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Yamada Mumon Roshi, 1900–1988

Let me celebrate your manifestation of life
as a mendicant in hemp of burnt sienna.
Let me celebrate your dedication as a monastery teacher
to the training of both monks and students.
Let me celebrate your benevolence which was boundless
to help and encourage those who suffered.
Let me celebrate your manifestation of death
which knows no extinction of any kind.

Mumon Roshi was born on July 16, 1900, as the fourth son of Yamada Takujiro, who ran a forwarding agency on a highroad in a mountainous area in Aichi Prefecture. At the age of fourteen he went to Tokyo together with his elder brother, and enrolled in Waseda Middle School for a five year-course. While he was in his fourth year, he came upon a passage from the Confucian Analects, which he came to cherish:

Listening to lawsuits, I may be like others;
If only there were no need for lawsuits at all! (XII, 13)

This became a stumbling block for him. As he wrote in his autobiography, *Waga Kokoro no Furusato* ("My Spiritual Home," privately printed by the Institute for Zen Studies, Kyoto, for distribution at his funeral service):

When I came upon this statement, I was obliged to think and rethink. It took my breath away—as if I had suddenly come face to face with a solid wall. I felt that way perhaps because my father wanted me to become a judicial officer or lawyer. No matter, it loomed in my way. A world in which there are no law suits—is this not the ideal of humankind? Are not judgments and defense merely a temporary remedy, a means to an end? What is the ultimate aim of life? Coming up against this barrier, I was quite at a loss.

This was the beginning of his spiritual wanderings. He lost interest in his school work. Instead, he sought books that would respond to his inner quest. He had no desire to go on to college. For a year after graduating from middle school, he frequented religious meetings, both Christian and Buddhist alike,

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held by such famous figures as Uchimura Kanzō and Chikazumi Jōkan. He wrote that he wandered like a hungry dog, sniffing for anything that smelled of truth. In the second year after graduation he wanted to study Buddhism, and enrolled in the course of Indian philosophy at the Buddhist Tōyō University in Tokyo. While the lectures he attended were important in contributing to the formation of his thought, they still did not seem to offer any key to the ultimate objectives of life.

In this same year (1919) Rev. Kawaguchi Ekai (1866–1945), who had four years before returned from his second journey to Tibet, was lecturing on Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* ("Attaining the Activities of Awakening"; *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, according to the Tibetan version), a Buddhist text which he had translated from the Tibetan. Invited by a friend, Mumon Roshi attended a Buddhist meeting at Rev. Kawaguchi's home in Tokyo, to which he had given the name Himalaya Vihara (monastery). A mimeographed text which was handed out had the following passage (Verse 13, Chapter 5 *Samprajanya-rakshanam*, "Preservation of Full Consciousness"):

Where will there be enough leather to cover the whole earth? Only the sole of a shoe can cover the great earth.

He understood it to mean: If the earth were covered entirely with cow-hide, one could go anywhere barefoot. That is impossible, but if you wear shoes on your feet, it would be the same thing as covering the whole earth with cow-hide. It is impossible to turn this world into an ideal paradise, but if you are determined to have awakening and to devote your life to others, and finally come to realize the oneness of humankind and yourself in both mind and heart, that amounts to the identification of this world with paradise.

This passage moved him very deeply and became the second turning point in his spiritual quest. It determined for him the path he was to follow. Although the progress of science and civilization will continue endlessly, an ideal paradise will never be realized in this world. Yet when one is determined to attain religious awakening, that is, in itself, the time when an ideal land of bliss is brought to completion. The land of bliss must be established immediately through one's determination for awakening, for here is the path through which both the self and the world are saved.

Mumon Roshi believed that vowing inwardly to devote his life to humankind was all he had to do, that to do so would need no preparation. Once he firmly vowed that he would dedicate his happiness, his body and mind, his whole life to humankind from that day on, he experienced great delight in the brightness of mind that forsook everything, with the clarity of the heart that turned everything to the benefit of others. Toward the end of 1919 he obtained the agreement of his parents and he was admitted into the

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Himalaya Vihara as an apprentice priest.

He got up at four o'clock in the morning, swept and cleaned, prepared breakfast; at five, he chanted the "Verse of Impermanence" in the mournful rhythm peculiar to the Obaku Sect, accompanying himself by beating the wooden board on which the verse was written. In the afternoon, after school, he swept the garden and heated the bath. Once a week, together with a senior disciple, he went shopping at a vegetable market. As a disciple-servant, he paid for his own board.

