

## TAKUAN Sōhō 沢庵宗彭 (1573–1645)

Beginning as a nine-year-old novice monk of poor farmer-warrior origins, by the age of thirty-six Takuan Sōhō had risen to become abbot of Daitoku-ji, the imperial Rinzai Zen monastic complex in Kyoto. Takuan's Zen was extraordinarily wide-reaching. It covered monastic theory and practice (extensive literary 'kōan' practice, dharma talks, popular sermons, temple regulations), literature (poetry, literary criticism, travel diaries, essays, extensive correspondence), martial and cultural arts (swordsmanship, tea ceremony, calligraphy, ink-wash painting, Nō drama criticism), ethics (Daoist and Confucian), Chinese science (metaphysical reflections on the *Book of Changes*), and Chinese folk medicine and hygiene.

Takuan's reputation as a Buddhist thinker is reflected in the following selection, an appeal to the Japanese art of swordsmanship to explain Zen awakening, based on a series of letters written to his patron, the master sword instructor of the Tokugawa Shōgun, Yagyū Munenori. In Indian Buddhism, change and impermanence were seen as something negative that needed to be transformed into a state of pure, empty enlightenment. In China, where change was seen as the metaphysical ground of the Dao, Buddhist practice needed to accommodate to the transforming flow of reality as it was recognized by all Chinese religious traditions. Takuan combines the ancient Daoist idea of "effortless action" with Buddhist notions of nonduality, nonattachment, and the practice of mindfulness, and traditional Japanese values of simplicity, emotive-intuitive awareness, and spiritual discovery through physical activity.

Dennis E. Lishka [DEL]

### UNDISTURBED WISDOM

TAKUAN Sōhō 1642, 1–9, 16–23

#### *Suffering as Being Stuck in Ignorance*

*Ignorance* is a word that means lack of awareness; it refers to delusion. *Being stuck* is an expression that suggests resting or stopping. There are fifty-two stages to the 'bodhisattva' practice in the teachings of the buddhas. Among these fifty-two stages, any place where the 'mind' stops on anything is called *getting stuck*. It means *to stop*, and anytime there is a stopping on any object whatsoever, this is "the mind getting stuck on an object."

Let me explain this in terms of your practice of swordsmanship. If you get just a single glimpse of a slashing sword coming at you, and if your mind thinks of making contact with that sword, your mind is stuck on that sword coming at

you just at the point where you saw it. You will lose your freedom of movement and your opponent will slice into you. This is how the mind gets stuck.

Seeing a sword striking means that you see it—but your mind does not have to stop on it. Meet the rhythm of a sword coming at you—but you don't have to think about striking it. If no deliberation and no discrimination remains, your mind will not stop for even an instant, whether you see a swinging sword or not. By taking advantage of exactly this situation, you can catch the sword coming at you. The sword that is supposed to cut you down will be ripped away to your side; instead, it will be your sword that cuts into your opponent.

In the Zen schools this is known as “just grabbing the spear and stabbing the person back.” A spear is also a weapon. This phrase refers to wrenching away the sword held by the other individual and cutting into this opponent at the same time. This is what you call the “no-sword” in your martial tradition.

If your mind stops for even an instant on the slashing coming at you, or on the attack coming from you, or on the person slashing, or on the sword being swung or on the range or the rhythm of these actions, your own momentum will be lost completely. This means that you can be cut down. If you set your “self” up against an opponent, your mind will be captured by that opponent. And, do not fix your mind on your “self” either. Fixing your mind in tension on your “self” is what people do when they start training—this happens when one has a beginner's mind.

Your mind can be captured by a sword. If you fix your mind this way for just one moment, your mind will be captured for that one moment. If you position your mind on your sword, your mind will be captured by your own sword. If your mind stops within any of these situations, you will be nothing but a corpse. No doubt you can recall such experiences. We also speak of this in the Buddha's teachings about reality—where this stopping of the mind is known as “delusion.” That's why I have called this “suffering as being stuck in ignorance.”...

### *The Undisturbed Wisdom of All the Buddhas*

We can speak of the undisturbed wisdom of all the buddhas. *Undisturbed* is a word that means *not shifting at all* or *not being interrupted*. It does not suggest being totally unalive or immobile like stone or wood. A mind that does not stop in the slightest degree as it moves any way it wants to—forward, to the left, to the right, or in any of the directions—is known as “undisturbed wisdom.”

For instance, even though ten men come at you, each with a slashing sword, if you ward off one sword after another, your mind does not have to get stuck on any lingering traces. If you simply abandon one trace and then abandon another trace, none of your movements toward ten men will be wasted. The mind moves

ten times against ten men, but it does not get stuck on even one person, so your movements in response to one opponent after another won't be lost. If, on the other hand, your mind does come to stop on any one person in front of you, even though you are able to ward off that person's striking sword, you may not be able to escape harm if there are two or more individuals.

