

Hakuin's Song of Zazen

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Produced by the [Zen Buddhist Order of Hsu Yun](#)

Discussion notes 'Song' here means a style of verse that express Hakuin's understanding of enlightenment. Many teachers of the Dhyana School (Chan in China, Zen in Japan, Sōn in Korea) composed such verses.²

All beings by nature are Buddha,
As ice by nature is water.
Apart from water there is no ice;
Apart from beings, no Buddha.

From the beginning all beings are Buddha.
Like water and ice, without water no ice, outside us
no Buddhas.

*If all beings are like Buddha, is Buddha like all beings? Are they both conditioned (paṭicca-samuppāda), or unconditioned? Is that an appropriate question? Water is liquid and ice is solid in dependence on temperature, which is an external condition. Is it an external condition that turns all beings into Buddhas, (other-power rather than own-power) or does that stretch the metaphor too far?*³

How sad that people ignore the near
And search for truth afar:
Like someone in the midst of water
Crying out in thirst,
Like a child of a wealthy home
Wandering among the poor.
Lost on dark paths of ignorance,
We wander through the Six Worlds,
From dark path to dark path--
When shall we be freed from birth and death?

How near the truth, yet how far we seek.
Like one in water crying, "I thirst!"
Like the son of a rich man wand'ring poor on this
earth we endlessly circle the six worlds.
The cause of our sorrow is ego delusion.
From dark path to dark path we've wandered in
darkness,
how can we be freed from the wheel of samsara?

Presumably, 'near' means within one's own experience and 'far' refers to the teachings of others. But the Buddha and Hakuin were both teachers, so the scope of the metaphor must be limited.

The idea of thirst amidst water is an interesting example of metaphorical doubling. A metaphor in the target (getting rid of the metaphorical 'thirst' that causes suffering) is repeated in the source of the metaphor (an aquatic case of being blind to the true state of affairs).

Waddell gives us 'ignorance' (avijjā) where the Hsu Yun Order translation gives us 'ego delusion', which is more like a gloss on belief in a soul-like self (attā) – but that is itself a prime case of ignorance.

Oh, the zazen of the Mahayana!
To this the highest praise!
Devotion, repentance, training,
The many paramitas--
All have their source in zazen.

The gateway to freedom is zazen Samadhi.
Beyond exaltation, beyond all our praises the pure
Mahayana.
Observing the Precepts, Repentance and Giving,
the countless good deeds and the Way of Right
Living, all come from zazen.

Zazen is the formal practice of sitting in meditation. In Soto Zen it refers to 'just sitting' or 'silent illumination'. In Hakuin's Rinzai Zen, sitting meditation usually takes a koan⁴ as the object of meditative attention. It is not clear which form of zazen Hakuin has in mind, or whether he meant the term to refer more widely to meditative concentration in daily life, 'off the cushion'. On other occasions he was highly critical of the passivity of 'just sitting', speaking about the 'malady of

meditation' when pointing to an inability to transfer meditative insights into the practice of everyday life. That may be one of the insights behind his 'What is the Sound of One Hand?' koan.

Those who try zazen even once
Wipe away beginning-less crimes.
Where are all the dark paths then?

Thus one true Samadhi extinguishes evils. It purifies
karma, dissolving obstructions.
Then where are the dark paths to lead us astray?

Those who struggle with meditation may find claims of magnificent effects from miniscule causes to be over-exaggerated. Perhaps the Hsu Yun Order translation makes more sense, if read to imply eventually achieving a level of calm and concentration that purifies the mind of ingrained, habitual thoughts and behaviours.

The Pure Land itself is near.
Those who hear this truth even once
And listen with a grateful heart,
Treasuring it, revering it,
Gain blessings without end.

The Pure Lotus Land is not far away.
Hearing this truth, heart humble and grateful.
To praise and embrace it, to practice its Wisdom,
brings unending blessings, bring mountains of merit.

Literally, a Pure Land is an ideal world in another place and time, with ideal physical conditions, such as absence of arduous gradients, and groves of trees fruiting with wish-fulfilling jewels, all of which is overseen over by non-historical Buddha. Sukhāvati, the western paradise of the Buddha Amitābha, has attracted the most devotion over the centuries. But the Pure Land ideal can also bear a phenomenological interpretation, by which this place and time is a Pure Land, if seen under the right frame of mind. Blessings and merit are then part and parcel of that view of the world. It follows that this world is overseen by Gotama, sage of the Śākya clan: the historical Buddha.

