

OBITUARY

Where Did He Go? Ueda Shizuteru Sensei's Last Lesson

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The author with Ueda Sensei in his retirement home in Uji on August 4, 2018.

UEDA SHIZUTERU 上田閑照, Professor Emeritus of Kyoto University, passed away on June 28, 2019 at the age of 93. A leading scholar of Meister Eckhart and of Nishida Kitarō, the central figure in the third generation of the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy, and last but not least—indeed first and foremost—an *inka* certified lay master and a foremost philosophical interpreter of Rinzai Zen Buddhism, it is a vast understatement to say that Ueda Sensei lived a long and fruitful life. I am deeply

grateful for the great fortune of having been able to learn directly from him over the last quarter of it.

The first and last books that Ueda Sensei published were in German. Based on his doctoral dissertation submitted to Marburg University, he published in 1965 a book on Eckhart's mysticism, with an appendix comparing it to Zen. In 2011, he published a collection of his articles written in German over the years under the title *Wer und was bin ich? Zur Phänomenologie des Selbst im Zen-Buddhismus*. In between, he published some twenty books in Japanese on Zen, Eckhart, and Nishida, books in which he carefully developed his own distinct philosophy of what he called "the self that is not a self" living in a "twofold world." Iwanami Shoten, one of the premier presses in Japan, published Ueda Sensei's eleven-volume *Collected Works* in 2001–3, and a five-volume paperback set, *Philosophical Collection*, in 2007–8.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of Ueda Sensei's articles were published in excellent English translation in the pages of *The Eastern Buddhist*. Following in the footsteps of his teachers Nishitani Keiji and D. T. Suzuki, Ueda Sensei contributed more than just his own work to this journal that has played such a vital role in discussions of Zen and Pure Land Buddhism over the last century. Ueda Sensei served as an Associate Editor of *The Eastern Buddhist* between 1971 and 1978, and on its Editorial Board for two years after that.

I have written several scholarly articles on Ueda Sensei's thought—a thought from which, I confess, it is difficult for me to gain much critical distance. I find his philosophical articulation of Zen in particular to be more compelling than any other. For an overview of his thought, allow me to simply refer readers to my "The Contours of Ueda Shizuteru's Philosophy of Zen," forthcoming in *Companion to the Philosophy of Ueda Shizuteru*, edited by Ralf Müller, Raquel Bouso, and Adam Loughnane (Springer Publishing). This volume will be the first English anthology of works on Ueda Sensei's philosophy.

The reflections I offer here are more personal and less theoretical. They were originally written for myself, as a practice of coming to terms with his death and as an exercise in appreciation of his life. They recount especially several meetings with Ueda Sensei during the last year of his life.

On June 13, 2019, two weeks before he passed away, I visited Ueda Sensei for the last time in the hospital. I had been told by Kobayashi Gentoku Rōshi, the current abbot of the Rinzai Zen monastery of Shōkokuji in Kyoto, that he had fallen seriously ill and that I should come to Japan to visit him for what would likely be the last time. Before I tell of my last visit

with, and the last lesson I received from Ueda Sensei, allow me to briefly recount a few memories from earlier times.

The first time I met Ueda Sensei was in silence. In 1996 I joined *Chishōkai*, the lay practitioner group at Shōkokuji. In the early years of my participation in the Sunday meetings, Ueda Sensei would join us for the last round of sitting before giving a talk on one of the classics of the Zen tradition. For the next eight and a half years while living in Kyoto, and during summer and sabbatical stays in Kyoto over the past fifteen years, I was privileged to be able to study closely with Ueda Sensei in various intimate academic as well as Zen contexts, including, for example, meetings of the Nishida Tetsugaku Kenkyūkai (Nishidan Philosophy Research Group) in the living room of the late Nishitani Keiji and during some private meetings at Ueda Sensei's home in Hieidaira.

Ten months before he passed away, in August of 2018, I visited Ueda Sensei in his retirement home in Uji. At that time, I was able to ask him to elaborate on a comment he made at a small symposium several years ago that “emptiness” bears for him a “dark” quality. On this occasion he stressed the unknowability of the ultimate nature and dimension of reality. This intimate conversation was all the more poignant and profound given that we were discussing both his experience of living alone at the age of 92, after the recent loss of his beloved wife and constant companion for many decades, Ueda Maniko, and his comportment toward his own undeniably approaching death. Strikingly, Ueda Sensei said that he did not feel “lonely” per se and that his attitude toward death was one of acceptance of, and *Gelassenheit* toward, the unknown. He embodied an indelible air of unassuming calm releasement throughout this unforgettable conversation.

Until the age of ninety, Ueda Sensei continued to give his monthly talks at Shōkokuji on the classics of the Zen tradition, for the last few years on the *Record of Linji*. Although his calm manner of “tranquil illumination” (which happens to be the literal meaning of his given name, Shizuteru) was notably different from the shouts and blows that Linji is famous for, it would be difficult to find a more fitting contemporary model than Ueda Sensei for what Linji called “the true man of no rank.” Despite his world-historical significance as a preeminent philosopher of Zen Buddhism who is deeply conversant with Western philosophy and religion, Ueda humbly walked the path he cleared for others.

