

ZEN
MASTER
TALES

PETER HASKEL



STORIES FROM THE LIVES OF TAIGU,
SENGAI, HAKUIN, AND RYŌKAN

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For Hannah

*Ye men of gloom and austerity, who paint the face
of Infinite Benevolence with an eternal frown;
read in the Everlasting Book, wide open to your view,
the lesson it would teach. Its pictures are not in black
and somber hues, but bright and glowing tints;
its music—save when you drown it—is not in sighs
and groans, but songs and cheerful sounds.
Listen to the million voices in the summer air, and
find one dismal as your own. Remember if ye can,
the sense of hope and pleasure which every glad return of
day awakens in the breast of all your kind who have
not changed their nature; and learn some wisdom . . .
when their hearts are lifted up they know not why
by all the mirth and happiness it brings.*

—CHARLES DICKENS,
Barnaby Rudge, 1841

*Meaning comes not from systems of thought
but from stories.*

—LORD JONATHAN SACKS

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INTRODUCTION

When I was pursuing my graduate studies at Columbia, the university's specialist in Chinese and Japanese Zen was Philip B. Yampolsky, a formidable and exacting scholar of Zen history who also served as the director of the East Asian Library. With his curling mustache, sideburns, and perpetual scowl, he had the intimidating appearance of an antebellum riverboat gambler or, for some of his Japanese subordinates, a *sengoku daimyo*, one of the samurai warlords whose perpetual feuding terrified late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Japan.

My dissertation, many years in the making, dealt with Bankei Yōtaku (1622–1693) and certain of his Zen contemporaries, all eccentric and colorful individuals, like Bankei himself, and the subjects of many anecdotes and legends. I submitted the draft to Professor Yampolsky in his office, a cozy aerie overlooking the old wood-paneled library. Chewing on a well-worn cigar, he paged carefully through my offering, starting, as always, with the endnotes. As he proceeded through the text, his face gradually flushed a bright red. Finally he looked up from beneath beetling brows and riveted me with an accusing stare.

“But these are just stories!” he protested. “They’re not history . . .”

Of course he was right. Crestfallen, I slunk back to the library and began the task of reworking my paper along strictly academic lines, a sobering but invaluable learning experience. In a lighter vein, and perhaps to buoy my flagging spirits, Professor Yampolsky phoned me the next day to suggest that I might retain these

portions for the future, something I could pick up again “after my dissertation,” and I have always promised myself to do just that.

Even now, at a remove of some forty years, I confess that such stories—as that is to varying degrees what they are—still charm me. Indeed I plead guilty to finding more “Zen” in them by and large than in the more factual—or at least historically verifiable—records of Zen in premodern Japan. Casual readers who share these feelings are quite welcome to skip the following introduction and the individual biographies for each section and simply go right to the stories themselves, which are, after all, the core of the book.

In my defense, Zen, from its still misty beginnings in China, where it is read “Chan,” has been deeply intertwined with its myths, its tales and “stories.” Indeed, it is the preservation and celebration of these that have imparted to the teaching much of its distinctiveness and appeal. Put another way, it is stories and their enduring fascination that lie at the heart of so much that has come to be associated with Zen and its development.

Among Chan’s most familiar myths are the stories surrounding Bodhidharma (d. 528?), the semilegendary South Indian monk and putative First Patriarch of Chinese Chan. Carrying the teaching from India to China, crossing the Yangtze River on a single slender reed, he is said to have spent nine years meditating before the wall of a cliff. There, he is approached by an aspiring pupil, the monk Huike (487–593), later Chan’s Second Patriarch, who stands in the snow ignored by the Indian master till Huike cuts off an arm to demonstrate his sincerity.¹

Other such stories lie at the heart of what might be called Chan’s founding scripture, the *Platform Sutra*. Despite the many references to celebrated texts from the Buddhist canon, certain elements make the *Platform Sutra* distinct and distinctively Chinese. Notably, this is the only sutra dealing specifically with a

Chan school, and the only sutra that purports to convey not the teachings of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, or another Indian buddha or bodhisattva, but those of an ordinary Chinese individual, a “living buddha” present in a particular time and place. In the text, set in the early Tang dynasty (618–907), Huineng, an illiterate layman peddling firewood in the market, is suddenly enlightened on hearing a line from the *Diamond Sutra*: “Manifest the mind that does not attach anywhere.” He then goes to the temple of the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren (600–674), where he is relegated to work as a kind of human treadmill hulling the monastery rice.² One day Hongren challenges his students to compose a verse expressing their understanding of Chan. The temple’s senior monk, Shenxiu (605–706), brushes his submission on a public wall, and seeing it, Huineng begs a lettered monk to read it to him and then inscribe his reply. The upshot is that Hongren secretly summons Huineng in the dark of night and picks him from among the eminent monks of his assembly to become the sixth (and last numbered) Chinese patriarch, his successor in Chan. Huineng, fleeing his jealous brethren, secludes himself in the forest among a band of hunters, ultimately emerging to champion the mind-to-mind transmission of sudden enlightenment passed on from Bodhidharma himself.³

This direct and mysterious transmission from teacher to disciple is the central theme of the collections of Chan biographies that appear in China in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. These deploy dramatic stories that frequently feature the lightning give-and-take of encounter dialogues between various protagonists. The earliest of these compendia, the *Patriarchs’ Hall Collection* (*Zutang ji*, 952),⁴ appeared in the closing years of the Five Dynasties period (907–942), a brief but, for Chan, critical time of social and political upheaval between the collapse of the Tang dynasty and the founding of the Song dynasty (960–1279). Called “the oldest extant history of Chan,”⁵ the *Patriarchs’ Hall*

was followed by collections of Chan biographies that purport to chronicle the “transmission of the lamp” of intuitive wisdom from master to disciple, most notably the *Jingde Transmission of the Lamp* (*Jingde chuandeng lu*) of 1004 and its 1036 successor *Extensive Tiensheng Transmission of the Lamp* (*Tiensheng guangdeng lu*).⁶ The latter collection, the *Guangdeng lu*, aims to make the case for the superiority of not just Chan among other schools of Chinese Buddhism but of a particular line, that of Mazu Daoyi (709–788), with whom Chan as we know it is sometimes said to begin and whose methods for teaching might include beating students with a stick, shouting at them, and pulling them violently by their noses.⁷

The seemingly gratuitous displays of violence and abuse in the records of Mazu and his descendants may at first glance seem shocking or offensive. They were intended to be so. Such forceful words and acts have been regarded by generations of East Asian readers not as instances of random aggression but as prods to awakening. They are thought of as a means of dramatically short-circuiting the delusive framework that separates us from reality, a sort of intervention to startle students awake. The roughhousing is closer in spirit to the Marx Brothers or Laurel and Hardy than to the blind violence and invective of a street brawl. Zen’s “barnyard” quality, as one scholar terms it, was especially appealing to the well-bred and highly educated members of China’s bureaucratic elite. Indeed, this roughness is itself part of Zen’s distinct urgency and charm, hard-hitting and direct, but hardly an endorsement of or invitation to brutality for its own sake.

In the *Guangdeng lu*, Mazu is hailed as the spiritual descendant of Bodhidharma and the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, as well as the spiritual progenitor of Linji Yixuan (d. 866), revered as the most illustrious representative of the Mazu line. The inclusion of a preface by the Song emperor Renzong (r. 1022–1063) lends the

collection and its particular view of Linji Chan as the school's single orthodox teaching something of an official imprimatur.⁸

Such transmission accounts (*deng lu*), whose depictions of Chan teachers and their interactions with students and with one another grow increasingly more outré, lead in turn to works devoted to the teachings of a single Tang- or Five Dynasties-era Chan master. Known as *yu lu* (J. *goroku*), records of words or sayings (though including a variety of wordless responses), the prime example of these texts is the record of Linji Yixuan, for whom the Linji (J. Rinzai) school, which ultimately dominated Song Chan, is named.⁹ Linji's record, the *Linji lu*, is notable for elements of the “madcap” Chan frequently associated in the popular imagination with the later Tang and Five Dynasties masters. An example is the following account of the death of Linji's obstreperous colleague Puhua (d. 860), who was known for wandering the streets and ringing a small bell:

One day Puhua went about the streets asking people he met for a one-piece gown [a typical sewn Chinese monk's outfit]. They all offered him one, but he declined them all. Linji had the steward of the temple buy a coffin, and when Puhua came back, the Master said, “I've fixed up a one-piece gown for you.”

