

# THE LIFE OF HAKUIN EKAKU

## The Path to Enlightenment

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I am constantly holding up the uglinesses of my house for others to see. Not a single word of my writing could possibly do anyone a bit of good... But I don't resent it when people take no interest. If there is even a single superior seeker, one who has broken through the Barrier, and he chances to get a glance at the lines I write, he will feel as though he is meeting an old friend in a far-off land.

Hakuin, postscript to *Isumadegusa*

### The Sources

The standard account of the life of the Rinzai Zen master Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 1685-1768, is found in the *Hakuin Oshō Nempu*<sup>①</sup>. Although not a biography in the true sense, the *Nempu* gives a year-by-year chronology of the important events of Hakuin's career. Compiled by his disciple and heir Tōrei Enji 東嶺円慈, 1721-1792, the *Nempu* is the chief source from which most later biographers of the master have drawn. As Tōrei was perhaps the closest of Hakuin's disciples, we may assume that in writing his work he made use of such information as was passed on to him personally by Hakuin, or at secondhand from fellow disciples. But such sources, valuable as they were, do not seem to have been the principal ones that he tapped in writing the *Nempu*. He clearly owed his greatest debt to the abundant autobiographical record contained in Hakuin's own writings. This is readily confirmed from an examination of the *Nempu* itself, a great many passages of which are taken, often in the same or very similar wording, from Hakuin's literary works.

Three of Hakuin's works are of special interest in regard to their autobiographical content: the long verse record *Isumadegusa*, "Wild

Ivy," known as his autobiography (1766), a prose miscellany titled *Yae-mugura*, "Goose Grass" (1759-61), and *Yasenkanna*, "Idle Talks on a Night Boat," (1755), his most popular book. The first of these, containing by far the largest amount of material, is the most important. The autobiographical sections in the other two, earlier, works, although containing a significant amount of material, parallel closely the accounts Hakuin later incorporated into *Isumadegusa*.<sup>②</sup>

Most of the episodes and events that Hakuin relates in telling about his life date from the years of his religious quest, the period from his entrance into the priesthood in his teens, until his return to the Shōin-ji in his thirties to begin teaching. As I wished to base this brief account as far as possible on the testimony Hakuin himself provides, I have concentrated exclusively on this highly interesting and well documented first decade of his career, tracing his life up until the dramatic moment in 1708, his twenty-third year, when his initial enlightenment occurred.

*Isumadegusa* has thus been my main primary source. I have taken into account parallel records, where such exist, in his other works and in Tōrei's *Hakuin Oshō Nempu*. The *Nempu* has also furnished supplemental material that is not found anywhere else.

#### i. The Early Years.

Both Tōrei's biography and the accounts given by Hakuin begin with episodes from Hakuin's early childhood that are clearly selected for the purpose of highlighting the causes and conditions which brought about the initial stirrings of his religious mind and led, eventually, to his decision to enter the Buddhist priesthood.<sup>③</sup>

Hakuin was born on January 19, 1686, the third son of the well-to-do Nagasawa 長沢 family of Hara 原, a small fishing and farming village at the foot of Mount Fuji important as a stop-over point on the main Tokaido road between Edo and Kyoto. His father served as supervisor of the Hara station.

His exceptional gifts revealed themselves early. At the age of three, he is said to have amazed his parents by repeating without a single mistake a long passage of over three hundred words from a folk song he had heard sung around the village. The following year, when he was taken to the seashore, while the other children played together in the sand, he sat off by himself, gazing out to sea. The sight of the clouds moving across the horizon impressed his young mind with the essential transience of the world.

When he was six, he was taken to visit a Buddhist ascetic, who said that he read in Hakuin's countenance the signs of future greatness. He told the young boy to live "*jikiri bakiri*" 地限場限—that is, according to the circumstances, for that place and for that moment alone—and then gave him three "secrets," which he said would help him to achieve a long and successful life. He was to eat the left-over bits of food in his bowl by first mixing them with hot water; to squat and never stand when he urinated; and always to show due respect to the northern quarter (e. g., he was never to relieve himself or to sleep with his feet facing north). The *Nemfu* says that Hakuin followed these directions scrupulously his entire life, even when he was ill or bedridden—and then reminds us that he lived to the ripe age of eighty-three.

