

World of the Buddha

An Introduction to Buddhist Literature

Edited with Introduction and Commentaries by
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Chapter XXIV

ZEN POEMS

What follows is a selection of Zen Buddhist poems written by Japanese masters from the thirteenth century to the present. The poems are so suggestive in themselves that explication is rarely necessary; furthermore, the poets rarely theorized about the poems they would write from time to time, and for good reason: to them poetry was not, as so often in the West, an art to be cultivated but a means by which an attempt at the nearly inexpressible could be made. Though certain of the poems are called *satori* (enlightenment) and others death poems, in a sense all Zen poetry deals with momentous experience. There are, in other words, no finger exercises, and though some of the poems may seem comparatively light, there is not one that is not totally in earnest, fully inspired. Indeed when you consider the Zennist's traditional goal, the all-or-nothing quality of his striving after illumination, this is scarcely to be wondered at. The Zen state of mind has been described as "one in which the individual identifies with an object without any sense of restraint," as in this poem by Bunan:

The moon's the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I've become the thingness
Of all the things I see!

Zen poetry is highly symbolic, and the moon here is a common symbol. It should be remembered, in relation to the use of such symbols, that Zen is a Mahayana school, and that the Zennist searches, always within himself, for the in-

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divisible moon reflected not only on the sea but on each dew drop. To discover this, the Dharmakaya, in all things is for the Zennist to discover his own Buddha-nature. Perhaps most Zen poems, whether designated as such or not, are satori poems, which are composed immediately after an awakening and are presented to a master for approval. Daito's poem is typical:

At last I've broken Unmon's barrier!
There's exit everywhere—east, west; north, south.
In at morning, out at evening; neither host nor guest.
My every step stirs up a little breeze.

And here is a satori poem by Eichu:

My eyes eavesdrop on their lashes!
I'm finished with the ordinary!
What use has halter, bridle
To one who's shaken off contrivance?

Traditionally death poems are written or dictated by Zen-nists right before death. The author looks back on his life and, in a few highly compressed lines, expresses his state of mind at the inevitable hour. The following are among the best known:

Fumon

Magnificent! Magnificent!
No-one knows the final word.
The ocean bed's aflame,
Out of the void leap wooden lambs.

Kukoku

Riding backwards this wooden horse,
I'm about to gallop through the void.
Would you seek to trace me?
Ha! Try catching the tempest in a net.

Zen Poems

Zekkai

The void has collapsed upon the earth,
Stars, burning, shoot across Iron Mountain.
Turning a somersault, I brush past.

The void, mentioned in all three of these death poems, is the great Penetralium of Zen. The mind, it is thought, is a void in which objects are stripped of their objectivity and reduced to their essence. In the death poem which follows, by Bokuo, there is an important Zen symbol, the ox, which here serves as an object of discipline:

For seventy-two years
I've kept the ox well under.
Today, the plum in bloom again,
I let him wander in the snow.

Bokuo, in his calm acceptance of death, proves himself a true Zen-man. Though satori and death figure heavily in Zen poetry, most of the poems deal with nature and man's place in it. Simply put, the Buddha-nature is by no means peculiar to man. It is discoverable in all that exists, animate or inanimate. Perhaps in this poem by Ryokan the Zen spirit is perfectly caught:

Without a jot of ambition left
I let my nature flow where it will.
There are ten days of rice in my bag
And, by the hearth, a bundle of firewood.
Who prattles of illusion or nirvana?
Forgetting the equal dusts of name and fortune,
Listening to the night rain on the roof of my hut,
I sit at ease, both legs stretched out.

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DOGEN (1200-1253, Soto)

The Western Patriarch's doctrine is transplanted!
I fish by moonlight, till on cloudy days.
Clean, clean! Not a worldly mote falls with the snow
As, cross-legged in this mountain hut, I sit the evening
through.

DOGEN, WAKA

Coming, going, the waterfowl
Leaves not a trace,
Nor does it need a guide.

A waka on "The mind must operate without abiding anywhere" (from the *Diamond Sutra*).

DOGEN

This slowly drifting cloud is pitiful;
What dreamwalkers men become.
Awakened, I hear the one true thing—
Black rain on the roof of Fukakusa Temple.

MUSO (1275-1351, Rinzai)

Many times the mountains have turned from green to yellow—
So much for the capricious earth!
Dust in your eyes, the triple world is narrow;
Nothing on the mind, your chair is wide enough.