Puhua put the coffin on his shoulders and went around the streets calling out, “Linji fixed me up a one-piece gown. I'm going to the East Gate to depart this life.” All the townspeople scrambled after him to watch.

“No, not today,” said Puhua, “but tomorrow I'll go to the South Gate to depart this life.” [Again,] all the townspeople scrambled after him to watch.

After Puhua had done the same thing for three days, no one believed him anymore. On the fourth

day, not a single person followed him to watch. He went outside the town walls all by himself, got into the coffin, and asked a passerby to nail it up. The news immediately got about. The townspeople all came scrambling; upon opening the coffin, they saw he had vanished, body and all. Only the sound of his bell could be heard in the sky, receding away: tinkle . . . tinkle . . . tinkle . . .¹⁰

Familiar as they are to students of Chan, many of the episodes described in the Chan classics and noted above are patently fiction, not fact. Even the moving story of Huineng in the *Platform Sutra* has been characterized as “a brilliant and religiously meaningful bit of fiction.”¹¹ Yet some intangible quality about these stories has captured the imagination of generations of Zen adepts, and continues to do so. Inherent in all these texts is the notion that the transmission and what is transmitted must be living, direct, constantly functioning, like a ball tossed spontaneously back and forth among players. As Iriya Yoshitaka, the late scholar of Chinese language and Zen, observes in speaking of Mazu, Chan insists on the manifestation in daily activity of one’s concrete experience of reality.¹² As such, the “words and deeds,” the tales of the old masters, however seemingly exaggerated or farfetched, are viewed as revelations, testimony to the ancients’ profound understanding of things as they are.

As with so many of the figures from the “golden age of Chan” in the Tang and Five Dynasties periods, our specific knowledge of Mazu’s and Linji’s often brash words and unorthodox teaching methods derives exclusively from later, primarily Song dynasty sources. Recent scholarship in both East Asia and the West has begun to upend the accepted, frequently sectarian picture of Chan as descending directly from the masters depicted in classics such as the *Record of Linji*. Albert Welter, for example,

makes a strong argument that Mazu, Linji, and the whole cast of “hero Chan masters” from Chan’s golden age are for the most part “myths,” created retrospectively by chroniclers in early Song China.¹³ The chroniclers’ purpose was to offer a fresh, dynamic, and at times raw and outspoken teaching that would appeal to the cultural and political power brokers of the new age, inaugurating a new Chan orthodoxy, that of the Linji line. By deftly inserting this revolutionary picture of Tang Chan into the framework of a dimly remembered past, the new teaching was endowed with both a history and a pedigree, however specious and contrived.

The Linji record, as we have it, Welter contends, is “not a reflection of Linji the man and his teachings” but “a carefully drawn formulation at the hands of later storytellers.” In part, this development was culturally determined, attributable to a “Chinese penchant for fictionalization in history and biography, coupled with the importance of stories.”¹⁴

At present, all that can be said with certainty is that the records of the eighth- and ninth-century Chan masters, with their arsenal of impulsive antics and wild words, exist in written form from at least the cusp of the Song dynasty. But whether these narratives, and the vivid world they conjure up, predate their tenth- and eleventh-century chronicles, and if so, by how much, remains a vexing and possibly unanswerable question.

The koan (*gong’an*) method, which has dominated much of Zen since the Song dynasty, centers also on narratives of uncertain authenticity: the responses, spoken or otherwise, of the revered teachers of the past, particularly the masters of the preceding Tang and Five Dynasties periods, recorded in classic Chinese koan collections such as the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyān lu*, 1128) and *Gateless Gate* (*Wumen guan*, 1229).¹⁵ These collections include brief interlinear comments (*hsialu*) that introduce a new idiom to the literature of Chan, a distinctive and deliberately jarring juxtaposition of Buddhist terminology with elements drawn from

literary and popular Chinese culture, including proverbs, imprecations, and other expressions heavily imbued with the slang of the period. (“You don’t know the smell of your own shit!” “Washing a dirt clod in mud.” “Dragging each other into a fire pit.”)¹⁶

The *Blue Cliff Record* opens with the koan “Zhaozhou’s ‘Wu!’,” which, with the Linji master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), revered as the koan method’s foremost proponent in Song China, became a principal entrance for koan study and remains so today.¹⁷

Zhaozhou was asked by a monk “Does a dog have buddha nature or doesn’t it?”

Zhaozhou said, “Wu!” (J. *Mu!*; literally, “no,” “it doesn’t,” etc.).¹⁸

Dahui urged his students to focus unremittingly in their meditation practice on the *huatou*, the “nub,” “crux,” or “essence” of the koan (here, for example, Zhaozhou’s answer, “Wu!”).¹⁹ This, Dahui held, led in turn to “great doubt” (*dayi*), an all-consuming existential struggle with the koan, culminating in “great satori” (*dawu*), an ecstatic spiritual breakthrough into the original nature of things that overturns all the student’s prior experiences of reality. “You may be assailed by doubts,” Dahui wrote to one of his students, “doubts by the thousands, the tens of thousands; but all these will [resolve into] a single doubt. Just break through the doubt surrounding your *huatou* and instantly you’ll shatter *all* your doubts. . . . Just take up the case ‘A dog has no buddha nature. . . .’ If you can penetrate this ‘Wu!’ penetrate it immediately through and through, you won’t need to go questioning others, asking about the Buddha’s words, the patriarchs’ words, the words of reverend masters everywhere, but will be forevermore enlightened about being and non-being.”²⁰ While seated meditation, *zuoshan* (J. *zazen*), was crucial to this endeavor, most effective

of all in sundering the barrier of the huatou, Dahui maintained, was uninterrupted practice amid one's daily activity.²¹

Like the fanciful episodes surrounding Bodhidharma, the Sixth Patriarch, and Puhua, the koan collections are most often stories of the past recalled, recorded, perhaps even contrived in later generations for the edification of Chan students. For such adepts, they are true, not in a literal but in a more compelling sense: they reveal in a quirky, enigmatic, and at times deliberately jolting fashion something about the human mind and its place in the universe that cannot be conveyed by mere words. It is this something, inherent in such stories, that has sustained the teaching in all its manifestations in East Asia over a millennium, first in China, then Korea, and lastly in Japan.



It is not the continent but Japan of the Edo period (1600–1867/68) that is the source of the materials presented here. Although also a premodern setting, it is one far distant in time and culture from the Tang and Song masters who formulated what we today know as Zen. But Iriya Yoshitaka's observation about Chinese Chan still holds true: Japanese Zen likewise established its "focus on the individual's ordinary activity as the function, the manifestation of the absolute."²² Most of these Japanese stories, however unabashedly humorous and at times crude, impart something of the character of the Zen masters involved, whose attainment must be plainly manifest in even the most humble and unlikely of situations.

The new age inaugurated in 1600 by Tokugawa rule, though like its medieval precursors essentially a feudal society governed by a military elite, was to prove a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity for Japan. The Zen school, which had flourished during the preceding age of internecine warfare dubbed the

“Warring States” or Sengoku period (approximately 1467–1568), continued to receive the patronage of both the leading samurai clans, the emperor and imperial court, and the rising merchant class, whose *chōnin*, or townspeople, culture quickly came to dominate cities such as Edo (now Tokyo) and Osaka.

Zen and the other sects of Buddhism, however, found themselves under assault by a Confucian establishment that in many respects provided the ideological framework for the Tokugawa regime and its many powerful vassals. These included the daimyo, or hereditary clan chieftains, whose domains straddled the nation’s seventy-two traditional provinces. Many Confucians carped that a teaching such as Zen, conducted largely in the isolation of temple precincts, had little to offer to the Japanese masses—the farmers and artisans who performed the actual productive functions that sustained Tokugawa society. As in Marxism, the merchant class was reviled by most Edo-era Confucians as little more than a parasite on the national body, and as such was relegated to the bottom rungs of the social order, together with the Buddhist priesthood.²³

While nominally subscribing to the Confucian ethic that in theory underpinned Tokugawa society, Buddhism, including Zen—a particular object of Confucian ire—rarely rose to a spirited defense of its own teachings. Yet the frequent encounters in this period’s Zen stories between Zen masters and ordinary men and women of all classes of Japanese society, and their preservation in written form by monks and laypersons, testify to a new integration of Zen with the world outside the temples and hermitages. The stories seem to attest, in a kind of implicit rebuttal to the Confucians, that if Zen is to function, it must function everywhere. If it is to work, it must work for everyone, from prostitutes and professional entertainers to daimyo, from the bartender to the rice farmer. Sengai carouses with the town drunk. Ryōkan spends his days playing ball with the village

children and joins the locals in their all-night dances costumed as a flirtatious maiden. And Hakuin interacts freely with the common folk of his native Shizuoka, handing out koan and bringing his neighbors to satori, according to his testimony, with the aid of their own pungent dialect and slang.²⁴ Indeed, Hakuin celebrates in his art and writing the villagers' labors and pastimes, enthusing in the humor and raucousness that fill the rural society around him.

