

Ishikawa Jōzan

(1583–1672)



Ishikawa Jōzan had much in common with the ten-years-older Takuan, including a samurai background, a deep interest in neo-Confucianism, and a love of both solitude and poetry. In most respects, however, the two men's lives played out very differently. Whereas Takuan's sword flashed only on paper, Ishikawa's saw action on the battlefield in service to Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the new shogunate. Whereas Takuan's passion for out-of-the-way scholarly and artistic endeavors was frustrated by his political involvement, Ishikawa succeeded in withdrawing to the hills outside Kyoto and devoting his final three decades to undisturbed pursuit of things literary. Whereas Takuan's wish for obscurity has, if anything, added to the luster of his reputation, Ishikawa's fame has dimmed considerably since his death, and he is today little known even in Japan.

Ishikawa's Zen practice began, it appears, with the abrupt termination of his samurai career. Despite a heroic performance in the 1615 siege of Osaka that dispatched the last major barrier to Ieyasu's power, Ishikawa was cashiered by the shogun for failure to execute orders precisely. His warrior topknot was shaved off soon thereafter, as he entered the great Myōshin-ji monastery at the age of thirty-two. His Confucian studies, which commenced a couple of years later, permanently turned his life in the direction of letters. To support his aged mother, he worked subsequently for twelve years as tutor to the family that ruled the Hiroshima area, then retired at fifty-eight to dwell on the lower slopes of Mt. Hiei and to exercise his literary faculties full time.

Zen Dust, an encyclopedic sourcebook on Rinzai tradition, makes only one passing reference to Ishikawa, calling him "a samurai who [became] an eminent Confucian scholar and poet." While his ties to Rinzai institutions were not strong, this description understates Ishikawa's commitment to Buddhism and to Zen, in particular. Abounding with Zen themes and phrases, his work continues in the direction of the Literature of the Five Mountains, bearing close relationship to the work of its more rural representatives like Jakushitsu. Among the Chinese poets who inspired Ishikawa, Wang Wei and Su T'ung-po stand out, and his life after retirement resembles Wang Wei's semi-monkhood. Though his home was not a Buddhist temple per se, it became one after his death.

The Tokugawa shogunate closed Japan to foreigners in the 1630s, in part to exclude firearms. Chinese influence was little diminished by this action, and indeed, the government's promotion of Confucian ideals as a social stabilizer so fu-

eled study of Chinese language and literature that, in the next two centuries, an ever greater proportion of the population gained competency in written Chinese. Among well-educated people, ability to compose a proper Chinese poem came to be expected, but in Ishikawa's day, such ability was still rare, and even rarer was the grace, freshness, and intimacy of the verses he produced. While other writers adopted an aesthetic philosophy of emulating great eighth-century Chinese poets, Ishikawa put Chinese prosody to his own devices, in accord with a rival aesthetic urging expression of one's "innate sensibility." There is no doubt which of these philosophies produced the better results.

Since a command of Chinese is no longer considered essential academically or culturally, Jakushitsu, Ishikawa, and other poets who did their work exclusively or primarily in Chinese are now out of reach for a lot of highly literate Japanese—as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman would be for Americans if they had created in Latin instead of English. Lacking any other grip upon their compatriots' hearts and minds, as generations pass, the Chinese-language poets become increasingly ghostly presences in the national literary heritage. That has been Ishikawa's fate, though the Shisendō, his lovely house-cum-temple on Mt. Hiei remains intact and helps anchor his reputation in present realities. ☸

WRITTEN AT THE WALL OF IMMOVABLE STONE

Evening mountains veiled in somber mist,
 one path entering the wooded hill:
 the monk has gone off, locking his pine door.
 From a bamboo pipe a lonely trickle of water flows.

TITLE The Wall of Immovable Stone, or Ishi Fudō no Heki, is in present-day Tokushima Prefecture, Shikoku.

HELL VALLEY

Beyond the village, an unpeopled region—
 everyone calls it the citadel of Avichi.
 When the sun sets, woodcutters grow fearful;
 when clouds rise up, the angry thunder growls.
 Mountain spirits weep in the gloomy rain,
 night monkeys cry to the moon as it shines.
 In this lonely, deserted valley
 the voice of the cuckoo would frighten your soul.