Of all the episodes related about his youth, perhaps the most significant for his future life are those which tell of his abnormal fear of hell. The Sugawaras were Nichiren Buddhists. The mother seems to have been a particularly active devotee of the Lotus teachings. One day, she took her young son to hear a well-known Nichiren priest preach. He described in great detail the horrible sufferings that awaited those men and women whose sins in this life caused them to fall into hell.

While Hakuin seems to have been possessed of an unbending will—he never gave up any project once he started it—he was at the same time by his own admission an unruly youngster, whose childish pranks got him into frequent hot water with his parents and brothers. In one

passage, he confesses the cruel pleasure he took in torturing and killing some baby crows which he and his playmates got their hands on. In any case, he was convinced by what he had learned that his was a deeply sinful nature. He was the very sort of person who could expect to tumble straight into the blazing furnaces of hell when he died.

These fears of terrible karmic retribution took such strong hold in his mind that before long he lived in constant dread of the fate that he was sure awaited him. His mother tried to allay his anxiety by telling him to worship Tenjin, the deity of the Kitano Shrine. She said that he could count on Tenjin to protect him from harm because he had been born on the twenty-fifth of the month, the day sacred to that Shinto deity.<sup>④</sup>

He now began worshipping Tenjin with great diligence. He performed prostrations before an image of the deity. He chanted the prescribed religious texts. Before long, he had an opportunity to test the efficacy of Tenjin's powers. While he was playing with a toy bow and arrow, he accidentally shot a hole in a valued family scroll painting. He promptly appealed to Tenjin to come to his aid and keep the matter from becoming known to his parents. But the deed was soon discovered. His faith was shaken; he began seriously to doubt Tenjin's ability to help him. He heard that in cases such as his, the Bodhisattva Kannon could always be relied upon to produce good results. Thinking it unwise to put all his hopes on a single deity, he started chanting the *Kannon Sutra*.

A troupe of travelling puppeteers came to town to perform a play about a Nichiren priest who was able to endure horrible tortures with complete equanimity because of the strength of his spiritual attainment. Hakuin, now eleven, watched the play with the other village youths. He was particularly impressed by the Nichiren priest's declaration that he could enter a blazing inferno without being harmed; and when his persecutors placed a red-hot cauldron over his head, he did not even flinch. Hakuin decided then and there that his only

chance to avoid the burning terrors of hell lay in religious practice. He went home, recited his sutras, and then took a pair of hot tongs from the hearth and touched them to his thigh. This only gave him a bad burn. He concluded that more than a few months of sutra-recitation would be needed to assure himself of escaping the hell-fires. He would have to become a priest himself, and devote all his time to his training.

But in spite of his pleadings, he could not convince his parents to allow him to leave the family home and become a Buddhist priest. He decided to accomplish what he could at home, on his own. He recited Buddhist sutras. He went into the mountains and engaged in ascetic practices. Once he carved an image of Kannon on the face of a large rock with an awl, and sat long hours in front of it chanting the *Kannon Sutra*.

In his thirteenth year, he read through the *Kuzoshi* 句雙紙 (literally, "Book of Phrases"), an anthology of short quotations from Buddhist, mostly Zen sources, and Chinese literature, used by Zen students as "capping phrases" for their koans. In two months, he had memorized the entire book from cover to cover. An extraordinary feat for anyone, much less a boy of thirteen.

