

## Experiences in the Zen monastery (with Yamada Mumon roshi)

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by Judyth O. Weaver

I have been asked to write about my experiences in the Zen monastery in Japan. Here is a little bit about what for me was a magnificent life-changing experience.

My mother died when I was 3. That and the influence of an abusive stepmother put my life into a turmoil that brought me to question my situation and what I had done to deserve it. Questions such as "Why am I here?," "Why am I suffering so much?," "What am I supposed to be doing with my life?," and "What is this all about and what can I do about it?" kept burning in me and the feeling that "it just isn't fair" prevailed and led me to question everything I read and saw.

I started searching for answers early. I went to various churches with my friends, read some of every western philosopher I could find, and delved into the Jewish tradition in which was my heritage, but what I found could not bring me satisfaction or relief.

When I was 14 or 15, I discovered Buddha, Lao Tzu and Parahansa Yogananda . . . all at about the same time. These eastern sages responded to my questions and desperation differently from the others; rather than give me answers that I should follow, their message to me was that they really couldn't/wouldn't tell me why but ,since I was here, why didn't I just try to do the best I could in the best ways I could manage. With youthful relief and enthusiasm I embraced them all and began to meditate and practice yoga on my own during my last two years of high school.

Later, during my years as an aspiring dancer in New York and San Francisco, my practice had to compete with my dance classes; but I continued to investigate and study, and eventually, at age 26, I embarked for Japan. (China was closed to Americans at that time, so the conflict that I would have had otherwise was not an issue.) I resolved the competition by determining I would study dance and Buddhism.

After a year of intensive study in the dance world, the weekly sittings with a Zazen group in Tokyo led by Omori Sogen Roshi were not enough and I told him that I wanted to experience the Zen way more fully. He sent me to his friend's monastery in Kobe.

I had not had any intensively long meditation experiences before I walked into the 300-year old Shofukuji Zen monastery that nestles at the foot of the mountain range which runs along the back of the city of Kobe. After a week of sitting and experiencing what the monks' lives were about, I realized all my readings had been just that....and that if I were really going to understand, I had to live it.

I had no idea what I was doing or getting into when I asked to be allowed to stay and study in this rigorous, traditional Rinzai Zen Monastery . . . for men. I just knew it was something that I had spent ages looking and longing for, and in which I needed to immerse myself. I returned to Tokyo briefly to terminate my studies in kabuki dance, in Noh dance and tea ceremony, and to close the classes I had been teaching in modern dance and English. No one in Tokyo understood nor appreciated my change of direction, but I was driven — I did not take into consideration that I was a westerner, that I basically had no background for this kind of life and, most especially, that I was a woman!

Yamada Mumon Roshi, the Abbot of Shofukuji, a very open-minded and generous visionary, was also the president of Hanazono University, the Rinzai Buddhist University in Kyoto, as well as the very popular and prolific author of many books and works of art. (His writings, calligraphy, and sumie ink paintings are still today very highly valued.) He was also an impressively potent peace activist. None of this did I know. I just saw him as a deeply kind, intelligent, magnanimous man with a wonderful sense of humor and an enlightened, open mind.

When we first met, Mumon Roshi asked about my heritage and my activities. When I told him I was a dancer he laughed and said, "Now you will be learning the highest form of dance —movementless dance!"

He granted me permission to stay and study at Shofukuji where he was heartily training 30 monks. Japanese monastic tradition does not allow men and women to meditate together, or even have much to do with each other. Mumon Roshi understood how seriously I desired traditional training, and he permitted me to participate in the full monastic schedule, working with the monks and meditating with them in the zendo (the place for sitting Zen, the monastery's large meditation hall), rather than having to sit in the hondo (the general hall) with the lay people and the very few nuns.



I gratefully received Yamada Mumon Roshi's open-mindedness and support of me. His permission granted, however, did not protect me from the various adverse feelings and actions from others. Some of the monks were very upset that a woman would be allowed into their ages-long exclusive sanctuary: The old ones were against my being there because it was breaking with tradition; the young ones were concerned that my being there would interfere with their own fledgling practice. To the monks in the middle, the ones who were deeply connected with their own path, it didn't matter — they were working hard on their own discipline and I came to work hard on mine.

