

Awakening Stories of Zen Buddhist Women

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The status of women in Buddhism has been problematic throughout Buddhist history. According to scripture, the Buddha was approached early in his career by his aunt, Mahāpajāpati, at the head of a delegation of women who wished him to institute a Buddhist order of nuns. The Buddha initially declined to institute such an order. But when the Buddha's close disciple, Ānanda, asked him whether women were able to attain the fruits of spiritual practice, the Buddha unhesitatingly answered that women could attain such fruits. This affirmation on the part of the Buddha has been of the first importance to Buddhist women throughout history, while his reluctance to establish an institutional place for women has haunted them.

The ordination of the first Buddhist nuns followed shortly after this interview. In the order instituted, all nuns were formally subordinated to all monks by means of the "eight weighty rules," which forbade nuns' admonishing or teaching monks and declared the most senior nun to be subordinate to the most junior monk in the monastic seniority system. As reflected in their place in the monastic hierarchy, the social standing of nuns as a group has always been inferior to that of monks. The nuns' order died out in Theravāda countries and in Tibet, but has continued to the present in East Asia. But in East Asia as well, the nuns' order has been subjected to unequal treatment. For example, in 1913 in the Japanese Soto Zen sect, from which the translations here derive, the sect annually spent 600 Japanese yen per nun and 180,000 yen per monk or male priest. With such poor institutional support, it is obvious that the social standing of nuns was far inferior to that of monks and that provisions for their education and training were minimal. Social reform came to the Soto sect, as to much of the rest of Japan, in the Meiji era and especially after World War II. But it was not until 1970 that nuns were formally permitted to hold meditation retreats by themselves, without male supervision. The selections below give accounts of women-only meditation retreats held in the 1940s and 1950s, led by a nun ahead of her time.

These selections are excerpted from a text entitled *A Collection of Meditation*

Experiences, published in Japan in 1956. The book records the meditation experiences of laywomen and nuns practicing under the Zen master and nun, Nagasawa Sozen Roshi. (Her family name means Long Valley; her Buddhist name means Zen-ancestor.) Nagasawa Roshi was in her time perhaps the only nun directing a Japanese Zen nunnery and practice center and holding meditation retreats without the supervision of a male Zen master. She was a disciple of the famous Harada Daiun Roshi, who, though a member of the Soto Zen lineage, supplemented traditional Soto practices with Rinzai Zen koan practice. The present selections show Nagasawa Roshi at work, training nuns and laywomen in the Tokyo Nuns' Practice Center. Her nun disciples themselves had previously undertaken an extensive alms-begging tour in order to raise funds to build the meditation hall in which the retreats were held.

It is noteworthy that Nagasawa Roshi is depicted as training her disciples in the same manner as other teachers in her line. Though a number of contemporary Western feminist Buddhists have criticized aspects of Zen training as "macho," and some modern Zen masters have dropped some such practices, Nagasawa Roshi seems to employ them all. She is depicted as being quite stern and even fierce with her disciples before they make a breakthrough in their practice, shouting at them and abruptly ringing them out of the interview room with her dismissal bell; she relies heavily on a koan practice in which the disciple aggressively assaults the ego, suffering a roller-coaster ride of blissful highs and despairing lows in the process; and she uses the "encouragement stick," a flat hardwood stick with which meditators may be slapped on the shoulders during prolonged meditation sessions to help them call up energy for their practice (it functions much like cold water splashed in the face and is not a punishment). This severity is what Zen calls "grandmotherly kindness": the teacher's aid to the student working to free herself from the limitations of ego. The atmosphere of the meditation retreats is portrayed as taut and austere; Nagasawa Roshi herself is described as possessing exalted experience and, though hard and demanding before a disciple makes a breakthrough, warm and gentle when the breakthrough is achieved. It is clear that her students deeply respect her and are grateful to her. All this is classic Japanese Zen. Thus, while Nagasawa Roshi does represent for her time a female incursion into a male world, she makes no changes in behavior within that world other than the significant change of inviting other women into it.

