

TRANSLATION

Unnecessary Words

The Zen Dialogues of Bankei Yōtaku

PART I

TRANSLATED BY NORMAN WADDELL

*A priest asked Bankei: Why don't you use the staff and the khat!
like Rinzai and Tokusan and all the other worthy Zen masters of
the past?*

*Bankei said: Rinzai had his khat! Tokusan had his staff. I have
my tongue.*

Introduction

Some years ago, I published a translation of Bankei's (1622–1693) colloquial sermons.¹ They contain the fullest exposition of his characteristic teaching of the Unborn Buddha-mind, which he preached tirelessly to the eager students who came to him in large numbers from all over the country. The present translation gives a glimpse of another side of Bankei's teaching activity, showing him at work in the confrontation and give and take of the Zen dialogue.² Taken together, the sermons and dialogues should provide a balanced picture of this extraordinary teacher, whom the late Suzuki Daisetz numbered among

¹ "The Zen Sermons of Bankei Yōtaku," *Eastern Buddhist* VI, 2 (October 1973); VII, 1 (May 1974); VII, 2 (October 1974).

² For another collection of Bankei's dialogues, see "A Selection from Bankei's Zen Dialogues," *Eastern Buddhist* VIII, 2 (October 1975).

UNNECESSARY WORDS

the greatest masters in Zen history. In his style of Zen, Bankei is one of the few Japanese who recalls the genius, complete simplicity, and all-rounded wholeness of the great T'ang masters of Zen's golden age.

"Unnecessary Words"—*Zeigo* 贅語 in Japanese—is a collection of seventy-three items, consisting, with the exception of several talks, entirely of dialogues Bankei had with his students and with the Zen teachers and priests of other sects who came to him for interviews. The editor, Sandō Chijō 山堂智常 (1667–1749), has transcribed the material from the original Japanese into Chinese, the traditional language for such records, and has placed it within a narrative framework. He has also added, for better or worse, occasional interpretive comments of his own.

Chijō, a priest in Bankei's teaching line who was twenty-six years old when Bankei died, tells us in his colophon that he compiled the collection in 1747, at the age of eighty. It remained in manuscript until 1941, when it was published in the first major edition of Bankei's records, the *Bankei Zenji Goroku* ("Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Bankei"), edited by Suzuki Daisetz (Iwanami Bunko series; most recent edition 1966). This is the text that I have used for the present translation. I have referred also to the one given in the recent *Bankei Zenji Zenshū* ("Complete Records of Zen Master Bankei"), edited by Akao Ryūji (Daizō Shuppan, 1976), pp. 279–343.

Unnecessary Words

Preface by Sandō Chijō

The admiration and respect that men feel for their teacher's virtuous achievements arises in them spontaneously. Although they may be determined to remain silent about his wonderful words and deeds, they find themselves unable to refrain from speaking out. Hence these 'unnecessary' words. With the master's death, a whole lifetime of meritorious deeds and unsurpassed utterances, countless in number, perished forever. Less than one in many thousands has survived. The task of assembling them has now become extremely difficult. In compiling this work, I have just gathered together what I could—a leaf or two here, a few grasses there. The entries are thus mixed randomly. No particular order of arrangement has been observed regarding either the time or the location at which they occurred.

Long ago, in the T'ang dynasty, the great Chinese Zen master Ummon prohibited his disciples from making any records of his words. In spite of that an attendant named On copied them down, and consequently they have been transmitted to the present day.¹ His example is something we must cherish and deeply envy. While master Bankei was alive, he too expressly forbade his followers to make any transcripts of his talks or dialogues. But there was in his case no Attendant On ready to jot them down on his paper robe, so all those countless words, like the exquisite tinkling of precious jade, were cast aside and remained uncollected—just left there for the sparrows to play around with! What a grievous waste!

(Some years after Bankei's death, his disciple, Zen master Jōmyō [Itsuzan], showed me a manuscript in his possession. It was a transcript copy of one of the master's informal talks. After cleansing my hands and rinsing out my mouth, I perused it reverently, feeling as I did

¹ Ummon Bun'en (Yun-men Wen-yen, 864–949). Attendant On (later Zen master Kyōrin Chōon 香林澄遠: Hsiang-lin Ch'eng-yuan, n.d.), who became Ummon's Dharma heir, always wore a paper robe, on which he surreptitiously jotted down the master's words.