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MUSO, SATORI POEM

Vainly I dug for a perfect sky,
Piling a barrier all around.
Then one black night, lifting a heavy
Tile, I crushed the skeletal void!

DAITO (1282-1337, Rinzai), DEATH POEM

To slice through Buddhas, Patriarchs
I grip my polished sword.
One glance at my mastery,
The void bites its tusks!

GETSUDO (1285-1361, Rinzai), SATORI POEM

I moved across the Dharma-nature,
The earth was buoyant, marvelous.
That very night, whipping its iron horse,
The void galloped into Cloud Street.

DAICHI (1290-1366, Soto)

Thoughts arise endlessly,
There's a span to every life.
One hundred years, thirty-six thousand days:
The spring through, the butterfly dreams.

JAKUSHITSU (1290-1367, Rinzai)

Refreshing, the wind against the waterfall
As the moon hangs, a lantern, on the peak
And the bamboo window glows. In old age mountains
Are more beautiful than ever. My resolve:
That these bones be purified by rocks.

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CHIKUSEN (1292-1348, Soto)

He's part of all, yet all's transcended;
Solely for convenience he's known as master.
Who dares say he's found him?
In this rackety town I train disciples.

BETSUGEN (1294-1364, Rinzai)

All night long I think of life's labyrinth—
Impossible to visit the tenants of Hades.
The authoritarian attempt to palm a horse off as deer
Was laughable. As was the thrust at
The charmed life of the dragon. Contemptible!
It's in the dark that eyes probe earth and heaven,
In dream that the tormented seek present, past.
Enough! The mountain moon fills the window.
The lonely fall through, the garden rang with cricket song.

The authoritarian attempt . . . refers to the Chinese classic *Shiki*, in which Choko presents a horse to the Emperor, claiming it is a deer. The Emperor's courtiers, obsequious to Choko, do not dispute his claim.

As was the thrust at . . . refers to Soshi (Chuantzu): Shu spent three years acquiring the skill to kill dragons, but of course this did him no good.

JUO (1296-1380, Rinzai)

Beyond the snatch of time, my daily life.
I scorn the State, unhitch the universe.
Denying cause and effect, like the noon sky,
My up-down career: Buddhas nor Patriarchs can convey it.

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SHUTAKU (1308-1388, Rinzai)

For all these years, my certain Zen:
Neither I nor the world exist.
The sutras neat within the box,
My cane hooked upon the wall,
I lie at peace in moonlight
Or, hearing water plashing on the rock,
Sit up: none can purchase pleasure such as this:
Spangled across the step-moss, a million coins!

Mind set free in the Dharma-realm,
I sit at the moon-filled window
Watching the mountains with my ears,
Hearing the stream with open eyes.
Each molecule preaches perfect law,
Each moment chants true sutra:
The most fleeting thought is timeless,
A single hair's enough to stir the sea.

RYUSHU (1308-1388, Rinzai)

Why bother with the world?
Let others go gray, bustling east, west.
In this mountain temple, lying half-in,
Half-out, I'm removed from joy and sorrow.

SHUNOKU (1311-1388, Rinzai)

After the spring song, "Vast emptiness, no holiness,"
Comes the song of snow-wind along the Yangtze River.
Late at night I too play the noteless flute of Shorin,
Piercing the mountains with its sound, the river.

Vast emptiness, no holiness. Bodhidharma's reply to the question put by Butel, Emperor of Ryo, "What is the primary principle of Buddhism?" (Cf. the first koan of *Hekiganroku*.)

Shorin. Name of the temple where Bodhidharma, on finding that Butel was not a true Zennist, sat in Zen for nine years. To reach the temple, he had to cross the Yangtze River.

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TESSHU (14th century, Rinzai)

How heal the phantom body of its phantom ill,
Which started in the womb?
Unless you pluck a medicine from the Bodhi-tree,
The sense of karma will destroy you.

TSUGEN (1322-1391, Soto)

Not a mote in the light above,
Soul itself cannot offer such a view.
Though dawn's not come, the cock is calling:
The phoenix, flower in beak, welcomes spring.

GUCHU (1323-1409, Rinzai)

Men without rank, excrement spatulas,
Come together, perfuming earth and heaven.
How well they get along in temple calm
As, minds empty, they reach for light.

