

Chapter 21

Bankei



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BANKEI Yōtaku 盤珪永琢 (1622–1693) was a seventeenth-century Japanese Zen master best known for originating the uniquely Japanese tradition known as “Unborn Zen” (J. *fushō Zen* 不生禪). Active during the early decades of the feudal Tokugawa period (1600–1868), Bankei was a popular teacher who traveled widely throughout Japan, urging his followers in simple, everyday language to live in the unborn Buddha-mind. His innovative teachings reached a broad audience, lay as well as ordained, helping to popularize Zen among the ordinary people of Japan.

1 A Mischievous Child

In one of his talks Bankei described his early childhood:

My father, whose surname was Suga 菅, was a masterless samurai (J. *rōnin* 浪人) and Confucian scholar from the island of Shikoku. He moved here [to Hamada on the main island of Honshū], where I was born. While I was still young he died, leaving me to be raised by my mother. I was an unruly child, my mother later told me, who led the little boys of the neighborhood in making mischief. She also said that already from the age of two or three I was afraid of death. If I was crying or misbehaving the mere mention of someone’s death would make me stop. (“Seppō” 説法 [“Sermons”], BZZ 1: 9)

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Bankei, the fourth of five sons in a family of nine children, was so unusually precocious as a child that he was known among the villagers as “the wonder boy of the Sugas.” He was born on the eighth day of the third month of 1622 in the town of Hamada, near the southern coast of the province of Harima on the Inland Sea. His father, who supported the family as a physician, died when Bankei was only ten, leaving his first son to head the family and carry on in the medical profession. The site of Bankei’s childhood home, located not far from the present-day city of Himeji 姫路 in Hyōgo Prefecture, is now occupied by the temple Gitoku-in 義徳院. The well from which the water was drawn for Bankei’s first bath as an infant can still be found on the temple grounds.

2 The Great Doubt

Bankei’s search for truth began not with Zen but with his study of the Confucian classics. At the age of 11 he was sent to the village school, where, in line with the educational customs of the time, he was set to work memorizing the Four Books of Confucianism. While reciting the opening line of the *Great Learning* (C. *Daxue* 大學) he came across the statement, “The way of great learning lies in the clarification of bright virtue” (BKK 13). Seized with a desire to understand the meaning of “bright virtue” (J. *meitoku* 明德), he questioned his teachers on the matter. Their definitions, such as “Bright virtue is the goodness of our fundamental nature” or “[b]right virtue is the Principle of Heaven” (BZZ 228), left him dissatisfied. Consumed by the desire to know what this principle was, he lost interest in his schoolwork and devoted all of his energy to his investigation. His desperate search finally led his oldest brother, in despair over Bankei’s obsession, to expel him from the family home.

Undeterred, Bankei continued his single-minded questioning. Realizing that he would find no solution to the meaning of bright virtue in Confucianism, he sought out teachers in other traditions. At the age of 13 he began the practice of Pure Land Buddhism at the family temple, Saihōji 西芳寺, under the guidance of Jugon 寿欣, the resident priest. After engaging in *Nenbutsu samadhi* (J. *nenbutsu zanmai* 念佛三昧) for some time, he became convinced that, although the answer to his search could be found only in Buddhism, Pure Land practice was not his path. After studying Shingon 真言 (esoteric) doctrine for some time, he finally turned to Zen, entering the temple Zuiōji 随鷗寺 in the town of Akō 赤穂 to train under UNPO Zenshō 雲甫全祥 (1568–1653), a well-known master of the time. Upon his ordination under Unpo the 16-year-old Bankei was given the name Yōtaku 永琢 (literally, “long [永] polishing [琢]”), signifying Unpo’s hope that his new disciple would “long polish the jewel of the mind in order to illuminate the world.”

3 Solitary Investigation of Bright Virtue

What Bankei was seeking in his inquiry into “bright virtue” was not a doctrinally correct interpretation of this concept, of course, but rather an experience of the reality of “bright virtue” itself. After three years of training under Unpo, the 19-year-old

Bankei, hoping to focus more intensely on his meditation, left Zuiōji and embarked on an extended pilgrimage. Bankei describes his practice during this period as follows:

When I asked about bright virtue, Unpo replied, “To know bright virtue you must practice *zazen*. Do *zazen*, and you will realize bright virtue.” I therefore immediately took up this practice. Sometimes I would enter the mountains and meditate for seven to ten days without eating, or go among the cliffs and sit myself atop a sharp crag, pull open my robes, and fold my legs in the *zazen* position with my bare bottom right on the rock. I gave no thought to my life, pressing on in my meditation until I collapsed of exhaustion, no one having brought me food. (“Seppō” 説法 [“Sermons”], BZZ 1: 9)

Even after several years of such practices Bankei felt no closer to understanding “bright virtue,” so at the age of 23 he returned to the area of his birth and secluded himself in a hermitage near the village of Nonaka 野中村. In this hermitage he prepared a prison-like cell about ten feet square and sealed off the entrance. Food was passed to him twice a day through a hole in the wall, and an opening in the floor gave access to the privy. There he embarked on an arduous regimen of training, meditating day and night without ever lying down, pressing on even when his buttocks developed bleeding sores. Finally he contracted a severe illness that caused him to cough up bloody phlegm and left him weak.

