

My Zazen Sankyū

(san = to participate humbly; kyū = to inquire or explore)

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Notebook (5)

Fragmentary Thought XV <*Zaso Korin: Zazen Posture Has Descended From Heaven*>

In the summer of 1979 when I was a Ph.D. student at Tokyo University, I hosted a weekend study retreat for a group of my fellow students from the developmental psychology department. We left the heat and congestion of Tokyo for the cool mountain air of Komoro, in Nagano prefecture. One afternoon we took a walk in the Ruins of Komoro Castle Memorial Park. As we were walking we saw a strange old man, sitting perfectly straight and still, under his tent in front of a portable charcoal brazier. His dignified bearing was unmistakable. We watched him for a moment. I was wondering if this old fellow was sitting zazen, when he quickly glanced over at us. He plucked a leaf from a nearby tree limb. With two fingers he pressed it flat against his lips and whistled a simple, haunting melody. We were not quite sure what to do, so we just continued on our way. Someone in our group said “He is playing a grass flute. Very unusual for a homeless beggar...”

The sight and sound of this old man made a strong impression on me, although I didn't know why at the time. Back in Tokyo, one evening after our Noguchi exercise class, I mentioned him to some friends of mine. One woman seemed to recognize the man I was talking about. “Really! It sounds like the old monk my uncle sponsors. His name is Sodo Yokoyama. He is a disciple of the great Roshi, Kodo Sawaki. I have seen his calligraphy and his writing. Everyone calls him “Grass Flute Zenji”.”

“I wonder if that was him. I wish I would have spoken to him...” I was very disappointed that I missed that opportunity to talk to the old monk, but I was determined to go back to Komoro during the next study retreat, the following August, and see him. Sad to say, he died several months later, and I missed my chance to speak with him, forever.

Karma works in mysterious ways... During the first summer that I entered Antaiji temple I met Yokoyama Roshi's patron, Masakichi Nakamura, the man my Tokyo friend had mentioned. He and his children lived in Tokyo, but were visiting Antaiji for a while that summer. I was a new monk and I was assigned the job of baby-sitting the children from time to time, so after a while I became well acquainted with the family.

From then on whenever I had occasion to go to Tokyo, I was invited to stay at the Nakamuras' home. Over the course of time Mr. Nakamura showed me some

extraordinary examples of the calligraphy and letters of Sawaki Roshi and Yokoyama Roshi. And he told me many stories about those great Zen masters, about events he had witnessed himself or had heard about. I cannot tell you how much, as a novice monk, I was inspired by listening to the stories of these great Roshis, both of whom were so intimately connected with Antaiji.

I moved to Valley Zendo in the United States in 1987, and in 1990 I returned to Japan for the first time in three years. On that trip I visited Yokoyama Roshi's memorial monument, at the Ruins of Komoro Castle Memorial Park, with my teacher Koho Watanabe Roshi. On the same trip we visited Joko Shibata, Yokoyama Roshi's only disciple, who shared his memories of Yokoyama Roshi with us.

I am telling you about these things not simply to share my personal recollections with you, but to introduce you to the life and thought of the extraordinary monk Sodo Yokoyama Roshi (1907-1980). I would like to acquaint you with this man with whom I share strong karmic ties, and to introduce you to the zazen of the Zen master who coined the phrase “*zaso korin*” -- Zazen posture is descended from heaven.

Yokoyama Roshi's essays, letters, calligraphy, and songs -- with his own words and music -- are his “footnotes to zazen.” They are collected in four books: [I Stand By The Tall Tree](#), [The Grass Flute Master - The Man and His Works](#), [The Collected Songs of the Grass Flute Master](#), and [The Collected Songs of Sodo Yokoyama](#).

Since I did not have a chance to speak with or practice with Yokoyama Roshi directly, I can only infer his understanding of zazen from the works he left behind. Reading his books I can see that Yokoyama Roshi thoroughly assimilated the teachings of Sawaki Roshi, and sat shikantaza single-mindedly. It is clear to me that because of his sincere desire to transmit the practice of zazen and the Buddha way correctly to future generations, he deepened his practice continually.

That Yokoyama Roshi truly inherited the tradition of Sawaki Roshi is evident both in his total dedication to the practice of zazen and in his fertility as a creator of his unique “footnotes to zazen.” The list of Yokoyama Roshi's coined expressions is long, and it conveys clearly how well he understood, absorbed and practiced zazen. Some of his expressions are aphorisms, some are technical terms. Both help to communicate his understanding in a fresh, lucid way. His expressions are highly unusual, even in Japanese. Among the expressions he created are:

“*zaso yuishiki*” - zazen is all about form

“*bannsho rinen*” - phenomena are separate from thought

“*miyabi no zazen*” - the zazen of grace

“*zaso mihotoke*” - zazen posture is Buddha

“*hishi no ryo*” - the substance of non-thinking

There are many more. Of all his expressions the statement “*zaso korin*” (“zazen posture has descended from heaven”) most completely reveals his profound understanding of zazen.