Excrement spatulas. To a monk's question, "What is the Buddha?", Unmon replied, "An excrement spatula." (Cf. the twenty-first koan of *Mumonkan*.)

MUMON (1323-1390, Rinzai)

Life: a cloud crossing the peak.
Death: the moon sailing.
Oh just once admit the truth
Of noumenon, phenomenon,
And you're a donkey-tying pole!

A donkey-tying pole. Often used in Zen writing, meaning a trifle.

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GIDO (1325-1388, Rinzai): *INSCRIPTION
OVER HIS DOOR*

He who holds that nothingness
Is formless, flowers are visions,
Let him enter boldly!

REIZAN (一四一〇-1411, Rinzai)

The myriad differences resolved by sitting, all doors opened.
In this still place I follow my nature, be what it may.
From the one hundred flowers I wander freely,
The soaring cliff—my hall of meditation
(With the moon emerged, my mind is motionless).
Sitting on this frosty seat, no further dream of fame.
The forest, the mountain follow their ancient ways,
And through the long spring day, not even the shadow of a
bird.

MYOYU (1333-1393, Soto), *SATORI POEM*

Defying the power of speech, the Law Commission on Mount
Vulture!
Kasyapa's smile told the beyond-telling.
What's there to reveal in that perfect all-suchness?
Look up! the moon-mind glows unsmirched.

HAKUGAI (1343-1414, Rinzai), *SATORI POEM*

Last year in a lovely temple in Hirosawa,
This year among the rocks of Nikko,
All's the same to me:
Clapping hands, the peaks roar at the blue!

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NANEI (1363-1438, Rinzai)

Splitting the void in half,
Making smithereens of earth,
I watch inching toward
The river, the cloud-drawn moon.

KODO (1370-1433, Rinzai)

Serving the Shogun in the capital,
Stained by worldly dust, I found no peace.
Now, straw hat pulled down, I follow the river:
How fresh the sight of gulls across the sand!

IKKYU (1394-1481, Rinzai)

After ten years in the red-light district,
How solitary a spell in the mountains.
I can see clouds a thousand miles away,
Hear ancient music in the pines.

VOID IN FORM

When, just as they are,
White dewdrops gather
On scarlet maple leaves,
Regard the scarlet beads!

A waka on "Void in Form" (from *The Heart Sutra*).

FORM IN VOID

The tree is stripped,
All color, fragrance gone,
Yet already on the bough,
Uncaring spring!

A waka on "Form in Void" (from *The Heart Sutra*).

Zen Poems

GENKO (-1505, Soto)

Unaware of illusion or enlightenment,
From this stone I watch the mountains, hear the stream.
A three-day rain has cleansed the earth,
A roar of thunder split the sky.
Ever serene are linked phenomena,
And though the mind's alert, it's but an ash heap.
Chilly, bleak as the dusk I move through,
I return, a basket brimmed with peaches on my arm.

SAISHO (-1506, Rinzai): *ON JOSHU'S
NOTHINGNESS*

Earth, mountains, rivers--hidden in this nothingness.
In this nothingness--earth, mountains, rivers revealed.
Spring flowers, winter snows:
There's no being nor non-being, nor denial itself.

YUISHUN (-1544, Soto), *SATORI POEM*

Why, it's but the motion of eyes and brows!
And here I've been seeking it far and wide.
Awakened at last, I find the moon
Above the pines, the river surging high.

TAKUAN (1573-1645, Rinzai), *WAKA*

Though night after night
The moon is stream-reflected,
Try to find where it has touched,
Point even to a shadow.

A waka on "The willow is green, the rose is red."

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GUDO (1579-1661, Rinzai)

It's not nature that upholds utility.
Look! even the rootless tree is swelled
With bloom, not red nor white, but lovely all the same.
How many can boast so fine a springtide?

KARASUMARU-MITSUHIRO (1579-1638, Rinzai)

Beware of gnawing the ideogram of nothingness:
Your teeth will crack. Swallow it whole, and you've a treasure
Beyond the hope of Buddha and the Mind. The east breeze
Fondles the horse's ears: how sweet the smell of plum.

UNGO (1580-1659, Rinzai)

Whirled by the three passions, one's eyes go blind;
Closed to the world of things, they see again.
In this way I live: straw-hatted, staff in hand,
I move illimitably, through earth, through heaven.