As my other Columbia advisor, Yoshito Hakeda, loved to point out, the protagonists of the Chinese Chan stories—even the untrammelled Mazu and the vituperative Linji—though memorably and dramatically presented in their records, remain somehow remote, semihagiographic figures. By contrast, the Zen masters who enliven many of the anecdotes culled from Edo Japan present themselves, seemingly at firsthand, warts and all. They appear as true-life personalities interacting within a vivid environment that stands forth in its own right in full color and detail. Additionally, one can't help remarking that the vast number of episodes in the classic Chinese records, apart from those few that record interactions with local commanders or officials, show the Tang and Song teachers primarily confronting other Chan monks and masters. By contrast, the tales surrounding Ryōkan, Sengai, and Hakuin, while offering many vignettes involving their priestly followers and disciples, are conspicuous for the number of ordinary villagers and townspeople, sometimes anonymous but often identified by their given names, who are a regular feature of such anecdotes. Only Taigu Sōchiku is probably an exception in this respect, being something of a misanthropist and dedicated loner.

Like many of their early Chinese counterparts, the Edo teachers assembled here tended to remain in provincial temples throughout most of their lives as Zen masters—Hakuin and Ryōkan in the vicinity of, respectively, their native Hara and Izumozaki, and Sengai in Hakata. Yet at least as depicted in the stories about

them, all stayed in close contact with the local population, unlike the Chinese masters. (Again, Taigu is the exception, being reclusive in later life, and prior to that having spent time in Kyoto serving as abbot of Myōshinji and involved in the politics central to the life of the great Rinzai headquarters temple.)

Many of these features may reflect the “democratization” of Zen in Edo-period Japan. This was a development spurred in part by Confucian critiques of the teaching’s lack of practical application to this-worldly concerns in the still largely agrarian society favored by Confucian scholars.²⁵ But it was also driven by the vigor of the emergent townspeople culture. It was this *chōnin* culture—emanating from the bustling cities of Edo and Osaka, from the metropolises’ busy markets and trading houses and colorful entertainment districts—that came to dominate much of the distinctive, and distinctively Japanese, popular art forms that characterize the period of Tokugawa rule. These include haiku; Kabuki; *bunraku* (puppet dramas accompanied by music and narration); and *ukiyo-e*, the prints (and paintings) of the “floating world” of professional actors, sumo champions, courtesans, and the like who occupied a cult status among urbanites of the day.

One surprising aspect of some of the Japanese Zen stories in this period is the role played by women, who figure as serious Zen students in a land that was, and in many respects remains, a “man’s world” (*otoko shakai*). Though generally relegated to the background, women in premodern Japan were not infrequently key figures in their families’ business enterprises in the cities and towns. In the countryside they were crucial to many aspects of farming and crafts work. Even in typical warrior households, the samurai wife was indispensable to her husband’s economic survival. Though we hear of few, if any, celebrated female Zen masters, prominent male teachers such as Bankei and Hakuin openly testify to the full ability of women, both lay and religious, to realize the deepest truths of Zen enlightenment.

During the Middle Ages, Zen, particularly Rinzai Zen, had been a form of Buddhism associated with the ruling elite in the capitals of Kamakura and Kyoto, a teaching carrying enormous “snob appeal.” Only gradually in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and largely because of its aristocratic associations, did Rinzai Zen begin to attract the patronage of provincial warlords and the rising merchant class in commercial centers such as Sakai. In the new age of Tokugawa rule, certain teachers seemed to sense that, as with literary and artistic culture, the time had arrived for Zen to be accessible to the common people, even in rural Japan. The essentials of zazen, koan study, and enlightenment, such masters affirmed, could be conveyed to all members of Japanese society, presented directly not in the classical Chinese-inflected language written and read by the temple monks but in the speech of ordinary Japanese, including even comic verse and work songs.

While this involved a certain recasting of the teaching, the aim was not a watered-down, accommodationist version of Zen practice and enlightenment simply incorporating familiar devotional beliefs that had persisted since the Middle Ages, such as the worship of redeeming buddhas and bodhisattvas like Amida (Amitabha) and Kannon (Avalokitesvara). While such popular accommodations were not wholly rejected, what was required, many masters maintained, was “the thing itself,” the Zen mind, transmitted through generations of buddhas and patriarchs. Some sought to reinvent Zen practice as something for everyone, whatever their circumstances. Bankei Yōtaku, who attracted overflow crowds to his public lectures, famously dispensed with the koan as an artificial device and insisted on direct experience of the “Unborn Buddha Mind, brightly illuminating.” Suzuki Shōsan (1579–1655), a former samurai whose warrior training imbues his teachings, sought to spread Zen among the different classes of Japanese society, not by vitiating it but by stripping it

of what he viewed as extraneous elements. In the process, he concocted a teaching very much of its time and place—that is, Japan in the premodern period.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1769) too sought to make Zen available to men and women of every class, not by reinventing the teaching but by resurrecting it through a revival of the dynamic koan Zen of the Song masters such as Dahui and Xutang Zhiyu (1185–1269).²⁶ Presented by Hakuin in a popular format, Dahui-style koan study leading to sudden enlightenment was now the prerogative of Japanese from every station of life and no longer the preserve of priests, warlords, social-climbing commoners, and the like. Hence, Hakuin's later adoption of his own "Sound of One Hand" koan, in place of "Wu" (*Mu!*). Hence, too, his multitude of vernacular works presented in popular contemporary format, embracing even supernatural elements such as possession by native deities. The same is true of Hakuin's humorous, fanciful brush paintings of religious and mundane subjects. The two at times combined, so that Kannon, the bodhisattva of mercy, is given the face of one of Hakuin's country neighbors,²⁷ while various other buddhas, bodhisattvas, Zen patriarchs, and even the stock Edo comic figure "Grandma" bear a suspicious resemblance to Hakuin himself in the master's occasional self-portraits.²⁸

It is not hard to see how such creative and colorful personalities could lead to folk traditions surrounding Zen teachers with links to the common people of premodern Japan. Figures such as Hakuin, Taigu Ryōkan (1758–1831), and Sengai Gibon (1750–1837) came to be regarded as both Zen masters and beloved local characters about whom humorous, even outrageous accounts were soon circulating. Such tales harken back to the late medieval Zen master and poet Ikkyū Sōjun (1394–1481), an unconventional figure crucial to the restoration of the great Kyoto headquarters temple Daitokuji. Ikkyū's at times outrageous behavior, including his open affair with a blind female courtesan, became the stuff of

legend even in his lifetime, and during the Edo period, stories, often comic ones, surrounding the Zen master were published for popular consumption under the rubric *Ikkyūbanashi* (Ikkyū tales).²⁹

Even in this relatively recent period of Zen's development, then, "stories" seem to have retained a certain importance, answering an unarticulated need on the part of both monks and laypeople. Hakuin, revered as Japanese Rinzai Zen's "second founder," shared in this as well, freely embroidering his many autobiographical writings with episodes that often strain belief. An example is Hakuin's well-known description of seeking out the anchorite Hakuyūshi in 1710 at Hakuyūshi's cave in the mountains of Shirakawa, east of Kyoto. Finding the young Zen monk physically and mentally depleted from his arduous koan practice, Hakuyūshi instructs Hakuin in a series of Taoist-inspired revitalizing meditation techniques, which enable Hakuin to persist in his quest and reputedly continue to sustain him through his long and exacting subsequent career.³⁰ Hakuin's account of his meeting with the mysterious Hakuyūshi, however, is now acknowledged by Japanese scholars to be an invention, devised by Hakuin to lend color to his narration, Hakuyūshi having fallen to his death from a cliff a year before the master claims to have visited him in his cave.³¹

