

The Zen Art of Deiryu (1895–1954)

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(*Orientalism*, December 1998)

**If I hold a sake cup
my friend is there
I think of Deiryu.
(By Isamu Yoshii. in *Deiryu Iho* p. 130)**

'Deiryu...Deiryu...Deiryu...', the thunderous voice of the Zen Buddhist master Yamamoto Gempo (1866-1961) called out as tears flowed down his face. Gempo was conducting the funeral service for Kanshu Sojun, better known as Deiryu, on the morning of 7 March 1954 at the temple Empukuji, just outside Kyoto. Deiryu had been only sixty when he died, and the deep sorrow and affection expressed by Gempo, himself 89 years old, was indicative of the love felt for Deiryu by monks and lay people alike.

Deiryu was born in 1895 to the Izawa family. Although the Izawas were residents of Kobe, he was actually born in Tomogashima in Wakayama prefecture, where Deiryu's father was working as an engineer on the construction of a fort. The elder Izawa was a noted naval engineer, and Deiryu received the strict upbringing and education typically given a son in a military family. One of his brothers, in fact, joined the navy, eventually becoming a Rear Admiral, and following further in his father's footsteps, acted as it consultant on the construction of a lighthouse. Deiryu held military men in great respect throughout his life, but his father's expectations were overwhelming, and school in particular made Deiryu agitated and nervous. He found a remedy for his academic troubles in physical education, an area in which he was said to have excelled. He had a particular affinity for the sea, and since he outclassed the other students in swimming, he often represented his school in competitions.

Despite his athletic abilities, Deiryu was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis, and his doctors predicted he would not live past the age of 25. Faced with an uncertain future, he decided to begin serving as an acolyte in a Zen temple. However, times were difficult, and many temples were experiencing severe financial hardship. The local temple, Zensho-ji,

already had five acolytes, and due to its destitute state could not afford another. Hearing of Deiryu's predicament, the Zen master Nantenbo (Toju Zenchu: 1839-1925) from Kaisei-ji (in Nishinomiya, between Osaka and Kobe) stepped in, saying: 'Kaisei-ji right now also has many troubles, but by all means I will allow this child to become an acolyte'. Thus, Deiryu began serving as an attendant to Nantenbo, one of the most noted and highly respected Zen masters of the twentieth century. Despite occasionally running into trouble for his independent spirit., Nantenbo, more than any other Zen master, helped usher Zen safely into the twentieth century by emphasizing strict, traditional training, and practice in the face of modernization. He was also a noted painter-calligrapher.

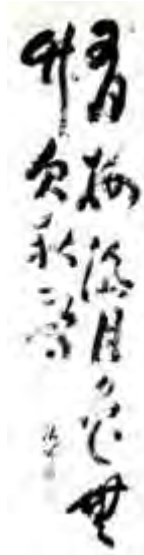
In the spring of 1912, Deiryu's father and mother passed away within a month of each other—a great shock that sent Deiryu into a period of deep mourning. Attempting to escape his sorrow through physical activity, he turned to *kendo* (fencing with bamboo swords), an art in which he was already very accomplished. The *kendo* master at the gym in Kobe at the time was a friend of Deiryu's older brother Toru, a man named Takeji Teramoto. Teramoto was acquainted with Nantenbo and often asked the master to talk about Zen to his *kendo* group. Largely through Teramoto's influence, in 1913 Deiryu entered Kaisei-ji to train formally as a monk, rather than to be merely an acolyte, under Nantenbo.

With Nantenbo, Deiryu traveled through the countryside on lecture tours for the general public, trips that could include as many as thirty stops. The two usually traveled at night, often sitting up in a third-class train carriage, in order to arrive at the next location in the morning. On these journeys, Nantenbo sat in *zazen* meditation, and Deiryu diligently memorized Zen texts and practiced calligraphy by tracing the shapes of characters with his finger in the palm of his hand.

Kasumi Bunsho, a pupil of Nantenbo and later of Deiryu, recalled:

When Deiryu was young, and still called 'Jun-san' [the name he had as a novice], he used to practice calligraphy all day when his Master, Nantenbo, was away. He also practiced calligraphy whenever he was on a train or ship with Nantenbo. With an example by Wang Hsi-chih [Wang Xizhi: 309-65] on his lap, he licked the index finger of his right hand and practiced copying the characters on his left palm with it. Once he started, nothing distracted him.

