

The Faltering Brush

*Material, Sensory Trace, and Nonduality in
Chan/Zen Buddhist Death Verse Calligraphies*

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Death is always only an image. Michael Camille, *Master of Death*

Death and poetry share a fertile bond.¹ Laments and elegies are composed for the deceased. Innumerable poems contemplate death. There are also poetries of imminent demise, often referred to as death or departing verses. Death verses make up a literary genre that lives in the leave-taking words of the dying. Such verses depend on a death distinguished by the availability of time as well as the cognitive and sensory capacity in which poetry, separate from nonverbal outcry, remains possible. Sudden death without warning—from a stroke that obliterates mental activity, a car that runs a red light and crushes life, and other such causes—yields little in the way of departing verse, be it spoken or materialized in written form.

We find instructions for how to die correctly in many cultures and periods, including the tenth-century *Ōjōyōshū* (Collection on Essentials for Birth in the Pure Land) from the Japanese Buddhist tradition and the fifteenth-century Latin *Ars moriendi* (The Art of Dying).² Death poems too have a long history. We may also experience firsthand a dying family member or friend who pushes through pain, fear, or diminishing capacity to speak of what matters most before the arrival of death. We may find ourselves pulled into this moment of last words, listening as never before and stunned thereafter by the echoes. If written down, these final words may assume particular force as lasting material and auratic traces of the deceased writer.

For the dying, the composition of departing verse may be the most time-sensitive of poetic acts—the last chance for words that commune as poetry. In this sense, the verse represents a liminal moment in between the recognition of death's approach and death itself. As readers of a death verse written in the past, we may find ourselves imagining the place and circumstances of the author's approaching demise, perhaps years if not centuries before our time. We follow the words that were followed by their author's death. A death verse may also have a long afterlife—preserved, copied, dis-

seminated, and emulated—when it is believed to embody the teachings of the learned and saintly or to capture the essence of self, humanity, or the absolute. These are words, from among an individual's many speech acts across a lifetime, that may lead us beyond words.

Poets, we might venture, would seem especially inclined, if not required, to leave this world through parting verse, and death verses (Chinese *yijie*; Japanese *yuige*; “the *gāthā* [Sanskrit] left behind”) have also been an ancient and enduring part of the premortem protocol and collected memory of Buddhist dying processes (for Chinese and Japanese terms, please see the Concordance).³ To offer a recent example, we might note the poem composed by the Chan Master Sheng Yen (b. 1930) prior to his death of renal failure on February 3, 2009: “Busy with nothing, growing old. Within emptiness, weeping, laughing. Intrinsically, there is no ‘I.’ Life and death, thus cast aside.”⁴

Not all Buddhist monks and nuns prepare such verses, and indeed many are said to have “returned to the source” (C. *huanyuan*; J. *kangen*) without fanfare, utterance, or trace. This may have been the doctrinal ideal, but Buddhist chronicles frequently tell us that upon a master's death strange fragrances filled the air, mysterious lights appeared, flocks of cranes suddenly took wing, and other unusual multisensory events signaled that a “special death” had occurred.⁵ Premodern Chan/Zen Buddhist hagiographic texts such as *The Jingde Era Transmission of the Lamp* (C. *Jingde chuandeng lu*; 1004) are full of such stories.⁶ We read in them also that the master generally foretold the time of death, engaged his or her disciples in discourse, abandoned possessions, prepared body and costume, recited and/or wrote a final poem, and passed away in equanimity.⁷ Prior to the instant of extinction, therefore, the master established an “angle of repose” through actions, dialogs, objects, and miracles that seem, in hindsight, calibrated to self and community, local history and transhistorical dharma, and what we now call the “politics of death.”⁸ That a Chan/Zen master would compose poetry and participate in the culture of calligraphy should not surprise us, for the literary and visual arts were and remain fellow travelers of Chan/Zen masters within their teachings on emptiness (Skt. *śūnya*; C. *kong*; J. *kū*).⁹

That said, the preparation of death verses and their calligraphies is neither ubiquitous nor undifferentiated in the Chan/Zen tradition. Certain masters remained silent as death neared. Others admonished, when asked for a departing poem, that everything they had previously said and done constituted their death verse.¹⁰ Some engaged in final dialogs with disciples from which a death verse was harvested posthumously. The Song dynasty master Dahui Zhonggao (1089–1163), meanwhile, informed his disciples, “Without a verse, I couldn't die” and then, employing a time-honored Chan didactic strategy, wrote a death verse to caution against attaching to a master's death verse: “Birth is thus, death is thus. Verse or no verse, what's the fuss?”¹¹

That death verses are recorded in the Chan/Zen literature in such great number suggests that, as John Jorgensen puts it, “Language that has soteriological functions is

... ‘alive,’ [in contrast] to ‘dead’ language or words.”¹² Monastic codes, meanwhile, stipulate display of the death verse beside the master’s coffin.¹³ When the verse was compiled in a master’s collected sayings (C. *yulu*; J. *goroku*) or chronicle (C. *xingzhuang*; J. *gyōjō*), it spoke well beyond its moments of composition and inscription. The death verse of the Song dynasty master Wuzhun Shifan (1178–1249) was even engraved on wood shortly after his death and circulated thereafter to Japan in the form of rubbings—subsequent representations distinguished by particular materials and sensory-rich processes of carving and printing.¹⁴ In short, the departing poem and its calligraphic presence were important parts of the Chan/Zen “cult of the dying” and, thereafter, its “cult of the dead.”