## ii. Entrance into the Priesthood

The original opposition that Hakuin's parents showed at the idea of losing their son to religion diminished over the next year as they watched the way he dedicated himself singlemindedly to his religious practice. They finally realized that his determination was not easily to be denied. When he turned fourteen, they took him to the Shōin-ji 松蔭寺<sup>⑤</sup>, a small Rinzai temple in the neighborhood, where the priest, Tanrei Soden 單嶺祖伝<sup>⑥</sup>, gave him the tonsure, and conferred him with the name Ekaku, 慧鶴 "Wise Crane." The boy's reaction at the time, as related in the *Nempu*, was expressed in a vow: "If leading a monk's life will unable me to enter the flames without being harmed,

then I am never going to give it up, even should it be the death of me.”

Here at the Shōin-ji he had his first taste of the Zen way of life. But he did not stay long. A few months later, he moved to the Dai-shō-ji, 大聖寺, a Zen temple in the neighboring town of Numazu, where the incumbent priest, Sokudō Fueki, 息道普益<sup>⑦</sup>, had agreed to accept him as his attendant. He spent the next four years, until 1703, at the Daishō-ji, and then transferred to the brotherhood of the Zenso-ji 禅叢寺 in the city of Shimizu, a short distance along the coast. There he encountered another disappointment, one that caused him to question the wisdom of his choice of career.

Listening to a lecture being given on the *Kōkofugetsu-shū*, a collection of Chinese Zen poetry, he heard the priest tell a story about a Zen master of the T'ang dynasty named Gantō Zenkatsu 巖頭全藏<sup>⑧</sup>. Desiring to learn more about this man, he borrowed some books, and, with the help of an older monk, studied the parts that dealt with Gantō's life. He was appalled to discover that Gantō had been murdered by bandits—to make matters worse, his death cries were said to have been heard for ten miles around. If such a fate could befall a priest as celebrated as Gantō in this world, he reasoned, then what hope did he, an ordinary monk, have to avoid falling into hell when he died? The doubts that arose at this time remained in his mind right up until his initial breakthrough into enlightenment five years later.

Greatly discouraged, at this point Hakuin even contemplated giving up his religious career and returning to lay life. But he thought better of it—mainly, he says, because he was too ashamed to face his parents and admit his mistake. In any case, after days of agony and nights of sleepless torment, during which the burning hell-fires never left his thoughts, he resigned himself to accept his fate. Since hell was unavoidable, when the time came he would leap straight into the flames together with his fellow monks.

Meanwhile, so as not to waste the rest of his life, he resolved to

turn his attention to the study of literature and calligraphy, and become a famous writer or artist. Now, “the mere sight of a sutra-book or Buddhist painting made him nauseous.”

iii. The Zuiunji—Genroku 17 (1704).

In the spring of the year, he visited southern Mino province, having heard of a Zen priest named Baō Rōjin 馬翁老人 in the city of Ōgaki, who was reputed to be unsurpassed in the field of letters. But old Baō was a tough and ruthless character, whose nickname, “the wild horse of Mino” (Baō means “Old Horse”), was apparently well earned. Moreover, his temple, the Zuiun-ji 瑞雲寺, was so poor that he and the other monks even had to pay for their own keep. Few of the students who came to the Zuiun-ji remained for long.

But if Hakuin had any second thoughts about the choice he had made, they were soon dispelled. He used the “travelling money” given him by his mother to pay for his food. And as for Baō’s severity, he refused to allow that to scare him off. He spent the better part of his nineteenth year at the Zuiun-ji, helping around the temple, reading in Baō’s extensive library of books, and pursuing his study of Chinese literature. During that time, he formed a close and lasting relationship with the old priest.

Sometime toward the middle of the year, the sad news reached him of his mother’s death. Hakuin was very close to his mother, and it was a heavy blow. Whether the loss was responsible for the reappearance of the old fears of hell that began to plague him once again, he does not venture to say. But after pursuing the study of letters for over half a year, he came to realize his mistake: “Even were I able to write verses that excelled those of such great poets as Li Po and Tu Fu,” he decided, “I would still be no better off when it came time for me to face the terrible fires of hell.”