Bunsho also described copies of Nantenbo's lecture books, which Deiryu had made at the age of thirty and which were kept at Kaisei-ji. Deiryu's copies of the *Rinzairoku*, *Mumonkan* and *Hekiganroku* are written in *kaisho* (square, printed style), and reveal no mistakes or corrections as well as displaying an assuredness 'as if written by a computer: as if [the artist] himself' was the brush...'



Deiryu's style in calligraphy and painting seems to have been strongly influenced by Nantenbo. This can be seen in the two-line calligraphy in Figure 1, which reads:

With plum blossoms
the moon colors intensify:
Without bamboo
the autumn voice is stilled.

Figure 1

The poem reveals how both joy and sorrow can be magnified by the changing aspects of nature and the seasons. Just as the presence of plum blossoms can enhance an evening of moon viewing, the absence of bamboo makes autumn a little more austere and lonely. The rhythm and breadth of the characters as they sweep down the scroll, punctuated by streams of 'flying white' (where the brush has split, allowing the paper to show through) are reminiscent of Nantenbo's style of brushwork.

Using his painting skill to pay homage to his master, Deiryu created a portrait of Nantenbo at the age of eighty (Figure 2). Nantenbo himself wrote the inscription:

Striking and pounding with the Nantenbo*

I annihilate all false Zen:

This ugly old shave-pate arouses hate for a thousand ages,
Extinguishing the transmission like a blind donkey.

(Steven Addiss, *The Art of Zen* [paperback edition] New York, 1998, p. 202)



Figure 2

[*Here, 'Nantenbo' also refers to the staff of a Zen monk.]

Nantenbo is depicted in stem concentration, with fiercely knit brows and scowling mouth. Both the physical and the textual descriptions reveal a Zen master of strong conviction, determined to protect and preserve the true nature of Zen. Deiryu has portrayed his master with awe and slight apprehension; the thick eyebrows and powerful frown enhance the fierceness of a Zen master as seen by his disciple.



Figure 3

Despite the rigorous and harsh nature of Zen training, with its long hours of sitting meditation, the implements associated with this training are occasionally transformed into works of art. In one instance, Deiryu inscribed a wooden *keisaku*, a long stick used by a presiding monk (*jiki jutsu*) who walks silently around the meditation hall striking dozing monks (often at their own invitation) during meditation sessions (Figure 3). The words are appropriate: 'When you train hard, your *satori* [enlightenment] will be much greater.'

The inclusion of calligraphic inscriptions on functional objects such as the *keisaku* reinforces the continuity of art, teaching, training and life in Zen Buddhism. The inscribed objects reveal not only the Zen

master's enlightened experience, but also the tools with which his experience will be transmitted. Personal experience and spiritual tradition merge.

Deiryu left Kaisei-ji probably in 1924 and went to Empuku-ji, a major training center for Rinzai Zen, to continue his study under Kozuki Tesso (1883-1941), the master from whom he would receive *inka* (certification of enlightenment). Unfortunately, the year after Deiryu arrived, Nantenbo became ill, and Deiryu returned to Kaisei-ji to be with him during his last days. In 1927, Deiryu was sent to Taiwan to become head of Rinzai-ji, a branch temple of the Kyoto temple Myoshin-ji. There he promoted the spread of Zen throughout Southeast Asia.

Two years later, he became head of Kensho-ji in Kumamoto prefecture, Kyushu, and then in 1932, at the age of 37, he returned to his first temple, Kaisei-ji, as *kancho* ('abbot'). During his tenure at Kaisei-ji, he established a private school for students from Southeast Asia at the temple. The establishment of this school required great effort on Deiryu's part: he received help and support from many friends and acquaintances whom he had met in Taiwan, as well as from his elder brother, who was by that time a naval officer.

In 1937, while on a lecture tour, Kozuki Roshi, Zen master at Empuku-ji, was killed in a car accident, and Deiryu was asked to take over his position. Before beginning his duties at the *sodo* (training hall) at Empuku-ji, Deiryu decided to visit 25 *sodo* around the country, meeting the Zen masters at each. Having completed this task, he then began what would be a seventeen-year, tenure at Empuku-ji.

While overseeing the training program at the temple, Deiryu showed great appreciation for the trials and tribulations of the monks he taught, and he could often be seen on begging rounds with his pupils. Isamu Yoshii, his close friend and a noted poet, described the practice: 'My house faced the road which led from Empuku-ji to town. Over the hedge, I used to see a group of monks on begging rounds walking down the road chanting "oh, oh" in the morning mist. At the head of the group was Deiryu himself wearing a brown robe, which distinguished

him from the other monks in black robes'. For the Zen master of such a large Zen monastery to participate in begging rounds with his student monks was highly unusual.

