

## HAKUIN EKAKU

### What is the Sound of One Hand Clapping?

Edward Ross

Prior to the Tokugawa period, Buddhism was an elitist religion in Japan. It was practiced by government officials and was part of the state cult. After the Tokugawa *shogunate* took power, Buddhism was separated from the state cult and forced to fend for itself. As a way to prevent the spread of Christianity, the Tokugawa *shogunate* forced the populace to register within the Buddhist temple system, bringing the working class into the Rinzai Zen temples. Zen master Hakuin Ekaku developed a form of teaching using *koan* and calligraphy in order to bring Rinzai Zen to the everyday people. He turned Rinzai Zen Buddhism into a more universal practice that would accept anyone who was willing to devote themselves to Zen, regardless of social class. This essay will follow a chronological structure, discussing the political movement of Rinzai Buddhism from its entrance into Japan during the Kamakura Period to the Ashikaga Period and then the Tokugawa *shogunate*. Once entering the Tokugawa Period, it will be possible to discuss the role of Zen master Hakuin and his contributions to the practice of Rinzai Zen Buddhism. Before the history of Rinzai Buddhism in Japan can be discussed, the basic concepts of Rinzai Zen practice must be outlined.

Rinzai Zen Buddhism was heavily based in the practice of *zazen*, seated silent meditation on a *koan*, a phrase or word that is said to aid in realizing enlightenment. The *koan* is meant to be so confusing that it can tear away all forms of discrimination and open the way to enlightenment, the realization of an immediate and sudden awakening with “no-mind” (Hori 281; Watts 100). The act of reaching this breakthrough is called *kensho* (Hori 280). Lin-chi, the originator of this sect, taught in a very informal manner, physically hitting and verbally assaulting his students (Watts 101). The form of practice that Rinzai evokes seems to be very natural and connected directly to the experiences of an individual. Lin-chi even found that one must “be ordinary and nothing special” to practice Rinzai

Zen (Lin-chi Lu 13). Now seeing the concepts of Rinzai Zen, the context of Japanese religious patronage must be understood.

Religious sects in Medieval and Pre-Modern Japan relied heavily on the support of the government. As the favoured sect of any one government, a school would hold positions in state affairs, would be able to construct new headquarters and temples, and would be followed by the warrior and imperial classes. Buddhism, for example, was dependent on the giving of alms, and the support of the government meant an illustrious amount of donations and supporters. Under this patronage, the sect could establish itself within Japan and easily attract followers. However, if the sect lost its patronage, it would need to rely on the common people in order to survive. Understanding this concept, the beginning of Rinzai Zen Buddhism in Japan can be discussed.

The Kamakura period began in 1192 when Emperor Go-Shirakawa died and was replaced by a feudal military regime in the city of Kamakura (Kitagawa 86). This moved the capital of Japan from Kyoto to Kamakura, representing the movement of power from the imperial class to the military class (86). The government leadership, which once consisted of courtiers and imperial aristocrats, now consisted of military generals and samurai (86). These military leaders, the *bakufu*, rejected the culture that was developed by the imperial class, which was built upon elegance and compared to a dainty, artificial lotus (88). Instead, they preferred a more natural form of culture and society. This affected the art, literature, and religious patronage of the period. Seeking a more simplified and instant way to enlightenment, the *bakufu* favoured Zen Buddhism and allowed it to develop into a sect of its own in Japan (Earhart 99).

