

6. Hakuin

From Hakuin's song of meditation

All beings are from the first Buddhas.

It is like water and ice:

Apart from water, no ice;

Outside living beings, no Buddhas.

Not knowing it is near, they seek it afar.

What a pity.

Like one in water crying out in thirst;

Like a rich child straying amongst the poor;

The cause of our circling through the six worlds

Is that we are on the dark paths of ignorance.

Dark path upon dark path treading,

When shall we escape from birth-and-death?

Background

Kyoto, along with its magnificent temples, was virtually burnt to the ground during the Onin wars in the late fifteenth century. Although the temples were restored – an inheritance which is appreciated throughout the world today – the Buddhist establishment was severely damaged. With the national peace imposed by the Tokugawa regime early in the seventeenth century there was state support and control of Buddhist institutions. This political dependency tended to encourage a general decline in serious spiritual striving, nurturing intellectual pursuits in place of meditation. Zen was generally more resilient than the other Buddhist traditions, but it too suffered. However, as the Tokugawa government shifted the capital from Kyoto to Edo (now Tokyo), Rinzai Zen transformed its appeal from the old aristocracy to the broader populace. Bankei led the way in this direction, and Hakuin consolidated the revival of Rinzai Zen.

Life of Hakuin

Hakuin was born to a commoner family in the town of Hara in 1685. He used to accompany his parents to the local temple, which belonged to the Nichiren school. His obvious intelligence was enhanced by a remarkable memory. By the age of four he knew three hundred local songs by heart. While still very young he was deeply disturbed by a sermon on the eight hot hells, and he stayed away from the temple. In time, however, his confusion turned into a deep desire to know the truth, and he eventually persuaded his parents to allow him to follow a religious way of life. At fourteen he entered the Shoinji Temple of the Rinzai school and was given the preliminary ordination in 1699. He undertook disciplined studies, which included journeying from temple to temple to listen to the discourses of well-known Buddhists. His travels were

interrupted by the death of his mother in 1706, after which he went through a period of despair about the efficacy of the Buddha's teachings. During that dark period he learnt a great deal about literary style from the renowned poet Ba-o, and used what he had gained to good effect later in life.

In 1708 he went to study at a temple in Takata, and then moved to Iiyama where he met an elderly priest named Etan. Although Etan treated Hakuin roughly and with seeming indifference, Hakuin was drawn to Etan's character and to a subtle radiance about his being. So he remained at Iiyama. One day, after months of harsh treatment, Hakuin was making his rounds in Iiyama when his mind was lit up by a wondrous sense of the Way. He became so absorbed in his luminous thought that he failed to notice that he had remained rooted to the spot before a doorway after he had been ordered by the master of the house to move on. Not hearing the exasperated pleas of the householder, he stood still until the man threw a writing brush and knocked him over. Several passers-by helped him to his feet, but he only clapped his hands and laughed. When he recovered his senses he returned to the temple. Etan saw him coming and called out, "What has happened to you?" When Hakuin explained what had happened Etan was delighted, but also warned him not to discontinue his spiritual quest.

Soon after this Hakuin was called to the aid of his first teacher, whose health was failing. Returning to a temple near his home in Hara, he cared for this teacher and also undertook austerities and studied the Blue Cliff Record (a Zen classic comprising koans, commentaries, and the Diamond Sutra). After a number of months his own health failed, and he spent a considerable period restoring it. Hakuin realised his illness was caused by an unbalanced approach to spiritual life and sought help from a hermit who lived in the mountains. This hermit helped him in many ways, including giving him visualisation exercises and encouraging Hakuin to develop energy in his hara.

Once recovered, Hakuin resumed his studies and travels. By now he began to instruct others, and gained a number of disciples. His inclination was to retire to the mountains, but just as he was preparing to become a recluse he heard that his father was dying and therefore returned to Hara to care for him. After this he took up residence at the Shoinji temple, which had fallen into extreme disrepair. Water

rushed through its roofs whenever it rained, and weeds grew in its gardens. Living there in austerity he taught and ministered to the peasants in the surrounding area, he oversaw the training of monks, and he maintained warm relations with monks and nobles throughout Japan. For almost forty years he laboured on behalf of others at the Shoinji temple, invariably surprising visitors with his energy and enthusiasm. People from diverse Buddhist traditions, and even followers of Taoism and Confucianism, sought and received his guidance

In addition, he nurtured a simple and moving form of calligraphy and painting which permanently reoriented Zen art. Many of his brush works survive. He died in 1769.

Hakuin's teachings and methods

Hakuin emphasised that people should neither seek enlightenment, nor even worldly gain, for themselves alone. The bodhisattva ideal was so much a part of Hakuin's thinking and being that he rarely used that particular term in his teaching.

Although he recommended activities such as meditation, chanting, study, reflection, ritual and various secular activities, he insisted that merely sitting in formal meditation, or simply being involved in any other particular activity, should not be taken as an end in itself.

Hakuin resolved the long-standing dispute between those who considered enlightenment came gradually and those who considered it came suddenly. In relation to this, his "Explication of the Four Knowledges of Buddhahood" says:

"When the student has accumulated effort in study and investigation and the enlightened nature suddenly appears, all at once he realizes the essence of inner reality; when one form of knowledge is actualized, all are actualized. Yet even though one reaches the stage of Buddhahood without passing through steps and stages, if one does not cultivate practice gradually, it is impossible to fulfil omniscience, independent knowledge and ultimate great enlightenment."

He varied his teaching emphasis to suit his audience. When writing to nobles and rulers he emphasized the need for a meditative state of mind at all times. He courageously spoke to people in high places about the decadence of the times and the need for self-discipline and meditation. They accepted his frank

assessments without rancour. [Indeed, they generously supported the publication of his poems, sermons, letters and stories.]

When speaking to peasants he underlined the importance of a life of ethical principles. He did not give them strict instruction in meditation, preferring to emphasize the possibility of engaging in any activity – cooking, tilling the soil, washing, sweeping, sewing – with a meditative state of mind. In addition to teaching "meditation in action" he wrote out and told edifying stories to illustrate everyday ethical principles, often drawing upon secular literature and styles.

He frequently reminded the monks that a common-sense approach to physical health and well-being would aid meditation. In guiding monks Hakuin made use of koans. Although books of koans existed, he made his own collection which suited his methods. Hakuin appended brief comments to the koans he used, not as "solutions" but as reflections to aid the disciple.

Although Hakuin was convinced of the value of Rinzai Zen he was tolerant towards other teachers and schools. Although he generally did not reject other approaches, he viewed the Pure Land school as an aberration that was not a legitimate part of the Buddhist tradition.

Is that so?

A beautiful girl in the village was pregnant. Her angry parents demanded to know who was the father. At first resistant to confess, the anxious and embarrassed girl finally pointed to Hakuin, the Zen master whom everyone previously revered for living such a pure life. When the outraged parents confronted Hakuin with their daughter's accusation, he simply replied "Is that so?"

When the child was born, the parents brought it to the Hakuin, who now was viewed as a pariah by the whole village. They demanded that he take care of the child since it was his responsibility. "Is that so?" Hakuin said calmly as he accepted the child.

For many months he took very good care of the child until the daughter could no longer withstand the lie she had told. She confessed that the real father was a young man in the village whom she had tried to protect. The parents immediately went to Hakuin to see if he would return the baby. With profuse apologies they explained what had happened. "Is that so?" Hakuin said as he handed them the child.