The text from which these selections are drawn contains some sixty accounts written by laywomen and nuns studying under Nagasawa Roshi. In the Zen sect, it is believed that enlightenment comes in varying depths and is subject to ever greater deepening. In the lineage which Nagasawa Roshi represents, it is customary upon attaining kensho, the first awakening experience, to write an autobiographical account of the events that led one to practice Zen and a description of one's practice, culminating in an account of the kensho itself. Two such accounts follow.

These accounts depict students working with koans, meditation devices which give the practitioner a puzzle that cannot be resolved by rational means. It func-

tions as both goad and carrot to the inquiring mind. The accounts translated below show one nun and one laywoman working with the well-known koan "Mu." This is very frequently given as the first koan to serious practitioners; it is believed to be a good tool for helping the practitioner to make the breakthrough to a first awakening, or preliminary enlightenment, experience. The Mu koan reads: "A monk once asked Master Joshu, 'Has a dog the Buddha nature or not?' Joshu said, 'Mu!'"

A koan is assigned by a Zen master with whom a student has an ongoing relationship; the teacher assesses the student's character and degree of understanding and assigns a koan which he or she believes will best work for the student at his or her current stage. The teacher may or may not give additional instructions or explanations to the student. The student then meditates on the koan for a period that may last hours or years, attempting to resolve the puzzle embedded in it. Periodically, the student returns to the private interview with the teacher, or dokusan, to demonstrate his or her progress in working with the koan. These interviews are not the time for casual discussion; they are the student's opportunity to demonstrate understanding and ask for specific instructions, and the teacher's opportunity to test the student and give further instruction. Their atmosphere is extremely formal and intense.

As the following selections demonstrate, students working with Mu frequently concentrate their minds entirely on the Mu itself, repeating the word Mu over and over to themselves with great energy as an aid to concentration. When the student working on the koan Mu returns to the private interview with the teacher, any answer spoken from dualistic thinking will be rejected; an answer that is an expression of buddha nature, in whatever form it takes, will be accepted.

In the following selections, both students work on the koan Mu, most importantly in the setting of sesshin. In this tradition, sesshin are severe and intensive week-long meditation retreats. In a typical day at such a retreat, all present rise well before the sun and spend the entire day in meditation. Most of the day is given to formal zazen, or sitting Zen meditation, done usually in the full- or half-lotus position, sometimes in kneeling Japanese style. The rest of the day is occupied with light meals, chanting, a work period (mostly cooking and cleaning), usually one talk per day by the teacher, and mandatory private interviews with the teacher. The student is expected to maintain a meditative state of mind throughout all of these events. Strict silence is required and eye contact is avoided at all times, except in the private interview room. Formal rules of decorum and ceremony cover all movements and interactions, contributing to the taut and intense atmosphere. The programmed part of the day ends around 9:00 or 10:00 P.M., but many students stay up later, sometimes through the whole night, to continue working on their meditation practice.

In reading the following accounts one should recall the dual heritage of Buddhism for women: the Buddha's affirmation of women's spiritual ability paired with the weighty neglect of women in Buddhist institutions. In Nagasawa Roshi and her lay and nun disciples we see three modern Japanese women encountering

this heritage, embracing what helps them and transforming what could hold them back.

The translations are from Iizuka Koji, ed., *Sanzen Taiken Shu* (*A Collection of Meditation Experiences*), with a Foreword by Nagasawa Sozen (Tokyo: Chuo Bukkyosha, 1956), pp. 30–38 and 242–46.

Further Reading

On the Mu koan, see Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, translated by Sumiko Kudo (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 19.

Remembering My Child

In the first account, written in 1949, a laywoman named Nakayama Momoyo shares with us her life before and during Zen practice. We are given a picture of a woman who manages impressively as virtually a single mother in prewar and wartime Japan, but who finally cannot cope with her grief over her son's death. Her initial encounter with Zen is instructive in its outsider's perspective and skepticism. Her experiences in retreat, with her roller coaster of emotions, are typical. Finally, however difficult it is to understand her awakening experience, it is at least clear that her broken spirit has been healed.

My beloved son, my only son, for whom there is no replacement in heaven or earth, him I lost in the war. Just three days after graduating as a reservist from Tokyo Imperial University, he left for the front in high spirits. In a corner of a northern island his life came to an end; this young sapling of just twenty-six years died.

