

## Remembering Hisamatsu Sensei

The first and last time I visited Hisamatsu Sensei was on a Sunday afternoon, June 14, 1976, when William LaFleur, Robert Grous, and I went with Abe Sensei by train from Kyoto to visit Hisamatsu Sensei at his home in Gifu. Once in Gifu, walking in the “plum rains” along a country road, and then turning down a narrow lane, we found his house. It had no gate, only a garden where living things had taken root in the rich soil.

Entering an open door, we were met and ushered into an eight-mat room. Soon, Hisamatsu Sensei, wearing a plain robe, appeared and extended his greeting, “*O genki desu ka?*” Conveyed in a voice that was uncommonly clear and resonant, it had an extraordinary ring, and, though often accepted as a customary greeting in everyday Japanese, in this situation, its direct meaning suddenly surfaced. In effect, Sensei had asked, “How is the source of your *ki*? How is the source of your vital energy? Is it circulating well?” Sitting straight and still, Sensei emanated vital energy which seemingly radiated from an inexhaustible well-spring.

Ban-cha and cakes were served, and, because he liked a certain kind of cake from Kyoto, we had brought some and presented them to him.

Wishing to avoid as many long and useless questions as possible, the three of us had prepared only one question each. Perhaps, in part, because I had been so thoroughly trained in the Socratic method of inquiry, I found myself almost instinctively spending quite a bit of time pondering “which questions are so fundamental that adequate answers provide a basis for resolving all other related questions.” If I could only ask the single appropriate question, I thought, then all other questions would be answered.

Sensei said he was ready to receive our questions. We could not be silent, but how could we speak? He asked for the first question. The first question took about a minute to present. As it was being presented, Sensei sat very patiently, listening with his eyes, breathing rhythmically and calmly. End of question. A brief silence. Thirty blows of the stick? Evidently not in this situation, for he focussed his adamant eyes on the questioner and responded in a clear, steady voice, cutting through the tangled thicket of concepts that had proliferated.

Then the second questioner and subsequently the third questioner presented their questions. To each one, Sensei, keeping an erect posture, responded in an energetic voice. You may wonder what the questions were, but now I cannot remember a single one, not even my own.

Having received our questions, Sensei responded with one of his own: "At the moment, what is your greatest concern?" One of us spoke about the need for more effective communication between East and West. Someone else mentioned the need for better dialogue between Zen practitioners and Christians. Another person asked a question concerning the relation between Zen and the practice of the fine arts. Finally, someone asked emphatically, "Sensei, what is your greatest concern now?"

He smiled. "Make strenuous efforts," he said in a definitive tone which made the three of us sit more erectly. "In your own way, you must be diligent and make strenuous efforts. This is important. We all must make strenuous efforts." At that point in the encounter there was a brief silence, and the subject was "Four Eyes Meet." More silence.

He had prepared some calligraphy for us which he now asked us to choose from. Unwrapping a furoshiki, he brought out several pieces of calligraphy on thick Japanese paper that he had carefully done in a flowing grass-style. The one that found its way to my place reads:

Transcend the Buddha, transcend the Patriarchs;  
Solitarily emancipated and non-dependent.

By then it was around five o'clock in the afternoon and we had stayed much longer than intended. Surely Sensei would be tired, and we thought it was appropriate for us to make our departure. The three of us mentioned this to Abe Sensei, and we agreed to leave. Gently and graciously, however, Sensei declined our concern. Realizing that we would return by train to Kyoto that evening, he suggested that we stay long enough to share dinner with him. We accepted his invitation, and he ordered some sushi from a local restaurant. Robert Grous had brought his shakuhachi, which Sensei asked him to play. As I remember, Robert played *Ajikan*, a Buddhist piece which conveys the message "All is Nothing, Nothing is All." That evening, when we made our departure, it was bright dark, and the moon was shining.

On February 27, 1980, Hisamatsu Sensei passed away at the age of 90. Today I received the message from Abe Sensei. For a moment the tears streamed down as I stood on the bridge, listening in the moonlight to the sound of the river flowing through Big Thompson Canyon. As the tears cease, I wondered "who" had passed away? Speaking in an interview, Hisamatsu Sensei once said: "I tell my family I do not die. I say that I am the formless Self. Therefore, I do not die. In fact, death never even crosses my mind. I have some work to do." Let us continue that work.

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