

From “Pointing Straight to the Human Mind” to “Pointing Round to the Human Mind”

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Introduction: Surpassing Language to “Point Straight to the Human Mind”

Today the Zen school is thought of as having been founded, in China, through the efforts of Bodhidharma. Later generations of Zen practitioners, however, going back far beyond the First Patriarch Bodhidharma, sought the sect’s deeper origins in the Buddha himself. According to a legend found in various texts,¹ at the end of his life the Buddha, giving up on teaching by means of words, presented his disciples instead with the sight of a single flower taken to hand. None of them could understand what this signified, but there was one, Mahākāśyapa, who alone understood and smiled subtly. This “subtle smile at the plucked flower” (*nenge-mishō* 拈華微笑) was taken to be the origin of Zen. Its essence was in “mind-to-mind transmission” (*ishin-denshin* 以心伝心)—transmission beyond the bounds of words—and in “non-elevation of writing” (*furyū-monji* 不立文字)—the refusal to invest any text with ultimate authority. The foundational teachings of Bodhidharma in turn were encapsulated in the Buddhist slogan “pointing straight to the human mind, one sees its nature and becomes a Buddha” (*jikishi ninsbin, kenshō jobutsu* 直指人心, 見性成佛), meaning essentially that, through a direct demonstration of the human mind’s identity with the Buddha’s Mind, one comes to see one’s own buddha-nature, realizing thereby that one is, already, a buddha oneself.

Stories resembling the above can be found in several different sutras. For instance, in the *Ru bu'er famen ben* 入不二法門品 (“Grasping the Teaching of Non-Duality”) chapter of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sutra* (Ch. *Weimo-jiing* 維摩經, Jp.

¹ Cf., for example, case 6 in *Wumenguan* 無門關. Regarding the origins of this legend, see Ishii Shūdō 石井修道, “Nenge-mishō no hanashi no seiritu wo megutte” 拈華微笑の話の成立をめぐる, in *Sanron kyōgaku to bukkyō sho-shisō: Hirai Shun’ei-bakase koki kinen ronshū* 三論教学と仏教諸思想: 平井俊栄博士古稀記念論集 (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2000), pp. 411-430.

Yuima-kyō) we find a story like the following. Vimalakīrti asked thirty-one bodhisattvas in what exactly the teaching of non-duality (Skt. *advayā*, Ch. *bu'er famen* 不二法門, Jp. *funi hōmon*) consisted. All of them, however, went on to explain what non-duality was in different ways, saying that the teaching of non-duality signified awakening and confusion, or subjectivity and objectivity, or the I and the You, and so on. Last of all the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī explained that: “It is, to my understanding, in all aspects of the Law, the principle of leaving behind all language and speech, all demonstration and interpretation, all manner of teaching dialogues. This is what it means to grasp the teaching of non-duality.”² Thereupon he asked Vimalakīrti for his understanding of the teaching of non-duality. In response, however, Vimalakīrti was only silent, speaking not a word. To this Mañjuśrī said, with words of praise, “Very good! Very good! Indeed there is no writing or language for it. This, truly, is what it means to grasp the teaching of non-duality.”³

Or again, we find stories like the following.⁴ On a certain occasion, Emperor Wu 武 of the Liang 梁 dynasty asked Fu Dashi 傅大士 (Jp. Fu-daishi; also Shanhui Dashi 善慧大士, Jp. Zen'e-daishi) to give a lecture on the *Diamond Sutra*. In response, Fu Dashi sat himself upon the high seat, and proceeded to shake its desk violently, after which, without saying anything, he again descended. Emperor Wu of Liang, being well-versed himself in Buddhist studies, had fully expected to receive a detailed explanation of the *Diamond Sutra* down to individual words and verses, yet Fu Dashi had simply descended silently, without expounding upon one single character. In the event Lord Zhi 志公, who was at the Emperor's side, said, “Does Your Majesty perhaps understand . . . ?” “Not at all,” was Emperor Wu's reply. To this, Lord Zhi said, “[Fu] Dashi just completed a sermon on the *Diamond Sutra*.”

Afterwards, there thus developed in Chinese Chan a practice of communicating the essence of “non-elevation of writing” through slogans like *wuyan wushuo* 無言無說 (“without language or speech”) or *wushuo wushi* 無說無示 (“without speech or demonstration”)—in other words, through the “action” of “each moment, each situation” (*yiji yijing* 一機一境, Jp. *ikeki ikekyō*).

This can be seen from answers given to the representative question: “What was the purpose of Bodhidharma coming from the West (i.e. from India to China)?”—this being equivalent to asking, “What is Chan?” In documents of Chan school history, there are over 200 examples of this question being posed, but the answers given by Chan monks of the Tang period are not all the same.

² In the original text: 文殊師利曰：如我意者，於一切法無言無說，無示無識，離諸問答，是為入不二法門。In *Taishō shinsū daijōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, eds. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 et al. (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924-1932), vol. 14, p. 551c.

³ In the original text: 善哉! 善哉! 乃至無有文字，語言，是真入不二法門。Ibid., vol. 14, p. 551c.