Our son had cultivated his parents' fields—his father's as a man of religion, mine as an educator. . . . From the time of his childhood, idealizing his good but ordinary father and mother, he had cherished the hope of inheriting the child-care center which I ran and becoming a religious educator. His smaller motives were to give joy to the children and to express his filial piety toward his mother; his greater concern was, as a true man of religion, with the people of the world and, by extension, with the religious path. Thus he revered all buddhas and patriarchs. . . .

As a consequence, his personality was easy-going and generous. I, on the other hand, who was raising and guiding children, was always being taught and purified by him. I never stopped reflecting, "Can this child have developed in my womb? Can he have been born and raised by a mother with such deep sins as I? There must have been some mistake for me to come to be his mother."

After his preschool days, and throughout his school days, many people—teachers, classmates, all who knew him—loved him for his personality. From the bottom of their hearts, they grieved over his death in battle. A wounded soldier who had miraculously returned alive and who had served under my son from beginning to end called on me after the war was over. Kneeling before the Buddha altar, he spoke to me for thirty minutes, hands palm-to-palm and tears flowing:

"He was truly a kind commander. He loved his subordinates. No matter what, he never reprimanded us. In other squads, the commander always ate first, but our commander always gave food to his subordinates first. Consequently, all his subordinates adored him and had confidence in him. In the end, when we knew there was no hope, no one spoke of giving up. There wasn't a single person who didn't want to share the fate of the commander. I myself was wounded in the chest, but when I told the commander that I absolutely must die with him, I upset him. Uncharacteristically angry, he admonished me, 'Dying is not the only way of serving your country and your parents. You're young; your wound will certainly heal. Take responsibility for the seriously wounded; take them to the rear for me.' Then he put in good order all the mementos, charms, and photographs he had from you. He threw away his saber, saying, 'This kind of thing is why we've lost,' and calmly walked, unarmed, toward the enemy camp. This is what I have to say to you, his mother."

... As a foreign missionary, my husband lived [away from the family] for a long time in a temple in Hawaii. During his absence, in addition to running the child-care center, I had put my whole heart into raising my son; his growing up had filled me with delight. This great objective of my beloved son's adulthood, had been the one and only shining light in my life; whatever pain, whatever sorrow I experienced were nothing. My life had been full to bursting, like an always full moon.

The day I can never forget arrived! May 7, 1945: while I still held in my hands the news of my son's death in battle, his remains were ceremoniously delivered. The agony and grief I felt as I held in my arms the small box of plain wood cannot be expressed with such phrases as "I felt like vomiting blood," or "my heart was broken." Only another mother who has experienced it can know.

I was pushed from a world of light into a world of gloom. I lost all desire to live; every bit of happiness was taken away in grief and hopelessness. A soulless puppet, I mourned day in and day out, wretched with the loss of my son. How many times did I decide to follow my beloved son in death? In my need, I could clearly hear the longed-for voice of my son come back to me: "Mother, you must not die! Please, be happy! Please, live in happiness!"

So my son would not permit me to die, suffer, or sorrow. But I . . . would cry until I was emptied. People criticized me as a foolish mother, a prisoner of my emotions. I fell to a very low place. I felt it would be best if my life would end. I cried on and on for over three years. Day and night I consoled myself at the family altar, offering scripture readings, flowers, and incense before his

spirit. Thus passed the dreary days and nights. I realized that I had been a teacher to over two thousand pupils and young mothers, but now my life took on a pitiful appearance.

On June 3, 1949, I met the nun-teacher Nagasawa Sozen of the Nun's Practice Center (*dojo*) and listened to her give a talk. At first I thought, "How could she understand this pain, this suffering? She's never given birth to a child or raised a child, much less had a child be killed." My hard heart was shut tight, leaving me without a soul in the world to turn to. However, as I listened to the talk, and was touched by her character, I felt somehow that there was dragged out from me some kind of innocence free of poison which was just on the other side of my deep and relentless bitterness. My feelings toward Nagasawa Roshi changed a little, and as I was pulled along more and more by her lecture I decided, "maybe I'll give meditation (*zazen*) a try." The upshot was that I tried meditating for two days, then three, and finally completed a week's retreat (*sesshin*). As the retreats piled up, my shallowness bored deeply into me, by which I mean I realized that though it was true that Nagasawa Roshi had not borne a child, raised him, and had him die, with respect to the search for knowledge she possessed exalted experience surpassing that of the world's mothers.

