

Hakuin

Disliked by every one of a thousand buddhas,
Despised by every one of a myriad demons,
I crush those who practice silent illumination
today,
I slaughter those blind monks who still refuse to
see the truth.
This ugly, evil, aged, balding monk,
Adding yet another layer of ugliness to ugliness
(Meiwa 4, 1767).

So wrote the Japanese Zen monk Hakuin Ekaku (白隱慧鶴; 1686–1769), two years before his death. It was brushed in a rough hand along the top of a witty self-portrait, one of about ten such portraits that he produced after reaching his 70s. He was a talented painter and is known to have produced thousands of “Zen paintings” for supporters, “parishioners,” and lay patrons throughout his life. Today indeed it is for these iconic drawings that Hakuin is best remembered both in Japan and in the West, because for many they serve as a perfect illustration of what is often termed “the spirit of Zen.” Such an interest is, however, a very recent phenomenon. His biography, the chief source for which is the *Ryūtakū kaiso kidoku myōzenji nenpu* (龍澤開祖機獨妙禪師年譜, hereafter *nenpu*; *Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 1.3) written by his disciple Tōrei Enji (東嶺圓慈; 1721–1792), reveals that during his lifetime he was known and revered for entirely different reasons.

Hakuin was fortunate in his place of birth. He was born Nagasawa Iwajirō (長澤岩次郎) to a commoner family in the post-station of Hara (原) south of Mount Fuji (富士山) in the province of Suruga (駿河, present-day Shizuoka Prefecture). Hara was the 13th station on the Tōkaidō (東海道), the main trunk route from the capital at Edo to Kyoto, and was subject to a never-ending stream of travelers, so even if Hakuin had never left Hara, the world would have come to him. He made the decision to become a monk in 1700, starting out as an apprentice at the local Rinzai (臨濟) Zen temple Shōinji (松蔭寺) under the guidance of Tanrei Soden (單嶺祖傳; d.u.), who gave him the name Ekaku. Tanrei then sent him to Daishōji (大聖寺) in nearby Numazu (沼津) for initial instruction, after which, aged 19, he embarked on the kind of peripatetic,

ascetic wandering that was normally demanded of aspiring Zen monks. But for Hakuin this turned out to be no less than 14 long years on the road, working, studying, and practicing at as many as 16 different monasteries throughout the country from Shinano (信濃) and Echigo (越後) in the northwest to Shikoku (四國) in the south. He recorded that he experienced his first awakening in 1707, jolted by the sound of a temple bell in the early morning (Yampolsky, 1971, 118).

During his travels two men turned out to be of particular importance for his development. At one stage he trained with the monk Dōkyō Etan (道鏡慧端; 1642–1721) at his Shōjuan hermitage (正受庵) in Iiyama (飯山), Shinano (信濃) Province. Although we have no proof that Dōkyō ever formally recognized him as his dharma heir, Hakuin certainly saw himself in that light, which places him firmly in the Ō-Tō-Kan (應燈関) lineage that stemmed from Gudō Tōshoku (愚堂東菴; 1577–1661) of Myōshinji (妙心寺). The *nenpu* tell us that his second awakening came one day as he was deep in thought standing in front of an old woman’s house, when suddenly the crone rushed out and shooed him away with a broom. But by this time, the intense strain was beginning to tell on Hakuin, and he experienced what must have been a mental breakdown, which he described as a *zenbyō* (禪病) or Zen illness. Hearing that a hermit (*sennin* [仙人]) called Hakyū (白幽), living in the Higashiyama (東山) area of Kyoto, might be able to help, he went to seek his advice. Hakyū, who was by then a legendary 200 years old, revealed to Hakuin a method of introspection (*naikan* [内觀]) and other remedies that Hakuin described and popularized in a number of later writings, chief among them *Yasen kanna* (夜船閑話, *Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 5.3, 341–400; trans. Waddell, 2002), published in 1757.

In 1716 Hakuin was asked to return to Hara and was installed as the priest in charge of Shōinji the next year. In 1718 he was given the rank of *daichiza* (第一座) at Myōshinji and took the name Hakuin. Being in charge of Shōinji brought with it considerable problems, however, since the temple was in a bad state of repair and had heavy debts. In a time

of extreme hardship, and with the constant threat of famine and destitution, it was to take Hakuin 20 years before the temple was fully restored. Hara was little more than a large village; records show that in 1728 there were 190 landowning families and 119 tenant farmers, with a total population of 1665 plus 262 servants (Takahashi, 2014, 46). The only secure source of support lay in increasing the number of “parishioners” (*danka* [檀家]) and other lay Buddhists. Eventually he succeeded in attracting a number of the more wealthy land-owners and farmers as part-time students of Zen, laymen (*zaike koji* [在家居士]), who lived and worked at home but came for regular meditation practice and to listen to his sermons. It was this group that was to form the kernel of what later became known as the Kokurin Disciples (鶴林門下), taking its name from the temple’s “mountain title” (*sangō* [山号]).