What do such verses convey? Like the Buddha’s departing teachings (J. *ihō*) contained in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, a Chan/Zen master’s departing verse might be thought of as a final “ritual enactment and expression of awakened awareness” and a compassionate “teaching act” (J. *seppō*).¹⁵ In this sense, the master’s death verse is a prayer for the living that urges their realization of nonduality while revealing the master’s particular inflection (“house style,” J. *kafū*) of the dharma.¹⁶ Some masters wrote of death as a journey back to the original abode of emptiness; others urged disciples neither to resist what comes nor to cling to what was; some addressed the dispersal of the four great elements by wind and fire; for others there was no past, present, or future, and thus no farewell, only liberation—they were “footloose and fancy-free,” as one nun put it¹⁷—and there was no reason to grieve. Some verses urge us to grasp that both life and death are illusion (J. *genshō genmetsu*). As Huineng (638–713) put it to his disciples: “Just recognize your own fundamental minds and see your own fundamental natures, [which are] neither moving nor still, neither generated nor extinguished, neither going nor coming, neither correct nor false, neither abiding nor going.”¹⁸

Modern commentaries on Chan/Zen death verses often suggest that a verse is the unique, unmediated “expression in poetic form of the Zen master’s mental state just before death” that enables us to “imagine the Zen master’s final assertion of power over the conflicted final moments of life.”¹⁹ Focusing more on social performance than on psychological state, the historian Imaizumi Yoshio suggests that a death verse constitutes the words that are left behind *and* the trace of the ritual of leaving those words.²⁰ For Bernard Faure, meanwhile, the departing verse was “not simply intended to testify to the master’s enlightenment; it was *producing* it and contained, in the literal sense, its ‘essence.’”²¹

Death verses are therefore consequential verbal, social, and soteriological performances in Chan/Zen, and they are also significant visual and material presences as calligraphy, conveying the calligrapher’s touch, bodily movement, and vision as well as sensibility for the expressive practices of writing. In the weeks, days, or moments before death, a master might inscribe the final verse using a traditional writing brush and ink or, later in the tradition, a modern pen.

In modern commentary we repeatedly read that a master's death verse was written "immediately prior to death" (J. *shi no chokuzen*). Some verses were brushed prior to the day of death and maintain calligraphic norms as well as recognizable personal inflections found in an individual's prior writings. The master does not appear to "die on the page," as it were, in these examples. Thus there may have been different temporalities in which a master brushed a death verse and different graphic dispositions, even if a death verse by definition is written in reference to the singular approaching event of extinction and often expresses a state beyond presence and absence and beyond past, present, and future.

Not every master left behind such terminal calligraphies, however, and the majority of medieval death verses that were brushed have been lost over the centuries. Those that survive in monasteries and temples in Japan are often mounted as hanging scrolls, venerated as patriarchal relics, and displayed in proximity to the master's portrait in annual memorial rituals and other observances.²²

What Do Death Verse Calligraphies Reveal?

Death verse calligraphies are categorized in Japanese as *bokuseki*, "ink traces," along with many other types of Chan/Zen writings.²³ Because of its association with a master's death, however, the death verse calligraphy tends to be set apart from other texts written over a lifetime. In addition to its funerary and ongoing memorial ritual installation as a form of contact or trace relic, the death verse may be particularly auratic as writing that concludes the master's multisensory practice of writing: the hand holding the brush, the ink-saturated brush hairs touching the paper with varying pressure, and the arm moving the brush to the inkstone and across the writing surface from top to bottom, right to left.

Many modern viewers distinguish Chan/Zen death verse calligraphies by their calligraphic faltering if not failure: collapsing or incorrect characters, columnar disorder, and an absence of aesthetic expression (Figure 33.1).²⁴ These features suggest to some the master's final marshaling of physical, cognitive, and spiritual power in the face of decline to write because a good death depended on it.²⁵ Not all death verse calligraphies display such graphic turmoil or failure; many bear few signs suggesting collapse and were brushed some time before death. But in looking at death verse calligraphies we might consider the sensory-/bodily-rich acts, materiality, and enlivenment of the dying master. If brushed just prior to death, might the death verse embody not only the master's teachings and the visuality of calligraphy but also a particular sort of (possibly deteriorating) physiological/neurological sensation? Did the brushed death verse enact the master's graphical vanishing? Were such calligraphies, to borrow Yukio Lippit's characterization of Chan/Zen portraits, "self-annulling icons" through which Chan/Zen masters wrote to unwrite writing?²⁶



FIGURE 33.1. Chikotsu Daie (1229–1312), *Death Verse*, Kamakura period, 1312.11.22. Ink on paper, 39.3 × 56.7 centimeters. Ganjōji, Kyoto, Japan. Important Cultural Property. Photo by Gregory P. A. Levine.

We might first note that descriptions of a master's death and a record of a death verse preserved in the Chan/Zen *Lamp* literature or a master's biography inform us in retrospect (and often with embellishment, if not fabrication) how that saintly life resolved in words and actions. The death verse calligraphy, in contrast, not only records the master's poem but also purports to show us here and now, in a sequence of brushstrokes, the master and particular teachings as he or she neared death. The calligraphy

visually embodies not death but near extinction or preparation for death, and its strokes leave a residue of touch and movement and perhaps of the individual's diminishing life force—moving toward the obliteration of the senses while materializing transcendence. A death verse calligraphy therefore suggests that we might *see* and (especially if knowledgeable about calligraphy itself) *feel* through the graphic trace the master's approaching death and response to nearing demise, not merely *read* his or her final statement of the dharma after death. But how might the master's brushstrokes reveal looming extinction, a particular response to calligraphy at life's end, and the teaching of nonduality?