One day, as he sat in his cell resigned to death, he coughed up a glob of black blood, the size of a soapberry, which struck the wall and slowly ran down. As he watched this, the constriction in his chest suddenly vanished, and he felt an immediate sense of ease. In that instant he attained enlightenment, realizing that in this experience all was brought into harmony and that his questions regarding bright virtue were finally resolved.

According to another account, one early spring morning Bankei, gravely ill, was bending down to wash his face in the stream outside his hermitage when the scent of plum blossoms drifted to him on the breeze, and suddenly he experienced a profound awakening. Bankei was 25 years old at the time. When he called upon Unpo and informed him of his experience, the master said, “You have penetrated thoroughly, and attained the marrow of Bodhidharma’s bones” (BZZ 172).

4 Discovery and Deepening of the Experience of the Unborn

It appears to have been only after years of continued practice following this first decisive experience that Bankei began to describe this experience as an awakening to the “Unborn” (J. *fushō* 不生). The “Unborn” was Bankei’s term for the mind as it is prior to our birth: the mind prior to all picking and choosing, prior to all conceptual discrimination, and prior to all self-serving calculation. Bankei taught that if one has an unshakable faith in this “Unborn,” also referred to by Bankei as “Buddha-mind” (J. *bussnin* 佛心), and remains firmly committed to it, then one realizes that nothing more is needed. Bankei describes the experiences of the “Unborn” and “Bright Virtue” using the metaphor of a mirror:

When you place something in front of a mirror, the mirror reflects it; if you take the object away, the mirror reflects it no more. Because a mirror is clear it reflects things as they are; the bright virtue [i.e., the clear functioning] of the mirror is that it seeks neither to retain the object nor remove it. It is the same with the human mind. The ability of the eye and the ear to perceive anything that enters their perceptual fields, with no need for so much as a single thought, corresponds to “bright” [clarity]; this capacity is the virtue [functioning] of the Buddha-mind. Depth of faith is called Tathāgata. (“Seppō” 説法 [“Sermons”], BZZ 2: 66)

After a sojourn in the area of present-day Gifu Prefecture, during which he refined his experience, Bankei returned to Harima and reestablished the previously defunct temple Kōfukuji 興福寺 near the site of his enlightenment. There he began considering the most suitable and effective way to teach what he had understood. He was still in need, however, of someone to confirm his experience and help clarify his approach to Zen. In 1651, hearing of the arrival in Kyūshū 九州 of the Chinese Rinzai 臨濟 master DAOZHE Chaoyuan 道者超元 (d. 1660), he set out for the temple Sōfukuji 崇福寺 in Nagasaki, where Daozhe was staying. One story has it that, in anticipation of his meeting with the master, the free-spirited Bankei, who until then had worn only lay clothes, dressed for the first time in Buddhist robes. Bankei’s career as a monk in appearance as well as in spirit may be said to date from this period.

When he reached Kyūshū and met Daozhe, the master told him, “You have sufficiently understood the matter of self, but you have yet to go beyond that to clarify the essence of the Zen school.” Daozhe also said, “You are bound by the question of self, and still haven’t learned how to put the self to work.”

Bankei, recognizing Daozhe’s qualities as a teacher, began practice at Sōfukuji. As Bankei could not speak Chinese and Daozhe could not speak Japanese, the two communicated through written messages. On the twenty-first day of the third month of 1652, a year after arriving at Sōfukuji, Bankei went to Daozhe’s quarters, picked up a brush, and addressed to Daozhe the question, “What is the One Great Matter of birth-and-death?” Daozhe wrote in reply, “*Whose* birth-and-death?” Bankei immediately held open his arms, and when Daozhe attempted to write something further, Bankei grabbed his brush and threw it to the ground (BZZ 232).

The following morning Daozhe announced to the assembly, “Yōtaku has understood the Great Matter. As one who has transcended birth-and-death, let him be appointed to the position of head monk of the monastery.” With this, Daozhe confirmed the 30-year-old Bankei’s experience of the Unborn (BZZ 232–33).