Rinzai Zen Buddhism had attempted to percolate into Japan several times, but the patronage of the Kamakura government and the samurai class allowed it to finally make its own place. Myōan Eisai (1141-1215) is credited with bringing the lineage of Rinzai into Japan in 1191 after travelling to China and studying under Xuan Huaichang, a Ch'an master of the Rinzai lineage (Foulk 139).<sup>1</sup> It was difficult to install any sort of Zen temples in Kyoto because the city was deeply entrenched with the older sects of Buddhism, such as Tendai, but Eisai had the support of the samurai class and *bakufu* (Earhart 98). The Kamakura *bakufu* greatly preferred the Zen notions of attaining enlightenment through insight gained through personal experience rather than the older schools' stress on learning sutras and devotion to *bodhisattvas* (99). Eisai, with the help of the Kamakura *bakufu*, was able to build the first Zen temples in Kyushu, Kamakura, and Kyoto (Foulk 139). These temples were the beginnings of the Gozan temple system, which was built during the Kamakura period and consisted of five large temples that practiced Chinese Ch'an arts, such as calligraphy and painting, and taught them to the people of medieval Japan (Bodiford 311). Rinzai Zen Buddhism finally gained a foothold in Japan and was able to develop into a sect of its own because of the patronage of the Kamakura government.

The Kamakura period was riddled with internal war and rebellion as the remnants of imperial rule attempted to regain control of Japan. The *bakufu* was able to fend off these rebellions with ease, but the Mongol invasions of 1274

and 1281 left the *bakufu* in a critical state (Kitagawa 92). The samurai were able to fend off the Mongols but at a great economic and political expense (94). Emperor Go-Daigo took advantage of the political turmoil and in 1333 was able to collapse the Kamakura *bakufu* and reinstitute imperial rule (95). This was short-lived because Ashikaga Takauji, the new military *shogun*, brought together a force of the samurai class to revolt against the new imperial rule in 1336 (96). He was able to oust the emperor and create a new military rule known as the Ashikaga *shogunate*, thus starting the Muromachi period. Keeping the capital in Kyoto, the Ashikaga *shogunate* attempted to stabilize war-torn Japan and aided in the development of the household system (98). The feudal manorial system had fallen apart and individual households became solitary units focused on individual lineage rather than fief structure (98). The social structure of Japan had greatly changed, and the Ashikaga *shogunate* needed a way to organize the people.

The Ashikaga *shogunate*, much like the Kamakura *bakufu*, were patrons of Rinzai Zen Buddhism, and they made it their state cult. Rinzai Monks were employed by the *shogunate* to deal with state affairs. The five Gozan temples had been completed, and they were used to create a symbiotic relationship between the government and the Rinzai Zen Buddhists (Borup 16). The government warriors were considered lay monks, and the Buddhist monks would wear military arms to show balance (16). From this system, the *shogunate* called for the construction of more Zen temples as part of the Gozan system in all sixty-six localities of Japan as a way to disperse control over the localities in a top-down format (Dumoulin 178). Any temples that did not belong to the Gozan system were known as *ringe*, meaning “below the grove,” giving the Rinzai Zen temples a certain kind of elite connotation (Borup 16). This explains the use of the slogan “Rinzai for the *Shogun*, Soto for the peasants,” and why Rinzai was only really practiced by the warrior class and elite members of society during this period (Collcutt 29). In this period, Rinzai Zen Buddhism not only gained enough support to build temples throughout Japan, but it also became the state cult of the Ashikaga *shogunate* and was practiced by the elite members of society.

After the Ashikaga *shogunate* fell in 1567, Japan underwent a power struggle that ended with unification under Tokugawa Ieyasu, who defeated the combined opposition at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 (Bellah 11). His victory signalled the beginning of the supreme rule of the Tokugawa *shogunate* over Japan, which would be a dark time for Rinzai Zen Buddhism (Borup 17). This was considered Japan’s movement from the Medieval Period into the Early Modern Period (Bellah 7). The Tokugawa *shogunate* favoured the concepts and ideals of Neo-Confucianism and instituted it as the state cult (91). Having conquered all of Japan, the Tokugawa *shogunate* also had to reinforce the notion that they were its central power, not the emperor. This was completed through complex regulations that were instituted throughout Japan in order to bureaucratize and redefine the social norms of society (Kitagawa 135). One of these changes was the reformation of the system of Buddhist temples within Japan. Christianity was starting to spread into Japan during this period, and the Tokugawa *shogunate*, since it viewed Christianity as an evil force that would destroy political stability and social har-