We might begin to answer these questions by turning back to Chan/Zen hagiographic texts, which are often precise in their specification of the day and time of death and the master's age at death. Yunmen died, we read, "at the hour of the rat on the tenth day of the fourth moon of the forty-sixth year (949)."²⁷ Correct posture was imperative; death required a final disciplining of the body while the senses were still active.²⁸ As the monk Mujū Ichien (1226–1312) put it in his *Sand and Pebbles Anthology* (J. *Shasekishū*; 1283), "Stories of our predecessors in various sects have come down to us from ancient times. Outstanding in wisdom, practice and virtue, they all died as though entering into meditation."²⁹ The legs were therefore crossed into proper position, the body remained upright, and death arrived. A master's terminal writing was to be produced, according to this protocol, in the fundamental posture of awakening, which itself became part of death verse practice and rhetoric. The master Yangshan Huiji (807–883), we read, recited the verse "Completing seventy-seven years, today it ends. When the orb of the sun is just at noon, the two hands fold the legs."³⁰

To the extent that infirmity preceded death, meditation posture might have proved difficult to achieve. One of the more famous cases of adherence to orthodox posture in the dying process is that of the Japanese master Daitō Kokushi (Shūhō Myōchō, 1282–1337). According to Daitō's *Chronicle*, "By noon of the twenty-second [day of the twelfth month], the Master was close to death. He wished to die sitting erect in the posture of meditation. Long troubled by an affliction in one leg, he had been unable to sit in the full-lotus position. He wrenched his leg into place with both hands, breaking it at the left knee. Blood flowed from the wound, staining his robe. The Master then composed his death verse."³¹ Daitō's renunciation of bodily infirmity is usually taken as a sign of his indomitable spiritual power, but it also has genealogical and ideological potency, expressed in the tradition that the Daitō was the "reincarnation" (J. *sairai*) of the Chinese master Yunmen, who forced his own injured leg into meditation posture at death.³² Some acts at death may therefore have reperformed the earlier deaths of patriarchal figures, just as certain death verses and calligraphies allude to earlier authors and writing styles.

The traditional records are rather less exact about the sensory and material dimensions of how masters brushed their death verses. Most state merely that the mas-

ter left behind a departing verse. Some refer laconically to the place and manner of inscription. In the case of the Japanese master Enni Ben'en (1202–1280), founder of the Kyoto monastery Tōfukuji, we read in one account, “On the fifteenth day of the tenth month, he announced that he would go up to the Dharma Hall to lecture and then to pass away; but his disciples would not permit it. Then on the seventeenth day he told his attendants to call the monks together and to beat the drum in the Dharma Hall to announce his death. Seated in a chair, he wrote his verse of departure from the world and expired.”³³ Enni may or may not have actually written his verse while seated in an abbot's chair in the Dharma Hall, but this position would have been fully consonant with the “enthronement” of a master as abbot and living Buddha within the monastery.³⁴ In some instances, however, the attempt to brush a verse failed. The chronicle of the seventeenth-century Chan nun Yigong, for instance, recounts that “Yigong . . . wrote a few characters, but then laid the brush down and said with a sigh, ‘Lifting this pen is like lifting a huge pole.’ [The next day], after the first sutra recital, she turned to her attendant and said: ‘Yesterday, I composed a gatha but today I will recite it so that you can write it down for me.’”³⁵ Chan/Zen masters often employed scribes to write official documents, but the reliance upon a disciple for the final verse suggests an especially intimate moment and dharma relationship converging around the graphic embodiment of the master's final teaching.

Rarely are calligraphies themselves described in biographical sources. We find only brief glances, such as the comment that Dahui composed his verse in large script.³⁶ Quite striking, however, are records that state that the process was completed when the master “threw down the brush and transformed.” In these accounts, the final brushstroke of the death verse and the brush cast aside from the hand were the master's last gestures before death.

The Death Verse Calligraphy of Chikotsu Daie

Modern writers sometimes employ the phrase “terminal writing” (*J. makki no sho*) to specify the temporal location of a calligraphy written at life's extremity. Often this is aligned with an effort to distinguish the death verse as a form of writing that transcends calligraphy and art.³⁷ In these terms, the autographic death verse is not “calligraphic” because—in the face of death—the writer failed to fulfill, or eschewed, calligraphy's venerable logographic requirements and aesthetic inflections. The writing is characterized by slippage rather than control, mismeasure rather than fluidly gauged placement, stutter rather than momentum, and collapse rather than graceful strength or sustained energy. Thus the master's final traces of the brush are about death, not art.³⁸

There is something to this, and when commentators discuss death verses in this vein, they often have in mind startling calligraphies that suggest a direct link between graphic and dying processes. Arguably the most astonishing and disquieting example

is the calligraphy of the Japanese master Chikotsu Daie (1229–1312), a four-character quatrain (see Figure 33.1):

Surpassing skillful means	高超方便
Self-illuminated and self-so	自證自然
Responding to things as they are	爲物應世
For eighty-four years	八十四年
Chikotsu (cipher)	大慧 (花押)
22nd day, 11th month,	正和元年十一月廿二日
first year of the Shōwa era (1312). ³⁹	

Chikotsu was a master in the dharma lineage of Enni Ben'en and served as the ninth abbot of Tōfukuji. He also founded smaller temples in Ise Province and the Tōfukuji subtemple Daijia. His death verse calligraphy was originally a treasure of Daijia but later became the property of the Tōfukuji subtemple Ganjōji following Daijia's closure during the late Edo period (1615–1868).⁴⁰

Chikotsu's verse expresses his realization of original nature and equanimity in response to the world's myriad phenomena. It is conventional in its reference to the years of the author's life and allusion to prior death verses, notably that of his teacher Enni, which itself refers to the death verse of Enni's own teacher Wuzhun Shifan (1177–1249).⁴¹ For a viewer familiar with calligraphic conventions, however, the visual disorder of Chikotsu's writing, implying sensory, physical decline, may nearly overcome the poem's verbal content. Helmut Brinker's description of the calligraphy is fitting, if somewhat Romantic: "It is precisely this waning of the master's command over his handwriting that shows dramatically the extreme situation of the dying man. With a heroic effort, he tries to mobilize his last forces. Thus, this work must not be judged according to the usual criteria and aesthetic requirements of calligraphy; rather, it must be seen as a moving human and religious document of a master who was extremely vigorous and energetic during his lifetime."⁴²

It is difficult not to find Chikotsu's writing deeply affecting, and in Brinker's description the calligraphy's impact derives not from the elegant artistry we associate with calligraphy but from the master's immense determination as manifested in his profoundly compromised writing, which nevertheless seems to push back against his body's cognitive, physical, and sensory collapse. This perception of unyielding effort in the face of decline is hard to ignore, even if it is, as I suspect, conditioned partly by a perhaps overly literal response to the master's famous portrait statue and its startlingly physical and illusionistic carving (Figure 33.2); a master portrayed in this way would, it seems, create only a death verse calligraphy characterized by heroic effort.