⁴ See, for example, case 67 in *Bijan lu* 碧巖錄, ibid., vol. 48, p. 197a. In the original text: 拳。梁武帝請傅大士講金剛經。大士便於座上。揮案一下。便下座。武帝愕然。誌公問。陛下還會麼。帝云。不会。誌公云。大士講經竟。

One monk gave nothing in reply, merely exhibiting in his hand a fly-whisk made to stand on end.⁵ Another plunged a hand into the breast of his robe, drawing out again a fist, which he opened in display.⁶

These are ways of responding by means of action, without using language. Even among answers recorded as given in words, however, we find things like: “the cypress tree in the garden”,⁷ “Plant an apple tree at the bottom of a well!”⁸; “Ask the round pillar out there!”⁹ “I’ll answer when the stone turtle speaks”,¹⁰ “The mountains are cold, the waters chill”,¹¹ “Every three years there is a leap year”,¹² “If there was any purpose in coming from the West, then cut my head off”,¹³ “blue mountains, green waters”,¹⁴ “Chang’an is in the East, Luoyang in the West”,¹⁵ and so on in the same vein.

Using Language to “Point Round to the Human Mind”

There are plentiful examples of Chan formation (*sekke* 接化) being conducted along such lines, either by abstaining from all use of language, or by using language in a deliberately odd way to convey the sense that understanding is not obtainable from the surface of words alone. At the same time, the fundamental Chan principle of “non-elevation of writing” has also regularly been given expression by making use of that very writing. An exemplary masterpiece on these lines

⁵ *Linji lu* 臨濟錄, *ibid.*, vol. 47, p. 496c. In the original text: 上堂, 僧問: “如何是佛法大意?” 師豎起扃子, 僧便喝, 師便打。

⁶ *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄, vol. 11, *ibid.*, vol. 51, p. 284b. In the original text: “問, 如何是西來意. 師以手入懷出拳展開与之” (香巖智閑禪師章)。

⁷ *Wumenguan*, *ibid.*, vol. 48, p. 297c. In the original text: 趙州因僧問. 如何是祖師西來意. 州云. 庭前柏樹子。

⁸ *Jingde chuandeng lu*, vol. 11, *ibid.*, vol. 51, p. 285c. In the original text: 靈雲志勤禪師章, “問, 如何是西來意. 師曰, 井底種林檎。”

⁹ *Jingde chuandeng lu*, vol. 14, *ibid.*, vol. 51, p. 384a. In the original text: “問. 如何是祖師西來意. 師曰. 問取露柱看” (石頭希遷大師章)。

¹⁰ *Jingde chuandeng lu*, vol. 17, *ibid.*, vol. 51, p. 337c. In the original text: 問如何是祖師西來意. 師曰. 待石烏龜解語即向汝道。

¹¹ *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元, vol. 14, in *Shinsan Dai Nihon zoku zōkyō* 新纂大日本統藏經, eds. Kawamura Kōshō 河村孝照 et al. (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975-89), vol. 80, p. 287c. In the original text: 舒州四面山津禪師 僧問. 如何是仏. 師曰. 王字不著点. 曰. 学人不会. 師曰. 点. 問. 如何是祖師西來意. 師曰. 山寒水冷. 師有挂杖頌曰. 四面一条杖. 当機驗龍象. 頭角稍低昂. 電光臨背上。

¹² *Wudeng huiyuan*, vol. 15, *ibid.*, vol. 80, p. 318a. In the original text: 天睦山慧滿禪師章, “問, 如何是祖師西來意. 師曰, 三年逢一閏。”

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. 80, p. 319c. In the original text: 磁州桃園山曦朗禪師 僧問. 如何是祖師西來意. 師曰. 西來若有意. 斬下老僧頭. 曰. 為甚却如此. 師曰. 不見道. 為法喪軀。

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 80, p. 323a. In the original text: 韶州南華寶慈濟禪師 僧問. 如何是祖師西來意. 師曰. 青山綠水. 曰. 未來時還有意也無. 師曰. 高者高. 低者低。

¹⁵ *Wudeng huiyuan*, vol. 16, *ibid.*, vol. 80, p. 331b. In the original text: 僧問. 如何是祖師西來意. 師曰. 長安東. 洛陽西. 問. 如何是仏. 師曰. 福州檄欖兩頭尖. 問. 仏未出世時如何. 師曰. 隈巖傍壑. 曰. 出世後如何. 師曰. 前山後山。

is the *Zongjing lu* 宗鏡錄 (Jp. *Sugyōroku*; 961). Produced by the monk Yongming Yanshou 永明延寿 (Jp. Eimei Enju; 904–976), this work undertook to excerpt important passages from the records of Chan masters' sayings and the Buddhist sutras, and by then comparing side-by-side with one another the interpretations of the various schools, attempted to achieve thereby some final synthesis from all of them, under the single formulation “Chan is the Sect of the Buddha's Mind.” Essentially the *Zongjing lu* was a masterwork of Chan philosophy, the overarching theme of its massive hundred-volume span being the one question “What is the Buddha's Mind?”¹⁶ A story found within this *Zongjing lu* explains the transmission of the Law from Bodhidharma to the Second Chan Patriarch Huike 慧可 (Jp. Eka) in the following way (vol. 43, beginning):