I had no idea how stringently I was being tested. Only many years later have I been told how carefully I was observed and challenged. One transgression and I would have been out. Without knowing this though, all I felt then was that I was in the right place to do what I needed. Shofukuji gave support for the clarity, the cleansing, that I was craving. I put my hair up, kept my eyes down, followed the instructions, the bells, the knockers, the schedule, stayed consistent, tried not to upset the balance, and worked harder and was happier than I had ever been.

I did not live with the monks in the zendo where they slept, studied and meditated, each on their one tatami mat of space. Myokanji, a small temple with a nun in residence was a few minutes away, and I cleaned out the wood shed there in which to sleep and spend my private time.

Mumon Roshi gave me instructions on how to sit sossokan and smiling kindly before my first sesshin (seven-day intensive meditation period), told me to come and see him after.

Since I did not have a koan (unanswerable question to be answered) but was just counting my breaths, I did not go to sanzen (the private audience with the Roshi where one gives the answer to the koan on which one is meditating). Instead I sat very long, painful periods, without moving. When the sanzen bell rang, the monks got up, ran out of the zendo, and lined up for their private audience. One by one they offered their answers, were dismissed, and then walking slowly and usually thoughtfully, returned to their cushion. All this activity was good exercise for them. During this seemingly never-ending time I sat without moving. At times the only person in the huge zendo, I sat quietly, not moving, experiencing physical pains and mental anguish at levels I had never before imagined.

When I visited Mumon Roshi after that first sesshin as he requested, he smiled at me and said, "Did you experience enlightenment?" I told him that I was not after enlightenment, for I really did not know what that was. I was doing this training to be a better person.

The schedule was sitting and trying to concentratedly count my breaths every day from 4 A.M. until 9:30 P.M., with variations, depending on whether it was OSesshin (when we also sat yaza, zazen outside through much or all of the night) or if it was during the less intensive periods when we had more time for other work activities and study. I learned how to chop wood, clean better than I ever thought I could, garden, cook "Zen cuisine" and sometimes sewed and patched the monks' very worn robes.

After six months of this training I went to Mumon Roshi in great frustration and despair. "I just can't do this! I can't concentrate deeply enough, as you tell me to do."

"Now you must have a koan," he said, and he gave me the well-known question:

"A monk asked Joshu, 'Does a dog have Buddha nature?' Joshu answered 'Mu' (No)."

I had heard this famous koan many times, but actually receiving it to become my meditation was a different experience.

I thought "This is a question?!!"

Mumon Roshi told me I must become one with "Mu." I must die the great death, using "Mu" as my sword.

That began a new period of my meditation life. "Mu" was with me every moment. "Mu" became all of my life. I tried to concentrate on it mentally, physically, emotionally. In every way I could I worked to experience, to become "Mu." I sat "Mu." I walked "Mu." I breathed "Mu" in and out. I counted "Mu." I ate "Mu." I went to sleep with "Mu" and at the first moment of my awakening out came "Mu." I had planted a vine of little hyotan gourds outside my hut. They were growing, hanging from a trellis. One day, getting up from my cushion, I went outside, "Mu" every one of my steps, and carved the Japanese character for "Mu" in each one of the gourds. Everywhere I looked I saw "Mu."

And now I was going to sanzen to face the Roshi and answer my koan.

It was meeting the Buddha, face to face, alone, and showing him my essence. Each time the bell rang for sanzen I got up and walked or ran (depending on the practice for that time) "Mu," I waited in line "Mu," I rang the bell to announce my coming "Mu," and I bowed "Mu." I sat before the Roshi "Mu," I breathed in and out "Mu," I voiced "Mu." I showed "Mu." I answered "Mu."

When I came with a reasonable answer for my koan, his response to me was: "That is a reason. Zen is not a reason!" And he rang the small bell that dismissed the person who was with him at the same time it alerted the next person to ring the bell to announce his coming. When I offered some philosophic sort of answer I would

receive, "That is philosophy. Zen is not philosophy!" And he rang the bell. "You must become 'Mu!' Nothing but 'Mu.'"