He was sitting behind the temple, disconsolately pondering his next move. His gaze happened to turn down to the far end of the veranda,

where several hundred old books had been stacked, after an airing, on top of a desk. If he could not find his way out of his predicament on his own, then he decided to turn to higher powers for help. Praying to the gods and buddhas to point him in the right direction, he quietly approached the desk, where the books, on Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and a variety of other subjects, were piled in disorder. He shut his eyes, stretched out his hand, and picked up one of the volumes. He selected the *Zenkan Sakushin*, a well-known Zen work by a celebrated Ming priest named Unsei Shukō, consisting of anecdotes and excerpts from the sutras and from the sermons and talks of the Chinese Zen masters, designed to encourage Zen students in their practice.<sup>①</sup>

Opening the book at random, he turned to a passage that seemed to pertain directly to his present situation. It related the extraordinary hardships that the T'ang Zen priest Jimyō 慈明 experienced in his search for enlightenment.<sup>②</sup> Here is the episode, as it appears in the *Zenkan Sakushin* :

*Jimyō and two other monks...went together to study with the master Fun'yo. When they arrived, it was bitterly cold east of the river; the freezing weather had kept other practicers away. But Jimyō's aspiration was set firmly on the pursuit of the Way. He did zazen continually, sitting right through the long nights. Whenever he felt a sign of sleep, he would jab himself in the thigh with a gimlet...His vigorous spirit enlivened the Zen world of the time.*<sup>③</sup>

It turned out to be just the spur that Hakuin needed. Now twenty, he resumed his pilgrimage with an even greater sense of determination and spent the next three years travelling throughout the country. He crossed the Inland Sea to visit masters on the island of Shikoku. He made his way west as far as the Hiroshima area. Throughout his travels, he worked constantly on the *Mu* koan as he trudged along, and was able to achieve a state of deep samadhic concentration. On his way through Harima province with some fellow-monks, he was inspired

by the sight of a mountain stream to write a Japanese verse :

*At the foot of the mountain  
The stream flows on without cease,  
If the mind of Zen is thus  
How can kenshō be far off?*<sup>⑭</sup>

His travels took him past many famous scenic and historic spots, but he did not even take notice of them. He felt, he says, as though he were not proceeding forward at all, but standing alone. Everything around him—the people, houses, the roadside trees—seemed to be moving westward.

When he finally arrived back home at the age of twenty-two, and his friends and relations flocked to hear him tell of his adventures, he was still so absorbed in his koan he was unable to answer their questions, and could only manage a few unresponsive grunts.

In 1707, he returned to Ōgaki for three months in order to nurse Baō Rōjin, who had fallen ill. But he still devoted all his spare moments to his practice. The *Nempu* relates two strange experiences that occurred to him as he was sitting alone late at night in the Zuiun-ji—he had entered the realm of *makyō*, where delusions emerge to hinder the student in his progress. His practice was reaching a critical stage. First, there was a strange apparition :

*A oval form like a cart wheel, about the size of a cat's head, appeared above his hands as he was sitting in zazen. It remained there, frightening him, throughout the night. But he continued to concentrate himself on his koan, and it finally disappeared of itself.*

On another occasion, as he was sitting alone doing some night zazen, he suddenly rose up into the sky and began to fly southward. He quickly covered many leagues, and was able to recognize the islands off the Ise coast below him as he sailed over them. He continued until he had passed the tip of the Kii peninsula. Just then, the thought flash-

ed through his mind: "What am I, a Buddhist priest, doing this for?" He gave a loud Khat! and found that he was sitting back on his zazen cushion as before.

iv. The Eiganji—Hōei 5 (1708).

In the spring of fifth year of Hōei, Hakuin set out in the company of several fellow monks for Takada, a city in Echigo province on the Japan Sea coast in northern Japan; a series of Zen lectures was to be held on the *Ninden Ganmoku*<sup>15</sup> at the Eigan-ji 英巖寺, a Rinzai temple in that city.<sup>16</sup> His main concern in making the long journey north was not the lectures; rather, he wished to meet a monk whom he had heard was residing in the Eigan-ji. Word had it that he was a "true man of the Way."