Perhaps of more consequence, Hakuin's Dharma descendants, who by and large constitute what is today the Japanese Rinzai school, base their sect's lineage on yet another story, Hakuin's sanction and acknowledgment as heir by another of his teachers, the Zen master Shōju Rojin (Dōkyō Etan, 1642–1721), whom Hakuin met in 1708. The story is detailed in Hakuin's "authorized" biography, *Chronological Biography of the Zen Teacher Hakuin* (*Hakuin oshō nenpu*), by his Dharma heir Tōrei Enji (1721–1792), an undated text on which Hakuin is known to have closely collaborated. The work tells how the young Hakuin, following years of

grueling practice on the “*Mu!*” koan under a succession of teachers, finally believes he has realized satori when, after ten days and nights of single-minded meditation, he happens to hear the evening gong of a nearby temple.³² Having learned of Shōju’s reputation, he then travels to present his hard-won realization to the old master at his temple in Iiyama, a village in the province of Shinano (now Nagano Prefecture). Shōju promptly disabuses him of the idea that he has attained satori and instead delivers a drubbing to the astonished Hakuin, who is knocked off the temple verandah and lands on the ground unconscious, to Shōju’s loud laughter. Devastated, Hakuin nonetheless remains to study with Shōju and plods on with his koan practice.

After ten consecutive days and nights struggling with the “*Mu!*” koan, Hakuin is begging in the local village and positions himself before a particular house, whose elderly landlady, in no mood to provide alms, shouts at him to move along. But so preoccupied is Hakuin with his koan that he remains frozen to the spot, dazed and insensible to the old lady’s abuse. Annoyed, she smacks the monk with a bamboo broom and at that moment Hakuin suddenly experiences satori. He rushes to Shōju, who instantly recognizes his attainment, acknowledging his enlightenment experience.³³

Although he spent his entire teaching life in Shinano as an obscure country priest and became known to posterity primarily by way of Hakuin’s writings, Shōju boasted an illustrious lineage through a branch of the Kyoto headquarters temple Myōshinji, a lineage tracing itself directly to the founders of the so-called Ōtōkan. This composite term refers to the three celebrated medieval teachers from whom the Rinzai school derives the authenticity of its transmission: Daiō, who carried from Song China the koan Zen of his teacher Xutang; Daiō’s leading heir, Daitō (Shūhō Myōchō, 1282–1337), founder of the celebrated Kyoto headquarters temple Daitokuji; and Daitō’s heir Kanzan Egen (1277–1360),

founder of Myōshinji. Hakuin believed himself to be a reincarnation of Xutang and saw his mission as revitalizing the particular strain of Song koan Zen propagated by Daiō and his line, a strain that Hakuin regarded as the only authentic transmission of Zen brought to Japan from the continent.

In his writings, Hakuin vividly describes his eventual enlightenment under Shōju and the master's recognition of his realization, continually referring to Shōju as his principal teacher and praising Xutang and the celebrated Japanese members of Xutang's lineage. The latter include Shōjū's teacher Shidō Mu'nan (or Bu'nan, 1603–1676),³⁴ an early popularizer of Zen, and Mu'nan's illustrious teacher Gudō Tōshoku (1579–1661), who had opposed the entry of Pure Land–inflected Ming Zen at Myōshinji and was close to the retired emperor Gomizuno'ō (1596–1680), an important patron of Zen in seventeenth-century Japan.³⁵

Again, however, modern scholarship has found no evidence that Shōju actually gave Hakuin *inka* (literally, “seal of approval”), a Zen master's formal written sanction of enlightenment. In Japanese Rinzai Zen, *inka* constitutes proof of a student's attainment and spiritual connection with a particular master, whose signature appears on the document along with the name of the student. Indeed, by his own admission, the young Hakuin stayed with Shōju a mere eight months before moving on to study with a variety of other Zen teachers in an effort to resolve his lingering spiritual doubts. And while Hakuin's writings quote admiringly from Shōju's teachings, Hakuin never again returned to see Shōju. In 1718, when Hakuin became a Zen master in the Myōshinji line, it was not as Shōju's heir but as heir to the heir of the local Zen monk who had first ordained the thirteen-year-old Hakuin—a succession practice common in Zen temples in premodern Japan.³⁶

In spite of this, those within Hakuin's teaching lineage—one that embraces not only Hakuin's heirs and their immediate progeny

but nearly all present-day Rinzai Zen masters—implicitly accept the notion that Hakuin received Shōju’s sanction and was heir to his teaching of Zen. This claim cannot be documented, although it appears on any standard lineage chart of the Rinzai school. This lineage—traced back from the present day through Hakuin, Shōju, and the leading members of the Ōtōkan to Xutang, Linji, and the Sixth Patriarch—is recited routinely as part of the liturgy at Rinzai temples. As has often been noted, Rinzai Zen in Japan is Hakuin Zen. But while present-day Rinzai Zen’s descent from Hakuin and his heirs is clearly delineated, Hakuin’s own succession from his teacher is not. The modern Rinzai sect, which prides itself on indisputable evidence of succession from a given master to his disciple, seems to have suspended its normal standards of evidence for Hakuin’s “story.” This story, promulgated in Hakuin’s later writings, substitutes for the usual proofs of Dharma succession a kind of retrospective spiritual identification with Shōju, emphasizing Hakuin’s commitment to the revival of Xutang’s brand of koan Zen, which Hakuin believed to be embodied by Shōju and his line.³⁷

It should be noted that Hakuin’s inventing, dramatizing, or distorting the details of his life in autobiographical works would have been considered in no way reprehensible in the Zen world of Edo Japan. Hakuin’s purpose in the bulk of his many writings, his autobiographical works included, was not documentary, to clarify or nail down facts. It was rather to propagate Dahui’s style of koan study, to urge the effectiveness of all-out submersion in the koan in order to spur numbers of men and women, lay and religious, to satori and to then exhort them to assist others and to extend their efforts so as to experience a lifetime of satoris large and small.

Hakuin seems to have delighted in formulating and even publishing many of his own tales. Most of the Zen stories translated here, however, were assembled by third parties, masters’ disciples

and their priestly descendants, or lay enthusiasts in the particular localities with which figures such as Sengai and Ryōkan were identified. As in the more formal Chinese records, the object of these often homespun Japanese narratives is to put on display the masters' manifestations of Zen in daily life. Unlike in China, though, there is a conspicuous emphasis on the Japanese Zen teachers' encounters with not merely students in a monastic setting but people of every stripe—the ordinary men and women, young and old, who populated the world outside the temples. It is precisely for this reason that such stories, however homely at times, were dear to those who remembered, retold, and recorded them: they constituted testimony to what was viewed as the enlightened nature of their colorful protagonists. Whether fact, legend, or a blending of both, such Zen stories were preserved in Japan because they suggest a special kind of dramatic synthesis. They narrate the perfect interpenetration of the worlds of enlightenment and common human experience, which the Zen teacher, by tradition, is expected to demonstrate in even his most humble activities and interactions.

This is also apparent in another aspect of many of the Zen stories that follow—namely, the element of humor. This particular facet of Zen can probably be traced back to its Chinese roots and in particular to the influence of philosophical Taoism and texts such as the *Zhuangzi* (fourth century B.C.E.), with its madcap dialogue and cast of deliberately outrageous eccentrics. But it is also a familiar feature of many of the tales surrounding figures such as Sengai and Ryōkan. The mind awakened to reality itself is frequently associated in the Zen records, and even the popular imagination, with a quirky hilarity—with “getting the joke.” This cast of mind can be seen to pervade Sengai's and Hakuin's brush paintings, most especially in their depictions of Zen figures such as the First Patriarch, Bodhidharma, and the “laughing Buddha” Hotei (Ch. Budai, d. 916), with his ragged appearance and the

huge cloth sack (*hotei*) from which he takes his name. The image of the sage as a preposterous old man convulsed with delight, a common idiom in both Taoism and Zen, is quite foreign to the dignified demeanor and occasional pathos expressive of holiness in most Eastern and Western religious traditions. Indeed, Zen may be the only religion in which carefree laughter and the expression of wisdom are so seamlessly intertwined.