Much more, those who turn about
And bear witness to self-nature,
Self-nature that is no-nature,
Go far beyond mere doctrine.

And if we turn inward and prove our True Nature,
that
True Self is no-self, our own self is no-self, we go
beyond ego and past clever words.

Doctrine is less likely to be attractive unless expressed by 'skilful means' (upaya-kausalya) to suit capabilities of the audience. Some people will be comfortable with imaginative ideas such as a Pure Land, while others will benefit from an approach that references more philosophical views, while rising above some of their associated obscurities of logic and expression. For those people, this verse presumably refers to the initial enlightening experience in Zen (kensho), or it refers to parāvṛtti: a 'turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness' (in the ālāya-vijñāna)⁵. The concept of parāvṛtti appears in the Lankavatara Sutra, which is foundational for the Chan/Zen/Sōn tradition.

By 'self-nature' or 'True-Self' is meant the outcome of kensho or parāvṛtti: the understanding that what feels like a self is actually empty (sunya): it is not-self (anattā), for as the product of causes and conditions, it's nature (svabhava) is without substance.

Thus, although claiming to go beyond doctrine, this verse rests squarely on the foundations of the Chan/Zen/Sōn school: the teachings of the historical Buddha, of Nāgārjuna, of Vasubandhu, and of the Lankāvatāra, Mahāparinirvāṇa and Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras.

Here effect and cause are the same,
The Way is neither two nor three.
With form that is no-form,
Going and coming, we are never astray,

Then the gate to the oneness of cause-and-effect
is thrown open.
Not two and not three, straight ahead runs the
Way.
Our form now being no-form, in going and
returning we never leave home.

Here the reference is probably to the discussion of causation in the 'Wild Fox Koan', in the 'Gateless Gate' collection (Mumonkan).⁶

The idea of the 'oneness of cause and effect' is problematic. It seems to represent the view that being conditioned by cause and effect is the same as being unconditioned by cause and effect. This is, in effect, a further comment on Nāgājuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā XXV, which argues that nirvāṇa is unconditioned by cause and effect, yet the same as the world cause and effect (saṃsāra). This is a paradox, in that if it is true, then the theory of cause and effect, fundamental to Buddhism, loses all meaning. Either way, the paradox that lies at the heart of Buddhist theory is amply illustrated throughout the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras, in the Heart Sūtra and in this verse. That contradiction is brought into practice by means koans such as the 'Wild Fox'.

With thought that is no-thought,
Singing and dancing are the voice of the Law.
Boundless and free is the sky of Samādhi!
Bright the full moon of wisdom!

Our thought now being no-thought, our dancing
and songs are the Voice of the Dharma.
How vast is the heaven of boundless Samadhi!
How bright and transparent the moonlight of
wisdom!

In Chan/Zen/Sōn, paradoxes are expressed by 'clever words' that are simpler and more condensed than the clever theoretical expressions of the sūtra and śāstra literature. Zen sayings have to be either intuitively understood, or subjected to long reflection.⁷ Here the fairly uncontroversial point seems to be that communication takes place by many means, not just by language.

Also, here is a paean of praise to samādhi as the ideal state of meditative concentration, which can be described metaphorically as the unsullied appearance of 'luminous mind'.

Truly, is anything missing now?
Nirvana is right here, before our eyes,
This very place is the Lotus Land,
This very body, the Buddha

What is there outside us? What is there we lack?
Nirvana is openly shown to our eyes.
This earth where we stand is the pure lotus land!
And this very body, the body of Buddha.

The feeling that we lack something is a key component of the craving and dissatisfaction that marks everyday existence; Buddhism is about coming to terms with that sensation. But again there is a paradox: if this place is the Pure Lotus Land, does that include the possibility and the actuality of human and natural evil? And are Buddhas also eventually overcome by the failure of their genetic endowment? And what about time? It is not in question that saṃsāra has extension over time, but what about nirvāṇa? Must it always be momentary? If so, are saṃsāra and nirvāṇa not essentially different? If they are the same, what do they have in common? Is one a practice and the other a principle?