In any case, once Chikotsu's calligraphy is understood to be a "death verse," it is quite difficult to see his "wounded" or "afflicted" writing as anything other than an un-



FIGURE 33.2. *Portrait of Chikotsu Daie*, probably shortly after 1312. Wood, polychrome, 78.3 centimeters tall. Hōkokuji, Ehime Prefecture, Japan. Important Cultural Property. Photograph from Helmut Brinker, Hiroshi Kanazawa, *Zen: Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings* (Zurich: Artibus Asiae Publications, 1996), 82. Photograph by Julie Wolf.

mediated graphic embodiment of a momentary triumph over looming death.⁴³ But before we accept this conclusion, fully or in part, let us look more closely at the calligraphy itself, paying attention to its materials and ink application, the morphology of its Chinese characters, and its textual organization—looking for what they might suggest about the temporal, bodily, and sensory process of calligraphy in this instance.

The paper on which Chikotsu wrote, measuring today approximately 15½ inches in height and 22¼ inches in width, reveals a material condition that may hint at the

circumstances of the calligraphy's production.⁴⁴ Scattered across the surface are areas of insect damage and some cracks and patches, features of material decay and repair not unusual for a work of this age. Less immediately visible to the eye today are vertical creases or fold marks (*J. orime*). Chikotsu's calligraphy runs across these creases in several places, and the monk's brush wavered at and stuttered slightly over the uneven surface. The paper brought to Chikotsu therefore appears to have been folded loosely, perhaps for storage, and, I would speculate, may have been rushed into use rather than readied pristinely for the moment of final writing. If the paper perhaps implies the sudden, impending death of the writer, the relatively light tonality of the ink may suggest something similar: ink prepared without time to grind the ink stick sufficiently to produce darker brushstrokes indicating a greater density of carbon particles.

Chikotsu's four-character quatrain moves from top to bottom and right to left across the paper. But this is a poem, written on the day of his death, whose columnar structure teeters and collides and whose characters spin off a unified axis and suffer ideographic erosion. The initial four-character phrase begins with three characters in the first column on the right and straggles to its fourth at the top of the second column. What might appear to be the cursive extension of the fourth character, *hō* (方), at the bottom of the first column, may have resulted from the master's failure to lift the brush off the paper. Alternately, Chikotsu may have begun to write the final character of the first phrase, *ben* (便), which should appear at the end of the first line, only to realize that he had left insufficient room and was thus forced to add this character to the top of the next column. The poem's second phrase is, in turn, compressed into the second column below the character left from the first phrase, *ben*, while the third and fourth phrases occupy their own columns. Chikotsu's signature and cipher follow the fourth line but partially overrun each other and are then overwritten by the line of characters specifying the date. This is writing that does not hold to a consistent temporal and spatial graphism, even though its content adheres rather firmly to Chan/Zen rhetoric.

The axes of many characters, moreover, diverge from vertical orientation, especially in the initial column and, dramatically, in the character *ben*. If we imagine Chikotsu seated before the paper with brush in hand, it would seem that he was unable to begin the poem with a firm (perpendicular) physical relationship to the surface; the first character of the first line leans perilously toward the right. As for the character *ben*, perhaps the master's head tilted rightward and his body crumpled clockwise, in turn throwing the character wildly off axis. Equally startling is the disintegration of individual characters, which are sometimes reduced to simplified forms that have none of the controlled energy of cursive writing or even "wild cursive" script (*C. kuangcao*).⁴⁵ Characters fly apart or clot; a character's strokes may begin with control but then compress and sag. The same character, or analogous dyads or triads of strokes, may not merely vary but suggest a hand whose grip on the brush, wrist strength, and bodily anchor have suddenly weakened.

The impact of seeing this graphic collapse registers forcefully, it seems to me, not merely because of what we see happening to the calligraphy but, more profoundly, because of what we might sense was happening to Chikotsu the calligrapher. Absent a contemporary description of Chikotsu's act of writing, we might still surmise that physical weakness and failing faculties offer some degree of explanation for such compromised writing. But there is a more specific story that accompanies the calligraphy, namely that Chikotsu, unable to rise from his sickbed to a seated position, was able only to raise his arm upward from his body to write on a sheet of paper held above him by a disciple.⁴⁶ To imagine Chikotsu writing in this manner is to readjust our sense of the writer's body and the way a brush meets the surface of the paper, in this scenario a surface held above the writer rather than placed on the floor before him. Without a resisting support behind the paper to push back against the action of the arm and the brush's pressure, the brush might have moved unreliably away from the writer with a loss of friction between brush tip and paper. Surely this would have altered Chikotsu's characters in a material and kinesthetic sense accompanying his cognitive and physiological state. This scenario might also imply that ink ran down the handle of the brush onto Chikotsu's hand and perhaps even his face.

As striking as this account may be, the calligraphy itself may tell a different story, one that suggests that Chikotsu wrote with the paper in front of his body and below his brush. One must surmise that the small dots of ink that appear around certain characters fell with gravity from Chikotsu's brush toward the paper, something that would have been unlikely if the paper had been held above the master. The particular splay of the brush's hairs on the surface of the paper as the ink dried may also suggest that there was a supporting surface behind it. Be that as it may, both accounts prompt us to imagine that the act of writing in the moments before Chikotsu's death might have been compromised and collaborative, with a disciple holding paper above the master or supporting the master in a seated position and possibly preparing ink for him, even bringing the brush to his hand.