mony, organized a registration system as a way to battle it (Hur 47). Every Japanese person had to register as a parishioner in a Buddhist temple every year to prove they were not Christian (Bellah 51). This generated a huge influx of members to various sects of Buddhism, but these new members would only come to the temple during special holidays and whenever they were registering (52). The Tokugawa *shogunate* also instituted a strict code of rules over the Buddhist sects so that they would not come into any conflict, thus controlling all sects from the top (Earhart 136). Rinzai Zen Buddhism had taken a hard hit during this period as it was no longer the state sect, and they were forced to downsize from several main temples to a hierarchal system which allowed for only one main temple and several smaller temples linked to it (Borup 18). This left Rinzai Zen Buddhism in a difficult situation. Not only had they lost their patronage and several of their large temples, but they had also lost their large elite following. If Rinzai was going to survive the Tokugawa Period, it needed to find a way to attract the common Japanese people.

Enter Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768), one of the most influential Zen Buddhist masters of the last 500 years. He grew up as a commoner and at an early age devoted himself to the study of Buddhism (Yampolsky 12). He was greatly unsettled by a description of the eight hot hells and eight cold hells and began to study various types of Buddhism as a way to avoid them (Hyers 22). He eventually was confronted by the *mu koan*, and it struck him with a sort of awakening and made him study it unwaveringly (24). He travelled extensively during the next period of his life, and when he was twenty-four he attained a moment of awakening that sent him to travel from temple to temple attempting to learn more (Yampolsky 12). When he reached the age of thirty-two, he returned to the temple in his hometown to begin teaching (13).

Hakuin's teachings centered on a new form of practice he developed. He went back to the original intensive koan study of the Chinese Sung Period and brought in new aspects, thereby creating a new living Zen that would be attractive to the common Japanese people (12). Hakuin brought this new form of practice to the common Japanese people by going out into the fields. There, he taught them by painting calligraphy and reciting his personal poetry so that it would be easier to understand (Moate 94). He maintained a calm and joyful persona while drawing pictures that would embody the ideas of Zen, such as the "Long-armed Monkey," teaching the common people about the ideas of an active approach to *koan* practice (94). According to Hakuin, the important aspect of Rinzai Zen was not *zazen*, but rather the meditation on the *koan* itself. If one were to focus on a *koan*, it did not matter if they were sitting, standing, walking, or working; they would still be performing good practice and bettering their chances for awakening (Hyers 38). Since the common people were daily workers and usually did not have the time to meditate on a *koan* in *zazen* for hours on end, Hakuin's new practices were very appealing to them.

On top of developing a way for the common Japanese people to be more involved in Rinzai Zen, Hakuin developed ways for students in the temple to attain enlightenment. In the temple, he took on the persona of a socially unset-

ting Zen master. He would take on a racy vocabulary and be angered very easily (35). Torei, his disciple, described him as “a sheer cliff towering abruptly before him. A menacing presence stalking the temple like a great ox, glaring around with the eyes of an angry tiger” (Torei, Biography of Hakuin; Waddell, Mirror Cave 204). Hakuin would use verbal abuse, physical abuse, rejection, and frustration to bring the student to a point at which they could hopefully attain enlightenment (Hyers 36). He developed a form of practice in which the master would give the student a *koan* to meditate on, and the student would be given a chance to give an answer to the master, acting as a guide, in any form they wanted (Borup 165). This practice was based on the several levels of enlightenment he obtained while meditating on different individual *koans*. By following this regimen, it is hoped that the student will pass one, achieving a sort of awakening, and then move on to another *koan* (Hyers 30). Hakuin first used the *mu koan* when attempting to start a student off on the process of koan meditation, but later in his life he created a *koan* of his own: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” (30)? His training regimen was brash and bold, but he believed it worked, and it attracted hundreds of students (Waddell, Essential Teachings xix).