Statues and paintings of 'Kannon', the bodhisattva of compassion, have one thousand arms with hands—each holding an object. If this bodhisattva's mind were to stop on the specific hand that holds a bow, all the other nine hundred and ninety-nine hands would be useless. It is because the bodhisattva's mind does not stop at any single position that all of its hands are useful. How can a bodhisattva of compassion possess a thousand arms on a single body? This form was created to show people how all of a thousand arms on a single body could be used at the same time—if undisturbed wisdom is realized.

Suppose, for example, that you're facing a solitary tree. If you see only one red leaf on it, your eyes will not see the other leaves. If your mind gets caught by any single leaf, all the other leaves are out of sight. If your mind does not stop on any one leaf, thousands of leaves are visible. Someone who achieves this mind is exactly like the thousand eyes and thousand arms of Kannon.

#### *Not Even a Hair In-Between*

There is an expression, "not even a hair in-between". I can offer an example in your martial practice. *Between* refers to the space lying between two objects when one is put on top of another so that there is not even enough of an opening for a single hair to fit. For example, in clapping, the instant that one hand hits the other, the sound "crack!" comes out. There is no space in which to stick a single hair in the instant that the sound comes out as the hands are clapped. This is not a question of clapping one's hands, then thinking about sound, and finally the sound coming out. The hands clap and just like that—the sound appears.

If your mind is captured by the sword of your opponent as it strikes, there will be a space—an interval—and your timing will be lost. If not even a single hair can be slipped into the interval between your opponent's slashing sword and one's own movement, your opponent's sword will be your sword.

This state of mind can also occur in the practice of dialogue between Zen master and disciple. It is detrimental in the practices of the buddhas for the mind to linger by stopping on an object. That's why the mind stopping is technically called *defilement*. Moving like a ball drifting down a swiftly flowing stream, the mind that rapidly floats along without stopping even a little is priceless.

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*The Mind of Some-mind, the Mind of No-mind*

If there are any thoughts in your mind, even though you're listening to someone else speaking, you don't really hear because your mind has stopped on a thought. Your mind resides in this thought; it is not on course because it is leaning off to one side. Even though you are listening directly to something, you won't hear it because your mind is leaning to one side; even though you are looking right at something, you won't see it. It's because there is something in your mind—a thought is there. If you can get rid of whatever is there, this is the "mind of no-mind"; it will act whenever you need it exactly how you need it. A mind that is thinking about getting rid of whatever's there is still a mind with something in it. If you do not think, it will go away by itself and will naturally become 'no-mind'.

If your mind is continually empty of things, eventually it will get to this level by itself. If you try to do this suddenly, there will be no progress. An old poem says:

Thinking about not thinking  
is thinking of something,  
I can't even think of  
thinking at all.

*Throwing a Round Gourd into the Water—Push it Down, Yet it Never Stops Spinning*

"Pushing down a round gourd" is shoving it down with one's hands. If you throw a gourd in the water and press it down, it will probably shoot off to the side. Whatever happens, it will never stop in a single position. The mind of an accomplished person does not stop upon anything, even in the slightest. It is like a gourd pressed down into the water.

*Give Rise to the Mind without Its Stopping Anywhere*

...Whatever you are doing, if your mind comes up with a thought of "I'll do this," your mind stops upon this doing. So you have to develop a mind that stops nowhere. While a mind must arise to move your hands, if a mind arises that could stop on your moving hands but does not stop during such action—this points to the masters of many Zen arts. A mind full of attachments arises from a mind stopped, as does 'karma' and rebirth. The mind stopped describes the very obstacles of living and dying.

When you look at flowers and autumn leaves turning, your mind arises looking at flowers and autumn leaves turning—but you need to achieve "not stopping" during this action. There is the poem of the Tendai monk Jien:

A flower giving fragrance at the brushwood door,  
 Doing so no matter what happens;  
 But I remain staring at it—  
 A scene from this bitter world.

The flower is fragrant with 'no-mind', but the "self" stops its mind upon the flower and one's mind tragically becomes tainted with this. Not stopping the mind upon a single position is the ultimate achievement with any kind of seeing or any kind of hearing.

The feudal term *allegiance* really means "one's master alone and unrivaled." It is settling the mind upon a single entity and not moving it to any other. When unsheathing one's sword to strike, it is essential that one's mind does not veer away to the act of slashing. Particularly when receiving the commands of one's master, this term *allegiance* is crucial.

The term *allegiance* is also found in Buddhism. When a chime is struck three times during Zen practice, one's hands are brought together in allegiance to the 'buddha-nature'. First of all, "Buddha" is chanted with this mind of allegiance to "one's master alone and unrivaled"—this is the same as a singular mind undisturbed. Yet this mind of allegiance is not very advanced Buddhist practice. It is a beginner's stage of learning about how to control the "self" and to focus the mind so that it is no longer confused. It takes months and years of such practice to enable one's mind to move in any direction to function without obstruction. Thus "giving rise to the mind without its stopping anywhere" is precisely this accomplishment.

#### *Interruption Between Past and Future*

There is what is called an "interruption between past and future." It is dangerous not to completely abandon one's awareness of the past and to retain any traces in mind of the immediate present. So this refers to cutting out and getting rid of any interval between past and present. This also means obliterating any disruption between past and future. It indicates not stopping the mind.

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