When Bodhidharma came from India, it was with the sole purpose of conveying the “One Mind” (*yixin* 一心, Jp. *issbin*). The Second Patriarch was told by Bodhidharma to “go find and then bring back the thing called Mind.” Time and again he sought to find what this Mind might be, until he had the realization that Mind, ultimately, was not something possible to find by seeking. Instantly then the realization came to him that the one and only, the perfect and the flawless True Mind was fully omnipresent in the *dharmadhātu* “realm of the Law” (*fajie* 法界, Jp. *hokkai*). As a result, he received Bodhidharma's recognition, and thus it is that Chan—the teaching of the One Mind—has been transmitted even to the present day.¹⁷

In the Tang period, Chan dialogues such as these were recorded mainly in what were called *yulu* 語錄 (Jp. *goroku*, “records of sayings”), a genre of texts that preserved the words and deeds of individual Chan monks. Over time, several of the episodes in such works gradually took on an independent life of their own, being treated, for example, in religious sermons and the like as testimonials of achieving awakening. Eventually, these came to be known collectively as “cases” or *gong'an* 公案 (Jp. *kōan*)—in its origin a technical term from the field of law, signifying the record of a given legal question and its attendant judgment. By the Song period in China, Chan masters were using *gong'an* in the formation of disciples. This era saw the publication of the *Bijian lu* 碧巖錄 (Jp. *Hekiganroku*), which collected 100 representative cases from the larger *gong'an* corpus.¹⁸ Among the *gong'an* there collected are the two cases examined just above, the story of the “subtle smile at the plucked flower” and that of “Fu Dashi lecturing on the sutras.” The *Bijian lu* has a three-layered structure. The first consists of the “core cases” (*benze* 本則, Jp. *honsoku*) themselves, those *gong'an* excerpted from the

¹⁶ Regarding the *Zongjing lu* 宗鏡錄, see Yanagi Mikiyasu 柳幹康, *Eimei Enju to Sugyōroku no kenkyū: issbin ni yoru Chūgoku bukkyō no saihen* 永明延寿と『宗鏡錄』の研究：一心による中国仏教の再編 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2014).

¹⁷ In the original text: 夫初祖西来。唯伝一心之法。二祖求縁慮不安之心不得。即知唯一真心円成周遍。当下言思道断。達磨印可。In *Taishō shinshū daijōkyō* (op. cit.), vol. 48, p. 667a.

¹⁸ According to the preface by Fuzhao 普照, in 1128.

dialogues of older masters. On top of these was a layer of poetry, a treatment of each and every one of these hundred core cases in the Sinophone Buddhist verse-style known as *song* 頌 (Jp. *ju*), appended by the monk Xuedou Chongxian 雪竇重顯 (Jp. Secchō Jūken; 980–1052). This is the work *Xuedou songgu* 雪竇頌古 (Jp. *Secchō jūko*).¹⁹ Together with their song-verses, these hundred cases were in turn used by the monk Yuanwu Keqin 圓悟克勤 (Jp. Engo Kokugon; 1063–1135) as subjects for his preaching and lecturing throughout the land. The title *Biyān lu* refers to the amalgamated work that resulted from yet further addition of content from Yuanwu’s own preaching, which took three literary forms: summary introductions known as *chuishhi* 垂示 (Jp. *suiji*), short commentary annotations known as *zhuayu* 著語 (Jp. *jakugo*), and passages of general commentary known as *pingchang* 評唱 (Jp. *hyōshō*). The summary *chuishhi* preceded each of the separate cases, while *zhuayu* consisted of short commentary on individual words and passages within not only the core cases themselves but also their accompanying verses. Many of these annotations, moreover, employed phrases and vocabulary taken from the (Chinese) colloquial. Finally the *pingchang* supplied Yuanwu’s analyses, again both on cases and their verses.

Yuanwu’s act of recording his lectures in such a way, however, attracted criticism from another monk of the same sect, Fojian Huiqin 仏鑑慧勤 (Jp. Bukkan Egon; 1059–1117). This latter wrote a letter to Yuanwu, registering his criticism that such a manner of teaching was bound to lead students into error.²⁰ On another occasion Fojian Huiqin is to have said: “The meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West lay in the principle that by ‘pointing straight to the human mind, one sees its nature and becomes a Buddha.’ In spite of this, today a great number of teachers seem to operate on the principle that by ‘pointing round to the human mind, one speaks its nature and becomes a Buddha’ (Jp. *kyōkushi ninshin, sesshō jōbutsu* 曲指人心, 說性成佛).”²¹ This latter phrase was intended as a criticism of those who believed in using writing for the explanation of Chan. Inspired by Fojian Huiqin’s critique, Yuanwu’s own disciple Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (Jp. Daie Sōkō; 1089–1163) actually had the master woodblocks used to print the *Biyān lu* text destroyed by fire. According to a postface to the *Biyān lu* by Xugu Xiling 虛谷希陵 (Jp. Kyokoku Keryō; 1247–1322), it seems that at the time, there were those who tended to borrow phrases learned from the *Biyān lu* when it came to describing their own experiences, and Dahui had sent the book to the fire in order to extirpate this lamentable habit of, as he put it, “venerating language above all, trying to become masters of speech.”²²

¹⁹ In Tiansheng 天聖 4/1026, edited by disciple Yuanchen 遠塵, with a preface at the work’s beginning added by Tanyu 曇玉.