I was bitter. And yet, wasn't there deep within me a great, shining compassionate heart which spontaneously wrapped itself around humankind in all their infinite variety? Yes, a compassionate heart! I made my decision: "I too will be the disciple of this teacher. I'll break through the barrier!" Henceforth, as I pressed ahead on the path, I depended upon the teacher in my literally do-or-die struggle. However, I did not escape from the saying, "It's easy to say but hard to do." During the retreats, my pain and sorrow, my melancholy and wretchedness were beyond words; those who haven't had this experience cannot know what I suffered.

As a beginner, jumping headfirst into this world without knowing the first thing about it, my first surprise was a big one. When I saw the group earnestly taking up the practice of *Mu*, I didn't know whether to think it was a joke, or some kind of stupid incompetence, or perhaps that I was in a mental hospital and they were psychotics. Meals were even more surprising. When we received two slices of pickle, we reverently joined our palms in thanks. How often we joined our palms—for the rice gruel, the water, the clearing up—from beginning to end, the whole meal seemed like it was taken with joined palms! These harmonious manners were truly graceful and beautiful, but on the other hand, I felt that the solemnity brought with it an oppressive restraint.

In the search for *Mu*, I didn't relax my meditation posture, I didn't sleep, and I lost sensation in my whole body from the pain in my legs. But despite the fact that I was struggling with the misery of a thousand deaths and ten thousand pains, just when I wished for some mercy, I was hit from behind [with the encouragement stick], making sparks fly from my eyes. It was the first time in my life that I had ever been hit by anyone. "How barbaric!" flared

up my rebellious thoughts. I went furiously into the private interview with the teacher (*dokusan*).

"Don't spout logic! It's just your ego!" she thundered at me, driving me out with the ringing of her bell.

"Mu—, Mu—, Mu—" with all my might. I thought, "I am driving myself to death or insanity knocking up against this." But each time the teacher would crush me with, "That's emotion! That's theory! That's interpretation! What are you waiting for?" My faith, my ideas were demolished. "Mu—, Mu—, Mu—," while sleeping, while eating, while in the toilet room, just Mu.

As time passed, I lost my appetite. At night I couldn't sleep, but sat up in meditation. The fatigue of body and mind reached an extreme. I was seized, tormented by Mu to the extent that during walking meditation, my feet could not take a single step forward. Though Mu was in my tears, I could not seize Mu. Private interview was always, "That's an hallucination! That's just a belief! That's just an idea! That's just a blissful feeling!"—an unbearable, merciless, cutting whip of words.

Soon all means were exhausted and I had nothing left to cling to. "Oh, I'm no good. I'm an evil person totally lacking the necessary qualities to be helped." How many times I gave up, sinking to the bottom with a sorrowful "thud"! I even thought, "My son disappeared with the dew of the battlefield, but I don't think his suffering was worse than mine is now."

At one time I clung to the Roshi, overflowing with hope, believing that only she was capable of being my spiritual teacher; but after all, that was still my ignorance. Another time I decided to run away as fast as I could from this practice center. I went to my room, and as I was tearfully packing my bag, I heard a voice from deep within my heart saying: "Under the sky of a far-away foreign land, no food, nothing to drink, lying down in a field, sleeping in the mountains, how many times did he dream of his home? I'm sure he wanted to see his father and mother, his beloved younger sister. Cutting off his unsuppressable personal feelings, fully aware of the preciousness of his life, with no way to advance and, following his superiors' orders, no way to retreat, what was his distracted state of mind like?"

"I must think of my child's death in war!" I thought. "What is my hardship? It doesn't amount to a thing! If I don't open up the way here and now, when will my dead son and I be released from the world?" Instantly, all thought of fleeing vanished. Greatly stirred and with courage renewed, I picked up the practice again.