Hakuin taught for several years of his life, accepting any student that would promise to have three things: an overriding faith, a great doubt when facing the *koans*, and a strong aspiration and perseverance (Yampolsky 13). His concept of an active approach to *koan* practice could have been applied to all walks of life, be it working in a field, painting calligraphy, fighting in battle, pouring tea, or going to bed. His teachings stretched over social class, bringing people from both the common Japanese populace and the elite classes (Waddell, Essential Teachings xx). He did not care where his students were from, so long as they were dedicated to their own inner development through his form of koan meditation.

“What is true meditation? It is to make everything: coughing, swallowing, waving the arms, motion, stillness, words, action. The evil and the good, prosperity and shame, gain and loss, right and wrong, into one single koan” (Hakuin, Orategama I).

Through the examination of the history of the Rinzai Zen Buddhist tradition, it can be seen that it started from a position of political grace and gained a huge foothold in the Japanese *shogunate* governments of the Medieval Period. It was able to build up its influence through the patronage of the military class, who favoured a more natural approach to enlightenment. The Tokugawa Period saw the decline of Rinzai Zen because it lost the position of state cult to Neo-Confucianism. Having been left with few followers within the elite class and even fewer of the common people, Rinzai Zen Buddhism needed to attract the common Japanese populace in order to survive as a Buddhist sect. Zen master Hakuin came during the middle of the Tokugawa Period and developed a form of active *koan* meditation drawing on old and new sources, which did not confine the practitioner to *zazen*. This was attractive to the common populace. Hakuin also developed a new form of *koan* testing that was able to develop the practice

of *koan* meditation so that it would be possible for students to attain several levels of awakening, and this was attractive to the elite class. During its time of need, Zen master Hakuin was able to revitalize interest in the Rinzai Zen Buddhist sect and train hundreds more students with his use of *koans*, calligraphy and poetry. With the sole goal of bringing his students to a point in which they could achieve an awakening, Hakuin would use whatever tools he had in order to create the ideal grounds for his students' enlightenment.

## NOTES

1. Eisai is also suggested to have begun the tradition of tea in Japan after he brought several seeds back from China.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

Hakuin. *Orategama I*.

Lin-chi. *Lin-chi Lu*.

Torei. *The Chronological Biography of Zen Master Hakuin*.

### Secondary Sources

Bellah, Robert. *Tokugawa Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957. Print.

Bodiford, William. "Zen Buddhism." In *Sources of Japanese Tradition: Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. Print.

Borup, Jorn. *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism: Myoshinji, a Living Religion*. Boston: Brill, 2008. Print.

Watson, Burton. trans. *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi*. Boston: Shambhala, 1993. Print.

Collcutt, Martin. *Five Mountains: The Rinzai Zen Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981. Print.

Dumoulin, Heinrich. *A History of Zen Buddhism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1963. Print.

Earhart, H. Byron. *Japanese Religion: Unity and Diversity*, 3rd edition. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1982. Print.

Foulk, T. Griffith. "'Rules of Purity' in Japanese Zen." In *Zen Classics: Formative Texts in the History of Zen Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.

Hori, Victor. "Kenso and Koan in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum." In *The Koan*. Eds. Steven Heine and Dale Wright. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

Hur, Nam-lin. *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism, Anti-Christianity, and the Danka System*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.

Hyers, Conrad. *Once-Born, Twice-Born Zen: The Soto and Rinzai Schools of Japanese Zen*. Wolfboro: Longwood Academic, 1989. Print.

Kitagawa, Joseph. *Religion in Japanese History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966. Print.

Moate, Sarah. "The Zen Calligraphy of Hakuin Ekaku." In *The Middle Way*. London: The Buddhist Society, 2010. Print.

Shaw, R. D. M.. *The Embossed Tea Kettle: Orate Gama and Other Works of Hakuin*.

- London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1963. Print.
- Waddell, Norman. *Hakuin's Precious Mirror Cave : A Zen Miscellany*. Washington DC: Counterpoint Press, 2009. Print.
- Waddell, Norman. trans. *The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Hakuin*. Boston: Shambhala, 1994. Print.
- Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. New York: Vintage Books, 1985. Print.
- Yampolsky, Philip. *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971. Print.