TITLE Hell Valley is in Arima hot spring near present-day Kobe. The mineral waters issuing in the area were thought to be poisonous, hence the evil reputation of the spot.

LINE 2 Avichi, or the hell of incessant suffering, is the most terrible of the eight hot hells in the Buddhist concept of the underworld.

SUDDEN SHOWER

Darkness and light divide the tall sky,
the rumble of thunder passes over distant mountains.
The evening is cool, and beyond the slackening rain,
through broken clouds, a moon immaculate.

UP AFTER ILLNESS

Old and sick here in spring mountains,
but the warm sun's just right for a skinny body.
I sweep the bedroom, put the bedding out to air,
peer into the garden, leaning on a cane.
Birds scold, as though resenting visitors;
blossoms are late—it seems they've waited for me.
Trust to truth when you view the ten thousand phenomena
and heaven and earth become one bottle gourd.

RECORDING THOUGHTS

Years ago I retired to rest,
did some modest building in this crinkle of the mountain.
Here in the woods, no noise, no trash;
in front of my eaves, a stream of pure water.
In the past I hoped to profit by opening books;
now I'm used to playing games in the dirt.
What is there that's not a children's pastime?
Confucius, Lao-tzu—a handful of sand.

SPRING DAY, SINGING OF IDLE PLEASURES

The lingering cold, a burden, is still bearable,
but blossoms are late—spring is taking its time.
Mountain clouds billow out in dense masses;
from the rocks a stream of water gushes down.
In my distaste for wine, I remind myself of Vimalakirti;
praising poetry, I emulate Pu Shang.
Though my wits have not deserted me completely,
of ten characters I've forgotten how to write two or three.

LINES 5–6 Vimalakīrti, a contemporary of Shākyamuni Buddha, was a wealthy layman who had a wife and family but nevertheless possessed a profound understanding of Buddhist doctrine and lived a life as pure as that of the Buddha's monk disciples. Pu Shang, better known by the name Tzu-hsia, was a disciple of Confucius and the reputed author of the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Odes*, which discusses the nature and function of poetry.

AUTUMN NIGHT: DEPICTING BUSYNESS IN THE MIDST OF SILENCE

White-haired, in clear autumn touched by scenes and emotions,
among hills, moon my companion, living out the last of my life:
night deepens, no lingering echoes from the ten thousand pipes;
all I hear is the sound of the *sozū* tapping the rock.

LINE 4 The *sozū* is a device made of a bamboo tube that periodically fills with water from a stream, tips to pour out the water, and then returns to its original position, striking a rock and producing a sharp rapping sound as it does so. It was intended to scare deer away from the garden. The device continues to thump away in the Shisendō garden today. The "ten thousand pipes" in the preceding line is a reference to the famous passage on the noises made by the wind in the forest in the second chapter of *Chuang-tzu*.

ON A SUCCESSION OF THEMES, FIVE POEMS

A hundred battles that were over in an instant,
ten thousand goods consigned like chips of tile:
through the reigns of four sovereigns I've come and gone,
nothing right, nothing not right.

LINE 3 Jōzan's long life actually touched on the reigns of seven emperors. But since this poem was written in 1663, he probably has in mind the reigns of the four previous rulers, Gomizunoo (1612–1628), Meishō (1629–1648), Gokōmyō (1649–1654), and Gosai (1655–1662).

THREE ENOUGHES: AN ORAL COMPOSITION (IN THE STYLE OF HAN-SHAN)

(*The years of my age—enough; the years of retirement—enough; the number of my poems—enough. So I have given myself the title Old Man Three Enoughs.*)

Stubbornly long-lived—eighty-three;
since entering retirement—thirty years;

assorted poems—more than a thousand:
enough of everything to finish off one lifetime.

LEANING ON A CANE, SINGING

Leaning on a cane by the wooded village,
trees rising thick all around:
a dog barks in the wake of a beggar;
in front of the farmer, the ox plowing.
A whole lifetime of cold stream waters,
in age and sickness, the evening sun sky—
I have tasted every pleasure of mist and sunset
in these ten-years-short-of-a-hundred.

NOTE Jōzan's last recorded poem.