Previously I had been cramped, immobilized in my own narrow and rigid shell. As my practice progressed, I gradually got rid of my egotism, freed of my distracting thoughts, and able to emerge out into a bright and wide-open world. For a slice of pickle, a morsel of rice-gruel, even the intense "whip" of words, from deep in my heart a grateful prostration came. Heretofore, as the wife of a religious man, I had eaten Buddhist food, was taught Buddhism and read Buddhist books; I thought of myself as having understood Buddhist

thought. But I had come to realize keenly that since I had never really suffered, never really tasted experience, I couldn't stand up to a real battle in a crisis. I was truly abashed and could hardly bear my shame. Now this realization soaked into the marrow of my bones.

In high spirits I went into the private interview, but once again, "You're just finding religious joy in the world of faith. . . . Hey, reluctant one, where are you? Come out! Come out! Come out and grab *Mu*! Don't be unwilling! Come out naked and exposed! Come on out and grab it! Come on! Come on!" she pressed her urgent command. She sent me staggering away, thrown back upon my own resources and writhing in pain.

"Now I have arrived here where there is only death. . . . It is death, it is *Mu*, it is death, it is *Mu*, it is *Mu*, it is *Mu*." Soon I forgot all about the private interview. *Mu—, Mu—, Mu—*, there is only *Mu*. . . . I went out into the yard and quietly sat down. Before the temple house one great tree stood alone, reaching to the clouds. In harmony with my chant of *Mu—, Mu—, Mu—*, the earth trembled and urged me on. Azalea leaves and small flowers spoke to me one by one. The bright moon laughed and became one with me.

Night passed. How pleasant the morning practice, how sweet the little bird's song! The crisp crunch, crunch, crunch of the kitchen master at the cutting board, the sound of the mallet as a woman out back hammered away cracking soybeans—from everywhere I could hear wonderful, indescribable music. Was this a visit to the paradise of the pure land? I didn't know, but it was the greatest of joys. No longer was there either a corrupt and troublesome world nor an honored teacher. My clinging to my beloved dead son vanished, and the painful search for *Mu* also disappeared in this ecstatic, exalted state of mind (*samādhi*).

However, later, I was again slapped in the face by the teacher's ferocious roar and returned, startled, to *Mu*. Again, *Mu—, Mu—, Mu—*. A tiny insect flew onto the paper door; it was *Mu*. An airplane flew through the sky; it was *Mu*. The whole universe was nothing but *Mu*. In the midst of this, the wooden frame of the paper door fell away and vanished. My body felt as if it were being dragged up from deep within the bowels of the earth. "Gong!" rang the temple bell, and suddenly, I cried out and returned to myself. It was attained! "Heaven and Earth are of one piece. The universe and I are one body. I am the Buddha! We're joined in one!" It was *Mu*.

This greatest of treasures, which I hold, is without a shred of falsehood, even of the size of a cormorant's down; no one could ever harm it. This treasure, which I hold, transcends death; even the teacher herself could never damage or destroy it.

"It's nothing, it's nothing, it's nothing." . . . Imperturbable, I at long last went into the private interview as my original self. Now, for the first time, the teacher herself smiled warmly and I received formal approval. Then she gave me various instructions and advice.

The joy itself passed in a moment. When I was made aware of the responsibility and difficulties of those who aspire to the way, I fully understood what

the teacher meant in the private interview when she said, "That's just religious joy." I was introduced to koan practice as the way to the most exalted spheres. And while it is a path of trials, there is all the difference in the world between it and the suffering I formerly experienced within my narrow and rigid shell. These are the hardships one suffers while punting one's boat over to the territory of the buddhas and patriarchs; in reality this is the greatest of joys.

Eternal life presents me with ongoing, daily occupations. Words cannot express what it is like to live and work together with my dead son. That is buddha mind. This too is buddha mind. Apart from buddha mind, there is nothing. That is joy. This too is joy. My life is full in this vast, delightful and pure world. In one of my teacher's lectures she spoke the lines,

My clear dew mind
Is a ruby
When amongst the autumn leaves.

It's because my mind is clear or colorless that it can adapt to any and all circumstances.