Upon arrival, Hakuin sought the man out. But he soon realized to his considerable disappointment that the reports of his religious attainment had been greatly exaggerated. Having come all that way, however, he decided to stay for the meeting and concentrate himself on his koan.

By piecing together the accounts in *Itsumadegusa* and the *Nempu*,<sup>17</sup> we are able to obtain a rather good picture of the events that took place at the Eigan-ji, as well as the condition of Hakuin's mental state at the time.

At one point, everyone he saw seemed to be floating vaguely in space, as if part of a mirage, while his own body seemed to be enveloped in cloud. Then, "the entire world seemed to be of clearest crystal, and all the countless things in it were perfectly transparent, without a single flaw."

But he refused to allow his mind to abide and savor the wonders of this fascinating realm. Slipping away from the assembly, he found a small shrine behind the temple, and shut himself up inside. Confidant that a breakthrough of some kind was near, he resolved to fast for seven days and concentrate singlemindedly on the *Mu* koan.

Then, on the sixteenth of the second month, his long-sought enlight-

enment occurred. In Hakuin's own words :

*It was the middle of the night. The sound of a distant temple bell reached my ears. My body and mind dropped completely away...Beside myself with joy, I cried out at the top of my lungs, "Old Gantō lives! Old Gantō is alive and well!"*

With this initial breakthrough, all the old doubts ceased to exist. Now twenty-three, he proceeded from the Eigan-ji to the Shōju-an in the mountains of Shinano province to study with Shōju Rōjin, 正受老人, the Zen teacher whom he would come to regard as his true master. His religious career had entered the important post-enlightenment phase. Although he was now supremely confident of the powers he had attained—certain that no one in the past five hundred years had achieved such a deep realization—he was destined to spend another eighteen eventful years, and experience countless satoris, "both large and small," deepening this original attainment, before he would achieve his final enlightenment.

#### NOTES

- ① *Hakuin oshō nempu*. It is not known exactly when Tōrei composed the *Nempu*; it was first published fifty years after his death by his disciple Daikan Monju, in a slightly revised form. The text is found in the *Hakuin oshō zenshū*, vol. 1, Tokyo, 1934, pp. 267-368.
- ② *Itsumadegusa* 壁生草 (*zenshū*, vol. 1), the last of Hakuin's major works to be written, dates from the final month of 1765, his eighty-first year, only three years before his death. Although *Itsumadegusa* is written in a peculiar form of light verse called *kyōshi* (literally, "mad poetry") that often makes it difficult to understand, and has no doubt limited its readership considerably, the work deserves to be better known; for it is after all the autobiographical record of the man many regard as the greatest of the Japanese Zen masters.

The material in the third section of *Yaemugura* 八重葎 (*zenshū*, vol. 6; first published in 1761), devoted largely to an account of Hakuin's early years, is repeated in *Itsumadegusa*.

*Yasenkanwa* 夜船閑話 (*zenshū*, vol. 5; written in 1757) deals solely with the period of Hakuin's "Zen illness," and describes his cure through the use of the "introspective meditation" (*naikan*) taught him by a Taoistic sage named Hakuyūshi 白幽子. The final part of *Itsumadegusa* is in effect a *kambun* translation of *Yasenkanwa*, which omits part of the introductory section. In addition to these, autobiographical portions are found in *Orategama*, the introduction to *Kanzan-shi sendaikimon*, and the *Sokkō fusetsu roku*.