The death verses of a handful of other masters likewise manifest slippage and disorientation, including that of the Tōfukuji master Daidō Ichii (1292–1370):

A single song of nonbirth	無生一曲
Harmoniously fills the void	調満虚空
Sunny spring and white snow	陽春白雪
Green clouds and pure wind.	碧雲清風
Daidō Ichii (cipher)	大道一以 (花押)
[wrote this] on the twenty-sixth	応安三年二月廿六日
day of the second month, third	
year of the Ōan era (1370). ⁴⁷	

Daidō's death verse calligraphy elicits the following description from Brinker: "There is no order and stability to the lines any more and the characters are structureless to the degree of illegibility. Most of them tumble loosely around tilting toward the left, as if they were blown down by a thunderous storm. The writer's hand seems totally exhausted so that the uncontrolled movements of the brush are only able to produce scratchy and shaky flourishes that can hardly be identified as characters. These last messy 'ink traces' of Daidō Ichi'i unmistakably convey the agony of death."⁴⁸

To dismiss this description would be ungenerous, for the writing is indeed startling in its opposition to the poise and elegant imagery of Daidō's poem as well as earlier examples of his calligraphy. The postulation that Daidō's exhausted writing "conveys the agony of death," meanwhile, goes to the heart of the matter. It is perhaps not strictly a question of whether Daidō was actually in agony as he wrote but rather of whether his death was agonizing and in what sense or senses. Was it not expected of a master to die, as Robert H. Sharf puts it, with a "studied disregard for the physical body and utter dispassion in the face of death"?⁴⁹ Indeed, one biography of Chikotsu simply states that the master "wrote his *gāthā*, composed himself, and died," without reference to struggle or physical ailment.⁵⁰ Or were the pain and failure of the body revealed or openly acknowledged in the inscriptional act? If certainty surrounded the doctrinal idea of the master's transcendence beyond life and death, health and illness, might death prove less certain and more visible in a master's death verse calligraphy? Do we see the dharma and the mind-body parting on the paper in important and affecting ways simultaneous to a verse's literary enactment of awakened status? Or might the apparent sentiment of Daidō's poem—of harmoniously filling the void—perhaps have been what Daidō experienced in his final moments (rather than agony), even with the "agonizing" brushwork?

We cannot know what Daidō or Chikotsu felt, what their precise physical and cognitive conditions were during the moments of their final inscriptions, and this returns us to the age-old debate about whether we can recover what an author or artist thought in the process of creation.⁵¹ It is worth noting, however, that such calligraphies seem to force us to alter the nature of description itself to account for writing that is compromised rather than stylistically magisterial, elegant, or radical.⁵²

So what do such writings show and require of us, distant as we are from the moments of their inscription? First, they demand, I think, attention to the materials of calligraphy. To paraphrase James Elkins, we should consider the meanings that happen in the paper and ink before leaping to characterize the state of the maker's mind.⁵³ We might think, too, of the evaporation of moisture as the ink dried, a material manifestation of time—time, of course, being the critical "deep structure" of a death verse calligraphy. An idealist, meanwhile, might see in Chikotsu's writing an "aesthetic of death" rendered by "death's hand." This interpretation might be anchored in the fact that Chikotsu brushed the verse on the day of his death, with the calligraphy thereby

serving as a material and visual metric of his approaching demise. One need not reject this entirely, but it is also valid to see the death verse as an affirmation of living rather than merely as a testament to dying; it is evidence of an individual's own life presence, *still there and still writing*. Perhaps, too, the failing body and mind find their own prominence and lingering presence, even if the master is emphatic that life and death, strength and weakness, writing or no writing are beside the point in awakened non-duality. Moreover, Chikotsu *endeavored* to follow the rules of ink application, character stroke order and structure, and poetic and signature format. He may also have gestured toward a visual community of prior calligraphers and calligraphies, even or especially at this point of disintegration. By no means is this an iconoclastic rejection of calligraphy or language, even if there was reason, as Dahui Zonggao cautioned, to not get "caught up in the snares of writing, and keeping pen and inkstone."⁵⁴

At the same time, Chikotsu's writing does not suggest the free play within the conventions of personal inflection or stylistic disequilibrium that had become routine in East Asian calligraphy from the Northern Song dynasty onward.⁵⁵ Instead we find what may be a sensory, corporeal struggle to write in the first place. As barely legible or precipitously off-center graphs, the master's writing may suggest life tilting out of balance and with it an inversion of the traditional metaphorical relationship between calligraphy and the body. Namely, if "'Flesh,' 'bone,' 'sinew,' 'blood,' and 'veins' are all part of the critical vocabulary evaluating the health of one's writing," as John Hay tells us, Chikotsu's calligraphy—under what may have been neurological, cognitive duress—seems to manifest the weakening and ill health of the inscribing body.⁵⁶ A calligrapher's choices are conditioned by his or her life condition, individual intention, and the social-artistic discourses of calligraphy itself, but Chikotsu's decisions about the format, morphology, and even personal style of his death verse appear to have been perilously constrained or thwarted. From modern medicine we know that in the final days and hours of life a person's pulse rate and blood pressure become unstable, digestion and elimination begin to shut down, respiration becomes labored, the body shakes, and vision may close off. Much of this was no doubt known, if in different terms, in Chikotsu's period. The master's death verse seems to fall somewhere in this waning process.

If we are to think of these as Chikotsu's "death strokes," we might sense that they verge toward a state in which, to borrow from Michael Camille, the "visual distorts and erases the words rather than holds them up for analysis."⁵⁷ Picturing, to put it differently, is overrunning language. Or perhaps the death verse, as it approaches illegibility, becomes a rebus that "writes" death through its features of dissolution while retaining sufficient signs of calligraphy as such. Or we might see Chikotsu's brushstrokes as residing close to the border between writing and marking—a few steps further and it would leave writing as a landscape of signs—forced there by dissociation between the body's sensory and kinesthetic capacities and the master's mental intentions. Comparison to earlier works of Chikotsu's calligraphy, few of which survive,

might reveal the relationship between his death verse and his usual “stylistic signature” and just how close to this border of writing and marking his death verse resides.⁵⁸ In any case, Chikotsu’s final writing may demand that we reconceptualize “calligraphy” to allow for such critical conditions of body, mind, material, and inscription.