Because of the kindness of the buddhas and patriarchs, a life worth living, a life that requires only the slightest effort, has begun. I can never in my life forget the austerities of the retreat. For the trouble taken by my teacher I have truly deep gratitude which I can only express with hands palm to palm. I bow to you.

Seizing the True Body

The following account is the story of a nun, Nachii Keido, who manages through sheer persistence to overcome the limitations of her background. Born and raised in rural Japan, she was almost completely uneducated; the prewar educational neglect of girls and of nuns was her daily experience. She attained a somewhat minimal literacy largely through her own determined efforts; in the same way, she rebuilt a deteriorated shrine with little community support. Lacking in training herself, she soon found herself the head of her convent. Her sincere spiritual questioning led her to seek doggedly the training she was never given, culminating in her encounter with Nagasawa Roshi. Unlike the laywoman in the previous account, the now elderly nun who speaks to us in this account is not surprised by what she finds at Nagasawa Roshi's retreat, but is delighted to have found what she has sought throughout a lifetime as a nun. Note that her long-held personal devotion to the bodhisattva Kannon, the female embodiment of perfect compassion, becomes transformed through Zen practice into an experiential sense of ongoing union.

I know that our world is full of heavenly beings living in peace, but at the same time, I see that sentient beings are being endlessly consumed in a great fire. I

have eaten Buddhist food for forty-eight years, hoping to escape from this burning house of the triple world. When I look back on those years, there is nothing that does not move me to deep gratitude. My motive for leaving home and becoming a nun was rooted in my horror of the burning house. In the spring of my twentieth year, I wrenched myself away from my loved ones. Crying and begging, I finally obtained my mother's consent and hurried to the village convent.

At the time that I grew up, there were no schools like today's schools. In those days only special people went to school; girls especially were thought to have no need for schooling. So in the daytime I worked for a teacher and in the evenings I went over to my elder brother's house in the neighboring village to study basic reading and writing. I still remember how happy I was when I received an inkstone case as a reward for being able to write the Japanese syllabary without looking. With this background, my struggles to learn the Buddhist scriptures were indescribable. While unflaggingly laboring at this, I grew accustomed to a nun's life, and was fortunate enough to be sent to school in Toyama for four years.

From this time on, I gradually began to scrutinize myself and ask myself: What is human life? What is the mission of one who has left home? In the midst of this, the management of the convent was turned over to me and my responsibilities piled up. If I didn't work, there wouldn't be any food even to offer the Buddha. The convent was in a state of deterioration unworthy of the enshrinement of revered Kannon, the object of everyone's faith. Somehow or other, I wanted to build a shrine for Kannon; this would be the great undertaking of my life. I vowed before the Buddha, "From now on, I dedicate my life to revered Kannon. I offer to her the greatest effort I can possibly make." From then on, I was quite literally stirred up. I begged for monthly contributions that people would not give. Evil things were said about me, and I became physically and mentally exhausted. How many times I went before revered Kannon with tears pouring down my face! When I think about it now I realize that I did a good job, and what's more I can clearly see that that hard struggle became a great shining light for me.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I accomplished the enshrinement of revered Kannon in her new shrine without going too far into debt. But as I did this, the questions from my youth that I had forgotten in the interim rose up in my mind. What is the purpose of going around begging (*takuhatsu*)? What is the point of reading scriptures? What in the world is revered Kannon? I accosted the heads of four or five neighboring temples with these questions. Once or twice a year we studied how a nun should progress on the path and I proposed setting up some kind of association for this purpose.

My elder brother who, happily, had become a monk and was chief priest in a nearby temple, shared a great deal of wisdom with me. With his assistance and that of an abbot whom he knew, a training institute for nuns was organized. This institute was made possible by the great efforts of everyone, but since I

was the eldest attending, I was always made to sit in the seat of honor, raised above the rest. I didn't know anything, though, so while my body was raised in a position of status, my embarrassed mind always took a low seat. No matter how many scriptures I heard or books I read, I didn't understand anything. This worried me; I always felt uneasy because I didn't understand anything. Once while visiting a Buddhist friend's sickbed, I was deeply struck: "All his distress, all his grumbling—it's common enough in this world, but he's a monk!" I trembled as if I were the one who was sick. My uneasiness grew.