Not long thereafter, Bankei returned to Harima, then journeyed to the provinces of Yamato and Mino in central Japan to further deepen his understanding. In 1654, however, he made the long journey back to Nagasaki when he learned of the arrival there of the Chinese Rinzai master YINYUAN Longqi 隱元隆琦 (1592–1673) and the subsequent dissension that arose between Yinyuan’s followers and those of Daozhe. Yinyuan, unlike Daozhe, had the support of Japanese government officials and was apparently Daozhe’s senior in the Chinese Rinzai hierarchy. Realizing that the tension between the two groups was unlikely to abate as long as Daozhe remained in Nagasaki, Bankei attempted to find another temple for his teacher in another area of Japan. His efforts were fruitless, however, and Daozhe returned to China in 1658.

5 Teaching the People

Bankei had meanwhile been designated, in 1657, as Dharma heir of BOKUŌ Sogyū 牧翁祖牛 (d. 1694), the successor of Bankei's former teacher Unpo. Two years later he was appointed to the post of *senpan* 前版 by the great monastery Myōshinji 妙心寺 in Kyoto, and it was about this time that he first adopted the appellation "Bankei." This period marked the beginning of Bankei's long teaching career, in which he traveled throughout Japan advocating the practice of the Unborn Buddha-mind. The principal temples from which he conducted his preaching were Ryōmonji 龍門寺 in the town of Aboshi, in his home province of Harima; Nyohōji 如法寺, in the province of Iyo on the island of Shikoku; Kōrinji 光林寺 in Edo (modern Tokyo); and Jizōji 地藏寺 in Kyoto. Although his followers included many *daimyō* 大名 and other important people, Bankei's focus on the Dharma kept him from drawing too close to the centers of power.

The essence of Bankei's "Unborn Zen" can be summarized in a single sentence: "Abide always in the sole awareness of the bright Unborn Buddha-mind and everything will be fully resolved" (BZZ 24). Bankei's Zen teaching was distinctive in several ways. It freed Zen from Chinese modes of expression, relying instead on ordinary, easily understandable Japanese to convey its message; it avoided the use of *kōans* 公案, preferring to utilize the exigencies of everyday life to point directly to the central issue of Zen; and it addressed all followers – lay and ordained, male and female – in equal terms.

For example, Bankei offered the following advice to those grieving over the loss of a beloved parent or child:

From now on stop your grieving and devote that time instead to a period of *zazen*, reciting the *nenbutsu*, chanting the sutras, or offering flowers or incense, and in that way honor the memory of the departed. This is what is truly known as filial piety or parental devotion. ("Seppō" 説法 ["Sermons"], BZZ 2:64)

This passage, brief as it is, demonstrates several aspects of Bankei's distinctive style of teaching: placing *zazen* and *nenbutsu* on the same footing, avoiding difficult quotes from the sacred texts, and expressing ideas in everyday language. Speaking in his local dialect, Bankei would use colloquialisms corresponding to "Everyone, isn't it so?" (B 187) to elicit agreement or "Listen closely!" (B 157) to emphasize a point. Bankei's adroit use of colloquial phrasing was effective in increasing the appeal of his sermons, helping win him devoted followers from among all social classes and Buddhist schools and laying the foundation for a teaching style that brought Zen to the common people.

Bankei's character was another important aspect of his appeal. Numerous anecdotes attest to his humility, his lack of prejudice, and his compassion. It is said, for example, that, when lecturing, Bankei never sat on a raised seat, as Zen masters customarily do, but instead sat on the floor at the same level as his listeners. During retreats he would never accept food prepared especially for him but would insist on eating the same fare as everyone else. One anecdote involves a monk at a retreat who had a reputation for thievery. When other monks who knew of his inclinations

offered to make him leave, Bankei replied, “I am holding this retreat so that the evil will turn from evil and the good will continue being good, in order that all can realize their inherent wisdom. If from the outset we accept only good people and reject the evil, that would completely counter what I am trying to do” (BZZ 393).

Bankei’s uniquely Japanese expression of Zen, with its emphasis on the Unborn Buddha-mind, is actually a return to views central to early Chinese Zen. Bankei’s fundamental standpoint, expressed in his words, “Not one of you here in this place right now is a deluded being – you are all the Unborn Buddha-mind!” (BZZ 1: 9–10) is no different from that of the Tang-dynasty Chinese master Linji when he said, “You who stand here before me are the patriarch-buddha!” (Linji 2009: 9).

Bankei saw the confirmation of the Unborn as a transcendence of both self-power and other-power. The names that Bankei chose for his line of teaching reflect this return to the fundamental experience of Buddhism. One name was the Buddha-mind School; another was the Clear Eye School (since Unborn Zen opened the inner eye to penetrate the essence of mind).

Bankei’s lineage, with its teaching of the Unborn as the true mind prior to all discrimination, flourished during the master’s lifetime and immediately thereafter. Not long after his death at the age of 71, however, it entered a period of decline and, within a few generations, largely disappeared. It nevertheless remains an unusually clear expression of Zen, one that cuts through to the tradition’s heart and may have much to offer Zen in the contemporary world.

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Abbreviations

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