General Discussion

Hakuin (1685-1768) is one of the most recent masters to have been accorded high status in the history of Buddhism, but deservedly so, for he was multi-talented: as poet, as painter and calligrapher, as a social and political commentator, as reformer of the Rinzai Zen School, and originator of an almost universally-known koan: 'What is the Sound of One Hand'.

D.T. Suzuki has argued that there are 'Three types of thought in Japanese Zen'

- 1. Dōgen's just sitting in meditation until body and mind drop away.*
- 2. Bankei's 'Unborn Zen': that the 'first order of business is to get to the bottom of your own self'.*
- 3. Hakuin's Kanna Zen: seeing into the cryptic, apparently illogical meaning of koans.⁸*

But Hakuin had a much more diverse approach than reliance solely on koans, absorbing methods and doctrinal influences from his own time, from Chan in Song Dynasty China, including from the Caodong School (Sōtō Zen).

It is recorded that fear of the Buddhist Hells and their terrors was Hakuin's initial motivation for entering a monastery as a young boy. After reaching his initial awakening (kensho) at 24, achieved while meditating on the koan 'Mu', he travelled to practice under a variety of teachers until returning to his home town to begin his career as a teacher at 32.

Although Hakuin's main focus was on how to continue development after the initial experience of awakening, he was generally critical of the way the koan system was being administered in monasteries at that time. He felt that Ming dynasty Chinese commentaries had corrupted the system by providing access to over-intellectual, 'stock' solutions, which could be used to avoid reliance on direct personal experience of entering into great doubt, in search of an intuitive experience of the meaning of the koan. Outside the monastery, he taught koan study to ordinary lay working people, in a friendly fashion and using a variety of means, such as illustrations and poetry. Inside the monastery he was a fierce and exacting teacher, pressing his students to give all their 'faith, doubt, aspiration and perseverance'⁹ to reaching understanding of one koan, before moving on to another. He used his own knowledge and understanding to change the list of appropriate koans in relation to any student's particular level of realisation, although without undertaking root-and-branch reform of the whole system.

At a time when Rinzai Zen was facing a challenge from incoming Chinese monks (Obaku Zen), Hakuin felt that Rinzai practitioners had become permeated with worldly motivations. Something about current koan practice was proving ineffective in establishing the link between time spent 'on the cushion' and time spent out in the world: between subitism (sudden awakening) and compassionate activity, between 'principle' and 'practice'. In other words, and in terms of Tōzan's 'Five Ranks', between time focussed on emptiness and time spent on discriminating activity. He felt that it was important to find awakening and emptiness in all the things that are accessed by the discriminating mind: to see the real within the provisional, so breaking down the barrier between self and other and seeing all things as 'one's own true face'.¹⁰

Hakuin felt that the most widely used koan: 'Mu', lacked the element of motivation towards compassionate activity, so developed a koan of his own to fulfil that purpose, which was based on deep reflection on the compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, known in Japanese as Kannon. The literal meaning of that name is kan (contemplating) and on (sounds).

Kannon is the focus of case 89 of the Blue Cliff Record (*Hekigan-roku*), which includes the phrase 'hand and eye through and through'. The better to help all suffering beings, Kannon is said to have a thousand arms with a thousand hands, with an eye in the palm of each hand. They represent her compassionate activity, but each activity is the work of just one hand and one eye: the Dharma eye of enlightened seeing (first mentioned by the Buddha, in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, in relation to the awakening of Kondanna). Tōzan's second rank (seeing the real within the provisional), and Kannon's compassionate activity, together constituted the matrix of influences out of which emerged Hakuin's koan: 'What is the sound of one hand?' To hear the sound of one hand is the stopping of sounds, to hear no-sound, to realise that the sound is oneself, to realise that contemplating sound is to become Kannon, and to be awakened, like Kannon, into the motivation to help all suffering beings.

But this is just a discriminating explanation of the origin and meaning of Hakuin's koan. This sort of description can point the way at the start of a long journey to awakening, but has to be left behind, for it is not a realisation that amounts to awakening. Again, there is a hint of how this process might work in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, where it is said that understanding the four Noble Truths is a three-fold process: intellectual understanding, knowing that there is more to be done, and then undertaking the effort that leads to a full realisation. The Rinzai tradition is unique (in a brief interview every day during a meditation retreat) in relying on the student to express their realisation of the meaning of the koan, and relying on the teacher to discern the validity (or otherwise) of that student's realisation.