Three years ago in May, I heard that the nun teacher Nagasawa of the Tokyo Nuns' Practice Center (*dojo*) would be coming to the area for a meditation retreat. Deciding I must by all means go, I waited impatiently. Unfortunately, I had to do some temple business which made me miss the first two days of the retreat. When I, white-headed and knowing nothing, first went into the midst of them, they all seemed as young to me as my own novices. I felt embarrassed, but even more I feared that I might hinder them in their zealous practice. But as I got used to it, I felt, "How wonderful! Thank goodness! This is what I've been searching for all these years! I understand, I understand! Well, if it's a matter of sitting in meditation, I'll sit! I'll sit until I understand the true body of Kannon!" Taking courage, I embraced my faith and forgot my years. I returned home, aiming for that bright light of hard struggle I had previously discovered.

I had heard that practice in the midst of activity surpasses practice in inactivity a hundred-, a thousand-, ten thousand-fold, so when going and coming from reading scripture at parishioners' houses I purposefully took the long way around. I also chose quiet places to practice, such as while weeding, sweeping the garden, caring for the Buddha altar, and so on. I tried hard to practice in the midst of all these activities. I struggled to keep this up, but I just couldn't do it. How my mind wandered! I was thoroughly disgusted with it. Just as a monkey leaps from branch to branch, my mind grasped at the branches of desire for sense experience. It was pathetic. In the face of this unconscious and unknown bad karma which I had created in former lives, I could do nothing but press my palms together and bow my head.

I had not been able to attend all of the previous year's retreat, but had had to miss a little. At the time of the following year's retreat I had to stay in bed with an intestinal problem and was unable to attend. And so another year went by. But anyway, there was no other way than this. "If I don't cross over to liberation in this body, in this lifetime, then I'll cross over in some other lifetime," we say; all things are impermanent and ephemeral.

This year, though, I attended the retreat from the day before it began, together with a novice. I helped out as my age allowed and at long last the opening day arrived. From the three o'clock bell to the unrolling of my bedding at nine P.M., I exerted myself with enthusiasm. I sat in meditation with all the zeal I had, but I didn't make much progress. The young people were full of energy as they practiced. Whatever face or figure I looked at, all were strained,

as if pulled taut. Such austere, yet noble figures! Forgetting about myself, how many times I revered them as I sat behind them, thinking, as tears welled up, "these are truly living buddhas."

One day, two, three, gradually the days were gone.

Life and death is a great concern,
All things are impermanent and ephemeral.
Each of you must quickly wake up!
Be careful, don't miss your chance!

The verse recited at bedtime echoed on and on in my ears. I couldn't sleep.

It was the middle day of the retreat. I was sitting in meditation with fresh spirits. I don't know how or why, but all of a sudden, out of the blue, a happy feeling came over me, and I cried out. I realized: "It's *Mu*, it's *Mu*! *Mu* is overflowing! I understand *Mu*! I understand Kannon's true body, my true body, no—the true body of all things! It's all one! No matter what anyone says, I have penetrated to my original self (*honrai no jiko*). How wonderful! How wonderful that even I could have such an exalted experience!"

At the private interview, I presented the important points. The teacher smiled. In gentle words such as she had not used before, she said this experience was a matter of paradoxical self-knowledge that was completely inexpressible.

The uncertainty I had felt before this experience has been swept away and I have become constantly one with Kannon. I pass my days in peace and gratitude. Since the joy of realizing that the triple world is composed of mind only, I clearly understand that all things, from the doors and windows and the straw floor-mats to Kannon herself, all things that strike my eyes, indeed, all invisible things too, are full of life and vigor. It's strange: the triple world has remained the same before and after I experienced myself, before and after I experienced the truth, but since I woke up and saw, the triple world seems so different.

Wanting even one more person to penetrate to the bright light of this great truth, I have forgotten my white hair and sixty-eight years, and related my foolish feelings. Please, dear readers, be my companions on the path for life after life. We will strive to advance on the path toward the realization of buddhahood and to send a refreshing breeze to the countless sentient beings. I bow to you, hands palm to palm.