

## Yanagida Seizan's Lesson

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I met Prof. Yanagida Seizan in the fall of 1976, just after I had arrived in Japan on a Monbushō scholarship, and I worked under his guidance until 1983, by which time I left Kyoto to take up a position at Cornell University. The first thing I remember is his telling me that Prof. Paul Demiéville, with whom I had hoped to study after returning to France, and whose writings on Chan texts from Dunhuang and on the Chan master Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (Rinzai Gigen) had introduced me to Prof. Yanagida's work, had just passed away.

For the next few years, I attended Prof. Yanagida's courses at Kyoto University and Hanazono College, and his seminars at the Jinbun Kagaku kenkyūjo. But most importantly, I visited him weekly in his office, and these visits nurtured and greatly stimulated my nascent research.

From 1976 to 1978, together with Carl Bielefeldt, who had recently joined us from Berkeley University, we read the "Chinese" *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏, a collection of some three-hundred kōan compiled by Dōgen 道元. Walking through the labyrinth of the *Shōbōgenzō* with such a guide was a wonderful experience. Later on, however, inspired by his lectures on Heze Shenhui 荷沢神会 (Kataku Jinne) and by his writings on early Chan, I embarked on a study of Northern Chan that was to become my doctoral dissertation.

Prof. Yanagida's classes at Kyoto University were attended mainly by Kyodai students and by a handful of foreign students, among whom Carl Bielefeldt, William Powell, Kuo Liying, and Mark Blum. His reputation among foreign scholars was fast growing, and we had the sense of belonging to a privileged intellectual community.

Seminars at Jinbun were another matter. For one thing, I was for some years the only foreigner to attend them, till the coming of Silvio Vita, Urs App, and

Griff Foulk. Being totally immersed in a Japanese context, and spending long hours (early morning or late at night) at reading cryptic Chan texts such as the *Jingde Chuandenglu* 景德伝灯録, the *Chanlin sengbao zhuan* 禅林僧宝伝, or the *Zutang ji* 祖堂集, was quite an ordeal, and I may not have survived it without the friendly help of young Japanese scholars like Katsumi Mimaki and Ishii Shūdō. But it was there that I was most able to appreciate Prof. Yanagida's soft maieutics and subtle hermeneutic skills.

Yet, the most productive moments were the one-on-one meetings in Prof. Yanagida's office. I was always duly impressed by the quasi-ascetic atmosphere that reigned in that office. Prof. Yanagida would usually greet me by offering me a bowl of green tea that sometimes sent my heart racing. Then we would review the questions I had prepared for him, and I was always awed by the way in which he would consider a question and unfold its implications, which I had not perceived. I was often overwhelmed by the generosity and patience he showed to this awkward student, and I felt that I could never repay my debt. I also felt humbled by his unassuming erudition, for instance the way he would suddenly pick a volume of the Taishō edition of the Buddhist canon or of some Buddhist collection from the shelf and find a reference that would illuminate a textual passage I had brought up. More than through his writings, it is through these blissful moments of quiet discussion that I began to appreciate the sharp historical criticism that allowed Prof. Yanagida to revise, almost single-handedly, the traditional history of Chan and Zen. His gentle iconoclastic spirit — always tempered by humor — is what I remember most fondly from these days when I was privileged to work under his guidance.

Apart from that scholarly context, I knew little about Prof. Yanagida's personal background. He rarely, if at all, spoke about himself. I learned more about him on one single occasion than during several years, when he came to the United States in 1989, invited by Carl Bielefeldt and myself to give a series of lectures at Stanford University and at the San Francisco Zen Center. At that time, a number of American scholars who had at one point or another studied with him or benefited from his scholarship — among whom Philip Yampolsky, John

McRae, Robert Gimello, Griff Foulk, Peter Gregory, William Powell, and Urs App (who served as his translator) — gathered at Stanford. During one of these lectures, and perhaps prompted by the unusual context, Prof. Yanagida for the first time explained how, after the war, he had gone through a period of despair and self-doubt. I was glad to be able to include this autobiographical talk in the volume of the *Cahiers d'Extrême Asie* that I edited in his honor in 1993.

In recent years, I had only a few occasions to see Prof. Yanagida, but I was always impressed by his ability to stay ahead of the curve and to remain constantly aware of the latest developments in the field. The last image I will keep of him is that photo, which Urs App sent us, and in which Prof. Yanagida, having grown long hair and a beard, appears like the kind of wild Chan hermit and trickster figure that he always was inside. He seemed to have reached that state of mind for which death and life no longer matter. That is the ultimate lesson I will retain from him.