Yokoyama Roshi often spoke of the time when he was about 28 years old, before he was ordained a monk. He was sitting zazen alone in the mountains when a pheasant suddenly appeared. The pheasant stopped and stared at him. Had he been standing the pheasant surely would have run away. But since he was sitting in zazen, the pheasant must not have been able to tell he was a human being, so the pheasant stared at him, perhaps pondering what he was. Yokoyama always said that from his "pheasant experience" he learned, intuitively, what shikantaza really is.

His teacher, Kodo Sawaki Roshi, had a very similar experience when he was a young man. When Kodo Sawaki was seventeen years old, still a novice and not yet fully ordained, he was sent out to help perform a service at a nearby temple. He had only recently learned to sit zazen. And when he was finished with his ceremonial duties, he sat zazen alone in his room. Suddenly an old woman burst into the room. This woman worked for the temple, supervising the work of the young novices, and she had a habit of driving this particular young monk very harshly. Assuming the room was empty she slid open the sliding door and burst in. As soon as she saw him sitting in full lotus, she pressed her hands together and bowed deeply before his zazen posture. She bowed more fervently than if she were bowing to a Buddha statue. She chanted *Namu Shakamuni Butsu*, *Namu Shakamuni Butsu* (Homage to Shakyamuni Buddha). Since the young novice had no academic training in Buddhism all, he had no theoretical understanding of what zazen was all about. Nevertheless this woman, who had been treating him like a slave every day, was now worshipping him as she would a Buddha.

Sawaki Roshi said that this early experience of the sacred mystery of zazen posture was decisive in forming his lifelong faith in zazen. It is significant that both of these great Roshis, as young monks, before their formal ordination, had insight into zazen posture as something that is beyond individual consciousness. Sawaki Roshi and Yokoyama Roshi both agreed that “The Buddha way is the faith that zazen posture is Buddha. When we refer to the qualities of *hishiryō* (beyond thinking) and *munen musō* (no thought, no image) we mean that sitting posture is beyond thinking and has no thought, no image, not that we ourselves are. We will never be beyond thinking, nor have no thought, no image, as long as we live. What we can do is sit with the faith that zazen posture itself is Buddha, that zazen posture itself is beyond thinking, with no thought, no image. Shikantaza is only concerned with zazen posture. Zazen posture is the supreme way for human beings to be.”

Yokoyama Roshi's faith in zazen posture was extremely profound. He said "Zazen and the universe are congruent. It was zazen posture as the whole universe that descended to the foothills of the Himalayas (where the Buddha was born), as if to say “This is the way I am.” Briefly we can say “*zaso korin*: zazen posture has descended from heaven. We

tend to think that we are sitting zazen. This is not the case. The entire universe is sitting zazen.”

Yokoyama Roshi is saying that in zazen we can rely upon sitting posture alone. He is saying that Buddhism as the source of wisdom is not essential. When there is nothing but zazen posture, a pheasant will stop and stare at zazen. Zazen is just to sit. If we sit, that is all there is. Thus, zazen is available to everyone. Simply instructing people on the elements of the proper posture of zazen - fold your legs like this, hold your hands like this, stretch your back, pull in your chin - is enough. Yokoyama Roshi was quoting the Bible (Matthew 5-37) when he said: “Say yes when you mean yes, and no when you mean no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

In the Annual Collected Essays, published by Antaiji in 1976, Yokoyama Roshi wrote: “Let me restate *zaso korin* in slightly different words: A flower blooming or a human being thinking are events which occur on a cosmic scale. If we look at human beings from the point of view of the stars, we can see that human beings are just part of the universe. Trees, flowers, human beings and human action all are connected to the whole universe.” He is telling us that in zazen we adopt a posture in which we accept the fact that we are seamlessly connected with the whole universe; we immediately and naturally conform to it with our own body-mind.

He is also saying that a person sitting and breathing in full lotus posture is the grass, a tree, a bird, a life - the person is the world, the person is “*keisei sanshiki*” the voice of valleys, the form of the mountains. The universe itself.

This may just sound grandiose, like a fantasy far removed from the reality of daily life. However, it will be helpful to recall that Shigeo Miki (cf. Notebook 4) asserted essentially the same idea, drawing on evidence from a field of exploration very different from Buddhism. I personally feel a very strong need to reconsider Buddhism along the lines indicated by Yokoyama Roshi and Shigeo Miki.

Zazen as *zaso korin* can be practiced by anyone in the world. Anyone who actually practices *zaso korin* can immediately experience and understand it. The rest of one's life, Yokoyama Roshi said, can be lived in a way that is harmonious with the traditions and character of one's country.

The great challenge is to get practitioners to understand and accept that it is zazen posture that is precious. It is not your own brain or personality that are most valuable. For someone like me, who's life is centered on zazen, the last 22 years of Yokoyama Roshi's life spent at the Ruins of Komoro Castle Memorial Park - he called the place the Blue Sky Temple on Sunshine Mountain - is a beacon lighting my way. I am deeply grateful for the karmic connections that allowed me to see Yokoyama Roshi, even though it was only for five minutes or so, before I became a monk at Antaiji, the temple with which he was so closely connected.