²⁰ See the letter from Huiqin to Yuanwu (仏鑑勤和尚与仏果勤和尚書) in *Zimen jingxun* 緇門警訓. Text in *Taishō shinshū daijōkyō* (op. cit.), vol. 48, p. 1085c.

²¹ See *Dahui wuku* 大慧武庫, *ibid.*, vol. 47, p. 956c.

²² *Ibid.*, vol. 48, p. 224c.

Notwithstanding, the *Bijian lu*, its separately extant fragments strung together, came eventually to be republished (1300). A preface to this republished edition of *Bijian lu*, by one Sanjiao Laoren 三教老人 (Jp. Sankyō Rōjin), contains the following anecdote: “Somebody once asked, ‘Yuanwu made the *Bijian lu*, but his own disciple Dahui had it destroyed by fire. Which of them was right?’ To which it was replied, ‘Both of them were.’”²³ Chan was thus a movement fraught with something of a paradox, championing “pointing straight to the human mind” on the one hand even as it practiced “pointing round to the human mind” on the other. As it entered the Song period, Chan would even make use of previous ages’ literary works, for explaining information at least adjacent to the inexplicability at its core. This sort of Chan came at length to be brought to Japan. Zen, as such, was also a movement seeking to discover how to express, in language, what it was beyond language to express.

“Mind-Pointing” in Medieval Japanese Zen

In the *Seizan yama* 西山夜話 of Musō Soseki 夢窓疎石 (1275–1351), one finds the following exchange. A certain monk had asked, “If writing and language are an impediment for the student, why is it that from ancient times our founding teachers have made so much use of writing and language, in works like *daigo* 代語 (substitute words), *betsugo* 別語 (alternative words), *nenko* 拈古 (*kōan* commentary), and *juko* 頌古 (*ju*-style verses on *kōan*)?” In answer to this, Musō Soseki said, “Masters of the sect have made various explanations by means of words, and different masters have said different things. Yet all of these are nothing but the feint of “Calling Little Yu” (Xiao Yu 小玉, Jp. Shō Gyoku). If a truly gifted student is able to grasp that the core of the sect’s teachings lie beyond words, then the teachers’ writings and language will pose no impediment.”²⁴ Here reference is made to the series of events from Yuanwu’s composition of *Bijian lu*, to Fojian Huiqin’s criticism of that text, Dahui’s burning of it, and its eventual republication.

The feint of “Calling Little Yu” alludes to a passage from a love poem once presented for the consideration of Yuanwu by his teacher, Wuzu Fayan 五祖法演 (Jp. Goso Hōen): “Vain from the beginning were her frequent calls for “Little Yu”; she wanted only that her beau might thereby know her voice.”²⁵ The meaning is this: the noble daughter of deeply sheltered upbringing often calls out within her mansion for her maidservant “Little Yu! Oh Little Yu!”—only not, however, because she needs anything in particular from the servant, but rather

²³ Ibid., vol. 48, p. 139a.

²⁴ In the original text: 僧又問云。文字言句若於學者為害。何故古來尊宿各有代語別語拈古頌古而行于世耶。師曰。明眼宗師東語西話以接學者。所示雖異皆是呼小玉之手段也。若有吾家種草言外領旨。則宗師言句何害之有乎。Ibid., vol. 80, p. 495b.

²⁵ In the original text: 頻呼小玉元無事只要檀郎認得聲。Ibid., vol. 47, p. 768a.

because she wants the young man in her thoughts to notice her voice, as he walks past her mansion in the outer street. Writing and language are not, in other words, goals to be achieved in themselves, but serve rather as mere expedients for other goals’ indication.

Both *Bīyan lu* and *Zongjing lu* were brought to Japan, and both frequently featured as subjects of lecturing and preaching. Having been imported to Japan, this type of “literary Zen” (*wenzī chan* 文字禪, Jp. *monji-zen*)—a type that put interpretations of *kōan* into various literary styles, and produced Zen-school texts—underwent further independent development locally. There appeared an expansive body of Zen literary works, penned in a complex and recondite rhetorical style that not only drew upon Zen record texts, starting with the *Bīyan lu*, but also drew upon non-Buddhist Chinese classics, particularly on Chinese poetry, mixing into these moreover the kind of (Chinese) vernacular phrases and vocabulary that appeared so frequently in Zen records. This was the Five-Mountains literature,²⁶ a “literary Zen”, and a paradigmatic example of “pointing round to the human mind.”

