

Okamura Mihoko Sensei

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Mihoko Okamura (Bekku), born on May 2, 1935, a day full of flowers, died on June 17, 2023, shortly after reaching her 88th birthday. In the past, when I expressed my congratulations on May 2, she always replied that it wasn't even that bright an occasion.

I first met Mihoko Okamura, personal assistant and companion of D.T. Suzuki the last decade and a half of his life, in the summer of 1994. I asked her to talk about the last years of Suzuki's life as part of a project for the quarterly journal *Zen Bunka*, and she accepted with surprising ease. At the time, transcribing recorded interviews was one of the most troublesome tasks, but I remember that I had no difficulty in listening to the interview again, so moved was I by Mihoko Okamura's clear, luminous voice and her interesting stories.

The entire content of the interview was published in *Zen Bunka*, no. 155 (January 1995). Her gestures through the interview are also memorable. During the Second World War, when she was very young, she performed classical Japanese dances in a Japanese internment camp in the United States, but she had great difficulty when her dance master chastised: "Even if you point at a bird, there is no bird where you point." As she spoke, she quickly gestured to the bird, which I still remember almost 30 years later. It was as if I could see the bird.

Once I visited her home, and on another occasion she came to my home, and when I served her a simple meal for lunch, I was surprised

that she said it was “such a luxury,” because it truly was a very simple meal. Perhaps Mihoko-sensei had lost her sense of comparison.

When D.T. Suzuki lived for a short time in the Okamura house, a four-story brownstone in New York, Dr. Shin'ichi Hisamatsu visited him. He gave Mihoko-sensei's mother — who had looked after Dr. Hisamatsu as well with her characteristic generosity — a brooch that he had bought in a New York jeweler's shop as a token of his appreciation.

Perhaps because every time I met Mihoko-sensei I was always eager to hear not only about Dr. Suzuki but also about Hisamatsu-sensei, one day she gave me the brooch along with a note that read: "In memory of Shin'ichi Hisamatsu-sensei." The brooch was of a magnificent design, cool and calming.

On another occasion, Mihoko told me: “Dr. Suzuki was going to entrust the management of Matsugaoka Bunko to Muneyoshi Yanagi. He was so sad when Muneyoshi died that he continuously wore Yanagi's cardigan, given him by the deceased's family as a memento.” Whenever Mihoko spoke of Yanagi, she always called him ‘Soetsu-sensei’ rather than ‘Muneyoshi-sensei.’

An exchange in English between D.T. Suzuki and Mihoko shortly before D.T. Suzuki's own death is described, encased in Mihoko's commentary, in the journal *Zen Bunka*:

I asked him if he wanted anything. "No, nothing. Thank you," he replied. I think he had already prepared himself for the end.¹

Ten years later Mihoko returned to the subject of Dr. Suzuki's

death. "After saying, 'I don't need anything. Thank you,' he kissed me on the cheek." As she related this, she smiled.

I immediately thought of Sanshoken Roshi (猷禪玄達, 1841-1917). In an account by Master Kato Kozan (1876-1973), an old Buddhist monk from Okutama who studied under him at Bairin monastery, Master Sanshoken's last hour is mentioned.

He was a great man, of heroic character. When he was dying, he was close to his last breath and needed water, so a nurse at the hospital brought him water. The nurse asked him if it tasted good and he said, "Oh, it tastes good, and I miss it."

It's not easy to get such words out, I wonder if we can do it in the throes of death? In all things he was concerned only with the present moment, never thinking a bit about the future, if the future would be this way or that. That's how Sanshoken lived.²

Mihoko-sensei, Honorary Director of the D.T. Suzuki Museum in Kanazawa, was once asked, "What would Dr. Suzuki say if he saw this D.T. Suzuki Museum now?" She replied with a laugh, "I think he'd say: "Don't you have anything better to do?"

Years earlier Buddhist scholar Ryomin Akizuki visited Dr. Suzuki at Matsugaoka Bunko and asked him to compile a collection of koan answers. As Dr. Suzuki saw him off at the door, he asked Professor Ryomin: "Don't you have anything better to do?" "The Akizuki story," added Mihoko, "popped into my mind when I was asked the question at the Suzuki Museum."

On 12 July 1966, the day D.T. Suzuki died, Mihoko-sensei returned alone to the Matsugaoka Bunko and searched the premises, trying to

catch a glimpse of him. Emerging into the garden and halting —

The instant I saw the branches of a pine tree beside me swaying in the wind I blurted: — Ah, That's it, Professor! — I felt I'd finally met the real thing in person. Since then, when I'm quiet, here and there, this and that, even the logs lying by the side of the road, are all familiar to me.³

In no time at all, Mihoko was reunited with Dr. Suzuki. Rather, it would be better to say that they were together without interruption.

In the same essay, she writes:

Four years ago, when he fell asleep forever, nothing changed in his expression. That's because he'd already been dead for a long time. In other words, I had the impression that he had already gotten rid of everything that could be gotten rid of on a daily basis. Even if he died, nothing would begin, so nothing would end.⁴

The last time I saw Mihoko was shortly before the coronavirus spread through the city. We'll meet again when the world calms down. That's what I thought as the days went by.

I've heard it said that Dr. Suzuki often used to tell her: "Be quiet, Mihoko-san" — and Mihoko-sensei, with whom I had the pleasure of corresponding, was cheerful, yet fundamentally calm.

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1. *Zen Bunka*, no. 155, (January 1995): 40.
2. *Zazen ni Ikiru: Kato Kozan Roshi Zuimonki*, Hakujusha, 1973, p.45.
3. *D. T. Suzuki: The Man and his Thought*, Iwanami Shoten, 1971, pp. 369-370
4. *Ibid.*, p.371