My choice of stories to include in this volume was subjective, predicated on those I personally found to be most engaging while best lending themselves to translation. I have, for example, omitted many stories that were based on the punning and other word-play so beloved of the Japanese, materials whose humor is often lost amid a welter of tiresome notes and explanations. I have also tried to avoid repeating text found in my earlier books. Hence the absence of any stories concerning Takuan and Tōsui and of materials from Itsuzan Sonin's *Dharma Words of Zen Master Bankei* (*Bankei zenji hōgo*) and Kera Yoshishige's *Curious Accounts of Zen Master Ryōkan* (*Ryōkan zenji kiwa*)—both rich firsthand sources for these beguiling figures but ones I've translated elsewhere.

In addition, the capsule biographies that precede the sections for each of the four Zen masters are not intended as exhaustive reviews of their lives and teachings. Rather, these are thumbnail sketches highlighting the salient aspects of the masters' careers and approaches to Zen, especially those that may help in appreciating the image of the masters presented in the accounts that have come to surround them. The treatment of Hakuin, in this respect, is somewhat more extensive, given his pivotal role in the subsequent history of Japanese Zen, as well as the abundance of (albeit often unverified) autobiographical material in his writings. Ryōkan's life is similarly treated at greater length due to the

wide recognition the master received in Japan during the twentieth century and the plethora of studies and other works that accompanied this revival of interest.

For reasons of space and continuity in a work essentially devoted to stories, I have also deliberately passed over a number of subjects touched on in my previous books and exhaustively dealt with by Japanese scholars. Among these are the institutional development of Japanese Zen in the Kamakura, Muromachi, and Edo periods; the founding of the first Zen temples by émigré Chinese masters and Japanese monks returning from the continent; the tensions between the official Gozan, or “Five Mountains,” temples and those Rinzai and Sōtō headquarters temples, such as Daitokuji and Myōshinji, Eiheiji and Sōjiji, which were largely outside the system and all of which became dominant in the Zen world of late medieval and Edo Japan; and changes in the Song koan Zen introduced by the temples’ Chinese and Japanese founders, which in many cases came to resemble an Esoteric Buddhist–style secret oral transmission that continued into the Edo period itself. I’ve likewise omitted any discussion of the temple system of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, or military government, which sought to control the Buddhist sects, including Zen, while deploying the parish temples as enforcers in its ongoing persecution of Christianity in Japan. Zen masters, even eccentric ones such as Sengai, were not exempt from participation in the bakufu’s “religious census” (sometimes referred to as *shūmon aratame*) and other measures aimed at rooting out hidden Christians.³⁸

The book uses “Edo,” the new capital of the Tokugawa shogunate and the site of present-day Tokyo, as a shorthand for “Edo period,” as is often done with other important place names used to designate periods of Japanese history, including religious and cultural history. Examples are Kamakura and Muromachi—the former, the military capital of Japan from 1192 to 1333; the latter,

a district of Kyoto that gave its name to the period of the Ashikaga shogunate, which ruled (though often in name only) from 1333 to 1573.

While this is a book on Japanese Zen personalities, I've opted by and large to use Chan when the context is plainly Chinese. *Master* is capitalized in the translations when referring to the particular Zen priest who is the subject at hand—that is, Taigu, Sengai, Hakuin, or Ryōkan. Otherwise it is lowercase.

This book involved the efforts of many organizations and persons. The First Zen Institute of America in New York City graciously made available to me its library and computer facilities. Maria Collora, Michael Hotz—my high school sidekick and now president of the First Zen Institute—John Storm, and Peeter Lamp all read the manuscript at various stages and offered countless valuable suggestions, as did my friend Dan Stevenson, professor of religion at the University of Kansas, who lent valuable perspective on the Chinese portions of the material. Ikuyo Nakagawa offered her help in untangling difficulties in certain of the Japanese texts, while the institute's Ian R. Chandler, Milan Nikolic, and Melissa Lebrun were always ready to augment my rudimentary computer skills. Matt Zepelin, Shambala's editor extraordinaire, assisted in skillfully shepherding the book from acquisition to publication. Thomas Y. Kirchner, a longtime Rinzai monk attached to Kyoto's Hanazono University International Research Institute for Zen Buddhism, kindly assisted me in assembling many of the Japanese materials. He and Jeff Shore, another distinguished member of Hanazono's faculty and a lay Zen master in the Rinzai school, made available the research facilities at the university's handsome library. But this book is really a tribute to the Zen priest and scholar Nōnin Kōdō, also a faculty member at Hanazono, who over the past years has performed a remarkable task of assembling, editing, and seeing to publication

a mass of stories surrounding leading Edo-period Zen masters, including all those assembled here. This volume is a direct result of Nōnin's valuable and extensive work, from which I and others have greatly benefited.

—PETER HASKEL
New York City, Summer 2021



TAIGU
TALES

*Springtime arrives in the human world
bestowing innumerable blessings
Each and every flower an offering,
a thus-come buddha!
Unexpectedly, the lingering snow
has melted away
And everything in the vast universe
beams with delight.*

—TAIGU SŌCHIKU,

Taigu oshō gyōjoitsu, Taigu oshō goroku, 197

Taigu (also read Daigu, 1584–1669) is generally ranked among the leading figures of seventeenth-century Rinzai Zen. Like nearly all celebrated Rinzai masters of the early Edo period, with the notable exception of Takuan Sōhō (1573–1645), he was a prominent member of the Myōshinji line, Myōshinji being the powerful Kyoto temple whose masters would come to dominate Japanese Zen.

In his 1703 collection of Japanese Buddhist biographies *Honchō kōsōden*, the Myōshinji scholar priest Mangen Shipan laments that the authentic Zen transmission failed to survive beyond the first five or six generations of teachers, having languished till its revival by a handful of early-Edo Myōshinji masters, including Taigu, Gudō Tōshoku, and Ungo Kiyō (1582–1659).¹ Taigu was a close colleague of Gudō and Ungo, both of whom he accompanied

for a time on a renowned 1607 *angya*, or Zen pilgrimage, and, like them, was sought out by the retired emperor and Zen enthusiast Gomizuno'ō.

Many of the details of Taigu's biography are lacking.² He was born in 1584 in the town of Sano in the old province of Mino (now Gifu Prefecture) to a family named Takefu (also read Mutō). Mino had been a leading center of the Myōshinji line's expansion during the preceding Muromachi period, and at age ten, Taigu entered the nearby Zen temple, where he became a monk under the Myōshinji-line teacher Jōgen Sōkō (d. 1610), receiving the religious name Sōchiku. In 1615 he reportedly received Dharma transmission from Jōgen's heir Chimon Genso (d. 1630), along with the second Buddhist name Taigu, "Great Fool." Subsequently he is said to have served a term as abbot of Myōshinji, receiving the imperially conferred purple robe. In 1626 Taigu became abbot of Nansenji, a Myōshinji branch temple in Edo, but in 1630 was expelled from Myōshinji (an event described in one of the stories) and was not allowed to return to the temple until 1636. In the interim, in 1634, he founded Enkyōji in what is now Shiga Prefecture, and that year at the temple he experienced his first great enlightenment. Between 1657 and 1660, under the patronage of Matsudaira Mitsumichi (1636–1674), daimyo of Fukui (present-day Fukui Prefecture), Taigu founded Daianji, in what is now Fukui City. In 1664, the aging Taigu received the honorary title Shosō Hisō Zenji (Zen Master All Forms Are without Form) from the emperor Reigen (r. 1683–1687) and five years later passed away at Daianji at age eighty-five.

As apparent in the episodes that follow, Taigu could be an abrasive and cantankerous teacher. But he remains honored as one of the pillars of Myōshinji Zen during this formative and at times troubled period in the temple's history, when the shogunate was clamping down on the major Zen temples' autonomy

and the temples themselves were divided internally over the arrival in Japan of a new generation of Chinese Zen masters, the most important of whom was Yinyuan Longqi (1592–1673).