Among the various achievements of these Muromachi-period Zen monks, there is one particularly worthy of notice (**Figure 1**). This is the appearance of the work *Hyōnen-zu* 瓢鮎図 (“Gourd and Catfish”; completed before 1415). Painted by the monk Josetsu 如雪 (dates unknown) under orders from the Muromachi shogun Ashikaga Yoshimochi 足利義持 (1386–1428), it represented the paint-form rendering of the new *kōan*: “Can a slippery gourd capture a wet catfish?” On the topic of this new *kōan*, thirty-one Five-Mountains Zen monks, led by Daigaku Shūsū 大岳周崇 (1345–1423), expressed their interpretations in the form of Chinese poems, which were then inscribed into the painting itself.²⁷ In the world of art history this *Hyōnen-zu* has long received attention as a pioneering work of Japanese ink-painting, but the thirty-one Chinese poems inscribed within the painting have gathered decidedly less interest. If, however, one examines each of these Chinese poems carefully alongside the painting, it becomes clear that what the work represents is a new form of Zen expression. The man depicted in the painting’s lower center, trying to capture the catfish, as well as the catfish itself, gliding at ease through the water, are both drawn almost as caricatures. Finally, in the painting’s background a traditional *sansui* 山水 (lit. “mountains-and-waters”) motif is depicted, though

²⁶ Literature composed by monks in Zen temples belonging to the Five-Mountains system. For more on the Five-Mountains system, see Martin Colcutt, *Five Mountains: The Rinzaï Zen Monastic Institution in Medieval Japan* (Harvard University Asia Center, 1996). For more on Five-Mountains literature, see Tamamura Takeji 玉村竹二, *Gozan bungaku* 五山文学 (Tokyo: Shibundō, 1955); also Marian Ury, *Poems of the Five Mountains: An Introduction to the Literature of the Zen Monasteries* (Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies, University of Michigan Center For Japanese Studies, 1992).

²⁷ For details, see Yoshizawa Katsuhiro 芳澤勝弘, “*Hyōnen-zu*” no nazō: *kokubō saidoku hyōtan namazu wo megutte* 「瓢鮎図」の謎: 国宝再読ひょうたんなまずをめぐって (Tokyo: Wedge, 2012).



Figure 1. *Hyōnen-zu* 瓢鮎図 (“Gourd and Catfish”). Painting by the monk Josetsu 如雪. Completed by 1415. Lower half: In a visualized *kōan* 公案, a man attempts to catch a catfish by means of a hollowed-out gourd. Upper half: Chinese poems treating the pictured *kōan* by thirty-one monks. (Myōshin-ji Temple, Taizō-in).

using a “water-and-sky in single color” (*suiten isshoku* 水天一色) palette such that no clear line divides the water from the sky above. The third poem in the series, by Unrin Myōchū 雲林妙冲 (dates unknown) runs as follows:

一瓢因甚 欲捺鮎魚 江湖水闊 道術有餘

Why now with a single gourd
 Would you hope to catch the catfish?
 Broad the waters of river and lake,
 Yet no less the Way and its workings!

The third and fourth verses of the quatrain refer to a passage in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 that runs: 魚相忘於江湖 人相忘於道術 (“The fish forgets that it lives in rivers and lakes; man forgets that he lives in the Way and its workings”).²⁸ Accordingly the poem’s meaning is something like:

Why now would you disturb what sits at rest, and with a gourd try to catch the catfish? For just as the fish is surrounded unconscious by the water’s broad expanse, no less is man himself swimming deep in the limitless Way (*Dao* 道)!”

It is worth noting what this expresses: that the *sansui* scenery—the “river and lake” (*gōko* 江湖)—depicted here in the background is, in and of itself, none other than the “Mind” at Zen’s very core. Such a collaboration between image and language being used to express the truth of the Way (*Dō* 道, Ch. *Dao*) or of “Thusness” (*Nyo* 如, Ch. *Ru*, orig. from Skt. *Tathatā*) had probably never been known in China. This manner in which the man and catfish, cast thus as caricatures, are able to express the question “Can one grasp the Buddha’s Mind with the Mind’s own cognitive functions?” thus represents a new genre of “*kōan* in painting”—one invented by Muromachi-period Zen monks. In Chinese history, the most that might be found by this date consisted in what are called “Chan (awakening-)occasion paintings” (*Chan ji-bua* 禪機画, Jp. *Zen ki-ga*) that depicted, almost as illustrations, the story of a particular *gong’an*, or perhaps also in works like the “Ten Bulls” painting series (*Shiniu tu* 十牛圖, Jp. *Jūgyū-zu*). This “Ten Bulls” series depicted the ten steps to awakening with a separate picture and poem for each, throughout which the bull represented the “true self” while the cowherd represented the self seeking that true self.

Unfortunately, however, expressive experiments with “*kōan* in painting” like the “Gourd and Catfish” would not continue to be produced thereafter. One reason for this probably lies in the fact that painter-monks of the Zen sect grew now ever more specialized, with the various different painting skills no longer united in single artists.