Conclusion

If the Chan/Zen tradition began, at least in its hagiographical account, with Śākya-muni wordlessly holding aloft a flower, the death of many masters ended in words and also in acts of writing.⁵⁹ There are, in turn, many ways to study a master’s death verse calligraphy, and from a distance we are asking about the relationship of text and image to the completion of life as a Buddhist teacher. As far as the hagiographic literature is concerned, in the dance with death the Chan/Zen master leads.⁶⁰ The survival of death verse calligraphies, however, gives us a reason and the means to explore more deeply how dying found compelling visual and material form, all the more so in cases in which the calligraphic traces suggest the collapse of writing. The purposefulness of death verses—with masters writing, in some instances, even when writing may have been nearly impossible—and their long preservation also suggest that they were important social and ritual artifacts as much as windows onto the awakened minds of the inscribers.

There may not have been an *a priori* Chan/Zen death verse calligraphy style, but those calligraphies that present degrees of collapse have been recognized (and lauded) as embodying a distinctive “system” of representation—a system that, from the standpoint of “orthodox calligraphy,” would seem to be a vulnerable nonsystem and therefore in accordance with modern, Romantic characterizations of Chan/Zen as obstreperous and aloof from anything that smacks of regulation, mediation, or culturally or historically located concepts.⁶¹ But part of the affective power of such calligraphies arises, I sense, precisely from the writer’s desire or need for form; we see the master’s brush falter because we can see how his or her brush sought to fulfill calligraphic obligations.

If images are “ontologically constitutive”—if they have a transformative impact on lived reality for a viewer (rather than simply representing some thing)—what was the ontological effect of a death verse?⁶² In the postmortem context of funerary and memorial ritual, the effect may have been that of the posthumous presencing of the charismatic teacher through a calligraphic relic and of his or her final teachings being perceived to be “living” and “active” forces that impact a viewer’s world. There is no reason to discount the possibility that seeing a death verse after a master’s death may inspire realization of nonduality or have an efficacious or miraculous impact.

What the writer of a medieval death verse thought or felt in brushing and then looking on what his or her hand left behind is lost to us. Nevertheless, the inscrip-

tional circumstances and calligraphic form of a master's "terminal writing" may be valuable if we are to learn not simply that the master heroically marshaled his or her remaining strength to hold the brush and bring it to bear upon the paper to inscribe poetry on nonduality but, in a very human act, left behind *particular* traces of language and of the body's sensory and kinesthetic capacities before moving beyond them to return to the absolute. The collapse of calligraphy itself, meanwhile, may yield an especially telling sense of both writing and dying. The ink may be the literal medium, but closing arteries, decaying cognition, obstructed airflow, intensified or dulled sensations, and so forth might be the indirect media of the death verse calligraphy. Perhaps we need to rethink our understanding of "calligraphy" to account for such particular bodily, sensory, material, and mortal circumstances of writing. To move beyond hagiography and Romantic models of interpretation, we may wish to imagine more fully the writing process in relation to life and death, brush and body, visibility and nonduality.

Concordance of Terms

Akashi Koshū 明石湖洲
bokuseki 墨蹟
 Chikotsu Daie 癡兀大慧
Chixiu Baizhang qingui
 勅修百丈清規
 Daitō Kokushi 大燈国師
Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu
 大慧普覺禪師語錄
 Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲
 Daijian 大慈庵
 Enni Ben'en 圓爾辨圓
gāthā 偈他 or 伽陀
goroku 語錄
gyōjō 行狀
genshō genmetsu 幻生幻滅
 Hōkokuji 保国寺
huanyuan 還源
 Huineng 慧能
ihō 遺法
Jingde chuandeng lu
 景德傳燈錄
jisei no ge 辭世偈
kafū 家風

kangen See *huanyuan*
kong 空
kū See *kong*
kuangcao 狂草
makki no sho 末期の書
 Mujū Ichien 無住一圓
Ōjō yōshū 往生要集
seppō 說法
Shasekishū 沙石集
 Sheng Yen 聖嚴
 Shūhō Myōchō 宗峰妙超
Sodōshū 祖堂集
 Sumida Sōki 角田宗龜
 Tōfukuji 東福寺
 Yangshan Huiji 仰山慧寂
 Wuzhun Shifan 無準師範
yuige 遺偈
yijie See *yuige*
Yuanzhou Yangshan Huiji chanshi yulu
 袁州仰山慧寂禪師語錄
yulu See *goroku*
 Yunmen 雲門
Zutangji See *Sodōshū*

NOTES

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1. See Xiaofei Tian's observation, "Death and narration seem to share a darkly close relationship," in Xiaofei, *Tao Yuanming and Manuscript Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 132.

2. See James C. Dobbins, "Genshin's Deathbed Nembutsu Ritual in Pure Land Buddhism," in *Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George J. Tanabe Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 166–175.

3. Early examples of death verses from Japan include the death poem of Prince Ōtsu (663–686) in the *Manyōshū* collection (ca. 759) and the poet Ki no Tsurayuki's (883–946) death verse in the imperial anthology *Shūishū* (ca. 1006). Premodern Japanese texts employ terms such as *jisei no ge* (verse upon departing this world) and *yuisho* (writing left behind); the phrase *imawa no kotoba* (dying words) appears in the "Kiritsubo" chapter of *The Tale of Genji* (early eleventh century). Verses composed before an unplanned death should perhaps be differentiated from those composed and/or recited by monks who then performed acts of self-immolation, although all may cohere in broader Buddhist understandings of death. See James Benn, *Burning the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

4. 無事忙中老, 空裡有哭笑, 本來沒有我, 生死皆可拋, trans. Jimmy Yu, posted to the H-NET Buddhist Scholars Information Network February 3, 2009, also available on the website of Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery, accessed February 22, 2012, <http://www.dharmadrum.org/wcbe/content/news/view.aspx?sn=599>.