By 1737 the situation had improved: the temple was financially stable, and Hakuin was attracting a large number of student monks. Eventually, indeed, he would become so well known and respected as a teacher that it was said that: “in Suruga there are two marvels, Mount Fuji, and Hakuin from Hara.” Using Shōinji as a base from which to work, Hakuin now began to travel again, but this time as a teacher, visiting temples in response to invitations, and lecturing to both high and low. Wherever he visited, the locals would come to him for advice, and he soon gained a reputation for speaking his mind. To those daimyō (大名, lords), officials, and village headmen whom he met, either on his travels or in Hara, he gave advice not only about how to meditate but also on more worldly affairs, for he saw no essential difference between the two. He then went further: not content to keep such conversations private, he took steps to make sure that his words were made available to all through the medium of printing, through a series of “letters” which, although addressed to single individual, were designed as a didactic tool for all.

Perhaps the most famous of these are contained in a collection that Hakuin entitled *Oradegama* (遠羅天釜, also read *Orategama*, *Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 5.2, 105–209). This title is commonly understood as a reference to his favorite tea-kettle (*ora tegama*, “my hand kettle”), but its true significance is a matter of some dispute, given that his titles were carefully chosen to have double meanings: *orade*, for example, would suggest “not there.” Written in 1749 and published in 1751, it contains three separate pieces. The first is addressed to the daimyō

Nabeshima Naotsune (鍋島直恒; 1701–1749) of the Hasuie (蓮池) domain in Hizen (肥前). It is a long sermon, discussing the importance of practicing meditation in the midst of activity (動中の工夫) as opposed to “silent illumination” (*mokushō* [黙照]), the use of introspection (*naikan*) to conquer mental breakdown during Zen training, and the central role that Zen practice can play in producing the ideal, compassionate ruler. The second letter is written to a monk on his sick bed, urging him not to stop practicing even when ill. It also contains a famous recipe that he had learned from Hakuyū that was meant to relieve exhaustion and revive those who felt depressed. He called it “the soft butter pill” (*nanso no hō* [軟酥の法]):

One part of the “real aspects of all things,” one part each of “the self and all things,” and the “realization that these are false,” three parts of the “immediate realization of nirvāṇa,” two parts of “without desires,” two or three parts of the “non-duality of activity and quietude,” one and a half parts of sponge-gourd skin, and one part of “the discarding of all delusions.” Steep these seven ingredients in the juice of patience for one night, dry in the shade and then mash. Season with a dash of *prajñāpāramitā*, then shape everything into a ball the size of a duck’s egg and set it securely on your head (*Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 5.2, 169; trans., Yampolsky, 1971, 84).

The third letter is to a woman of the Hokke (法華, Lotus) sect explaining what he had meant by saying “outside the mind there is no Lotus Sūtra and outside the Lotus Sūtra there is no mind” (Yampolsky, 1971, 87). The message is the same, Hakuin told her, no matter how different the practices might appear to be on the surface. *Oradegama* finishes with an autobiographical supplement, in which he describes his training and his experiences of awakening.

Hakuin also used his privileged position as Zen monk to talk directly to members of the court nobility with extraordinary frankness. The sermon *Oni-azami* (於仁安佐美), Part I (*Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 5.3, 25–26), for example, published in 1751, is addressed to two imperial princesses who were appointed abbesses (*amamonzeki* [尼門跡]). *Oni-azami* is the name of the common thistle in Japan and is meant to reflect the sharpness of his criticism, which takes both women to task for their luxurious lifestyle, urging them to lead austere lives without constant recourse to servants. Here too, we find the theme of meditation in the midst of activity. Occasionally,

he almost went too far. Perhaps the best example is *Hebi-ichigo* (邊鄙以知吾, *Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 5.4, 401–450), which was written in 1754 but deemed too critical to be publishable at the time. The title refers to a small, insignificant strawberry, but is written in such a way as to suggest that the path to self-knowledge lies in the mundane. This letter was addressed to Ikeda Tsugumasa (池田継政; 1702–1776) of the Okayama (岡山) domain, who, like many others at this time, had crippling financial difficulties. At some stage Tsugumasa must have sought Hakuin's advice, perhaps as his cortège passed through Hara on its way to Edo. Hakuin's letter is extraordinarily blunt, strongly condemning the unwise ruler (*ankun* [暗君]) who sought to alleviate his financial troubles not by instituting a program of austerity but by raising taxes on the poor, and castigating those monks who collaborated. Hakuin was also highly critical of the *sankin kōtai* (参勤交代) system, which forced the domains to spend an inordinate percentage of their funds on a biennial progress to and from the capital, and he had no compunction in placing the blame for civil unrest and peasant uprising (*ikki* [一揆]) squarely on the shoulders of those who ruled. The word *kokuri* (酷吏, cruel official) appears 34 times, giving the letter a strong Confucian flavor. It is hardly surprising that such a blunt appraisal of the status quo was not allowed to enter the public domain; it appears in a 1771 catalog of banned titles. Indeed, the fact that Hakuin himself was not interrogated and punished is testimony to the regard in which he was held. It was not printed until 1862.

