

Yûkô Okamoto

Master Okamoto impressed himself in my memory as a person who was always unobtrusively present, open to others, his stance without expectation or defensiveness. Unnoticed in the midst of the crowd, keeping entirely to himself, without anything harmonious with others, flowing like clouds and water, *unsui*. During one of Okamoto's visits to Zen Dojo Zurich Muijoji, Meihô Missen Michel said: "If you want to study *mushin*, then simply observe and study Master Okamoto." He also recounted the story of how Yûkô Okamoto once arrived for his visit to Europe without a kesa because he didn't have enough space in his luggage and, faced with the choice, decided to rather bring presents for the children.

At his first visit to the Zen Dojo Zurich Muijoji, Master Okamoto said of the atmosphere at the time that the community during Buddha's life must have been exactly so and recited: "Namu kie so – I take refuge in the Sangha." Directly thereafter he said amongst other things: "I would like to also ask you to please no longer call me Okamoto Roshi. I am too young and have not practiced enough. So please call me Okamoto-san or simply Okamoto."

My first encounter with him was in 1999, when Meihô Missen Bovay and Dôkô Raphaël Triet ventured upon a trip to Japan for their Zuse Ceremony with several disciples. During this trip, Master Okamoto organized a small bus to show us around for a few days in his and Michiyo Uoya's company. Neither of us ever experienced a language barrier. The understanding between us worked intuitively, *ishin denshin*, and this continued for all the following years – wherever we met, whether in Japan or Zurich or in the Gendronnière. Guiding him during his 2001 visit, there were several amusing moments when he would keep talking to me in Japanese, only noticing after a while that I didn't understand Japanese. Then we would chuckle together.

As we were taking a group photo at the end of the trip to Teishoji in Japan, he gestured with his hand to the spot by the *sôdô* and explained: "I am going to build a house for the ladies here. That way you can stay overnight in Teishoji, because men and women need separate places in temples." Moreover, he said: "This temple is also your temple" – a sentence that moved me deeply and that I shall never forget.

And so it was. At our next visit, a new building stood there, and our large group had more than enough room, which later also enabled us to hold a *sesshin* with many people

He gave his magnanimity and affection to all who visited him many times over the years, often in the context of a Hossenshiki Ceremony as he wanted to support Zen in Europe, the AZI and Master Taisen Deshimaru's mission. As his wife, Mrs. Chie Okamoto, once told me, he loved Master Deshimaru and the way he had passed on Zazen to others very much.

At the same time, he respected tradition deeply. In Spring 2014, he took over the position of abbot of Chokokuji. He took on this responsibility despite his worsening illness and despite being discharged from the hospital only a day before the ceremony. Chokokuji was a training temple exclusively for Japanese monks at that time and it was Okamoto's wish to enable European monks and nuns to have the *ango* training together, as is usual for us in Europe. That April, I visited him and witnessed the very impressive ceremony for his appointment as abbot, amid the cherry blossoms, together with the Sangha from Teishoji and Chokokuji. It was simultaneously a taster moment for me: Mrs. Chie Okamoto took me through the buildings, giving me an impression of the place where a few months later, ten other people would join us to experience an *ango*. At this first *ango* in September 2014, there were five people from France, four from Zurich and one from Vienna. During this *ango*, he invited us for a trip to Niigata and Mount Kugami to visit Gogo-an, the hermitage of Master Ryokan, whom he venerated and whose poems he calligraphed on our Rakusu. Like Master

Ryokan, Master Okamoto was an example of “a true person, who has given up all airs and graces”, as described in the Shôdôka.

It was his heartfelt wish to continue to support Zen in Europe and AZI after the passing of Master Deshimaru. Even though he never imposed himself, he was simply there when needed. After the passing of Michel in 2011, which saddened him deeply, he arranged a visit to Zen Dojo Zurich. Together, we paid our respects to Michel’s grave and held a ceremony there and at the Dojo for him. During this visit, he emphasized again that he would continue to support Zen Dojo Zurich Muijoji and offered me the Hossenshiki Ceremony in the following year at his temple Teishoji to fulfill Michel’s wish for me to continue ordinations. So, from 2012 onwards, we had many mutual visits with multiple deeply moving talks from him.

His last visits to Europe were to the Gendronnière, to Zen Dojo Zurich Muijoji and to Zen Dojo Wien Mushoju in 2014. Thereafter, we visited him a few times in Japan. The affability with which he, together with Mrs. Chie Okamoto, served as a generous host remains in the memory of everyone who experienced it. These were, for all who knew him well, also wonderful, unforgettable encounters, which touched *kokoro*, the heart. His precious gift may lie in being an example of a true monk, *unsui*, like the clouds in the sky, which Kôdô Sawaki spoke of: “Birth and Death come and go without end, like clouds in the sky drifting by. They drift by, chasing after nothing and away from nothing. *Mushotoku*, the practice of the Bodhisattva-vow.”

Eishuku Monika Leibundgut with Kaihō Richard Fürst