DAIGU (1584-1669, Rinzai)

Here none think of wealth or fame,
All talk of right and wrong is quelled:
In autumn I rake the leaf-banked stream,
In spring attend the nightingale.

Who dares approach the lion's
Mountain cave? Cold, robust,
A Zen-man through and through,
I let the spring breeze enter at the gate.

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MANAN (1591-1654, Soto)

Unfettered at last, a traveling monk,
I pass the old Zen barrier.
Mine is a traceless stream-and-cloud life.
Of those mountains, which shall be my home?

FUGAI (17th century, Soto)

Only the Zen-man knows tranquillity:
The world-consuming flame can't reach this valley.
Under a breezy limb, the windows of
The flesh shut firm, I dream, wake, dream.

BUNAN (1602-1676, Rinzai), WAKA

When you're both alive and dead,
Thoroughly dead to yourself,
How superb
The smallest pleasure!

MANZAN (1635-1714, Rinzai)

One minute of sitting, one inch of Buddha.
Like lightning all thoughts come and pass.
Just once look into your mind-depths:
Nothing else has ever been.

TOKUO (1649-1709, Rinzai)

The town's aflame with summer heat,
But Mount Koma is steeped in snow.
Such is a Zen-man's daily life—
The lotus survives all earthly fire.

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HAKUIN (1685-1768, Rinzaï)

Past, present, future: unattainable,
Yet clear as the moteless sky.
Late at night the stool's cold as iron,
But the moonlit window smells of plum.

•

Priceless is one's incantation,
Turning a red-hot iron ball to butter oil.
Heaven? Purgatory? Hell?
Snowflakes fallen on the hearth fire.

•

How lacking in permanence the minds of the sentient—
They are the consummate nirvana of all Buddhas.
A wooden hen, egg in mouth, straddles the coffin.
An earthenware horse breaks like wind for satori-land.

•

You no sooner attain the great void
Than body and mind are lost together.
Heaven and Hell—a straw.
The Buddha-realm, Pandemonium—shambles.
Listen: a nightingale strains her voice, serenading the snow.
Look, a tortoise wearing a sword climbs the lampstand.
Should you desire the great tranquillity,
Prepare to sweat white beads.

SFENGAI (1750-1837, Rinzaï): ON BASHO'S "FROG"

Under the cloudy cliff, near the temple door,
Between dusky spring plants on the pond,
A frog jumps in the water, plopl
Startled, the poet drops his brush.

Basho's haiku on the frog is one of the most famous ever written. Here is Harold G. Henderson's translation (*An Introduction to Haiku*, Doubleday Anchor):

Old pond—
and a frog-jump-in
water-sound.

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KOSEN (1808-1893, Rinzai), SATORI POEM

A blind horse trotting up an icy ledge—
Such is the poet. Once disburdened
Of those frog-in-the-well illusions,
The sutra-store's a lamp against the sun.

TANZAN (1819-1892, Soto)

Madness, the way they gallop off to foreign shores!
Turning to the One Mind, I find my Buddhahood,
Above self and others, beyond coming and going.
This will remain when all else is gone.

KANDO (1825-1904, Rinzai)

It's as if our heads were on fire, the way
We apply ourselves to perfection of That.
The future but a twinkle, beat yourself,
Persist: the greatest effort's not enough.

SHINKICHI TAKAHASHI (1901- , Rinzai)

THE POSITION OF THE SPARROW

The sparrow has cut the day in half:
Afternoons—yesterday's, the day after tomorrow's—
Layer the white wall.
Those of last year, and next year's too,
Are dyed into the wall—see them?—
And should the wall come down,
Why, those afternoons will remain,
Glimmering, just as they are, through time.

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(That was a colorless realm where,
Nevertheless, most any color could well up.)

Just as the swan becomes a crow,
So everything improves—everything:
No evil *can* persist, and as to things,
Why, nothing is unchangeable.
The squirrel, for instance, is on the tray,
Buffalos lumber through African brush,
The snail wends along the wall,
Leaving a silver trail.
The sparrow's bill grips a pomegranate seed:
Just anything can resemble a lens, or a squirrel.