- ③ This is of course a common format for such official biographies. Cf. similar works compiled by Bankei Yōtaku's disciples; *Bankei zenji goroku*, Iwanami bunko 1782-2784, Tokyo.
- ④ Hakuin was born on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month, in the second year of Jōkyō, at two in the morning. All of these fall under the same zodiacal sign of the Ox.
- ⑤ The Shōin-ji, originally founded in 1279, was later restored in 1649 by Daizui Sōiku, 大瑞宗育 d. 1660, who was an uncle of Hakuin's father. Hakuin returned to the Shōin-ji at intervals during his years of pilgrimage. In his early thirties, acceding to his father's dying wish that he live in the Shōin-ji and revive its fortunes, he took up residence and remained for the rest of his life, making it the center of his teaching activities.
- ⑥ Few details are known of Tanrei Soden's life; he served for a time as head priest of the Shōin-ji.
- ⑦ Sokudō Fueki, d. 1712.
- ⑧ In Chinese, *Chiang-hu feng-chueh lu* 江湖風月集 ("A collection of wind and moon by priests of the Zen community"), a compilation of 272 religious verses by Chinese Zen priests of the Sung and Yuan dynasties, first published in Japan in 1328.
- ⑨ Chinese, Yen-t'ou Ch'uan-huo, 828-887; a brief statement describing his life as a ferryman appears in the notes of the *Kōkofugetsushū-ryakuchū* 略註, a Japanese commentary published in the 17th century. During the Emperor Wu's suppression of Buddhism, when many Buddhist monks and nuns were returned to lay status, Gantō continued his teaching as a layman, living as a ferryman at Lake Tung-ting in Hunan. A biography is found in *Keitoku Dentōroku*, (Chinese, *Ching-te chuan-teng lu*), 16.
- ⑩ Bāo Rōjin, "Old Man Bāo," also Bāo Sōchiku 馬翁宗竹, n. d., was an heir of the Rinzaï master Rizan Sodon, and founder of the Zuiun-ji, located near Ōgaki castle. *Hakuin zenji nempu* (the annotated edition published

by the Ryūtaku-ji of Mishima in 1967), p. 10.

- ⑪ Chinese, *Ch'an-kuan Ts'e-chin* 禪關策進, "Spurring Zen Students to Break Through the Zen Barrier," by Yun-ch'i Chu-hung, 1535-1615. First printed in Japan in 1656, it was later republished in 1762 by Hakuin's heir Tōrei Enji.
- ⑫ Chinese, Tz'u-ming, 986-1039. Also known as Sekisō Soen, 石霜楚円; Chinese, Shih-shuang Ch'u-yuan.
- ⑬ The *Zenkan Sakushin* became a kind of bible for Hakuin. He carried it with him on all his journeys, reading and rereading it for inspiration. His admiration for Jimyō's diligence never weakened. Often in his later years he would write these words from the *Zenkan Sakushin* in his bold, distinctive calligraphy or make drawings of Jimyō piercing his thigh with a gimlet, and give them to people to encourage them in their practice.
- ⑭ This verse was written as an inscription for a self-portrait, of which several versions exist. *Bokubi*, special combined issue on Hakuin's painting and calligraphy, 1977, pp. 162-3, pls. 32, 33, 34. The entire inscription, which is also quoted in the *Hakuin Nempu*, reads: "It was autumn of 1707, when I was twenty-two. I had left the training halls of the Tenshō-ji in Fukuyama, Harima province, travelling for home in the company of five fellow monks. We were stopping at the Kaisei-ji in Nishinomiya. I slipped off by myself to do *zazen*, sitting on a large rock in the mountain behind the temple. Painted in the winter of 1765, at the age of eighty, by the Old Monk Under the Sala Tree."
- ⑮ Chinese, *Jen-t'ien yen-mu* 人天眼目. A Sung work (1188) which sets forth the characteristics of the "Five Houses" of Zen.
- ⑯ The Eigan-ji was the family temple of the Toda clan, the feudal lords of Takada castle.
- ⑰ When there was a discrepancy between the two, I have followed Hakuin's account in *Isumadegusa*. According to the *Nempu*, Hakuin did not fast; he went to the refectory to eat, but was so absorbed in his practice that he did not know what he was eating. The *Nempu* also has him continuing his practice for over ten days, and says that his enlightenment occurred, not at midnight, but at dawn.

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