Within Myōshinji in the late 1650s, opposition to the newly arrived Chinese teachers was spearheaded by Gudō and Taigu, who viewed the syncretic Ming Zen they espoused, freely incorporating Pure Land and even some Taoist elements, as alien and degenerate. At the same time, a steady stream of enthusiastic Myōshinji monks and teachers continued to flock to the Nagasaki temples where the Chinese masters had established themselves. Some of these Japanese monks became the Ming masters' disciples, and there was even an attempt, led by one of the temple's distinguished masters, Ryōkei Shōsen (1606–1670), to make Yinyuan the abbot at Myōshinji. This movement was adamantly opposed by Gudō, Taigu, and other temple “conservatives” who reputedly sought to restore what they regarded as the founder Kanzan's original Song-style Zen, with its unalloyed emphasis on koan practice and the classic Song koan collection the *Blue Cliff Record*. The resulting acrimony ultimately led Ryōkei to abandon Myōshinji in 1664 to become Yinyuan's first Japanese Dharma heir. Ryōkei's name was consequently stricken from the temple register the following year, together with those of other Myōshinji priests who had become followers of the immigrant masters, the founders of what became the Rinzai Ōbaku school.



The Taigu oshō gyōjitsu, from which the following anecdotes are taken, was originally compiled in 1768 at Nansenji.³ The text, including Taigu's goroku, or collected poems and other inscriptions for particular formal religious occasions, was published in 2012 by Hanazono University's Institute for Zen Studies. The volume, edited by Nōnin Kōdō, is entitled Taigu oshō goroku, shūi, gyōjitsu

(Formal record, gleanings, and biographical accounts of Master Taigu).

In the fifth year of Keichō (1600), the Master found himself caught up in the warfare engulfing Gifu.⁴ The Master fled, shouldering his book satchel (*kyū*) and taking his elderly teacher Jōgen.⁵

A renegade warrior brandishing a sword attempted to make off with the Master's book satchel, but the Master grabbed the thief's arm, pursuing him and shouting loudly, "These are the personal records of my Dharma transmission and I'm not letting you get away with them—even if it costs me my life!" And so saying, the Master snatched back the satchel from the bandit's hand. The bandit, fearing the Master's strength, let go the satchel and fled.

Having routed the renegade warrior, Taigu bid farewell to Jōgen and traveled on pilgrimage to the Atsuta shrine in Owari, where he offered fervent prayers that he might realize the great matter of enlightenment. After this, the Master traveled to study under various Zen teachers, dwelling alone in forests and fields, and never forgetful of his purpose for even a single day.

After the passing of Jōgen, the Master became Dharma heir to Chimon.⁶ Early in the Genna era (1615–1623), the Master resided in Edo and served as abbot of Nansenji, of which he was recognized as the temple's second founder.



There was a certain Korean Zen master named Myōkan, who lived in Yoshino, in Yamato Province.⁷ Myōkan was a practitioner of exceptional endowments, who had meditated deeply on this matter [of Zen].

One day Myōkan asked a monk, "You have traveled widely on Zen pilgrimage, interviewing teachers. Who among them have you found to be a man of transcendent insight?"

The monk replied, "In all Japan there are no real Zen masters

apart from one man called Taigu. His behavior is coarse, and he loves to drink, so that he goes about half drunk and half sober, cursing everyone, with no restraint over what comes out of his mouth. Yet for all that, one cannot fathom his spiritual depths.”

Myōkan, delighted, exclaimed, “That is my true friend and master! I won’t take up drinking myself, and I won’t adopt his coarse behavior, but I’ll just follow his teaching.”

And that very day, Myōkan packed for his journey.

After going some one hundred *ri*, Myōkan came to a roofless houseboat.⁸ The Master received him just as if they had been old friends, and together they talked and laughed all day.



On one occasion the Master participated in a vegetarian feast.⁹

A certain Zen teacher who was present held up his bowing mat and asked, “See it?”¹⁰

“I see it,” the Master replied.

“What do you see?” the teacher demanded.

The Master told him, “I see you squirming in agony while you truckle to the parishioners.”



There was an old woman whose child died and who beseeched the Master to officiate at the cremation service. When the service was ended, the old woman approached the Master and said, “I have been most fortunate to receive Your Reverence’s care and compassion. Please tell me, where has my child gone now?”

The Master found himself unable to reply, and the old woman, grieving piteously, left.

The Master thought, “Till now I always believed I’d attained some realization. But now, when it came to leading a funeral service, I had no idea where the deceased had come to rest. How can I call myself abbot of a Zen temple?”

And so saying, he left the temple behind and set off once more on pilgrimage.

One day on the road, crossing the ridge at Hibara, the Master encountered a monk who had realized the Way. Their incisive challenges and responses flew back and forth, the clatter of their words like thorny chestnuts, and the Master found himself unable to either advance or retreat. He asked the man his name, but the monk would not answer.

This experience inspired the Master to renewed resolve, and he set off directly for Suse in Mikawa. Here he erected a simple retreat and retired into strict seclusion, his doubt weighing on him like a mountain.¹¹

Next, the Master took his well-worn meditation cushion to the mountains in Ōmi. He encountered a daimyo named Horita Shinano no Kami, who provided the Master with a secluded retreat. Here the Master would spend all day sitting in meditation on a rock and all night sitting in meditation on the platform cover over a well.

Suddenly one night the Master's meditation cushion wore through and the wood slats of the well platform supporting him snapped. At that moment he experienced realization of the koan he had puzzled over till that time and composed a *gatha*:

Dust and dirt: the squabbling over right and wrong,
 loss
 and gain
 What kind of man surrenders to the other army
 without
 a fight?
 As night wears on, the rain lets up
 It's hard, they say, to forget the places to which one's
 grown accustomed
 Tears without end line my cheeks.



One day the Master experienced a profound realization of the words of the monk at Hibara. “These days,” he thought to himself, “there’s no one who can tell a tortoise from a terrapin.¹² Rather than waste my time searching after some teacher’s phony written sanction, better to obtain the invisible sanction of the buddhas and patriarchs themselves.”

So saying, the Master burned incense and murmured a silent invocation: “If my experience is genuine, let all the buddhas of the three worlds and the successive generations of Zen patriarchs testify to my enlightenment!¹³ But if my experience is false, let me here and now suffer the punishment of all the dragons and gods and all the major and minor deities of heaven and earth!”

At that moment, day broke, the first morning of the new year. The Master recited a gatha:

Springtime arrives in the world of men
 bestowing immeasurable blessings
 Each and every flower an offering, a thus-come
 buddha!
 Unexpectedly the lingering snow has melted away
 And everything in the vast universe beams with
 delight.¹⁴



During the Genna era, Nansenji was established in Edo, and Taigu was installed as founding abbot.

At this time, the daimyo Horie Yamashiro Tadaharu kept a pair of prostitutes.¹⁵ The first was named Cricket, the second, Bell-Ring Cricket. In the daimyo’s residence was a handsome young page who had just reached manhood, and the two prostitutes were always trying to catch sight of him, though with scant success. One day, however, when the daimyo had gone out,

a group of pages and samurai retainers were drinking and carousing, and the young page was secretly observed by the prostitutes through a peephole. There followed an exchange of letters, and soon the three were amorously entangled, the page unable to resist the prostitutes' advances.

When word of this reached the daimyo, he was furious. The page was sent a blade and ordered to commit suicide, while the two prostitutes, terrified, fled to Nansenji, where they pleaded for assistance. Taigu hurriedly shaved their heads and gave them nun's robes, after which they hid themselves in a remote alley.

The irate daimyo dispatched samurai retainers to track down the prostitutes, and learning they had gone to Nansenji, the warriors entered the temple precincts in search of the pair.

Taigu told the daimyo's men, "I know nothing of this." To which the enraged samurai declared, "In that case, we demand to search the temple!"

Taigu allowed them to proceed, but though they searched high and low, they failed to find their quarry and returned home empty-handed.

News of these events was soon circulating in the city and thence to all the temples, including claims that the two prostitutes were being concealed at Nansenji. A greedy individual thereupon produced a woodblock print, which was hawked by a local gangster and featured two attractive Buddhist nuns, to which was later added the image of a giant Buddhist priest. By this means, false rumors were spread about, rumors that the Edo branch temples reported to the Kyoto headquarters temple, Myōshinji, in Kyoto. Taigu was consequently banned from the main temple.

Determined to clear his name, Taigu departed abruptly for the imperial capital [i.e., Kyoto], reaching the post station at Akasaka, where he hired a horse and groom.

From time to time, the groom would casually sing a ditty popular among packhorse drivers:

Spring showers at Kitayama—
 Pay them no heed
 And they'll clear up.¹⁶

Deeply struck by the song, Taigu clapped his hands and told the horse driver, "I won't be going to Kyoto!" He thereupon returned to Nansenji, reflecting, "This is the best way for me to humble myself. If I appeal to the authorities at Myōshinji, the rights and wrongs of the matter will remain murky. For now I'll just stay quiet." So the Master abandoned his plan to travel to Kyoto and simply returned to Edo and Nansenji.