The sight of black-robed monks on their morning begging rounds, their chanting resounding down narrow neighborhood streets, can still be witnessed today in Japan. The visual as well as the aural impression created is striking and has lent itself to one of the most charming and beloved subjects in Zen painting. Although the theme is known to have been painted by Zen monk-artists of the Edo period (1615-1867), such as Kogan Gengei (1747-1821), it was Nantenbo who simplified the compositions into two gentle swaying groups of monks clad in black robes and sedge hats.

Influenced by his teacher, Deiryu continued the tradition and painted his own diptychs of monks going out and returning from their rounds, or sometimes, single images showing one line of monks (Figure 4). The visual effect of the simplified ink figures is quite stunning; the black streaks comprising their robes fading into a gentle gray wash as the monks recede. The charmingly simplified feet and the faces that peer out one after another, mouths open to show the monks chanting, also reveal the delightfully uninhibited nature of Zen. Particularly appealing is the final figure in the procession, whose eyes peer demurely over the other monks. The inscription on the scroll reads: 'Walking, walking this Buddhist path'.



Figure 4

Deiryu had a life-long affinity for sakè, and despite the fact that it was customary for monks to politely refuse, he indulged freely, often landing in unusual predicaments as a result. Masahiro Yoshida, a *kendo* master who taught this martial art for the police department, recalled an evening when Deiryu came to his house in Osaka for a visit. The two friends drank sake until they became drunk. When Deiryu left the house for the evening, the last tram of the night was

pulling away. Deiryu shouted, 'Wait!' but the tram had already gone. He was arrested for obstructing traffic, and taken to the Yoshihara police station, where he was detained overnight. The next morning, a police officer inquired where he had been drinking the previous night. Deiryu replied that he had been at the house of Yoshida, the police station's *kendo* teacher. 'Last night when you were asked, you said you didn't know where you had been drinking. Why didn't you say you had been at Yoshida's house?' Deiryu answered that he could not use a friend's name to help him resolve his own misconduct, since that would be a dishonorable act. He then left the police station. When Yoshida arrived at work later that morning, the story of a drunken monk at the teacher's house was circulating. When he inquired more fully he was told the whole story, and thus came to understand Deiryu's personality. (*Deiryu Iho*, pp. 169-170)

Zen Buddhism has a long and deep connection with tea, and Deiryu himself often wrote calligraphy on tea bowls and cups. His thoughts on the relationship between Zen and tea are reflected in his answer to a question by a lay follower of Nantenbo, Soshin Omori, whose father was the seventh-generation head of the Tamagawa Enshu-ryu (related to the Enshu Tea School). As Soshin later recalled:

I had not understood clearly the difference between Lao-tzu and Zen, so I asked Deiryu about it. He said simply: 'Lao-tzu has no *ho* (inner law or structure)'. He meant that there is inner law in Zen but not in Taoism. After that, I began to pay attention to the inner law... Lao-tzu conveys a teaching which people can read and think about. On the other hand, Zen is a realization, an experience... In this sense, there is also *ho* in tea. Tea is not a thought. It places the utmost importance on experience and practice. I came to understand that this is why tea and Zen are considered to be one thing. (*ibid.* pp. 152-55)



For a set of five tea cups dated spring, 1944, Deiryu not only brushed characters on the cups in blue glaze, but also inscribed in bold calligraphy the wooden box in which the cups are kept (Figure 5). The inscriptions on

Figure 5 the cups read: 'Snow, moon, flowers'; 'Old pine, cloud leisure'; 'Southern mountain longevity'; 'Pine waves' and 'Eight-faceted crystal'. On the sides of the box, Deiryu wrote: 'Green mountains do not move, white clouds go and come.'

The four characters on one of the cups can also be seen inscribed within the *enso* ('Zen circle') in Figure 6. Here Deiryu has written the words, 'Old pine, cloud leisure', in bold calligraphy within a circle of gray ink punctuated by a few patches of 'flying white'. The wash of gray ink gives the *enso* a sense of radiance, which is enhanced by the sliver of darker ink along the left outer edge of the single brushstroke describing the circle.



Figure 6

In the small calligraphy scroll shown in Figure 7, Deiryu has written a single line of characters followed by the simple image of a horse viewed from the rear. The calligraphy says:



Figure 7

The myriad concerns of man
Are like old man Saio's [horse].