¹ Ciolek, T. and Keremidschieff, V., (eds.), The Buddhist Studies WWW Virtual Library, http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Translations/Song_of_Zazen.htm accessed 4/7/21.

² See Lu K'uan Yü (Chalres Luk) 1993 *Chan and Zen Teaching*, Volume 2, (Maine, Samuel Weiser), pp. 27-53, for (imaginary?) verses by the Buddhas of antiquity, the twenty seven Indian Patriarchs, and the six Chinese Patriarchs.

See also: Buswell, R., et. al., *The Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*, Vol. 9, (UCLA Center for Buddhist Studies / The Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism):

<https://www.international.ucla.edu/buddhist/article/127723>

³ Perhaps the underlying argument in this verse depends on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* XXV:19: *saṃsāra* (i.e., the empirical life-death cycle) is nothing essentially different from *nirvāṇa*. *Nirvāṇa* is nothing essentially different from *saṃsāra*. (trans Inada, K.K. 1993 (Delhi, Sri Satguru).

⁴ In the 6-8th centuries, Chinese Buddhists of the Chan (Jp. *Zen*, Korean *Sōn*) school developed a method of circumventing the all-pervasive influence exerted on consciousness by language and rational thought. In 'public cases' (Ch. *kong-an*, Jap. *Koan*) of actual (and fictional) meetings between prominent teachers and their followers, questions were asked that were devoid of a straight answer. Some of these Q. and A. sessions were gathered into collections such as the *Blue Cliff Record*, the *Gateless Gate*, and the *Book of Equanimity*. Shortened versions of some of these *koans*, known as *huatou* (Ch.), *watō* (Jp.) or *hwadu* (Korean), are used in meditation. For a beginner, it is better to choose and remain within the practice of one *koan*.

⁵ According to the Yogācāra school of Vasubandhu, the 'store-house consciousness' (*ālaya-vijñāna*) is an eighth type of consciousness, beyond the five consciousnesses of information from eye, ear, smell, tongue, body, and

mental events (*manovijñāna*), and beyond the seventh consciousness of defiled or deluded awareness (*kliṣṭamanovijñāna*). In the *ālāya* the karmic consequences of our actions are deposited in the metaphorical form of 'seeds', until they can come to fruition in the future, when the cooperating causes and conditions are appropriate. Since we are unaware of this state of mind, it might better be described, in a Freudian sense, as a version of the unconscious. It is interesting that some branches of East Asian thought pushed this idea even further, in Jungian fashion, by imagining a primordial, collective form of the *ālāya*.

⁶ Cleary, Thomas, 1993, *Unlocking the Zen Koan: a new translation of the Zen Classic Wumenguan*, (Berkeley, North Atlantic), pp. 9-11.

⁷ Intuition is an unconscious mode of thought, whereas reflection is a conscious mode of thought. The difference is more apparent than real, since unconscious thinking also underpins conscious reflection. But the Buddhist reliance on meditation depends on the view that, in the end, conscious thought gets in the way of a full and wise understanding of the way things really are, especially when thought is constrained by reasoning. The Zen view is that sitting in great doubt allows the solution to arise in a way that would otherwise be blocked by relying solely on conscious thought.

⁸ Suzuki, D. T., 2014, 'Dōgen, Hakuin, Bankei, Three Types of Thought in Japanese Zen', *Selected Works, Vol. 1*, (University of California Press), pp. 68-93. This article originally appeared in the journal: 'The Eastern Buddhist': [PDF] nii.ac.jp

⁹ Ross, Edward, 2016, 'Hakuin Ekakau: What is the Sound of One Hand Clapping?' *Canons: The McGill Undergraduate Journal of Religious Studies*, (academia.edu).

¹⁰ Tokiwa, Gishin., 1991, *Hakuin Genji's Insight into the "Deep Secret of Hen (Pian) Sho (Zeng) Reciprocity" and his Koan "The Sound of One Hand"*, *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* 39 (2), pp. 989-983.

'Seeing the real within the provisional' is the second of the 'Five Ranks' of Tōzan (Dongshan Lianjie): secret formulas that are transmitted during the final stages of training:

1. The provisional within the real.
2. The real within the provisional.
3. Returning from the real.
4. Arrival at mutual integration.
5. Mutual integration affirmed. (Tokiwa 1991: 985-984)