“Mind-Pointing” in Early-modern Japanese Zen

With the advent of the Edo period, and the emergence of a society in which understanding of writing extended even to the common people, Japanese Zen underwent fundamental changes. It was in such a period that the figure of Hakuin Ekaku 白隱慧鶴 (1685–1768) came to the fore. During the Muromachi period, the constituency for interest in Zen had tended to consist of the Emperor, the nobility, or the shogun and other members of the warrior class—people, in short, of the upper classes who had received a high level of education. With the change in era, however, there were now new potential targets for spreading the message of Zen on a far wider scale.

²⁸ See *Sōji* 莊子, ed. Kanaya Osamu 金谷治 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1971), vol. 1, p. 205.



Figure 2. The Bodhisattva Kannon 観音, assuming here the form of a woman in ancient Chinese dress, sits before a writing desk with a standing screen behind her, painted and inscribed. Painting by Hakuin 白隠. (Private collection).

Figure 2a. Detail of inscription on screen painting in Figure 2 (upper background).

As the famous poem had it, “What kind of thing, what meaning does it have, this word called “Mind”? The sound of the wind in the pines, painted on paper with ink.”²⁹ Hakuin’s achievement lay in the innovative ways he used to communicate this “sound of the wind in the pines, painted on paper with ink,” and not by means of writing alone, but through its use in tandem with the *technē* of painting. His marriage of the pictorial with the verbal succeeded, it can be said, in bringing the expedient means of “pointing round” (*kyōkushū*) to new unreach heights.

One name by which Zen has been known is that of the Buddha’s Mind sect—i.e., the sect that preaches the Buddha’s Mind, the awakened Mind. The question “What is the Mind?” is also the consistent theme of Hakuin’s Zen paintings. And while indeed the fundamental position of Zen denies the possibility of fully capturing in expressions of any sort definitive truths like “The Mind is . . .,” it remains the case that Hakuin succeeds in sketching out, aided by words and pictures both, something like the Mind’s own pattern. As one such example, let us examine a painting by Hakuin of Kannon 観音 (**Figure 2**).

²⁹ 心とはいかなるものを言うならん墨絵に描きし松風の音。

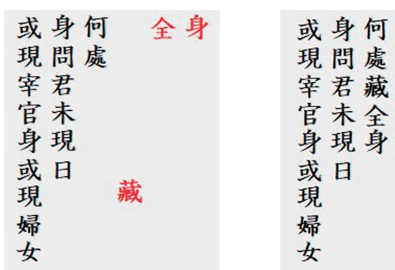


Figure 3a. (Left) Transcription of inscription visible on screen in background, Figure 2. Here the characters are arranged as they appear on the painting-within-a-painting, the final three being deliberately scattered. (Prepared by author).

Figure 3b. (Right) Transcription of inscription visible on screen in background, Figure 2. For comparison, the same transcription as in Figure 3a, without the scattering of final characters. (Prepared by author).

The woman in the painting’s center is a form assumed by the Bodhisattva Kannon. The imagery used has its roots in China, and the woman wears the robes of an ancient Chinese noblewoman. Seated in a chair, the Bodhisattva Kannon is facing a writing desk. Three volumes of sutra text sit atop the desk, while another is being held in Kannon’s hand. Behind Kannon stands a paneled screen, which has been painted with a *sansui* motif, and which is also inscribed, in thin ink, with a Chinese poem.

The twenty characters of the poem’s full length have been arranged across the painted screen in the manner indicated by **Figure 3a**. The meaning of the poem itself is something like the following: “Sometimes the Bodhisattva Kannon appears in the form of a court minister. At others he appears in the form of a woman. A question for you, then: when he appears in no form at all, where exactly does it hide, Kannon’s full body?” From inside his own picture, Hakuin is posing those of us viewing it from the outside this question: *Where, exactly, is Kannon in all his fullness hiding?*

The inscribed poem draws upon the following passage from the *Lotus Sutra*:

應以宰官身得度者 即現宰官身而為說法
 應以婦女身得度者 即現婦女身而為說法³⁰

Should one there be whom a court minister’s guise could help awaken,
 For him [Kannon] will become even court minister to preach the Law;
 Should one there be whom a woman’s own guise could help awaken,
 For him [Kannon] will become even a woman to preach the Law.

³⁰ For text see: *Taishō shinshū daijōkyō* (op. cit.), vol. 9, p. 57b.

But what about the way the poem is inscribed? A careful comparison of the inscription as painted (**Figure 2a**) with the poem's transcription in Figure 3a will show that those characters marked red in the latter do not follow the rest of the poem, but have instead been scattered and placed at a distance. What prompted Hakuin to write them this way? In particular, the two characters meaning "full body" (*zenshin* 全身) have been placed considerably apart from the rest. If written the usual way, the poem would have appeared as in **Figure 3b**, with the character "hide" 藏 and the other two after it following in the same line, but here instead all three characters—藏 ("hide") and 全身 ("full body")—have been scattered and placed in extremely unnatural locations. Yet it is not by chance that they ended up written like this. Rather, by inscribing them in such a deliberately scattered manner, Hakuin is trying to direct our attention to the meaning of the *sansui* scenery itself. He is trying, in other words, to show us: Look carefully at the screen's *sansui* motif—it is there, in the midst of this "scenery true to life," precisely there that in all its fullness the full body of the Bodhisattva Kannon appears.

