

# Shih-wu

(1272–1352)



China underwent profound change in the century between Ta-hui's death and the birth of Shih-wu. Early in the thirteenth century, Genghis Khan swept into China, and by mid-century, most of the north was in the hands of his grandson, Kublai Khan. The south fell to Mongol forces with scant resistance when Shih-wu was a boy, so he grew up in a nation reunited under foreign rule. Buddhism fared very well throughout the new regime, the Yüan dynasty, though Ch'an slipped to second place in imperial favor, behind the Vajrayāna tradition of Tibet, which Kublai Khan himself preferred.

In stark contrast to Ta-hui, Shih-wu is almost unknown today. He lived his entire life within a seventy-five mile radius of his birthplace in far eastern China, making his longest trip at seventeen, when he became a novice at a temple near Mt. Ching. After ordaining at twenty, he entered the mountains to study first with the important Yang-ch'i school teacher Kao-feng Yüan-miao (1238–1295) and then with Chi-an, another master in this branch of the Lin-chi lineage. After nine years of mountain practice, upset by a sharp reproach from Chi-an, Shih-wu set out to leave, but a glimpse of a rain shelter suddenly turned him around for good. He went back, received confirmation of his realization, and spent much of the next eleven years with Chi-an, accompanying him to the nearby city of Huchou when Chi-an was named abbot of a monastery there. At forty, rather than accepting a temple appointment himself, Shih-wu (lit., Stone House) headed back to the hills, resuming the hermit life so lovingly described in his poems.

The ancient Taoist themes of simplicity, naturalness, and ease resound in Shih-wu's writing, ringing out clearly within the Ch'an setting. Everything in his mountain life that might seem a hardship to others—very plain food, crude and cramped quarters, dearth of human contact—Shih-wu celebrates as an outright virtue or at least preferable to what a city dweller can know. Though he evokes Pai-chang's dictum that "A day without work is a day without eating" and obviously prided himself on his labors, he also exults in the leisureliness of his life, "relaxing all day on a peak." The unharried work that he did with his hoe he contrasts with the chase for fame and fortune going on in the dusty world below, even among Ch'an monks. "I wear myself out," he writes, "but not for the

State”—and not for the Dharma either, it seems. He represents himself as reluctant even to open his mouth if a visitor came seeking guidance.

Yet Shih-wu packed his verses with practice pointers and encouragements, enticements and goads, allusions to sutras and Ch'an stories. They seem casually tossed off, and perhaps were, but he clearly intended them to inspire and instruct his readers. While rejoicing over the wild pleasures of his home, he also cautions that “pine trees and strange rocks remain unknown / to those who look for mind with mind”—a warning that goes at least as far back as Seng-ts'an (Chapter 2): “To get hold of the mind by using the mind, / isn't that a gross error . . . ?” Other of his allusions are more current and less direct. When he confesses to idle thoughts during sitting meditation, he comments, “the dead wood I gather for my stove,” and though he has not used the characters for *k'u-mu*, the silent-illumination debate echoes discernibly in the distance.

Two of Shih-wu's poems refer explicitly to Han-shan, inviting comparisons between these Ch'an hermit-poets. Given the blurred image we have of Han-shan, such comparisons cannot be very finely or assuredly drawn, but it seems safe to say that Shih-wu makes basically the same critique of society as Han-shan does and touts the same dual freedom of wild solitude and awakened mind. Yet Shih-wu seems more domestic and more serene in his choices than his forerunner was, both less anguished and less zany than Han-shan. He definitely was less isolated, better established, and more widely appreciated by people of his own day.

Shih-wu mentions “two or three fellow monks” on his mountaintop and an occasional visitor from the flatland, but like Po Chü-i and countless other Chinese poets, he tended to write from a more solitary spot than he occupied in actuality. His roost was only a day's walk from the temple where he lived in the latter years of his study with Chi-an, and its elevation was hardly forbidding—just 1350 feet. Enough people beat a path to his door during his forties and fifties that Shih-wu became famous, and in 1330, he reluctantly accepted the abbacy of an important temple that Kublai Khan had undertaken to restore. After seven years as abbot, at sixty-six, he retired again to his mountain home, and the poems that follow were written there, sometime in the fourteen years before he died. A few months prior to his death, the empress honored the elderly recluse with a golden robe.

Two anthologies of Shih-wu's work were published posthumously—his *Mountain Poems*, excerpted here, and a collection of *gāthās* and occasional verse. These have barely kept his name alive in Chinese poetry, and his reputation as a Ch'an master has faded even more. As a teacher, Shih-wu may have made his greatest, most lasting contribution through his Dharma heir Taego Pou (1301–1382), a Korean master who unified his country's nine schools of Sŏn (i.e., Ch'an) Buddhism into the Chogyŏ order, which remains vigorous today not only in Korea but in the United States and elsewhere. ☸

## FROM MOUNTAIN POEMS

## SHIH-WU'S INTRODUCTION

Here in the woods I have lots of free time. When I don't spend it sleeping, I enjoy composing chants. But with paper and ink so scarce, I haven't thought about writing them down. Now some Zen monks have asked me to record what I find of interest on this mountain. I've sat here quietly and let my brush fly. Suddenly this volume is full. I close it and send it back down with the admonition not to try singing these poems. Only if you sit on them will they do you any good.