This is a reference to an ancient Chinese tale that Nantenbo had often utilized in his own paintings, suggesting that worldly gains and losses are meaningless. According to the story, old man Saio's horse runs away, but the old man is untroubled, suggesting that eventually something good might come of it. A few months later, the horse returns, bringing with it a beautiful stallion, but Saio does not rejoice. Soon afterwards, the old man's son falls from the horse and breaks his leg. Again Saio simply accepts what has happened. Because of his lame leg, the son cannot be conscripted into the

army. Saio's wisdom is revealed as the sons of his neighbors fail to return from the war.

Deiryu is not merely enhancing or illustrating the inscription by adding the image of the horse; rather, the image had been used as a substitute for the word 'horse', establishing a unique relationship between text and image. In East Asian art this is particularly appropriate, since many Japanese and Chinese characters were originally derived from pictographs. Deiryu has cleverly placed the horse at the end of the line of calligraphy, thus creating a continuous flow and making no distinction between word and image.

Like many Zen masters at the end of World War II, Deiryu worked tirelessly to help rebuild the country. At the same time, however, his health began to decline, exacerbated by work, his drinking and his already frail condition. His brothers had lost everything during the war, and Deiryu attempted to assist them as well. He became unable to travel, but Isamu Yoshii recalled that despite his illness, 'he would walk up thirty stone steps to sit in a cottage with a southern exposure. With the *shoji* [paper screens], it was always warm on an autumn day. He would keep the *hibachi* [charcoal brazier] burning so steam could rise. Even when he was resting, his face revealed the power to both scold and laugh'. On 24 April 1949, Deiryu himself wrote a poem in which he described the joys of this hermitage, the Suigetsu-an, and included mention of the stone steps:

'On the Anniversary of Repairing the Stone Wall at Suigetsu-an'

Blue pines and green bamboo shade my window,
Flowers smile; warblers sing by my hermitage.
As I climb the stone steps, I see the strength of
cedars;
At the pure cool mountaintop, Buddha is bright and
vivid.

(*Deiryukutsu Goroku*, p.96)

In 1953, Deiryu began planning a meeting to commemorate the anniversary of Kozuki death, but his plans had to be abandoned as his health declined. He wrote a final poem:

'Foolish Man's Dream'

**To explain the dream within a dream is a fool's dream.
My experiences have come and gone for 59 years.
While poisoned blood flows and flows
like a rain of ripe plum juice,
Trees return to vivid blues and greens.
(ibid., p. 97)**

Ironically, at some point in his life, Deiryu created a work in which he boldly wrote the character for 'dream', allowing it to fill the composition, and adding nothing else except his signature and seals (Figure 8). The manner in which the brushstrokes dance dramatically over the paper reveals the strength and spontaneity for which Zen calligraphy is noted. However, within the powerful directness of the calligraphic gesture there remains a certain mystery.



Figure 8

As his health worsened, Deiryu was moved to a hospital in Toneyama. One of the last monks to enter Empuku-ji under Deiryu described his visit to his teacher: 'When I learned from the head monk that [Deiryu] had entered the Toneyama hospital, I inquired and visited him. He smiled a big smile and said: "Come often. It is unfortunate that I cannot give you tonsure; if you and I had only met a year earlier." To me this is extremely regrettable'. (Deiryu Iho, pp. 120-21)

The master died on 2 February 1954. One of Deiryu's attending doctors, Kazue Yamanaka, recalled: 'After the Roshi had died, Dr. Watanabe [Deiryu's friend] wanted to have his body autopsied, but was not sure if this would be prevented on religious grounds. However, we found that Roshi had left a short note that said: "Submit my body to an autopsy and cremate it." It moved us, and we were very grateful to him.' (ibid., p 168)

Despite his seventeen-year tenure at Empuku-ji, Deiryu probably never reached his ultimate potential as a Zen master. Aware of Deiryu's frail health, Nantenbo had once told him: 'You should live to fifty, or sixty, but seventy or eighty is full of bloom'. (ibid., p.63) Nonetheless, Deiryu protected and fostered the tradition of monastic Zen training and practice in Japan, making sure that the efforts, which had been

made by Nantenbo at the turn of the century, were not in vain. In his painting and calligraphy, Deiryu displayed the humor, strength and inner vision that made him one of the outstanding monk-artists of the twentieth century.

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