5. See the account of the Sixth Chan Patriarch Huineng's death in John J. Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch: Hagiography and Biography in Early Ch'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 135. "Special deaths" alludes to the "special dead" in Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Medieval Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

6. *Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter T.), ed. Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaigyoku (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1936), 2076.51. See also *The Patriarch's Hall Collection* (C. *Zutangji*; J. *Sōdōshū*; 952), in *Sōdōshū*, ed. Yanagida Seizan (Kyoto: Chūbun Shuppansha, 1984), and Mujū Ichie, *Sand and Pebbles Anthology* (J. *Shasekishū*; 1238), in Robert F. Morrell, *Sand and Pebbles (Shasekishū): The Tales of Mujū Ichien, a Voice for Pluralism in Kamakura Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 261–265.

7. See Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, 180–182. On Chan nuns, see Beata Grant, *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 84, 103. On the "social or cultural fictions" of Chan/Zen texts, see Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, 9–18.

8. On preparing for death, see Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 184–191; Yanagida Seizan, *Zen no yuige* (Tokyo: Chōbunsha, 1973), 30–32; and Robert H. Sharf, "The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Chan Masters in Medieval China," *History of Religions* 32, no. 1 (1992): 1–31. "Angle of repose" is from Wallace Stegner's 1972 eponymous novel. On the "politics of death," see Gary L. Ebersole, *Ritual Poetry and the Politics of Death in Early Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 4.

9. See Natasha Heller, “Illusory Abiding: The Life and Work of Zhongfeng Mingben (1263–1323),” Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2006, Chapter 7.
10. See, for instance, the Japanese monk Bankei in *The Unborn: The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei, 1622–1693*, trans. Norman Waddell, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 25.
11. J. C. Cleary, *Swampland Flowers: The Letters and Lectures of Zen Master Ta Hui* (Boston: Shambhala, 2006), xvii, and *Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu*, in *T.* 1998A.47.0863a10–11.
12. Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, 13.
13. See “Post the departing verse [of the master] to the left of the shrine” (遺偈貼龕左), in *Imperial Compilation of the Pure Rules of Baizhang* (*Chixiu Baizhang qingui*; 1335–1338), in *T.* 48.2025.1127c01. See *The Baizhang Zen Monastic Regulations (Taishō Volume 48, 2025)*, trans. Chimura Shohei (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2006), 118–119, and Yifa, *The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Chanyuan Qinggui* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002).
14. See Tayama Hōnan, ed., *Zenrin bokuseki* (Ichikawa: Zenrin Bokuseki Kankai, 1955), vol. 1, 11.
15. See Taigen Dan Leighton, “Zazen as an Enactment Ritual,” in *Zen Ritual: Studies on Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 167.
16. One might liken the death verse to a gift that transfers merit from the master to the community. Masters often alluded to the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the *Heart Sūtra*, koan compilations, and the death verses of prior teachers and patriarchs, creating a rich literary palimpsest.
17. Grant, *Eminent Nuns*, 182.
18. *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch, Translated from the Chinese of Tsung-pao*, trans. John McRae (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000), 114. Or, as the Buddha was said to have put it, “Those of you who think of me as entering total extinction are not my disciples; those of you who think of me as not entering total extinction are not my disciples.” Yanagida, *Zen no yuige*, 48.
19. Imaeda Aishin, ed., *Shintei zusetsu Bokuseki soshiden* (Tokyo: Hakurinsha, 1970), 8; and Tayama, *Zenrin bokuseki*, vol. 1, 109.
20. Imaizumi Yoshio, *Ikkyū oshō nenpu* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1998), vol. 2, 253–254.
21. Faure, *Rhetoric*, 189, italics in original. See also Yanagida, *Zen no yuige*, 75.
22. On the death verse and portrait, see Gregory P. A. Levine, *Daitokuji: The Visual Cultures of a Zen Monastery* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 251. See also a modern reproduction of Minchō’s famous portrait of Enni Ben’en with a transcription of his death verse above his figure in Shiraishi Kogetsu, ed., *Tōfukuji shi* (Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 1979), 145.
23. On *bokuseki*, see Levine, *Daitokuji*, Part 3.
24. We might also note portraits that bear above the figure the master’s poetic inscription, which in some instances was brushed close to death and shows calligraphy not unlike what is seen in death verses proper. See Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, Kyōto Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, ed., *Nanzenji: Kameyama Tennō 700 onki ki’nen* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2004), 27.
25. I have heard that monks sometimes wrote a death verse each New Year’s Day in preparation for death, which might come at any time.
26. Yukio Lippit, “Negative Verisimilitude: The Zen Portrait in Medieval Japan,” in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Vishakha N. Desai (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2007), 87.
27. Urs App, *Master Yunmen: From the Record of the Chan Master “Gate of the Clouds”* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994), 28.