UNNECESSARY WORDS

as though I were sitting right in front of the master himself, listening intently to his compassionate preaching of the Dharma. I raised it up to my head in veneration. Then I took out my brush and made a copy. This I placed carefully inside a special box with other rare and precious books and papers—for what I had obtained was no mere costly gem! Alas, Zen master Jōmyō, Zen master Reigen, and priest Daikei Kakkō, who served many years as the master's attendants,² were under strict orders never to make any records of the words that he spoke; and this, owing to their deep respect for him, they could never bring themselves to disobey. As a result, knowledge of his teaching has been virtually unobtainable. And so now, on the occasion of compiling this record of the master's sayings and doings, I searched through my boxes, and finally came upon the transcription I had made years before—how could anything surpass this Treasure of the Dharma? I respectfully place it at the beginning of this collection of unnecessary words.)

1

How could the Zen school, the sect of “direct pointing,” have a single Dharma to preach to others?³ In our sect, you have only to address yourself to your original face—the one you got as you dropped from your mother's womb—and to grasp your own nose holes. Look at yourselves! What do you lack as you see and hear amidst the various circumstances of your daily lives? You are perfectly all right just the way you are now. But when you let the slightest thought or inclination to do something arise in your mind, you go completely astray. When you are watching and listening, you are Unborn. When you are not watching and listening, you are Undying. This original unbornness and deathlessness soars radiantly beyond past and present, its brightness surpassing that of the sun and moon. It is immediately present in all things, its vastness encompassing heaven and earth. It transcends by far the regions of illusion and

² Jōmyō, posthumous title of Itsuzan Sonin 逸山祖仁 (1655–1718). Reigen Shūin 靈源周蔭 (1653–1718); his posthumous *Zenji* title is Shōhen Chikaku. Taikei Kakkō 大圭廓公 (d. 1719).

³ Ref. to the well-known Zen maxim, “direct pointing to the mind of man.”

enlightenment, totally detached from the domains of the enlightened and unenlightened alike. In the Unborn, each and every thing is originally true and possessed of a marvelously illuminative wisdom, making wherever you are a place of totally unhindered freedom. The utter incomprehensibility and perfect virtue of the Unborn is present at all times in the mind of each one of you—it cannot be obtained anywhere else. People speak of the essential mind of the Buddhas and patriarchs, but there is not a hairsbreadth of difference between their mind and your mind right now. Yet you want to give rise to thoughts, to seek outside yourselves, for Buddhahood, for the Dharma, for knowledge, or for emancipation. You create the very obstructions which hinder you and keep you from conforming to your original mind.

An old buddha said: “The moment Yajnadatta ceased his crazed pursuit, he was enlightened.”⁴ So even were you to gain complete knowledge of all the sutras that the Buddha ever preached, and to understand all the intricacies of the Zen koans, and were even capable of displaying that understanding with confidence, when you look deeply and carefully, you will see that it is all so much external dust, clinging to you like filth. When your final hour arrives, the time for the dispersal of your four elements, you will be unable to put any of it to use. Much better, then, to turn inwardly, to your own selves, to act directly and immediately, using the vital, primal energy of the Unborn. What ingenious methods do you think the Buddha-patriarchs use when they appear in the world?⁵ They just pull the nails and wrench out the wedges for you in order to turn you into completely free, unattached fellows. Listening to me, you may think that you have grasped what I have just said. You may imagine that you really believe in it. But because your conviction is still incomplete, you are immediately susceptible to being deluded by others, and so you live like disembodied spirits, clinging to trees and grasses unable to gain complete freedom for yourselves. You lose your way under a bright cloud-

⁴ This anecdote appears in the *Shurangama Sutra*, (Japanese, *Shuryōgon-kyō*), ch. 4; Taisho 19. 121b. The beautiful young son of a wealthy family, who took great pleasure in gazing each morning at his reflection in the mirror, became obsessed with the idea of seeing his face in the flesh. He caused a great commotion dashing madly about the city looking for it, until, finally realizing that his face was on the front of his head, he attained peace of mind.

⁵ Buddhas appear in the world to save sentient beings from their suffering.

less sky, and you become someone else's man, a wretched underling. Isn't it unfortunate!

2

A light emanated from the master's eyes which illuminated people and never failed to penetrate straight into the hearts of those who came before him. He knew with perfect clarity everything about them before they had said or done a single thing. He was like a bright mirror: "If a barbarian came before him, a barbarian was revealed. If a Chinese came before him, a Chinese was revealed."⁶ Once, when he was in Edo at the Kōrin-ji, a monk came to him and made his bows.⁷

—How are you enjoying the Dharma? asked Bankei.

The monk set forth his understanding.

—Your words and your attainment do not match, said Bankei. What you speak flies before the streaking dragon; what you are hobbles behind a lame tortoise. Before you came, you discussed what you have said here today with a more advanced student, thinking that you would be able to hoodwink this old priest. But when you come before a teacher who possesses the true Dharma Eye, you can no more keep something from him than you could hide from the sun itself. The monk stood, prostrated himself before Bankei, and then gratefully received his teaching.