In the seventh month of Meishō (1636), seven years after Taigu's expulsion from the headquarters temple, Tenkai wrote to Myōshinji on the twelfth memorial of Tokugawa Ieyasu's death asking that Taigu be pardoned and praising him as an eminent monk. "While I do not know the truth or falsehood of the matter," Tenkai wrote, "if proof of guilt is lacking, Taigu should be promptly restored to full privileges at the temple lest its reputation thereby be tarnished."¹⁷

Myōshinji complied with Tenkai's request, and Taigu proceeded directly to the Kyoto temple, reciting a gatha before the founder Kanzan's pagoda, Misshō-an:

Neither an ill-omened owl nor an auspicious phoenix
 Yet skilled both at concealment and freely flying
 about
 When circumstances are right, the crooked will cease
 to
 conceal the straight

And the mountains of self-and-other be everywhere
Destroyed.



Praise of Taigu's realization of Zen reached the retired emperor [Gomizuno'ō], who had Master Gudō summon Taigu to an audience.

The Master, however, declared, "I can be a host; I can never be a guest."

The retired emperor did not invite the Master again . . .

Later, the Master was heard to remark, "Had I responded to the imperial summons, our school would likely have fallen into the dirt!"



Another account of the episode is included in part 7 of the Zen master and scholar Mujaku Dōchu's (1653–1744) Shōbōzanshi, a history of the Myōshinji line:

The retired emperor was greatly taken with Zen. Master Gudō frequently praised Taigu to His Majesty, who consequently wished to meet the Zen master in person. Gudō communicated the retired emperor's wishes to Taigu, who replied, "I'm just a country priest. I'm not someone who's suited to appear before noble persons. Nor can I be compared with teachers like yourself."

Gudō reported this to the retired emperor, who observed, "Taigu is boastful about Buddhism."

When this comment reached Taigu, he declared, "The retired emperor lacks a deep-seated faith [in the Dharma]. Had I presented myself at court, I'd have just spoken out spontaneously, wildly, and gotten myself exiled for sure. That's why I don't

involve myself with people's affairs but hide from the world and keep my head down."



In the second year of Meireki (1656), the Master suffered a bout of lumbago and traveled to bathe in the hot springs of Kaga. His route led throughout the [neighboring] province of Echizen. Here there resided a certain Shimada, a samurai retainer of the domain, whose layman's Buddhist name was Hōsetsu and who came to study under the Master when the Master was in Edo. Shimada therefore prevailed upon the Master to stop at his mansion, where he tended to him devotedly. The Master remained ill and was unable to return home.

The following year, the great lord of the province, Minamoto Mitsumichi,¹⁸ departing the imperial court, dispatched a messenger to inquire about the Master's illness. The daimyo went to call on him—the Master having now recovered—[at the home of his retainer] Shimada.

Although his illness had passed, the Master's legs remained completely numb. Unable to walk on his own, he would hoist himself on top of his bed quilt and use it to pull himself along.

The daimyo prepared to welcome the Master, who, hauling himself along on the quilt with his own hands, entered the daimyo's presence. His Lordship received the Master with the utmost reverence and devotion.

Master Gudō, too, had come to make His Lordship's acquaintance, and the daimyo exclaimed, "The chance to glimpse the *udumbara* in bloom is as nothing compared to the difficulty of meeting a single true teacher.¹⁹ Now today I have met *two* sage-like masters!"

Gudō declared, "Your Lordship is endowed with surpassing

wisdom such as is rarely encountered and would be prized in any land.”

The daimyo replied to Gudō, “I thank Your Reverence for at-testing to my realization.”

At this, the Master flushed and said, “Old man Gudō, you can’t tell good from bad and hand out your sanction indiscriminately. What can this pasty-faced kid know about anything?”

The daimyo, visibly taken aback, thought to himself, “I am lord of the entire domain. Who is there dares reproach me to my face like this? Truly, here is one worthy to be my teacher!”

On another day, when he had invited the Master to a vegetar-ian feast, the daimyo told him, “It was my misfortune that my father died prematurely, so from a young age I had to assume his position and duties. Yet now it has been my good fortune to encounter Your Reverence. What I wish is to offer you a site on which to erect a temple, so that you may serve as my teacher.”

The Master bowed in agreement, saying, “I receive Your Lord-ship’s command.”

The daimyo then immediately ordered his palanquin and took the Master to view the site he had in mind. His Lordship himself laid out the boundaries for the temple, which was completed in two years and named Daianji.

With his own hands, the Master himself planted auspicious shrubs and rare trees, and had countless others planted as well.

A monk asked, “What are you doing planting all these deep in the mountains?”²⁰

The Master replied, “You tell me: Why do I have to do this?”

The monk said, “How about working but not getting any merit?”

The Master told him, “I’m inept; I haven’t anything to teach people.”

The monk stifled a laugh.

Another monk remarked, “Your Reverence does not observe

[Confucian] practices of respect and ceremony, but wherever he goes, [unobtrusively] leads the assembly of monks in performing manual labor. Is there any benefit in this?”

The Master said, “Not particularly. Just to see yourself.”

The monk asked, “What do you mean by ‘see?’”

The Master told him, “You don’t see yourself.”



Once the Master was at the mansion of Layman Hōsetsu. So many male and female lay adherents arrived to pay their respects that it was like a marketplace, and the Master took advantage of the opportunity to deliver a sermon.

Hōsetsu said, “Your Reverence talks about Buddhism day in and day out, but I’ve yet to hear you say anything about the business of our school [i.e., Zen].”

The Master told him, “If I did say anything about that, I’m afraid people wouldn’t even have a clue.”



On another occasion, the layman brought up the story of the heretic and the sparrow.²¹ The layman asked the Master, “What is the meaning of the Buddha’s answer?”

The Master replied, “Suppose you tell me what you would have said.”

The layman answered, “If anyone were present and asked me, I’d probably shout at him, ‘What a lot of meaningless noise! Sizzle, sizzle!’”²²

The Master said, “You’re just talking about yourself.”

The layman asked, “Your Reverence, how would you answer?”

The Master said, “The World-Honored-One had nothing particular to teach. He just wanted to settle things once and for all.”



On another occasion the layman asked, “I’ve always understood the Way to lie in concentrating mind (J. *nen*). How have I failed to understand?”

The Master told him, “You have the capacity for enlightenment.”

Another time, the layman asked, “I beg Your Reverence for some expedient means to guide me to realization.”

Again the Master told him, “You have the capacity for enlightenment.”



The daimyo of Awa invited the Master to assume abbacy of Kōgenji, declaring, “The Zen temple Kōgenji is the place of our ancestors’ tombs and from generation to generation has been under our guardianship. I humbly request that Your Reverence will condescend to serve as abbot.”

The Master said, “I will accept an abbacy for the sake of the Way, but never to occupy a particular office.”

A monk remarked, “Kōgenji is a prestigious temple that was originally branch temple of another Zen lineage, and it is now to be granted to Your Reverence. Should Your Reverence assume its abbacy, would this not be a great coup for our line?”

The Master told him, “His Lordship is only interested in the graves of his ancestors; he has no interest in the Way.”



The Master happened to run into Master Gudō [Tōshoku] in Kyoto. Gudō [subsequently] dispatched a monk to inquire about the Master’s well-being. The Master then ordered his attendant to bring some sesame buns to thank the monk, but the monk would not eat them.²³ The Master then sent for more of the buns, but still the monk refused to eat.

The Master called, “Attendant, attendant, bring me my staff!

This lordly envoy declines to eat sesame buns. Perhaps I can thank our distinguished visitor by simply letting him have a taste of my stick!”

The monk fled.



It once happened that the shogun Iemitsu held a grand vegetarian feast on the occasion of a memorial for his wet nurse, Her Ladyship Rinshō-in.²⁴ The Master was requested to deliver a sermon on Zen [at the memorial] but declared, “My particular teaching is grounded in the seat of Dharma itself. Unless a monk has been studying Zen for a long time, I do not permit him to see me for private instruction. One must not haphazardly permit beginners in Zen practice and study to interfere with others’ questioning and examining with the teacher. That’s why the abbots of Zen temples and teachers of advanced standing in our line just select from their assembly of monks a few dozen [capable] students. Then host and guest can confront each other, and attainment be weighed in the give-and-take of dialogue to the wonder and admiration of both monk and lay followers.”²⁵

The shogun told the nun Sushi, abbess of Saishōji, “For some time I have heard of Master Taigu’s reputation for wisdom. Now, by good fortune he is to come. I greatly look forward to meeting him, and I am sure I can rely on you to arrange things so that this will be possible.”

