

REFLECTIONS ON MY COLLEAGUE, MY TEACHER, MY FRIEND by Ven. Shih Ying-Fa, Abbot

Recently we commemorated the life of Mrs. Yoko Ogui at a memorial service conducted at CloudWater Zendo. Mrs. Ogui, whose Dharma Name was Shakuni Shunyo (Spring Sunshine) was given the posthumous Dharma Name Yu Ho (Joyful Dharma) in accordance with Buddhist tradition. Yoko-san, as she was known to just about everyone, passed away as the result of metastatic breast cancer. Ch'an monks Ming-Xing, Zhong-Xin, Yong-Te and myself were privileged to have served as her primary caregivers while she was in home hospice care. For all of us it was a most remarkable experience. We learned many things from our friend while she endured her condition, including how to face our mortality with grace, dogged determination and, above all, deep appreciation.



Shakuni Shunyo

I first met Yoko-san at the Cleveland Buddhist Temple in the mid-80s. She was, at the time, the wife of my first teacher, Rev. Koshin Ogui. What I discovered was that Yoko-san was a most welcoming person. Her perpetually sunny disposition made everyone feel comfortable and accepted. What I discovered later, however, was that beneath that sunny exterior was a most disciplined and determined mind. She was my teacher in the traditional Japanese art of Shomyo chanting, a beautiful form that evokes elements of nature but is very difficult in its execution. Under her direction, our chanting group practiced and practiced and practiced until we could barely speak. Wavering tones, one of the hallmarks of Shomyo, had to synchronize perfectly in order to meet her demanding standards. It was like training under a singing Zen master with a beautiful (classically-trained, no less) voice, a steely disposition and a disarming smile.

Yoko-san's talents also extended to traditional Japanese Zen cooking, known as Shojin Ryori, which came to Japan about the same time as Buddhism and whose vegetarian recipes have been used in Japanese monasteries ever since. "Shojin" means "The steadfast pursuit of a non-attached state, the dropping of worldly thoughts and the continual striving for limitless perfection." In other words, cooking like a true Buddhist. Enlightenment never tasted so good, particularly when Yoko-san was the chef!

Yoko-san was ordained as a Buddhist priest of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) sect in Kyoto in 1982, and she did whatever a priest with no temple could do to serve others through the Dharma. This included conducting numerous memorial services for Japanese-American citizens, serving as a hospital chaplain, and conducting independent classes in Buddhism for Japanese- and non-Japanese Americans alike. The funeral director who arranged her cremation told me a story about Yoko-san that always made him smile. One day, as she was conducting a memorial service at his funeral home, the incense she was burning tripped the fire alarm. The fire warning buzzer went off, and within minutes a couple of fire trucks came rolling up. As the fire chief entered the parlor he was greeted with the sight of a slightly-built female Buddhist priest chanting away in Japanese while the buzzer was sounding, lights were flashing and people were getting nervous. She decided not to burn incense in a funeral home after that.

Yoko-san was also a talented seamstress. She made dozens of Buddhist garments for the temple and for those of us who were taking our initial ordination in Zen. She hand-made my first traditional Zen *rakusu*,

the bib-like garment that most Japanese Zen students wear (in other parts of the Zen tradition, students make their own *rakusus*...Yoko-san was having none of that!). Years later she told me that she would take cloth from her old kimonos to make the linings for the *rakusus*, including mine. She also designed and spearheaded the construction of the *zafus* (round cushions) and *zabutons* (mats) that were used at the temple for meditation. Most of the cushions and mats we use at CloudWater Zendo were originally made by Yoko and her students; we bought them when Cleveland Buddhist Temple decided to get new ones.

What Yoko-san was best known for, however, was being a world-class artist and illustrator. In her 28 years as a staff artist at American Greetings Corporation she won numerous awards, and she was the creator of AG's "Birthday Bear" character. Representations of animals were her passion, and using her unique gifts of concentration, humor and artistic ability enabled her to produce drawings of animals whose expressions could deeply touch the human heart. About a month before her passing she told me that when she heard that I was starting CloudWater Zendo, she was inspired to draw a bunny in meditation. She didn't know why she chose a bunny, she just thought that it was appropriate. "Meditating Bunny" (shown at right) was her way of letting me know that she was solidly behind our efforts to start a Zen center on the west side of Cleveland. It seems that we have a mascot now.



Yoko-san and I had a lovely relationship over the last 25 years. When we didn't see each other for a while we would always laugh and laugh and laugh when we were able to get together, either in person or over the phone. Even as she was dealing with her illness there were plenty of opportunities for laughter. Together we came up with a musical rendition of the Heart Sutra Mantra, "*Gate, Gate, Paragate, Parasamgate, Bodhi, Svaha!*" We called it, "Bodhi, Bodhi, Hallelujah!"

Throughout her illness Yoko-san never lost her sense of dignity, propriety or gratitude. Several days before her passing, as she lay in her bed barely able to speak, I bent over her to see if she wanted anything. She simply raised her head a few inches, opened her eyes, looked directly into mine and said, "Appreciate." In only one word, she managed to convey the depth of her gratitude not only for the assistance she had received during her illness, but also for the many beings who had assisted her on her life's path. In writing to her brother in Sapporo, Japan about her passing, I told him that unlike other Japanese Buddhist teachers through the ages, she did not write a death poem as was customary, but that something she said to Shih Zhong-Xin during her illness served much the same purpose. These words are her final gift to all of us:

*I do not live in dreams;
I live in reality.*

Enjoy the Pure Land, Yoko-san. I know you'll be back....as you promised....to help us all. Amitabha!