What, after all, are *sansui* paintings? A great number of *sansui* motifs have been drawn in Zen-derived art over the years, yet what exactly do they signify? For *sansui* is no mere representation of scenery—it indicates the place where the hermit goes to live. Moreover, though the motif does, quite literally, refer to the mountains and waters it encompasses, this realm it refers to can also be designated by the word *gōko* 江湖 ("rivers and lakes"). The origin of this usage goes back ultimately to the *Zhuangzi*, where the term appears in this passage:

The fish forgets that it lives in rivers and lakes;
Man forgets that he lives in the Way and its workings

The fish lives in the waters of rivers and lakes, yet he still forgets that water's very existence. In the same spirit, man himself is fully sunk in the world of the Way (the Truth) without ever being conscious of it. The rivers and lakes, in other words, are a metaphor for this Truth, which always surrounds us though we cannot see it.

About *sansui* paintings, the leading Japanese literary critic of the 20th century, Kobayashi Hideo 小林秀雄 (1902–1983) had the following to say:

The key thing to understand is this: nothing much would ever have happened with [the ink painters] if they had not believed, firmly, that *sansui* is not something existing trivially in the world outside, but resides rather within the heart of man. For beyond their skills with the brush, they also had the benefits of that sight endowed by training in Zen. And there exists, completely unnamable yet present unchangeably, a certain something utterly surrounding us. So intimately does it surround that it brushes our skin, pulses with our lifeblood, and decidedly it is not a mere question of so-and-so mountain glimpsed far off, or so-and-so river watched through the distance.

What *sansui* paintings do is make visible the existence of these greater things surrounding us. The *sansui* scene Hakuin has drawn here points likewise to such



Figure 4. *Jūō-zū* 十王図 (“Ten Kings”). From a painting series depicting the Ten Judges of the Underworld. Here pictured is Emma 閻魔, seated before a writing desk, with a painted screen behind him—a visual composition mirrored by Hakuin’s painting in Figure 2. (Eigen-ji Temple)

“greater things.” For it is none other than Kannon himself that appears in the background *sansui*, he whose ultimate form is beyond all shape.

There is also another feature that makes this painting unique. Kannon here is shown sitting busily at a writing desk, yet no other portrayals of Kannon in such an attitude are known, making it original to Hakuin himself. In summary, the two distinguishing characteristics of this painting are that Kannon (in female form) is facing a writing desk, and that behind her stands a screen, bearing a painting in the *sansui* style.

There does, however, exist a work with precisely the same visual composition, in the “Ten Kings” (*Jūō-zū* 十王図) series of paintings (**Figure 4**). Being judges for the underworld, all ten of these kings, starting with Emma 閻魔 himself, are portrayed as sitting at their writing desks. On the writing desk in front of each lie documents for use in trials, and behind each of them stands a screen, which always displays a *sansui* painting. Yet what, indeed, is the significance of Hakuin’s

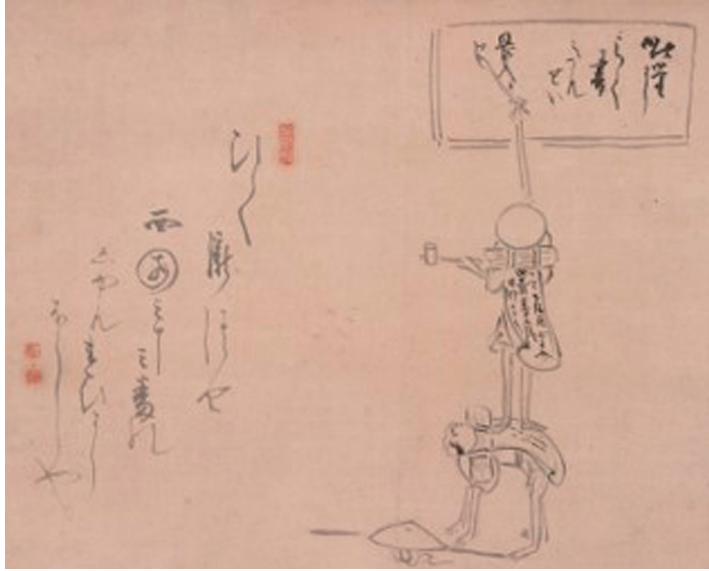


Figure 5. *Junrei rakugaki zu* 巡礼落書図 (“Pilgrim’s Graffiti”). Painting by Hakuin. Right: Two pilgrims cooperate to leave graffiti on a temple frame. Left: An inscription whose beginning *hibiku taki-tsu-se* ひびく瀧つせ associates the scene with Seiganto-ji Temple 青岸渡寺 at Mt. Nachi 那智, first stop on a famous pilgrimage route threading thirty-three shrines devoted to Kannon. (Private collection).

painting of Kannon having used the same visual composition as the “Ten Kings” paintings? What it expresses, even in the Kannon painting here, is that both Kannon and Emma are emanations equally of the universal One Mind.