In December of 2018, I had had the privilege of participating in the one-year memorial service for his wife, Ueda Maniko, at the monastery and graveyard of Shōkokuji. Afterwards, a small group—consisting of close

relatives, Kobayashi Rōshi, Professors Ōhashi Ryōsuke, Mori Tetsurō, Akitomi Katsuya, and myself—ate dinner at what had been the couple's favorite restaurant in Kyoto. At this gathering, we also celebrated the fact that Ueda Sensei had recently received a major national award of cultural achievement (*bunka kōrōsha*).

Ōhashi Sensei suggested that, as a direct disciple who has come from afar, I should sit next to Ueda Sensei at this dinner. I was honored to do so, and to be asked to give a short impromptu speech commemorating the occasion. This was not the first time, but it would be the last time I was able to tell Ueda Sensei how much his work and his way of life have meant to me. As I had done a dozen years prior at his eightieth birthday celebration, I spoke about how Ueda Sensei has personified and modeled a way of fruitfully integrating the paths of philosophy and Zen without sacrificing the integrity of either. He has shown, in his life as well as in his work, how one can take a both/and rather than an either/or approach to these very different, yet ultimately complementary rather than competing, Eastern and Western paths to wisdom.

Given the occasion of the dinner, I also conveyed my impressions—especially from memories of visits to their home—of what a wonderful person his wife had been and what a special marital relationship and partnership they clearly shared. I will never forget the time when, on a visit to their home in July of 2012, the Uedas gave me one of their two scrolls of Nishida Kitarō's calligraphy. Yet, humbling though it was, receiving the Nishida scroll was only the second greatest honor I received from Ueda Sensei. The greatest came just a couple of weeks earlier. Ueda Sensei had agreed to Kobayashi Rōshi's request to come up with the Zen layman's name (*kojigō*) that I was to be given. Moreover, he had decided to use a character from his own given name as the first character in the name that he formulated: Kanpū 閑風.

At the memorial service and dinner in December of 2018, although he needed assistance walking, Ueda Sensei was not only alert, but able to stand up and deliver a brief but characteristically captivating, impromptu address. I was therefore taken aback when, just seven months later, I entered a hospital room to find him looking like, well, what I probably should have been better prepared to see: a ninety-three-year-old man struggling to recover from a serious bout of pneumonia.

When I visited Ueda Sensei in the hospital on June 5, 10, and 13 of 2019, he was hardly able to speak. Only his eyes still sparkled with life. They also spoke, wordlessly yet profoundly.

Although spoken words came with great effort and were barely understandable, his facial expressions showed that he could understand and respond to what others said. When I told him that I was staying at the monastery of Shōkokuji, his face lit up and he blurted out, “Where?” He clearly wanted to know the specifics of exactly where in the monastery I was staying. When I told him that that very morning I had been helping the monks harvest plums and prepare the next year’s supply of *umeboshi* (the sour pickled plums served with rice porridge for breakfast), he smiled and nodded, evidently recalling his own experiences with this task. When I departed each of the three times I visited him in the hospital, I told him that I would be back; yet I could tell that, each time, he treated it as if it were to be the last.

The last time I visited, I told him that I was returning to the United States the next day. We both knew that this would in fact be the last time we would see one another, at least in this form. Although I told him that I looked forward to his recovery and to seeing him back at his retirement home on my next trip to Japan, he seemed to have neither the patience nor the need for such pretenses. Beckoning me closer, he mustered his strength, leaned forward, and forcefully uttered two words. Pointing downward, he said “Here!” Then, pointing to his eyes, he said, “Eyes!” We locked eyes, as we had done on each of my three visits. This time with utmost intensity. After a short while, a timeless while, he leaned back and rested, closing his eyes.

I did not want to tire him out unnecessarily, and so, after a few minutes, I told him, as I had on each of my hospital visits, that I wanted to thank him for everything. For everything. There was nothing more, or less, to say. As he had on each of my visits—always with great and now with utmost intensity—he put his hands together in *gasshō* and leaned forward, bowing almost to the point where I feared he would fall off the bed. Yet he never took his eyes off mine. I bowed all the way down, rising back up to sense, and then see, his eyes still locked on mine.

This *gasshō*, this bow, and especially this eye contact, were the last words he spoke to me. They were also the most profound words I have ever heard—or seen. This silently piercing look was, for me, Ueda Sensei’s parting poem (*jisei*).

Back in 2003, at one of the meetings in Kyoto at which we discussed individual volumes of his *Collected Works*, Ueda Sensei remarked that, in the end, he would like to compose just ten poems. Someone playfully asked, “Why not just one?” Ueda Sensei laughed—but also nodded in agreement. In the end, he went even further and, echoing Vimalakīrti, left

me with the “thunderous silence” of his penetrating eye contact. This was anything but a mute silence. And it was not even just a pregnant silence that speaks volumes. It was a silent seeing of which nothing more can or need be said.

After Tanaka Hōjū Rōshi passed away in 2008, Ueda Sensei asked those of us who were his disciples where we thought he had gone. He did not give us an answer, but rather told us that this was the koan that Tanaka Rōshi had left us with. It is the same koan that Hakuin struggled hardest with: “When Nanquan died, where did he go?”

Where, now, has Ueda Sensei gone? It is the same koan. I do not know the answer—as if the answer were a matter of knowledge. I do know that, that day in the hospital, with his eyes, Ueda Sensei demonstrated the answer to this ultimate koan. It is now up to me, to each of us, to realize its meaning.