3

During a conversation the master remarked: My present state is beyond the comprehension of the Buddha-patriarchs themselves

The decisiveness of Bankei's behavior in the execution of everyday affairs was totally beyond men's understanding. While he was engaged in some undertaking, the monks attending him thought at times that he was neglecting to do what he should be doing, or even doing the reverse. They simply could not explain his intentions. Later, however, they would come to discover their significance and fundamental truth.

⁶ A saying of the T'ang master Jōshū Jūshin (Chao-chou Ts'ung-shen).

⁷ The Kōrin-ji 光林寺, in Edo, built for Bankei by Kyōgoku Takatoyo (1655–1694), the Lord of Marugame Castle in Shikoku, at the behest of his mother, the nun Yōshin-ni, who was a devoted follower of Bankei.

4

The master was constantly using the word “Unborn” in his teaching, and those who came to him all obtained a share of benefit from it according to their capabilities. It is like the fish and shellfish, turtles and whales, which inhabit the wide ocean and are all able to drink their full portion of its waters without experiencing any lack.

5

The master said: There is a Zen saying which expresses the essence of our sect: “If there is even a hairsbreadth of difference, you are as far from it as heaven is from earth.”⁸ At the moment in a Zen encounter when two minds move without any separation, it is like two mirrors reflecting each other. Each and every thing presents itself in true suchness, and each and every thing is completely true. There is nothing above to catch hold of, and nothing below to support you. You live in your original perfection, unborn and undying, immersed in a samadhi of total freedom, where nothing, not even stone walls, can hinder you. You must realize that it is your own views and opinions that obstruct you; and that “doing nothing” is a dark, ghost-filled cave. The words I am uttering to you now are no different. You commit a fatal error if you seek to find some meaning in them. If I give you a word of explanation, and you cling to it, you go hopelessly astray. It is best not to allow yourselves to stop or abide anywhere. The words and phrases that I speak, the shouts from my mouth and blows from my staff as well—are a ration of unchewable iron nails. You couldn’t possibly get your teeth into them.

6

The master continually lamented the many evil customs that had become prevalent in the Zen training halls of his day. His own teaching was correspondingly direct, determined solely by the situation at hand. He did not allow the indiscriminate use of the staff or khat! nor did he permit students

⁸ A saying from the Zen poem *Shinjinmei* (*Hsin hsin ming*; “Verses on the Believing Mind”): The perfect Way is not difficult, only you must avoid picking and choosing. If only you do not love and hate, it is perfectly clear and bright. But when there is even a hairsbreadth of difference, it is as distant as heaven is from earth.

UNNECESSARY WORDS

to engage in literary pastimes, Zen-type dialogues, or other unnecessary displays of Zen activity. What is more, he vowed not to quote sayings from Buddhist or Zen records in his teachings. In responding to those who came to him, whoever they were and whatever their intellectual ability, he used the ordinary language of everyday life. At the time, Zen practice was tied inextricably to Chinese-style terms and phrases quoted from the Buddhist patriarchs of the past. But the master was able to make his students cut right through to the bone and marrow, spontaneously and naturally, by speaking to them in the informal, colloquial Japanese that they used in their daily lives.

7

When it came to the instruction of the students under his charge, the master did not lay down any rules or establish any regulations for them to follow, yet a silent, respectful atmosphere always prevailed in his temples—an example of “not governing yet having no disorder; doing what is right without being ordered to.”

8

A layman asked: Isn't what you say about the 'Unborn' similar to the teaching Layman Vimalakirti gave to Mahakatyayana?⁹

—Tell me what you mean, replied Bankei.

—Well, according to the sutra, Vimalakirti said: 'Mahakatyayana, you must not use the activity of mind to preach the changeless reality of things. All things are fundamentally unborn and undying; that is the meaning of impermanence and suffering.'

—Vimalakirti said that in order to instruct Mahakatyayana, said Bankei. My teaching is designed to make people penetrate directly beyond words.

9

A priest of the esoteric Shingon Sect visited the master and said: The

⁹ Vimalakirti (Jap. Yuima). The following passage occurs in the “Disciples” chapter of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*; Taisho 14.541a.

principle of the Unborn in our sect's Meditation on the Letter A contains two aspects, the "elimination of delusion," and the "actualization of truth." Wouldn't the teaching you expound fall into the latter category?¹⁰

—Come closer, replied Bankei.

The priest moved forward.

Bankei raised his voice and shouted: What aspect is that!!

The priest was struck dumb.

A monk in the audience stuck out his tongue.¹¹

10

A monk said to Bankei: When you read about the ancient Zen worthies, you notice how they used many different words when they taught their pupils, depending upon the situation which confronted them. Yet you use only the one word 'Unborn.' Don't you find using just a single word a hindrance in your exercise of the Dharma?