Privately, the Master received word of the shogun’s intentions and that very night secretly left the capital.

Long afterward, the Master was questioned about this by a monk: “It is said that the Buddha’s teaching must be bestowed on kings, ministers, and powerful supporters. So why, in years past, did Your Reverence run away?”

The Master replied, “Those who dedicate themselves to the Dharma do not shrink from death or destruction.”

The monk said, “I am still in doubt as to Your Reverence’s meaning.”

The Master told him, “By nature I’m coarse in my manner and incapable of smoothing things over with consoling words.”²⁶



Master Gudō prepared a poem to present at the three hundredth memorial service for Myōshinji’s celebrated founder, Kanzan Egen, held in the second year of Manji (1659).

The poem read:

Of the twenty-four lines of Japanese Zen,²⁷
 Most, alas, have perished
 Fortunately Kanzan has Gudō
 And the torch continues to be passed on,
 its fragrance carried across three hundred years.

Before delivering the poem, Gudō showed it to Taigu for comment.

Taigu said, “Two characters in the third verse need to be changed.”

Gudō asked, “How?”

Taigu said, “What do you think about adding ‘. . . and fortunately Taigu too?’”

Gudō laughed and agreed to change the line to “Kanzan is fortunate to have descendants.”

Taigu then declaimed his own verse to those assembled for the memorial:

For most of the twenty-four lines of Zen
 carried to this land by the teachers of old
 There remains neither realization nor transmission

But among the followers of the soaring dragon²⁸
 on the mountain of authentic teaching²⁹
 Rain still leaks through the roof
 and into a woven bamboo basket.³⁰



The Master asked a monk, “How old are you?”

The monk replied, “Thirty-one.”

The Master said, “At twenty-nine, the Buddha had already realized enlightenment, and here *you* are showing the same old face.”

The monk asked, “How old is Your Reverence?”

The Master replied, “Over eighty.”

“Shame on you!” the monk scolded him.³¹

The Master made a low bow.



His Lordship the daimyo once asked the Master, “I have served Your Reverence with devotion, granting you land and erecting there a temple.³² What I still can’t figure out is how you’re going to do something for me.”

The Master told him, “As for me, empty space.”



Again the daimyo questioned the Master, saying, “I have heard that the *Blue Cliff Record* is the preeminent text of the Zen school. Is that correct?”³³

The Master answered, “Yes.”

The daimyo said, “I beseech Your Reverence, instruct me in one or two of the work’s koan.”

The Master shouted, “Empty and boundless, nothing holy!”³⁴
 Does Your Lordship understand?”

The daimyo replied, “I do not.”

The Master told him, “My lecture is over.”

The daimyo, however, persisted, and the Master told him, “Words and phrases, words and phrases—by explaining things rationally you can get some sort of toehold, but it’s all idle talk, tedious blather! And I’m sure this learned priest can explain it just fine,” the Master added, turning his head and indicating a nearby monk.

The daimyo’s regard for the Master grew stronger by the day, and he asked the Master for a Dharma name.³⁵ The Master thereupon brushed the name, “His Lordship of Daian temple, the Layman Ten Thousand Virtues—Nothing! Nothing!”³⁶



In the fifth year of Kanbun (1665), the Master was seventy-nine and beset by the infirmities of age. He spoke to the [Echizen] daimyo, who proposed erecting for him a special detached hermitage within the temple grounds.

The Master told him, “Forget it! Even if you manage to set up such a place, I’ve got no more than a few days left.”

The daimyo replied, “My late elder sister, the nun Jōkan, had intended to relocate from her temporary dwelling to a retreat in the mountains. If Your Reverence has no objection [to occupying the spot], I am certain my late sister would have been overjoyed.”³⁷

The Master acquiesced, saying, “Let’s move there!”

This hermitage is today the [Daianji] subtemple Shōun-in.³⁸



[During his last years,] the Master would live in retreat at Hōtōji in Harima or return to convalesce at Shōunji in Echizen. One day, when the Master was eighty-five and staying at Hōtōji, he

announced to the assembly of monks, “The time has arrived for me to be off on pilgrimage.³⁹ I’m going to Echizen.”

The monks said, “In consideration of Your Reverence’s great age and virtue, go to pass away in that temple.”

The Master added, “Some time ago, I was in Echizen and had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the province’s daimyo.” The Master then summoned his palanquin and departed.

At the time, Echizen had been ravaged by fire, reducing the daimyo’s entire castle to ashes. Learning of this, the monks sent a messenger after the Master to halt his journey. But the Master told him, “Having come this far, I’m not turning back. My connection with this world is almost up. What other chance will I have?”

In the seventh month, during autumn of that year [1669], the Master had begun to show slight symptoms of illness, but his pulse was normal, and he was not experiencing any severe discomfort.⁴⁰ Some fourteen days later, he brushed his death verse:

The Dharma heir of the western skies [i.e., India]
 The Hun-lun Mountain of the eastern seas (i.e.,
 Japan)⁴¹
 One’s ordinary dynamic activity
 Is the teaching of nonduality.⁴²

To which the Master added the inscription, “Three days before my passing.” Then, having discussed with those present the arrangements for his death, he said not another word.

The following evening, the Master summoned the attendant monk Ridatsu and asked for writing paper. Ridatsu, bearing the paper between his palms, presented it respectfully to the Master. The Master slapped him.

The next day, the sixteenth day [of the seventh month], the Master peacefully passed away.

The lord of the province told his retainer, Layman Hōsetsu, “It’s bad luck that I’m down with the flu and unable to hasten to His Reverence. Please hurry there in my place.”

The layman, attiring himself in the robe and headgear of the daimyo, [set off for the Master’s temple]. He then stood facing the coffin containing the Master’s body and prostrated himself just as he would do when the Master was alive.

Some sixteen years before the Master’s passing, the daimyo had a portrait of the Master painted, which he asked the Master to inscribe.

When he had completed the inscription, the Master postdated it “sixteenth day of the seventh month.” Now, in astonishment, the daimyo wondered, “How did the Master know?”

A lively collection of folk tales and Buddhist teaching stories from four noted premodern Japanese Zen masters: Taigu Sōchiku (1584–1669), Sengai Gibon (1750–1837), Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769), and Taigu Ryōkan (1758–1831).

Zen Master Tales collects never-before-translated stories of four prominent Zen masters from the Edo period of Japanese history (1603–1868). Drawn from an era that saw the “democratization” of Japanese Zen, these stories paint a picture of robust, funny, and poignant engagement between Zen luminaries and the emergent *chonin* or “townsperson” culture of early modern Japan. Here we find Zen monks engaging with samurai, merchants, housewives, entertainers, and farmers. These masters affirmed that the essentials of Zen practice—zazen, koan study, and even enlightenment—could be conveyed to all members of Japanese society in ordinary speech, including even comic verse and work songs.

In his introduction, translator Peter Haskel explains the history of Zen “stories” from the tradition’s Golden Age in China through the compilation of the classic koan collections and on to the era from which the stories in *Zen Master Tales* are drawn. What was true of the Chinese tradition, he writes—“its focus on the individual’s ordinary activity as the function, the manifestation of the absolute”—continued in the Japanese context. “Most of these Japanese stories, however unabashedly humorous and at times crude, impart something of the character of the Zen masters involved, whose attainment must be plainly manifest in even the most humble and unlikely of situations.”

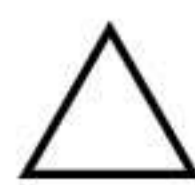
PETER HASKEL received a PhD in East Asian Studies from Columbia University. He is the translator of *Bankei Zen: Translations from the Record of Bankei, Letting Go: The Story of Zen Master Tōsui, Sword of Zen: Master Takuan and His Writings on Immovable Wisdom and the Sword Taia*, and cotranslator with Ryūichi Abé of *Great Fool: Zen Master Ryōkan—Letters and Other Writings*.

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