

Hakuin's Song of Zazen: Three Translations of the Zazen Wasan

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The Zazen Wasan

Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1768) was one of Japan's gifts to our world. The reviver of a moribund Rinzai Zen community, the reforms associated with his name created the modern curricular koan system used in both the Japanese Rinzai community and the Soto reformed tradition of koan introspection restored by Daiun Sogaku Harada. My own spiritual life has been founded within Master Harada's restoration of this discipline. Here with this poem we get a taste of Hakuin's spiritual call, a direct pointing the way of simple presence. Here are three translations, by Norman Waddell, Robert Aitken, and Zenkei Shibuya.

Translated by Norman Waddell

All beings by nature are Buddha,
As ice by nature is water.
Apart from water there is no ice;
Apart from beings, no Buddha.
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?
Oh, the zazen of the Mahayana!
To this the highest praise!
Devotion, repentance, training,
The many paramitas-
All have their source in zazen.
Those who try zazen even once
Wipe away beginning-less crimes.
Where are all the dark paths then?
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.
Much more, those who turn about
And bear witness to self-nature,
Self-nature that is no-nature,
Go far beyond mere doctrine.
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,
With thought that is no-thought,
Singing and dancing are the voice of the Law.
Boundless and free is the sky of Samádhi!
Bright the full moon of wisdom!
Truly, is anything missing now?
Nirvana is right here, before our eyes,

This very place is the Lotus Land,
This very body, the Buddha

Translated by Robert Aitken

All beings by nature are Buddha,
as ice by nature is water;
apart from water there is no ice,
apart from beings no Buddha.

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 we wander,
when shall we be freed from birth and death?

For this the zazen of the Mahayana
deserves the highest praise:
offerings, precepts, paramitas,
Nembutsu, atonement, practice —
the many other virtues —
all rise within zazen.

Those who try zazen even once
wipe away immeasurable crimes —
where are all the dark paths then?
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.

Much more, if you turn yourself about
and confirm your own self-nature —
that self-nature is no nature —
you are far beyond mere argument.

The oneness of cause and effect
is clear,
not two, not three, the path is put right;
with form that is no form
going and coming never astray,
with thought that is no thought
singing and dancing are the voice
of the Law.

Boundless and free is the sky of samadhi!
Bright the full moon of wisdom!
Truly is anything missing now?
Nirvana is here, before your eyes,
this very place is the Lotus Land,
this very body the Buddha.

Translated by Zenkei Shibayama

All beings are primarily Buddhas.
Like water and ice,
There is no ice apart from water;
There are no Buddhas apart from beings.
Not knowing how close the Truth is to them,
Beings seek for it afar—what a pity!
It is like those who being in water
Cry out for water, feeling thirst.
It is like the rich man's son,
Who has lost his way among the poor.
The reason why beings transmigrate through the six worlds,
Is because they are lost in the darkness of ignorance.
Wandering from darkness to darkness,

How can they ever be free from birth-and-death?
As to Zazen taught in the Mahayana,
No amount of praise can exhaust its merits.
The Six Paramitas, beginning with the Giving,
Observing the Precepts and other good deeds, variously enumerated,
As Nembutsu, Repentance, and so on—
All are finally reducible to Zazen.
The merit of even a single sitting in Zazen
Erases the countless sins accumulated in the past.
Where then are there the evil paths to misguide us?
The Pure Land cannot be far away.
Those who, even once, in all humility,
Listen to this Truth.
Praise it and faithfully follow it,

Will be endowed with innumerable merits.
But if you turn your eyes within yourselves
And testify to the truth of Self-nature-
The Self-nature that is no-nature,
You will have gone beyond the ken of sophistry.
The gate of the oneness of cause and effect is opened;
The path of non-duality and non-trinity runs straight ahead.
Your form being the form of no-form,
Your going-and-returning takes place nowhere but where you are;
Your thought being the thought of no-thought,
Your singing-and-dancing is none other than the voice of Dharma.
How boundless and free is the sky of Samadhi!
How refreshingly bright, the moon of the Fourfold Wisdom!
At this moment what is there that you lack!
Nirvana presents itself before you,
Where you stand is the Land of Purity.
Your person, the body of Buddha.