—Haven't you read about Gutei? Bankei said. Whenever someone asked him a question, he just held up a finger. He said, "I have grasped the one-finger Zen of Tenryū. I can use it for a lifetime yet never use it up."¹² He just raised his finger and was silent. How can something that a man cannot exhaust in a whole lifetime be a hindrance in the exercise of the Dharma? It is not only Gutei's one finger Zen. Rinzai's Khat! Tokusan's staff, Mugō's 'No illusions!' Zuigan's 'Main character'—hitting the ground or striking a drum too—they are all cases of the Great Activity embodied by every authentic Zen master.¹³ It is not that the word 'Unborn' does not exist in the Buddhist scriptures and Zen writings. It is found there. But since the time of the first Buddha-patriarchs, who, with the exception of this old priest, has used a single word exclusively in teaching his students?

The monk thanked Bankei humbly, and thereafter he followed the master's teaching with great diligence.

¹⁰ Elimination of delusion: *shajō-mon* 遮情門. Actualization of truth: *hyōtoku-mon* 表徳門.

¹¹ An expression of surprise and admiration.

¹² Gutei (Chu-chih, n.d.); enlightened when his teacher Tenryū (T'ien-lung, n.d.) raised a finger in the air.

¹³ Mugō (Wu-yeh) is said to have responded with the words "Have no Illusions!" whenever he was asked questions. Zuigan (Jui-yen) used the words "Main character" in teaching his students.

The master said: A Zen teacher cannot help others unless he himself possesses the discerning Dharma Eye. If he has fully perfected his Dharma Eye, he is able to know someone to his very marrow just by observing his face as he approaches. He can know all about him by merely hearing his voice come from outside the temple walls. It is like a bright mirror, which reflects fully and distinctly whatever faces it, revealing both the beautiful and the ugly. Each word he speaks, everything he does in dealing with students, strikes right to the place of their affliction like a sharp gimlet, dissolving their attachments, breaking off their shackles, ushering them into a realm of wonderful freedom and blissful joy. Unless he can do that, what help can he hope to be to others? It is in this essential point, the possession of the Dharma Eye, that our sect surpasses all others. We call it the "Treasure Eye of the Right Dharma," the "Special Teaching Apart from the Scriptures," the "Legacy of the Buddha-patriarchs." Look at the Buddha-patriarchs who have appeared through the ages. They could all tell the black from the white in less time than it takes a spark to jump from a flint. They grasped the essentials with lightning speed. Could such men have lacked the Dharma Eye? But Zen teachers of recent times erroneously regard a student's conversance with words and letters as the criterion by which to determine whether he has grasped the essence of Zen. They give certification to someone because he is quick and clever at the give and take of Zen dialogue. This burdens the student with a heavy cangue. Not only are they mistaken themselves, they misguide others as well. You can no longer find a single man who is capable of facing a person and clearly judging him before he has made a move or said a word. They have disappeared completely. What a terrible pity!

In recent years, the master has been converting people to his teaching of the Unborn mind effortlessly. For the past three hundred years, teachers and students everywhere have been clinging with attachment to their practice, pursuing the strange and unusual, without giving attention to the efficacy of what they were doing. It has consequently been extremely difficult for students to learn from their teacher's personal instruction.

Formerly, when Bankei used to teach people, he would receive their questions and engage in dialogues with them, but their responses could not match his. Most of them went to the foot of the precipice and then backed away. From his middle years, students desiring interviews came in tremendous numbers to see him—they gathered like storm clouds. They were devoted to him before they even saw his face; when they actually came before him, they emptied their minds and received his teaching in a state of complete selflessness. So now he does not even have to expend much effort.

13

The master made no attempt to attract the world's attention. He kept his distance from the powerful and rich, and refrained from close relations with royalty and members of the aristocracy as well. One year as he was passing through Echizen province, the Daimyo, Lord Matsudaira, having heard of Bankei's reputation as a man of religion, went to visit him at the inn where he was stopping. But when he entered the room, Bankei did not rise to meet him; he did not even take off his cap while they talked. And yet his behavior was extremely cordial and respectful. When Lord Matsudaira returned to his residence, he remarked to his retainers:

—Master Bankei is certainly no ordinary priest. He kept his cap on his head throughout our interview, yet I didn't feel the slightest sense of disrespect. Such a solid outward presence would not be possible unless his inner attainment were perfectly full and complete.

It was the same in all Bankei's dealings with people of high rank. His words and his demeanor were respectful and dignified, his behavior noble and refined, but never because he was courting the favor of the world.

