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Remembering Yamada Kōun Rōshi

Yamada Kōun-ken Rōshi died at his home in Kamakura, September 13, 1989, after a long illness. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Yamada Kazue, three children, and several grandchildren. He was 82.

Born Yamada Kyōzō in Nihonmatsu Village, Fukushima Prefecture, the Rōshi was educated at the Dai-ichi Kōtō Gakkō and Tokyo Imperial University, graduating in 1930 with a degree in law.

His high school roommate was Nakagawa Sōen, who already was reading and talking about Zen Buddhism. Though in those early days, the young Kyōzō did not share this interest, the two boys became fast friends. Nakagawa went on to become a monk and then a master of Zen at Ryūtakuji, while Yamada launched on a career in business. They remained life-time friends, and later their friendship was to lead Yamada Kyōzō into Zen study after all.

After seven years with the Chiyoda Mutual Life Insurance Company, Yamada Kyōzō (by now married with children), accepted a position with the Manchuria Mining Company, serving as personnel director. He and his family lived in Manchuria from 1941 until 1946, when they were repatriated. It was during this interval overseas that he met his old friend Nakagawa Sōen again, while the latter was visiting the Myōshinji Betsuin in Manchuria.

As Yamada Rōshi related many years later, the two friends had many earnest discussions, and at one point the monk Sōen exclaimed, "Your words tend to be much too philosophical. I hope that you might take up Zen practice and clarify your outlook."

This was the prompt that Yamada the businessman needed. He began Zen practice with Kōno Sōkan Rōshi, abbot of the Myōshinji Betsuin, and on his return to Japan with his family, he continued his practice, first with Asahina Sōgen Rōshi at Enkakuji in Kita-kamakura, then with Hanamoto Kanzui Rōshi at Mokusenji in Ōfuna, and finally with Yasutani Haku'un Rōshi of the Sanbō Kyōdan.

The Sanbō Kyōdan was established by Yasutani Rōshi in the early 1950s to incorporate the teachings of the Sōtō Zen Master Harada Dai'un Rōshi, who also studied Rinzai Zen Buddhism under Toyoda Dokutan Rōshi at Nanzenji in the early part of this century. With this experience under Dokutan Rōshi, Harada Rōshi incorporated kōan study into his teaching. Yasutani Rōshi, already a Sōtō priest, studied with Harada Rōshi in middle life, and became in-

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dependent as his successor in due time.

When Yamada Rōshi met Yasutani Rōshi, the latter had decided to devote himself to lay students. Yamada helped him to organize the Kamakura Haku'unkai, which operated in rented quarters for several years. In 1960 Yamada Rōshi received *inka shōmei*, attesting to his transmission, from Yasutani Rōshi, and in 1970 he became Master of the Sanbō Kyōdan and Rōshi at its headquarters, the Sanun Zendō, which he built on the compound of his home in Kamakura.

During this post-war period, Yamada Rōshi pursued a career first in business, and then as managing director of a large clinic, the Tokyo Kenbikyō In, where his wife was medical director. Each day, the Yamada couple commuted to Tokyo together, one hour and forty minutes each way, returning to take up Zen practice—and in later years—teaching, in the evening.

In 1971, Yamada Rōshi accepted an invitation to serve as Master of the Diamond Sangha and its centers in Hawaii, the Koko An Zendo and the Maui Zendo. He made annual trips to lead sesshin at the two centers until 1984, when he named Robert Aitken as his successor. In addition, he made many trips to the Philippines, Singapore, and Germany to lead sesshin with groups founded by his disciples.

Yamada Rōshi attracted many foreign students, including Brigitte D'Ortschy, now teaching Zen Buddhism in Munich. Most of the Rōshi's foreign disciples were, however, Catholic priests and nuns, beginning with Fr. Enomiya Lasalle. He was once heard to remark that he thought Zen would become an important stream in the Catholic Church one day. Perhaps that day is still to come, but nonetheless his Catholic disciples are teaching Zen today in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, the United States, Canada, India, Singapore, and the Philippines. Prominent among these are Fr. Willigis Jager in Würzburg, West Germany, Ms. Joan Rieck in Zurich and Seattle, Sr. Elaine MacInnes in Manila, and Fr. A. Maria Arokiasamy in Madras.

Yamada Rōshi is succeeded as Master of the Sanbō Kyōdan by Kubota Ji'un Rōshi, also a businessman, who was a disciple of Yasutani Rōshi from his middle-school years, and was a senior disciple of Yamada Rōshi from the establishment of the Sanun Zendō onwards. Many of Kubota Rōshi's fellow students from those early years form his executive committee—seasoned Zen leaders, including Yamada Ryōun Rōshi, son of Yamada Kōun Rōshi, who will be Associate Master, charged with the guidance of non-Japanese students. The large community of Japanese students that form the main body of the Sanbō Kyōdan are all of them lay men and women, pursuing a variety of careers.

As a lay master of a lay Sangha with a distinctly international flavor, Yamada Kōun Rōshi already occupies a unique place in contemporary Zen

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Buddhism. His writings in the journal of the Sanbō Kyōdan, *Gyōshō*, keep his words alive among his many Japanese disciples. Some of those talks and essays have been gathered and published in book form, the introductory *Zen no Shōmon*, the two-volume *Zenshū Goburoku* and the recent *Kōun Zenwa*. His English work, *Gateless Barrier*, a commentary on the *Mumonkan* (*Wumen kuan*), inspires Zen students who are English readers, and has been translated into German and Spanish.

Yamada Rōshi's students remember his warmth with nostalgia, and the tireless energy he extended to them with gratitude. My fondest memories are of gatherings in the Yamada living room in Kamakura, exchanging pleasantries over tea after zazen, and then sitting quietly and listening to a Beethoven quartet on his beloved hi-fi. This was zazen also, an experience of lay practice.

Culture enriched by Zen Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism enriched by culture—this was the lay teaching of our Rōshi. His interests extended from atomic physics to public health to international politics, always with the concern of a Bodhisattva fulfilling his vows. When he came to Hawaii we were in the throes of the New Age, and he was confronted by lightly clothed young people with casual manners. Like Hui-neng he knew that their barbarian bodies were different from his own, but essentially they were not foreign, and he conveyed the Dharma to them with the same spirit that enlightened his students in Kamakura. And with the same good humor.

I am grateful that his Dharma is being maintained so conscientiously by his successors at the Sanun Zendō.

ROBERT AITKEN