Rev. Kawaguchi took two meals a day, breakfast and midday meal, according to the Buddhist precept for mendicants observed in ancient India. He had gone through the hardships of two long journeys to Tibet (1900-1903 and 1914-1915) without deviating from this habit. But in spring the senior disciple left the Vihara. Mumon Roshi stayed on and kept serving the master and his aged mother. But overwork, insufficient sleep, and malnutrition took their toll on his delicate constitution. During the examination period of his second year at Tōyō University he fell ill, the lymphatic glands in his neck swelling until his neck was thicker around than his face. In the summer of that year he was summoned for a physical examination prior to conscription. After measuring his height and weight, the officer in charge said: "You don't have any business here. Go on home." He gave up his self-imposed practice at the Vihara, returned to his native house, and laid his emaciated body down to await death.

At the beginning of June the next year (1922), toward the end of the rainy season, his elder brother, who had taken ill soon after beginning work as a company employee, died of tuberculosis. One day during that period when he was completely secluded from other people, he left his sick bed after many days of confinement and went to the end of the room to view the garden. The nandin was blooming in one corner. Pleasant, cool breezes gently touched his cheeks as if to nurse his sickly body. He wondered how many years had passed since he had last felt such a breeze. Then it occurred to him: "What is the wind? The air moving. Yes, we have had the air!" It was with a great shock that he became aware of the existence of air. As he wrote:

For twenty years after my birth I have been nourished by the air, I was not conscious of its existence. I had thought nothing of the air whereas the air has been embracing me day and night. When this thought came to me, I began to weep. I thought: "I am never alone. I will never be lonely. There is a great power behind me that cares for me, urging me to live. I am sure to be cured." I was made to appreciate fully that humans do not merely live, rather they are being made to live. My heart opened brightly. I made a clumsy verse and recited it:

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Through the cool of the wind that blew this morning did I
Realize something wondrous and great eternally embrace me.

At the end of November that year he visited Rev. Kōno Daikei, head priest of a Rinzai Zen temple in Aichi Prefecture. He stayed for four months placing himself under Rev. Kōno's special care. He later wrote of the miraculous restoration of his physical strength thanks to the regimen that he learned during this period. For forty years after, he said, he continued to enjoy good health by using the same regimen, without ever resorting to medicine. Following Rev. Kōno's advice, he entered Rinzaishū College in Kyoto (the predecessor of Hanazono College, run by the Myōshin-ji of the Rinzai Zen school) as a second year student. After he came to Kyoto, his outlook became positive. He organized a club in the college to spread Buddhist teachings; they devoted two evenings a month to in out-door missionary work in the city. On Sundays he attended a prayer meeting at some Christian church wearing his black monk's robe. He also attended Bible class and a class for English conversation. He participated in an English speech contest for university students sponsored by the Mainichi Newspaper of Osaka, the first time such an event was held in Japan. He spoke about the Zen maxim, "Having No Words to Put Forth" and advanced to secondary competition. The pastor of one of the Christian churches he attended looked over the manuscript of the talk for him.

The Rinzaishū College offered a four-year course with from ten to fifteen students in each year-class. Every term the teachers and students went to the Enpuku-ji Monastery near Kyoto for a week of zazen practice. After he experienced one such session he felt that zazen was the true prayer. He wrote that

Taking up the right zazen-posture in front of the absolute, forgetting oneself completely and entering the condition in which there arises no moment of thought, that is, dedicating oneself exhaustively within the Absolute, and realizing the oneness of the Absolute and oneself—is this not the ultimate manner of prayer? In this clean and clear Self, like that of a new-born baby, not a bit of sentiment exists. There is nothing but the joy of God and man in unity. I suppose this is what Jesus meant by his statement (Matthew 5, 8), "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Four or five days into the special fall retreat at the Enpuku-ji, he was concentrated to the extent that he forgot he was sitting there. On the sixth day, coming from a meeting with the master, the sight of the yellow leaves of a ginkgo tree in front of the main hall startled him and suddenly opened his mind. Run-

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ning back to the master, he found himself able to respond immediately to his question. Now the unity of God-and-man burst open and manifested before him the divine creation of the universe. Everything was fresh and beautiful and true. Everything shone brightly as his self. He lept with delight. He realized that the non-dual loving affection toward humankind and the world was the true reality of human nature. He realized the truth of the determination for Awakening with which he had vowed to devote himself to other beings. Years later, as President of Hanazono College, he told his students:

“Don’t think that a student cannot see his true Self, or that lay people will be unable to be awakened. Far from that. Anyone who attains the deadly earnestness of a cornered mouse can attain Awakening.”