14

From the time Bankei entered the Ryūmon-ji¹⁴ to teach as its founder and first abbot, the Sasaki brothers, who were members of a wealthy landowning family in the district, gave him their financial support; their donations

¹⁴ The temple that became the center of Bankei's teaching activities, located in his home town of Hamada, a small village bordering the Inland Sea in present Hyogo prefecture.

helped with the cost of constructing buildings and with the general costs of running the temple.¹⁵ Whatever number of people happened to be in residence, the Sasaki saw to it that adequate provisions were supplied. The training halls never held less than several hundred monks, and at the summer retreat held in the third year of Genroku [1690], thirteen hundred people participated—not an empty seat could be found in any of the halls.

15

At the start of Bankei's teaching career, the Sasaki asked to become members of his congregation. He refused, but they begged and implored him.

—Even if our family business were to fail, even if all our storehouses were empty, even if we were forced to turn to begging for our livelihood, they said, we would never fail in our resolve to protect and preserve the master's Dharma fortress.

Finally, Bankei had no choice but to give in. Thereafter, whenever the monastery was in need of a donation, he would order the Sasaki to provide it. Yet never once did he consult them about it or give them any explanation. Was this a case of the master's compassion, which refused to recognize a distinction between lay disciples in the world at large and the monks in the monastery? Or was it perhaps because the Sasaki brothers already possessed a mature understanding of the Buddha Dharma?

16

Once when the master was at the Fumon-ji in Hirado,¹⁶ the abbot of the Kōdai-ji in Nagasaki came to him for an interview.¹⁷ After they had conversed for a while, the priest said:

—The teaching you have expounded is clear and direct. One must cut

¹⁵ The eldest Sasaki brother (1625–1686) was a childhood playmate of Bankei's. The Sasaki were a wealthy family of shipowners.

¹⁶ The island of Hirado, located off the northwestern coast of Kyushu, was a fief of the Matsuura clan, whose leader Shigenobu was a devoted follower of Bankei. Bankei had one of his disciples reside in the Fumon-ji, and he himself visited it on several occasions to lead retreats.

¹⁷ The Kōdai-ji 結台寺. The head priest at the time is thought to have been a man named Tange Jichō (湛元自澄 n.d.).

all illusions and passions immediately at their source, without entering into the stage of practice. But then what about that story of the Zen master Chōkei wearing out seven sitting cushions doing zazen?¹⁸

—You have misread those records, said Bankei. Chōkei went to many masters, Reiun, Seppō, and Gensha, over a period of twelve years—that is when he wore out those seven cushions. But it still did not bring him any understanding. Then one day he suddenly attained great Enlightenment raising up a screen. He composed a verse: “How different it is! How different it is! I raised up a screen and saw the whole world. If anyone asks me to explain what I have seen, I’ll take my fly-whisk and strike him on the mouth.” I think you had better have another look at that passage.

The priest could only nod his head in wonder.

17

The high-ranking Shingon priest Kōgen, head abbot of the Ninna-ji in Kyoto,¹⁹ paid Bankei a visit at the Jizō-ji in Yamashina.²⁰ After the exchange of greetings, Kōgen said: I am an heir to the Shingon Sect’s esoteric teachings, but I am unable to penetrate their essential meaning. For example, in the “Abiding Mind” chapter of the *Dainichi Sutra*,²¹ it says, “know the source of your own mind in the reality of suchness.” Now I have expended a great deal of time and trouble trying to discover what my own mind is, but all my efforts have been unsuccessful. Reading through the Zen records, I was deeply impressed by the severe, uncompromising methods that Zen teachers use to lead students to the truth. I want you to use your skillful means on me.

—There is only a very thin fabric separating you from that mind-source of yours, said Bankei—“But if there is even a hairsbreadth of difference, you are as far from it as heaven is from earth.”

¹⁸ The story of Chōkei Eryō (Ch’ang-ch’ing Hui-leng, 854–932) appears in a work titled the *Ch’an-yuan meng-ch’iu* (Jap. *Zen’en mōgyū*, 禪苑蒙求).

¹⁹ Kōgen 孝源; of the Ninna-ji branch of the Shingon Sect. The Ninna-ji is located in the western part of Kyoto.

²⁰ The Jizō-ji 地藏寺 was a temple in Yamashina, near Kyoto, rebuilt by Bankei and used as a personal retreat for practice and to recuperate from recurrences of his chronic illness.

²¹ The *Dainichi-kyō* (*Mahāvairocana Sutra*) is a fundamental scripture of the Japanese Tantric school.

A moment passed.

—What is obstructing you right now! said Bankei.

Kōgen nodded in affirmation—then bowed down in obeisance. After that, he paid frequent visits to the Jizō-ji.

18

Zen master Tenkei of the Sōtō Sect came to visit the master while he was at the Kōrin-ji in Edo.²² After the exchange of greetings, Tenkei said: Some years ago, when you stopped over at my temple in Shimada, I didn't grasp the true significance of your teaching. It wasn't until later, when I had acquired more experience and understanding, that I came to realize how wrong I had been. Master, I now have the deepest respect for your Great Activity.