1

I live far off in the wild  
 where moss and woods are thick and plants perfumed  
 I can see mountains rain or shine  
 and never hear market noise  
 I light a few leaves in my stove to heat tea  
 to patch my robe I cut off a cloud  
 lifetimes seldom fill a hundred years  
 why suffer for profit and fame

2

good and bad fortune never lose their way  
 success and failure both follow karma  
 just realize they're empty at heart  
 and what doesn't change is real

3

this body's existence is like a bubble's  
 may as well accept what happens  
 events and hopes seldom agree  
 but who can step back doesn't worry  
 we blossom and fade like flowers  
 gather and part like clouds  
 worldly thoughts I forgot long ago  
 relaxing all day on a peak.

LINE 1 The *Diamond Sutra* ends with this *gāthā*: "Everything dependent / is a dream an illusion a bubble a shadow / it's dew or it's lightning / regard it like this."

4

my Ch'an hut leans at the summit  
 clouds sail back and forth  
 a waterfall hangs in front  
 a mountain ridge crests in back  
 on a rock wall I sketched three buddhas  
 for incense there's a plum branch in a jar  
 the fields below might be level  
 but can't match a mountain home free of dust

LINE 5 The images were probably those of Amitābha, Shākyamuni and Maitreya, the buddhas of the past, present, and future.

5

I searched creation without success  
 then by chance found this forested ridge  
 my thatch hut cuts through heaven's blue  
 a moss-slick trail through dense bamboo  
 others are moved by profit and fame  
 I grow old living for Ch'an  
 pine trees and strange rocks remain unknown  
 to those who look for mind with mind

6

the sun rises east and falls west at night  
 the bell sounds at dusk the rooster at dawn  
 Yin and Yang have turned my head to snow  
 over the years I've used a hundred crocks of pickles  
 I plant pines for beams in the clearings  
 spit out peach pits for shade along the trails  
 tell the world's hunted birds  
 head for the mountains and choose any tree

LINE 4 Chinese eat pickles, especially in the morning, with steamed rice or rice porridge. There are hundreds of varieties made from just about every kind of vegetable.

7

the Way is so rare it can't be copied  
 but a well-hidden hut comes close  
 for cover I've grown bamboo in front  
 from the rocks led a spring to the kitchen

gibbons bring their young when cliff fruits turn ripe  
 cranes change their nests when gorge pines turn brown  
 lots of idle thoughts occur in *ch'an*  
 the dead wood I gather for my stove

8

a friend of seclusion arrives at my fence  
 we wave and pardon our lack of decorum  
 a white mane gathered back  
 patched robe loosely draped  
 embers of leaves at the end of the night  
 howl of a gibbon breaking the dawn  
 sitting on straw facing in quilts  
 language forgotten we finally meet

LINE 2-3 Some sort of headgear is called for in meeting someone outside.

9

cares disappeared when I entered the mountains  
 serene at heart I let them fly  
 the shade in front fades in fall  
 the stream roars after a rain  
 I offer tea and greens to a visiting farmer  
 a neighbor monk daisies in a pot from town  
 the jaded life of the gentry  
 can't match a hermit's with scenes like these

10

where did that gust come from  
 whistling through the heavens  
 shaking the whole forest  
 blowing open my bamboo door  
 without arms or legs  
 how does it move around  
 impossible to track  
 in the cliffs a tiger laughs

LINE 8 Some texts have "a tiger roars."

11

you're bound to become a buddha if you practice  
 if water drips long enough even rocks wear through

it's not true thick skulls can't be pierced  
people just imagine their minds are hard

12

becoming a buddha is easy  
but ending illusions is hard  
so many frosted moonlit nights  
I've sat and felt the cold before dawn

13

stripped of reason my mind is blank  
emptied of being my nature is bare  
at night my windows often breathe white  
the moon and stream come right to the door

14

no one else sees what I see clearly  
no one else knows what I know well  
I recall one misty day last autumn  
a gibbon came by and stole two pears

15

my hut isn't quite six feet across  
surrounded by pines bamboos and mountains  
an old monk hardly has room for himself  
much less for a visiting cloud

LINE 3 A grown man in China was called a *six-footer*, and six feet was also the dimension of a monk's cell.

16

a pot of parched wheat and pine meal  
a dish of bamboo shoots and vine buds  
completely worn out I've no other thought  
let others become gods or buddhas

17

standing outside my pointed-roof hut  
who'd guess how spacious it is inside  
a galaxy of worlds is there  
with room to spare for a zazen cushion

18

Cold Mountain has a line  
my mind is like the autumn moon  
I have a line of my own  
my mind outshines the autumn moon  
not that the autumn moon isn't bright  
but once full it fades  
no match for my mind  
always full and bright  
as to what the mind is like  
why don't you tell me

19

forty-some years I've lived in the mountains  
ignorant of the world's rise and fall  
warmed at night by a stove full of pine needles  
satisfied at noon by a bowl of wild plants  
sitting on rocks watching clouds and empty thoughts  
patching my robe in sunlight practicing silence  
till someone asks why Bodhidharma came east  
and I hang out my wash

LINE 7 Probably the most common of all koans is "Why did Bodhidharma come east?" (Or "from the west").