In 1929, three years after his graduation, he entered the Tenryū-ji monastery in Kyoto as a monk. he stayed and studied under Zen Master Seki Seisetsu until the latter’s death in 1945. It was a long period of “nurturing in the holy womb.” In 1945 he became a professor at Rinzaigakuin College—the former Rinzaishū Daigaku. In 1949 he became the presiding priest of the important Reiun-in sub-temple of Myōshin-ji. In the same year he was appointed president of Hanazono College, a position in which he served until 1978. In 1953 he became the master of Shōfuku-ji Monastery in Kobe, and served until 1977. He served as head of the Institute for Zen Studies, Kyoto, from 1964 until his death.

In 1968 he assumed the presidency of the South Pacific Friendship Association, and began visiting islands in the South Pacific to hold memorial services for all the war dead of World War II. In New Guinea he held a joint memorial service with Catholic monks for all the fallen soldiers regardless of their nationalities. His amazing activity—he made almost forty visits to various places in the South Pacific area—continued until 1982. The ceremony establishing the South Pacific Friendship Association took place in front of the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. On that occasion he told those present that the Japanese must apologize to people throughout the South Pacific for the immense destruction caused by Japan, and called on them to strive to establish peace and prosperity in the region. He felt no hesitation in standing in front of the controversial Yasukuni Shrine because, as he mentioned some time later (*Hana Samazana*, Shunjūsha, 1972, pp 66–7), he believed that the shrine stood merely for the rituals supported by the majority of the Japanese people, not because he believed that any who had been bereaved to have wished another war. He did not agree with those Buddhists and Christians who regarded the shrine as a religious institution, pointing out that it had no

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founder, no scriptures, and engaged in no missionary work. He believed that the shrine exists to fulfill a need for members of the Association of the War-Bereaved. He did not agree with those who believed the preservation of the Yasukuni Shrine would result in the restoration of Japanese militarism. I do not know if he later changed his idea about the shrine, but no one can deny how the shrine functioned during the war. It was founded by Emperor Meiji. The "Imperial Instructions Bestowed Upon All the Soldiers" could be called its scripture. The promotion of war could be called its mission. Mumon Roshi's program for peace must include a constant caution against having Yasukuni Shrine assume its former function. It is something we must all guard against.

Before the war Mumon Roshi visited China several times accompanied by his teacher Seki Seisetsu to encourage Japanese soldiers and to talk with Chinese Buddhist monks. After the war, in 1966, he headed a group of people to visit the Linji Tower in Daming Prefecture, Hebei, to celebrate the one thousand and one hundredth anniversary of the death of Master Linji Yixuan (d. 866). In 1980, he went again as head of the group of Rinzai and Obaku Zen monks on a mission to promote friendship between China and Japan.

While through such visits he came to have a deep sympathy with the policy of the communist government, he nevertheless criticized it on the grounds that selfless devotion to the state would lose its meaning when material prosperity was achieved, and that such prosperity would lead people to a pleasure-seeking way of life, which would then be crushed as anti-revolutionary. He hoped that Buddhist philosophy could be restored to Chinese life so that there would be consistency in both spiritual and actual life. Otherwise, he said new China would perish without ever reaching completion (*Hana Samazama*). On June 4 and 5 this year at the Tianan men Square, Beijing, the Chinese Government ordered the army to remove those students and citizens who had been protesting against corruptions among government officials and repression of the freedom of expression, and the army killed many of them under gun-fire and tanks. Besides, many people were arrested and executed for agitation despite protests from many countries abroad. The present Chinese Government seems to make little of the dignity of individual human life. This is a matter of great regret.

During his lifetime he gave countless lectures. I happened to be among the teaching staff at Hanazono College for the last ten years of his term as president, and was fortunate to attend many of them, including those on the *Wumenguan* ("Gateless Barrier"). But it was when I began reading his lectures on the Hekigan-roku for monks at the Shofukuji monastery that I really began to encounter him in the true sense of the word. (*Hekigan-roku Zenteisho*, "The Complete Lectures on the *Biyen-lu*," nine volumes and an

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index, Institute for Zen Studies 1988). Let me translate a few excerpts from these lectures to enable readers to appreciate better his view and lifelong dedication to humankind.