Tenkei was holding a fan in his hand. He raised it up.

—What do you see, master? I see a fan.

Bankei just shook his head.

—Your instruction is respectfully received, said Tenkei.

19

When Bankei was in his thirties, he often visited the village of Ikaruga in his home province.²³ Although the villagers loved and respected him, head priest Jakua of the Busshō-in, a Tendai temple in the village, was unwilling to accept him, dismissing him as a young monk unworthy of his notice. Only the repeated urgings of the villagers made him at last relent and agree to meet Bankei.

Jakua began by leisurely putting some questions to Bankei. But Bankei answered them with an unsettling ease and promptness. Jakua then summoned up all the learning at his command. He tried again and again

²² Tenkei Denson 天桂伝尊 (1648–1735). A great master of the Sōtō Sect (one of the styles he used was 'Old Rice Weevil'). Tenkei was long regarded as a maverick in his own sect for his outspoken criticisms of some traditional Sōtō doctrines. His writings were proscribed throughout the Tokugawa period. According to Tenkei's chronological biography (*nempu*), Bankei was visited by Tenkei at an inn near Tenkei's temple, the Seikyō-ji (near Shizuoka), in 1685, during a stopover Bankei made on one of his trips between the Ryūmon-ji in Hamada and Edō.

²³ Harima; present Hyogo prefecture.

to confound Bankei. At length he had nothing left to ask him.

He thought to himself: I can certainly understand now why Master Saichō, the founder of our school,²⁴ established three teachings, Tendai, Esoterism, and Zen, at the head temple on Mount Hiei.²⁵

From then on, Jakua treated Bankei with great respect, and visited him frequently. Some years later, he was invited to Kyoto to lecture on the sutras at the Enryaku-ji, the head temple of the Tendai Sect on Mount Hiei. He accepted the invitation and then made a special trip to the Ryūmon-ji in Hamada to see Bankei. When he told him what had happened, Bankei raised a finger in the air and said:

—Jari!²⁶ Can you lecture on this sutra?

Jakua was dumbfounded. Cold sweat poured down his body. He sent word that very day to the Enryaku-ji, canceling his lecture trip. He then resigned his position as a Tendai priest, and, donning the robes of a Zen monk, became a disciple of Bankei. He devoted himself to his practice with unabating diligence. People called him the “horned tiger of the Zen forest.”²⁷ Known by the name Soryū Sengaku, he eventually became one of Bankei’s Dharma heirs, but he died before Bankei.

20

Once when Bankei was staying at the Gyokuryū-ji in Mino province,²⁸ he was visited by a Zen master of the Sōtō Sect named Yui’e.²⁹ Bankei received him warmly and ordered the monks to clean and prepare special quarters for him. Instead of waiting for Yui’e to come to him, he went straight to the guest quarters himself for their interview. When the monks saw Bankei enter the room, they approached with stealthy steps hoping

²⁴ Saichō (762–822), founder of the Japanese Tendai school, whose headquarters, the Enryaku-ji, are located on Mount Hiei, northeast of the city of Kyoto.

²⁵ The Tendai written doctrines, its secret esoteric teachings, and the practice of dhyana (Zen).

²⁶ A respectful form sometimes used in addressing a priest.

²⁷ A tiger is even more terrifying with horns.

²⁸ The Gyokuryū-ji 玉龍寺 in Mino province (present Gifu prefecture) was originally a small hermitage used by Bankei during his early period of pilgrimage; later made into a large temple.

²⁹ Yui’e Dōjō 惟恵道定 (d. 1713) head priest of the Zen’ō-ji in the province of Owari. Yui’e was a member of the brotherhood at the Sōfuku-ji in Nagasaki when Bankei went there to visit the Chinese master Dōsha Chōgen.

UNNECESSARY WORDS

to hear what the two men would say; but Bankei discovered them and had one of his attendants drive them away. When Bankei finally returned to the abbot's chambers, he remarked: The Zen master possesses a goodly store of knowledge, but that's about the extent of it.

Someone said: From now on, Yui'e won't be filling his sermons with a lot of unnecessary words.

In the course of their conversation, Yui'e told Bankei: The religious mind awakened in me when I was seventeen or eighteen years old. I devoted all my time to zazen, without even stopping for sleep or rest. I kept it up for over thirty years. I did it in order to put a stop to my deluded thoughts. In recent years, I seem able to keep my mind a bit clearer. But what kind of practice did you do, to enable you to strip people bare the way you do when they come to you for interviews? Please, it would be of immense help to me if you would tell me about it.