28. References to dying in meditation posture appear at least as early as the third century CE. Sharf, "The Idolization of Enlightenment," 7.
29. Morrell, *Sand and Pebbles*, 263.
30. 年滿七十七, 無常在今日, 日輪正當午, 兩手攀屈膝. Translated in Andrew E. Ferguson, *Zen's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings* (Boston: Wisdom, 2000), 171; see *Yuanzhou Yangshan Huiji chanshi yulu*, in *T.* 47n1990_p0588a14-15.
31. Adapted from the translation in Kenneth Kraft, "Zen Master Daitō," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 1984, 304-305.
32. For Daitō as the "second Yunmen," see Kenneth Kraft, *Eloquent Zen: Daitō and Early Japanese Zen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 39.
33. Morrell, *Sand and Pebbles*, 265.
34. For accounts of Enni's passing, see Sugawara Akihide, "Kamakura jidai no yuige ni tsuite: Enni ni itaru rinju sahō no keifu," in *Kamakura jidai bunka denba no kenkyū*, ed. Ōsumi Kazuo (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1993), 75-116.
35. Grant, *Eminent Nuns*, 85.
36. *Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu*, in *T.* 1998A.47.0863a09.
37. The modern claim that no work of Chan/Zen calligraphy is "art" in a conventional sense falls flat given the explicit emulation by Chan/Zen masters of the brush styles of eminent Chinese calligraphers such as Wang Xizhi, Zhang Jizhi, Huang Tingjian, and Su Shi. Chan/Zen masters were in close exchange with literati cultures and part of a larger scriptocultural community.
38. Japanese monks with whom I have spoken have suggested that the death verse calligraphy is to be treated as distinct from a master's many other writings, while the aura of death may have generally kept such calligraphies separate from the art market.
39. I thank Robert H. Sharf and Raoul Birnbaum for their assistance with this translation. See Helmut Brinker and Hiroshi Kanazawa, *Zen: Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings* (Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 1996), 275, and Higuchi Tomoyuki, "Ganjōji zō Chikotsu Daie zō kō," *Bijutsu shigaku* 17 (1995): 63.
40. For Chikotsu's biography, see "Daijian Buttsū Zenji gyōjō," in Shiraishi, *Tōfukuji shi*, 227.
41. Higuchi, "Ganjōji zō Chikotsu Daie zō kō," 62-64.
42. Brinker and Kanazawa, *Zen*, 274. See also Helmut Brinker, "Zen Masters in Words and Images," *Orientalia* (November 1993): 57-58.
43. Yukio Lippit suggested to me that the problem is similar to that involved in the study of a painter's "late style" (such as Rembrandt's paintings of the 1650s-1660s) and the poignancy or heroism that is often seen in it, albeit in retrospect.
44. The calligraphy is mounted as a hanging scroll with a combination of brocade and plain-weave fabrics. The bands immediately to the top and bottom of the paper (*ichimonji*) are an indigo-colored brocade with a pinecone pattern in supplementary weft gold thread; the surrounding fabric bands (*chū-mawashi*) are damask with a peony pattern in supplementary thread with additional silver weft threads; and the top- and bottommost fabrics are a brown-colored plain-woven silk. Stored in its present box are remnants of prior mounting fabrics and a dowel inscribed in ink with the date Kan'ei 19 (1642).
45. The "wild cursive" calligraphy of Huaisu (fl. ca. 730s-770s), such as that used in his *Autobiography* (National Palace Museum, Taipei), employs formal and compositional disruption and dissonance that suggest particular performances of visual rhetoric that may be quite different from a physiologically encumbered act of writing. Arguably, the faltering calligraphy of death verses should be differentiated from writings composed in states of intoxication or religious trance. In the medieval Japanese calligraphic modes known as *kasane-gaki* ("clustered writing")

and *midaregaki* (“disheveled writing”), the purposive dissolution of orthodox writing (as a style) was performed to accentuate a particular reception of the textual content. Adele Schlombs, *Huai-su and the Beginnings of Wild Cursive Script in Chinese Calligraphy* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998), and Yukio Lippit, “Form and Facture in the *Genji Scrolls*: Text, Calligraphy, Paper, and Painting,” in *Envisioning the Tale of Genji: Media, Gender, and Cultural Production*, ed. Haruo Shirane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 59–60.

46. This story was related to me by the present abbot of Ganjōji and Wakasugi Junji, then curator at the Kyoto National Museum.

47. Translated in Brinker and Kanazawa, *Zen*, 110.

48. Ibid.

49. Sharf, “The Idolization of Enlightenment,” 5.

50. “Daijian Butsū Zenji gyōjō,” in Shiraishi, *Tōfukuji shi*, 227.

51. The relationship between creativity and illness is a favorite of studies bridging medicine and art history; diagnosis of what ails the artist is often said to explain the artist’s work and style.

52. It is probably far-fetched to imagine that masters as a rule purposively postponed inscription so that the body’s weakness would deform their writing and make their final calligraphy more “authentic” to approaching death.

53. See James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

54. Heller, “Illusory Abiding,” 340.

55. As the Northern Song dynasty scholar–official luminary Su Shih (1037–1101) put it, the best calligraphy was characterized by “inconstant form but constant principles.” Peter C. Sturman, *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 10, 33, 44.

56. See Sturman, *Mi Fu*, 7, drawing from John Hay, “The Human Body as a Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Calligraphy,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 74–102. Note, too, Michael Camille’s statement: “Images register the activity of a whole body—a body tense, weak, fatigued or frail—visible in the strength of the line, the viscosity of paint. The flux of bodily fluids that fourteenth-century people [in the West] thought controlled their humoral dispositions, the bile that darkened and the blood that brightened, were also constitutive of the fluids that were brushed on to the surface of parchment.” Camille, *Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remiet Illuminator* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 5.

57. Camille, *Master of Death*, 2.

58. See Sturman, *Mi Fu*, 54. One extant calligraphy is Chikotsu’s inscription dated 1301 on his portrait preserved at Ganjōji, Kyoto. Reproduced in Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, ed., *Kyōto Gozan: Zen no bunka* (Tokyo: Tōkyō Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan, 2007), 25.

59. See Albert Welter, “Mahākāśyapa’s Smile: Silent Transmission and the Kung-an (Kōan) Tradition,” in *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75–109.

60. On predicting death, see Faure, *Rhetoric*, 184–187.

61. On Zen and Buddhist Romanticism, see David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), Chapter 5.

62. See James J. DiCenzo, review of *The Ground of the Image* by Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), in *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* 75, no. 3 (2007): 709.