Other letters concentrated on more spiritual matters. *Yabukōji* (藪柑子, *Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 5.3, 319–340; trans. Yampolsky, 1971, 159–179), for example, was written for the same Ikeda Tsugumasa in 1753. Also known as *Sekishu onjō* (隻手音聲), it begins with a discussion of the merits of the *kōan* (公案) for which Hakuin is most famous and which he invented: “imagine the sound of one hand clapping.” He then launches into bitter criticism of contemporary Zen practice, in which Zen masters have no humility, preferring to surround themselves with the panoply of power and prestige. They avoid serious mental battle with difficult *kōan* and instead indulge in a lazy mix of “silent illumination” and recitation of the name of Amida (*nenbutsu* [念佛]). While in some of his works Hakuin seems content to include *nenbutsu* practice as one technique among many – but only as long as the practitioner understands that the Pure Land is nothing but a metaphor for the original mind – when this is not

the case, he sees it as a threat. Here in the *Yabukōji* he criticizes the practice and puts the blame for the decline of Zen practice in China squarely on the syncretic nature of Ming Dynasty Buddhism. It is at this point that we enter the world of contemporary Zen politics, because Hakuin is here referring directly to the popularity of Ōbaku Zen (黃檗禪), which had been introduced to Japan from the continent in the mid-17th century. Although it was officially treated as a branch of Rinzai, it was to all intents and purposes an independent rival.

By the early years of the 17th century the Rinzai School of Zen in Japan, which had been nurtured by monks such as →Nōnin (能忍; fl. 1189) and →Yōsai (榮西; 1141–1215) in the 13th century, was in need of considerable reform and renovation. The serious practice of the study of *kōan* and strict adherence to the precepts were hardly treated as matters of interest or importance. The immediate cause of this re-evaluation was the arrival of →Yinyuan Longqi (隱元隆琦; 1592–1673), who made a considerable impact with his brand of Ming Dynasty Zen, which combined an eclectic mix of Zen and Amidism with strict adherence to the precepts and other monastic rules, and which soon developed into a rival school. While Hakuin was not himself enamored of Ōbaku practice, he used it as a catalyst for the reform of Japanese Rinzai. Hakuin made it his business to make sure that Rinzai practice became much stricter than it had previously been, and, through his own force of character and his writings, he attracted a large number of students drawn by his uncompromising nature and his reputation for rigor. Indeed, so successful was he that his students began to occupy the majority of important positions in Rinzai monasteries throughout Japan. Other rival lineages within Rinzai died out during the Tokugawa period, and today all Rinzai monks trace their lineage back to Hakuin. He is therefore seen as the father of present-day Rinzai.

Although Hakuin in his role as a Zen master produced the usual collection of sayings and teachings (*goroku* [語錄]), titled *Keisō dokuzui* (荊叢毒藥, Poison Flowers from a Thicket of Thorns, *Hakuin Oshō zenshū* 2, 1–3) and published in 1758, he did not produce anything like a treatise. That was left to his disciple Tōrei, whose *Shūmon mujintō ron* (宗門無盡燈論, On the Inextinguishable Lamp of Zen, T. 2575; trans. Mohr, 1997), was a history of the Zen school followed by a series of chapters that described what the Rinzai student should expect to experience. The final object of meditation was to see into one's own

nature. The core technique for Hakuin was the use of *kōan*, which encouraged great doubt that, in turn, had to be overcome by a combination of meditation and interviews with the master. Once initial awakening had been achieved, however, that was not the end of the story, because practice had to continue so that further such moments were won. What is noticeable by its absence, however, is a fixed program or syllabus whereby the student would be led from one *kōan* to another in strict order. Although it is assumed that such a syllabus must have been in place, it is important to note that neither Hakuin nor Tōrei makes specific reference to the existence of such a program specifically, possibly because as Zen masters they wished to retain a degree of flexibility (Mohr, 1997, 111). We do know, however, that there was strict adherence to the adage “no work, no food,” so manual labor was insisted upon, something entirely consistent with Hakuin’s stress on “meditation practice in action.”

Hakuin’s strictness when it came to the monastic institution went hand in hand with a relaxed attitude to the layman, for whom he also wrote and lectured. Not being monks, this audience had to be approached in a different fashion, with stories that would include miracles, which he would attribute to the magical power of the 42 character formula, *Enmei jikku Kannon gyō* (延命十句觀音經, Ten Phrase Kannon Sūtra, from the *Fozu tongji* [佛祖統記], T. 2035, [XLIX] 345c4–6), invoking Kannon and still regularly recited in Rinzai circles. He also popularized his own life story, in works such as *Yasen kanna*, which described his progress, his moments of awakening, and the various cures for mental stress (“the soft-butter pill,” for example) that he had encountered. In the end, however, it was through his myriad paintings and sketches, many of them comical and illustrating such figures as Hotei (布袋) and Otafuku (お多福), that he must have made his most immediate impact, an impact

that is as strong today as it must have been at the time.

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