—When I was a young man, Bankei said, my mind was troubled by confused thoughts too. Then I suddenly grasped the fact that all things are originally empty and tranquil, and from then on I stopped picking and choosing and my mind became perfectly clear.

Yui'e was filled with respect and admiration for Bankei. He thought to himself: All the ancient worthies became teachers of men by perfecting the Dharma Eye in themselves. This old priest has broken through into enlightenment, and now he too is possessed of that same all-discerning Eye. Ever since, he has been able to see straight into people's hearts and know everything about them.

21

Before he took the vows and became a Buddhist priest, the Zen master Shingetsu of the Ōbaku Sect³⁰ once visited the master at the Kōrin-ji in Edo.

—How are you enjoying the Dharma? said Bankei.

—I have been reciting the *Lotus Sutra* for many years, said Shingetsu.

—Who recites the sutra? asked Bankei.

—The one who pronounces the words, said Shingetsu.

—Who pronounces the words? said Bankei.

—Eyes horizontal, nose vertical, replied Shingetsu.

³⁰ Shingetsu 真月. Nothing else is known of this priest.

—Don't give me that, you mealy-mouthed swindler! exclaimed Bankei. Now tell me: Who pronounces the words!

Shingetsu hesitated.

—If the teachers of our sect do not possess the all-discerning Dharma Eye they can never become the teachers of men and devas, said Bankei. Do you have that eye?

—Well, I believe I have my share of it, said Shingetsu.

—All right, said Bankei. Can you give an assessment of each of the people in this gathering?

—There is no one here, said Shingetsu, looking around him.

—Each and every person sitting here has his own distinguishing qualities, said Bankei. Aren't you able to assess them?

—Can you? replied Shingetsu.

—If I couldn't, then I might even blunder into passing you, said Bankei. Shingetsu's jaw dropped in amazement.

—There is not a priest in this country, or in China either, who could parry your Zen thrusts, said Shingetsu. I am certainly fortunate to have encountered you and had such a thorough interview.

—No one but this old priest could have made you know the error of your ways, said Bankei. Be diligent from now on. Your efforts will be rewarded.

Shingetsu never forgot the master's words, and came frequently to the Kōrin-ji to visit him.

22

In Bankei's middle years, there was a farmer in his native place by the name of Hachirōemon. Hachirōemon lived amidst the dust and dirt of the world, and came to the temple regularly to receive Bankei's teaching. Because of the man's extremely erratic behavior, the other villagers treated him as though he were demented, and left him alone. So they gazed incomprehendingly when they saw the close relationship he formed with the master, and the exceptional things they did and said when they were together. One day as Bankei was leaving the village, he encountered Hachirōemon.

—Where are you off to, master? said Hachirōemon.

—To your home, replied Bankei.

—Did you bring your medicine?³¹ he asked.

³¹ *Senyaku* 疝藥. A Chinese medicine taken to relieve pain in the abdominal area.

—I did, indeed, replied Bankei.

—I want you to pay me for that medicine, said Hachirōemon, holding out his hand. Bankei spat on the hand. They both roared with laughter.

All their exchanges were more or less the same. No one had the faintest idea what they were about.

Hachirōemon passed away with his head pillowed on Bankei's lap. His last words as he lay there were: I'm dying right here in the midst of the Dharma battlefield. I wonder if you'll have a word for me, master.

—Only that you must fell a formidable opponent, said Bankei.

—Would you allow that? Hachirōemon asked.

—There's nothing I don't allow, said Bankei.

—My husband! cried Hachirōemon's wife, wiping the tears from her eyes. You're a Buddha. Why didn't you save me from my ignorance before you left me?

—My whole body, when I'm speaking or silent, active or at rest, is the total activity of truth, answered Hachirōemon. I have never stopped revealing the essentials of mind to you. Why is it you have never understood?

23

Once, after Bankei had given a talk at the Kōrin-ji, a samurai proud of his skill in the fighting arts approached him for an interview.

—I trained for many years in the art of duelling, he said. Once I had it mastered, my arms moved in perfect accord with my mind. Now, if I face an opponent, my blade will split his skull before his weapon even moves. It is like you possessing the Dharma Eye.

—You say that you have perfected your skill in your art, Bankei said. Try to strike me!

The samurai hesitated for an instant.

—My blow has already fallen, said Bankei.

The man's jaw sagged.

—I'm astonished, he sighed. Your stroke is swifter than the spark off a flint. My head rolls at my feet. Please, master, teach me the essentials of your Zen.

With each visit to the Kōrin-ji his veneration for Bankei grew. While Bankei was in Edo, great numbers of swordsmen came to him for interviews. All of them encountered his powerful attack, and became his devoted followers.

Following a talk by Bankei at the Nyohō-ji,³² a group of samurai crowded around to question him about the Dharma.