Because the whole is part, there's not a whole,
Anywhere, that is not part.
And all those happenings a billion years ago,
Are happening now, all around us: time.
Indeed this morning the sparrow hopped about
In that nebulous whirlpool
A million light years hence.

And since the morning is void,
Anything can be. Since mornings
A billion years from now are nothingness,
We can behold them.
The sparrow stirs,
The universe moves slightly.

THE PEACH

A little girl under a peach tree,
Whose blossoms fall into the entrails
Of the earth.

There you stand, but a mountain may be there
Instead; it is not unlikely that the earth
May be yourself.

You step against a plate of iron and half
Your face is turned to iron. I will smash
Flesh and bone

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And suck the cracked peach. She went up the mountain
To hide her breasts in the snowy ravine.
Women's legs

Are more or less alike. The leaves of the peach tree
Stretch across the sea to the end of
The continent.

The sea was at the little girl's beck and call.
I will cross the sea like a hairy
Caterpillar

And catch the odor of your body.

HORSE

Young girls bloom like flowers.
Unharnessed, a horse trots
Round its driver who
Grasps it by a rope.

Far off a horse is going round and round
In a square plot.

Not miserable, not cheerful either,
The bay horse is prancing,
Shaking its head, throwing up its legs
By turn: it is not running.

But there are no spectators
In what looks like an amphitheater.

White cherry blossoms fall like snowflakes
In the wind. All at once,
Houses, people vanish, into silence.
Nothing moves. Streetcars, buses, are held back
Silently. Quiet, everything.
All visible things become this nothingness.

The horse's bones—beautiful in their gray sheen.

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A horse is going round and round,
Dancing now, with *joie de vivre*,
Under the cliff of death.

QUAILS

It is the grass that moves, not the quails.
Weary of embraces, she thought of
Committing her body to the flame.

When I shut my eyes, I hear far and wide
The air of the Ice Age stirring.
When I open them, a rocket passes over a meteor.

A quail's egg is complete in itself,
Leaving not room enough for a dagger's point.
All the phenomena in the universe: myself.

Quails are supported by the universe
(I wonder if that means subsisting by God).
A quail has seized God by the neck

With its black bill, because there is no
God greater than a quail.
(Peter, Christ, Judas: a quail.)

A quail's egg: idle philosophy in solution.
(There is no wife better than a quail.)
I dropped a quail's egg into a cup for buckwheat noodles,

And made havoc of the Democratic Constitution.
Split chopsticks stuck in the back, a quail husband
Will deliver dishes on a bicycle, anywhere.

The light yellow legs go up the hill of Golgotha.
Those quails who stood on the rock, became the rock!
The nightfall is quiet, but inside the congealed exuviae

Numberless insects zigzag, on parade.

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MASCOT

Somebody is breathing inside me—
Birds, the very earth.

The ocean's in my chest. Walking,
I always throw myself down.

Newssheets, a puppy were dancing in the wind—
Trucks rushed by,

Empty trucks stout enough to carry the earth
On their puncture-proof tires.

The instant I raised my hand to wave,
I was nowhere.

The puppy was sprawled out on its belly,
Run over—again, again.

You're a badger, I'll bet, posing as a mascot
With that moonlit tie

And, sticking from your pocket, night's flower.

STITCHES

My wife is always knitting, knitting:
Not that I watch her,
Not that I know what she thinks.

(Awake till dawn
I drowned in your eyes—
I must be dead:
Perhaps it's the mind that stirs.)

With that bamboo needle
She knits all space, piece by piece,
Hastily hauling time in.

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Brass-cold, exhausted,
She drops into bed and,
Breathing calmly, falls asleep.

Her dream must be deepening,
Her knitting coming loose.

FISH

I hold a newspaper, reading.
Suddenly my hands become cow ears,
Then turn into Pusan, the South Korean port.

Lying on a mat
Spread on the bankside stones,
I fell asleep.
But a willow leaf, breeze-stirred,
Brushed my ear.
I remained just as I was,
Near the murmurous water.

When young there was a girl
Who became a fish for me.
Whenever I wanted fish
Broiled in salt, I'd summon her.
She'd get down on her stomach
To be sun-cooked on the stones.
And she was always ready!

Alas, she no longer comes to me.
An old benighted drake,
I hobble homeward.
But look, my drake feet become horse hoofs!
Now they drop off
And, stretching marvelously,
Become the tracks of the Tokaido Railway Line.