training, an example showing that a man actually can live a life of *prajna* (wisdom) and *karuna* (compassion).

His warm, gentle smile is gone. Shibayama Roshi does live, however, in his friends and followers, or rather, what lives there is something prior to any such naming, an ever unnamable 'it' that, gratefully, keeps on living.