—We believe everything you have told us, they said. But there is something we would like to ask you. We study swordsmanship, and have grasped the essential principle of the art. But we are as yet unable to apply that understanding fully in practice. A gap still exists between theory and performance.

—In that case, said Bankei, you haven't really grasped the principle either. The true principle is beyond both principles and practice. It is a perfect interpenetration of the principle and the deed, the spirit of the art and the technique—a perfect interpenetration of all things.

But the samurai remained unconvinced. They kept arguing about the theory and the technique and whether a gap existed between the two.

Then one of them said: I understand what you are saying, master, but I have heard that you yourself sometimes use the staff when you teach, and that you do not strike a student when he is especially able.

—Whoever told you that was mistaken, said Bankei. You are wrong. In the hands of a true teacher the staff always strikes home. No one escapes this old monk's staff!

The samurai stared in mute amazement.

In his middle years, Bankei had usually five to seven monks as attendants. One day he said to them:

—Suppose that you were blameless, yet someone starting spreading a rumour that you were guilty of some misdeed. What would your mind be like? Do you think it would be possible for you to remain in the Unborn Buddha-mind, detached from thought, as you attempted to vindicate your honor?

—How could we remain in a state of mindlessness? they all replied.

—As a young man, Bankei said, my aspiration for the Buddha Way left

³² The Nyohō-ji 如法寺, located in the castle town of Ōzu on the island of Shikoku, was one of Bankei's three main temples.

no room for other thoughts. I devoted myself to my quest with singleminded perseverance, without a care for my own well-being. If at that time false rumours about my notorious behavior had spread throughout the entire land, I would still have continued to apply myself to my practice without a single thought for anything else.

—Such behavior is totally beyond us, they said admiringly.

—Although my notoriety spread from mouth to mouth and finally reached the ears of a government official, and I was taken into custody, even then my aspiration would not for a second be turned from its course. And if I was sentenced to death, and I could not avoid the executioner's blade, my mind would still not falter or entertain a single thought of fear.

—One of the attendant monks said: There must be someone among us whose mind has strayed from the Way, else the master would not have said this to us.

26

Bankei was constantly teaching his monks about the Buddha-mind. One time, he said:

—It is originally Unborn and it knows unmistakably the beautiful and the ugly without recourse to a single thought. It is just like knowing whether someone you meet is a stranger or an old friend. You don't resort to a single thought but you know it with unmistakable clarity nonetheless—that is the wonder of the primary mind.

One of the monks said:

—Granted that I know immediately if someone is an old friend or not, but thoughts still continue to pass through my mind. Why is that?

Bankei paused. Then, raising his voice, he shouted:

—Originally there are no thoughts!!

—I'm certain that thoughts occur!! shouted back the monk.

Without giving a reply, Bankei made a long exhaling sound:

—*Pfuu . . . pfuu . . .*

The monk sat stupidly, confused and unsure.

A few days later, experiencing a sudden satori, he went to Bankei for an interview. Bankei just smiled.

More than one thousand people took part in the ninety-day retreat held at the Ryūmon-ji in the winter of the third year of Genroku [1690].³³ Everyone was worried about the great number of people.

—We must establish firm rules and regulations for them to follow, they said. They will have to be scolded and intimidated if they are to be controlled.

But when the time came, everything went off in an orderly, trouble-free manner, everyone was well behaved, without need for a single rule. Nor was there any set pattern in the way that Bankei dealt with the people who came to receive instruction from him. He ascended to the teaching seat frequently to give his talks. On one of these occasions he said:

—It is important that you people here at this great assembly do not obscure your original unbornness. But the Unborn is like a blazing conflagration—if you come into contact with it, you are kindled with its fire. Right now I am teaching you about it—but I cannot exhaust it. I am using it—but I cannot use it up. Teachers elsewhere flap their tongues and beat their gums in order to amaze and astonish their students. All they accomplish is to throw dust into their eyes and delude them. I could never do that to you.

The great crowds of people gathered before the master and listened to his teaching, and as they did their doubts and uncertainties all vanished like ice in the sun.

A layman said: My mind-store overflows with Buddha-wisdom, but it is sealed up so securely that I find it impossible to make use of it. What should I do?

—Come forward, Bankei said.

The layman began to approach him.

—You use it wonderfully well!

The layman pressed his head to the ground in a deep bow.

³³ See “The Zen Sermons of Bankei Yōtaku,” *Eastern Buddhist* VI, 2 (October 1973).

A monk approached Bankei, bowed, and then uttered a loud shout.

—*Khat!!*—This is Buddha! he said.

Bankei struck him.

—Do you understand? he said.

—This is Buddha! repeated the monk.

—You only want to make a name for yourself, said Bankei, pushing him away.

The words came from his mouth like the spark off a flint.