* * *

Loving affection between man and woman may be a passion, a foolish passion. But the extermination of this amorous passion would mean the simultaneous drying up of humanity. Getting angry may be an ignorant passion, a sinful act. But without getting angry against the injustices of self and society, how could there be progress for humankind? Being greedy may be a delusive passion. But unless one craves for truth, good, and beauty, how could human culture be established?

These three "poisonous passions" should be affirmed, be given *aufheben*, and purified; they should not be negated or eradicated. On getting awakened, one realizes passions are originally Awakening. Master Wumen says: "Had you realized that the lamp [at hand] was the fire [you have been seeking], the rice meal would have long been cooked."

(*Mumonkan Kōwa*, Shunjūsha 1976, Case 7, p. 67)

The Twenty-First Case of the *Biyān lu*:

A monk asked Zhimen (Guangzuo, ?-1031):

"What is a lotus flower before coming out of water?"

Zhimen said: "Lotus flower."

The monk said: "What is it after coming out of water?"

Zhimen said: "Lotus leaf."

"What is a lotus flower before coming out of water?" What is a sentient being before getting Awakened to the true Self? An Awakened One. What is prior to attaining Awakening, what is struggling to practice prompted by one's own vow and accumulating merit—that is an Awakened One.

"What is it after coming out of water?" What is it after attaining Awakening? Zhimen said, "Lotus leaf." After attaining Awakening, go on as before as a mendicant, without assuming the look of an Awakened one. When you are established in practice, remain a monk in a tattered robe instead of becoming a scarlet-robed chief abbot.

Zhimen said, "Lotus leaf." Sentient beings are originally Awakened ones and an Awakened one must at once be a sentient being.

All of you must appreciate such norm-transcending expressions of Zen. . . .

When you attain emancipation, you ought to plant a Dharma pillar and openly clarify the viewpoint of Zen to society. Instead of setting up the

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signboard of the headquarters of the sect, set up the sign-board of the Dharma. You must establish Bodhidharma's religion.

(*Hekigan-roku Zenteisho* Vol. 3, Case 21, pp. 130–131)

Xuedou (Chongxian, 980–1052) said toward the end of the verse to the Twenty-Second Case of the *Biyān-lu*:

Loudly I say: "Look right under your feet!"

The spacecraft Apollo XI reached the moon. For the first time since the beginning of human history, humans left footsteps on the moon, flying three hundred and eighty thousand kilometers from the earth. Astronauts who went there conducted various kinds of research using complex apparatuses, and sent TV broadcasts back to earth. Such has science progressed. In these days in our Zen school we say as usual: "Look right under your feet. Don't make even a step forward, but look right under your feet." It sounds as if no thought was more outdated than that of the Zen school.

It is true, Apollo XI landed on the moon. But, still, what is it like right under the feet of humankind? Still, as before, a hundred nations guard their borders, have large militaries, and insist on "self-defense." The reverse side of self-defense, should things go wrong, would be invasion. Conflicts continue, between South and North in Vietnam, and Korea, between East and West in Germany, between Israel and the Arabs, as well as between the U.S.S.R. and China, over tiny border lines.

Look right under your own feet. In a day when science sends men to the moon, is there any difference under the feet of humankind, between the modern man and primitive people? More than that, modern men can destroy millions of lives instantly with atomic and hydrogen bombs. How silly! How stupid! How barbarous!

So it is today more than ever that we can't help calling out to humankind throughout the world: "Look right under your own feet!" We may have made progress in knowledge but not a bit in morality. We must start from the day when Apollo reached the moon, and bring about a great revolution of humankind. Naturally, we must have the eye of wisdom open, the eye to put an end to all war. (*Hekigan-roku Zenteisho* Vol. 3, Case 22, pp. 239–240)

In 1978 Mumon Roshi became Chief Abbot of the Myōshinji Zen Temple. He served until 1982. But he did not put on the abbot's robe of gold brocade; he kept wearing an ordinary dark brown hemp robe. In 1979 he visited Pope John Paul II in Rome on a journey for spiritual exchange between East and West. In 1980 he received the Dalai Lama at Myōshin-ji. In 1981 he attended the opening ceremony of the Wat Myoshin-ji Temple in Thailand. He also

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visited camps for Cambodian refugees. In 1982, President Mitterrand of France made a widely publicized visit to Mumon Roshi at Myōshin-ji.

He died on December 24, 1988, at the age of eighty-eight at Reiun-in.

Dear Mumon Roshi, I said "You died" as if I had known you well. Truly speaking, however, I did not know you at all, any more than I know myself. Thank you. We will take good care of ourselves.

TOKIWA GISHIN