Tenborin Zoom 11 July 2026

Who, then, was Master *Yunmen*, to whom *Koun Ejo* makes reference in the *Kōmyōzō Zanmai*?

In Japanese, his name is *Unmon*. He was one of the most eminent Chan masters of the late 9th century and the first half of the 10th. He was known for being relatively strict, demanding of his disciples the same sort of effort as he himself had made under his own master, *Seppo*.

Owing to his great independence of mind, his teachings formed the foundation of the *Unmon* School, which was one of the five most renowned schools in Tang-era China, stemming from five recognised lineages, including those of the Sōtō and Rinzai schools.

Unmon was one of the first masters to use the words of the ancient masters to create the kōans he presented to the monks at his temple. It was his habit to give answers that differed from those traditionally handed down and commonly used. Similarly, he would pose a first question, then a second, to which he would provide the answer himself rather than letting his pupils do so.

During a discussion with the monks, he said to them:

" I'm not asking you about the days before the fifteenth.

But about the days after the fifteenth, say a word, speak."

In place of his disciples, who remained silent, he gave this reply, which has become famous in Zen:

"Day after day, every day is a good day."

Master Unmon's answers and sayings are held in high regard in the Chan tradition and later in Japanese Zen. On the one hand, his answers corresponded exactly to the questions asked; on the other, they had enough power to cut through the disciples' blindness, their preconceived thoughts and dualistic sentiments. Unmon adapted to his audience as naturally as one wave follows another. Sometimes, his answer consisted of just a single word.

Koun Ejo repeats one of the questions a monk once sought to put to *Unmon* in a somewhat theatrical manner:

'The light shines silently through the infinite worlds …'

Before he had even finished his sentence, Master Unmon cut him off:

"Are those not the verses of a famous poet? "

"Yes, Master," replied the embarrassed monk.

"You are still trapped by words," retorted Unmon.

It's easy to see why *Unmon* cut the monk off so sharply. It shows a total lack of discernment and great arrogance to debate with a master using another's words as if they were one's own. It also means confining oneself to the world of words and restricting one's own understanding within conceptual boundaries that neither touch nor even approach the truth. It is to deceive oneself in making the other believe that one has understood. That monk would have done better to remain silent and remember Bodhidharma's '*I do not know*'.

Koun Ejo adds his own commentary to this little story:

"Hail to the ancient Buddha Unmon! His gaze is as swift as a comet, his mind as striking as lightning! Having reached this point, the monk was left speechless. Who would not have felt ashamed?"

Zazen teaches us how to be simply true to ourselves. Without hiding ourselves behind our illusions. Without forgetting to remain centred in the heart of our own light.

To conclude this kusen, here are two *haiku* that I have joined together:

"What to recommend to the generations to come
if not to read
the words of the ancients?
The ancients
cherished every moment;
just thinking of this
makes my whole being tremble"

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