There is another painting by Hakuin entitled “Pilgrim’s Graffiti” (*Junrei rakugaki zu* 巡礼落書図), wherein he uses quite a different way of expressing the questions: *Where is Kannon? And where is Kannon’s essence?* (**Figure 5**).

We see in the painting that there are two pilgrims. With one man crouched on all fours, the other man stands on his back, trying to write something or other on a hanging temple frame. The scene is that of a pair of pilgrims traveling together, and here indeed working together, to leave their graffiti at some temple along their way. The words already written out read: 此堂にらく書きんぜい畏入り候— “In this Hall graffiti is forbidden, and so with great humility it is . . .” (i.e. that I offer up my words).

We see that the inscription on Hakuin’s painting contains the phrase *hibiku taki-tsu-se* ひびく瀧つせ (“the waterfall resounding”). While not immediately apparent to the modern viewer, this quotes the final verse of the poem associated³¹

³¹ In full: 補陀洛や岸うつ波は三熊野の那智のお山にひびく瀧つせ.

with Seiganto-ji Temple 青岸渡寺 at Mt. Nachi 那智, the first stop on the famous West-Country circuit of thirty-three Kannon shrines. Separately the Nachi Great Shrine 那智大社, one of Kumano’s 熊野 three principal shrine mountains, had a long and ancient history as a holy place in Kumano devotional. The godhead worshipped at the Nachi Great Shrine was none other than the Nachi Waterfall itself, but due to Shinto-Buddhist syncretism, a temple (Seiganto-ji) was also built on the spot, whose enshrined image was that of the Bodhisattva Kanze’on 観世音 (Kannon). Seen from a Buddhist perspective, the godhead of the Nachi Waterfall was simply a manifestation of the Bodhisattva Kannon in any case.

Hibiku taki-tsu-se—to people in the past, for whom pilgrimages to holy places associated with Kannon were a popular practice, hearing the short phrase alone would have sufficed to recognize it as a line from the poem for Mt. Nachi’s Seiganto-ji, first stop on the famous pilgrimage route that wound its way through thirty-three locations held holy to Kannon. The location of the two pilgrims’ graffiti is therefore Seiganto-ji Temple.

At first glance, this picture reminds one of that famous image by the surrealist painter René Magritte (1898–1967), wherein under a picture of a pipe it is written: “This is not a pipe.”³² Likewise, a graffiti that reads “In this Hall graffiti is forbidden” bears some resemblance to the paradox of self-reference associated in the West with the phrase “A man from Crete said ‘All Cretans are liars.’” The pilgrims writing graffiti to the effect of “graffiti forbidden here” thus find themselves in “the world wherein self-reference becomes self-denial.” In terms of the *Hyōnen-zu* painting, too, the actions of the pilgrims correspond to those of the man trying to catch the catfish in his gourd.

The paradoxicality into which they have fallen, however, is obvious only because we ourselves view this scene from outside of the picture. Escaping the two-dimensional flatness of the painting, we view it from a world of three dimensions—we see it, namely, from a higher dimensional level. And if we are able, beyond mere appreciation, to understand also the meaning of the inscriptional *hibiku taki-tsu-se*? To understand the meaning, in other words, of the associated temple poem it alludes to?—*The sound of the waves as they break on the shore of the island of Mt. Fudaraku, that holy place in the South Sea where Kannon the Bodhisattva appears—now it echoes through the valleys and mountains of Kumano, in Mt. Nachi’s waterfall resounding. For this, without doubt, is the true body of the Bodhisattva Kannon!*—If we can understand this, then we notice: as regards this painting, we stand in the same dimension as the Bodhisattva Kannon himself, looking down at the picture’s two pilgrims with his same merciful eyes. This, too, would be a new kind of “pointing round to the human mind” that had developed in Japan.

³² For original image, see: <https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/magritte-and-contemporary-art-treachery-images>

While we as humans live as a point of fact within a world of only three dimensions, the world of the Bodhisattva Kannon sits in a higher dimension above this one. Trapped as we are in a three-dimensional world, for us the world of that dimension beyond is impossible to visualize. However, through the ingenuity here of Hakuin's Zen painting technique, as displayed in this picture, we are made aware of a certain breach leading up to that further-dimensional world. If the plane, therefore, within which the two pilgrims find themselves is in fact a world of virtual three-dimensionality, then we who view the picture from outside must find ourselves somewhere higher, somewhere, so to speak, in a virtual fourth-dimensional world.

Zen, precisely because of its “non-elevation of writing”—precisely because, in other words, it refused to invest any text with ultimate authority—was not a school that could afford to remain silent. The matter was not one for simple resolution by some decisive “single muteness” (*ichimoku* 一黙). There was no choice but to explain, again, and yet again.