All this while there were also wonderful happenings. The one-pointedness of this practice cleared much clutter from my being. I was becoming to know myself in ways quite different than before. I was learning to take one moment/thing at a time, to respond to one moment/thing at a time, to keep my mind clear until it needed to be engaged and then engage fully. The complexities and questions of why I was here were being met one by one. Living was not as confusing as before, I was able to respond in a simple way. Clarity was coming. It was the best time of my life.

An especially interesting learning was in the process of facing the Roshi, to answer the koan, to display the state of my being. My ringing the bell in turn to announce my coming was a true test and a clear depiction of the state of my mind. Time after time I would be able to hold the simplicity and one-pointedness of "Mu" all day long, through work and meditation and even at the time of the scramble of many monks jostling for their place to be in line to ring the bell. I could be one-pointed throughout the entire process of waiting only to lose it as I swung the wooden mallet to strike the bell or as I walked the last few steps or bowed in preparation to face the Roshi. I was so fully "Mu!" It felt so good. And yet as I was being called upon to absolutely demonstrate it to the Buddha, my "Mu" fell apart. Sometimes as soon as I rang the bell I realized my "Mu" had diminished. It seemed I could hold it on my own, I was doing well as I worked during the days and when I had contact with the monks, but I surely weakened as the prospect of facing my teacher came closer and me nakedly displaying my "Mu," my original mind, my state of being to him. As soon as I rang the bell, sometimes AS I was ringing the bell, I knew I had lost it and I wanted to turn around and not go into his room at all. Just hand the mallet to the next monk and have him go instead. But I could not. There was no way out. I had no choice, I had rung the bell that said I had something to present to him. I had to walk over the bridge, bow deeply at the appropriate places, closely face my teacher and show him clearly my present state.

I would try to pull myself together as I rested the mallet back in its place and slowly walked, passing the monk coming out who had gone before me. Perhaps I could reassemble myself and put it all together quickly and become "Mu" again. I tried deep breathing into my hara, trying to recreate how I had felt just a bit before, but the last-minute-repair method did not fool the Roshi. I am sure he could tell the state of my condition by my bow, by my walking, by my voice, surely even also by the sound of my ringing the bell before he ever saw me.

Time after time (we had sanzen everyday, usually several times a day, depending on the schedule) I had a chance to present my condition. I experienced deeply and fully my insecurities, my not-being-able-to-do-anything-right fears, my fears of doing it so fully I would lose it and myself, my avoidances and my copping out. I came to feel my resistances that prevented me from fully embracing "Mu" and as I experienced my impasses over and over I became more and more frustrated with them.

I became an embroilment of frustration and determination. Every time I came out of the sanzen room I resolved to try harder, and along with that resolve I seemed to uncover a deeper bit of me that I hadn't even known was there. And everyday I was showing it to the person whom I respected most in the world!

I would look into his compassionate eyes and give him the best I could, knowing that it was not my best, but I couldn't access any better, or so I thought.

I got to my wits' end. And that was just the point . . . the end of all my thoughts, my ideas, possibilities. Nothing more. Nothing else. Nothing but . . .

"MUUUUUU."

I even became desperate. If there were something else I could have done I would have, but I knew that there really wasn't any other way out of the mess. I just had to become "Mu." What was preventing me? Fear? Of what? Pain? I had already experienced so much pain that I wasn't really afraid of it. I of course knew that nothing was preventing me from becoming fully "Mu" other than me.

I don't exactly remember what happened. I do know that I got angry. I got angry at "not being able" to do it. I got angry at not doing it. I got angry at a lot of things. And I threw that anger into my "Mu!" And then I gave up. I gave up trying, I gave up resisting, I gave up anger, I gave up giving up. And I just was. I was just one. Just me. Just fully.

I went into sanzen and I WAS. I could feel the look in my eyes was different. I was different; I could feel it throughout my whole self. In fact I had felt it for a while, I had been feeling it as I was getting closer and closer. In sanzen for a while I had felt different. I didn't care. I didn't have any answers. I wasn't going anywhere. There wasn't anywhere to go. It didn't matter to me whether or not I answered this koan, just being as I was felt so good. I just WAS THERE. Fully there.

I let out my "MU."

I was "MU."

Mumon Roshi looked up at me from his lowered gaze. And he gave me my next koan before he rang the dismissing bell.