

PAUL REPS 101 ZEN STORIES

Transcribed by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps These stories were transcribed into English from a book called the Shaseki-shu (Collection of Stone and Sand), written late in the thirteenth century by the Japanese Zen teacher Muju (the 'non-dweller), and from anecdotes of Zen monks taken from various books published in Japan around the turn of the present century. For Orientals, more interested in being than in business the self-discovered man has been the most worthy of respect. Such a man proposes to open his consciousness just as the Buddha did. These are stories about such self-discoveries.

1. A Cup of Tea

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912) received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in saved tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. 'It is overfull. No more will go in!' 'Like this cup,' Nan-in said. 'You are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?'

2. Finding a Diamond on a Muddy Road

Gudo was the emperor's teacher of his time. Nevertheless, he used to travel done as a wandering mendicant. Once when he was on his way to Edo, the cultural and political center of the shogunate, he approached a little village mad Takenaka. It was evening and a heavy rain was falling. Gudo was thoroughly wet. His straw sandals were in pieces. At a farmhouse near the village he noticed four or five pairs of sandals in the window and decided to buy some dry ones. The woman who offered him the sandals seeing how wet he was invited him to remain for the night in her home. Gudo accepted, thanking her. He entered and recited a sutra before the family shrine. He then was introduced to the woman's mother, and to her children. Observing that the entire family was depressed Gudo asked what was wrong. 'My husband is a gambler and a drunkard,' the housewife told him. 'When he happens to win he drinks and becomes abusive. When he losses he borrows money from others. Sometimes when becomes thoroughly drunk he does not come home at all. What can I do?' 'I will help him,' said Gudo. 'Here is some money. Get me a gallon of fine wine and something good to eat. Then you may retire. I will meditate before the shrine.' When the man of the house returned about midnight, quite drunk; he bellowed: 'Hey, wife I am home. Have you something for me eat?' 'I have something for you: said Gudo. 'I happened to be caught in the rain and your wife kindly asked me to remain here for the night. In return I have bought some wine and fish. You might as well have them.' The man was delighted. He drank the wine at once and laid himself down on the floor. Gudo sat in mediation beside him. In the morning when the husband awoke he had forgotten about the previous night. 'Who are you? Where do you come from?' he asked Gudo, who still was meditating. 'I am Gudo of Kyoto and I am going on to Edo,' replied the Zen master. The man was utterly ashamed He apologized profusely to the teacher of his emperor. Gudo smiled. 'Everything in this life is impermanent' he explained. 'Life is very brief. If you keep on gambling and drinking you will have no time left to accomplish anything else, and you will cause your family to suffer too.' The perception of the husband awoke as if from a dream. 'You are right,' he declared. 'How can I ever repay you for this wonderful teaching! Let me see you off and carry your things a little way.' 'If you wish,' assented Gudo. The two started out. After they had gone three miles Gudo told him to return. 'Just another five miles,' he begged Gudo. They continued on. You may return now,' suggested Gudo. 'After another ten miles,' the man replied. 'Return now,' said Gudo, when the ten miles had been passed. 'I am going to follow you all the rest of my life,' declared the man. Modern Zen teachers in Japan spring from the lineage of a famous master who was the successor of Gudo. His name was Mu-nan, the man who never returned back.

3. Is That So?

The Zen master Hakuin was praised by his neighbors as one living a pure life. A beautiful Japanese girl whose parents owned a food store lived near him. Suddenly, without any warning her parents discovered she was with child. This made her parents angry. She would not confess who the man was, but after much harassment at last named Hakuin. In great anger the parents went to the master. 'Is that so?' was all he would say. After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin. By this time he had lost his reputation, which did not trouble him, but he took very good care of the child. He obtained milk from his neighbors and everything else the little one needed. A year later the girl-mother could stand it no longer. She told her parents the truth - that the real father of the child was a young man who worked in the fish market. The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask his forgiveness, to apologize at length, and to get the child back again. Hakuin was willing. In yielding the child, all he said was, 'Is that so?'

4. Obedience

The master Bankei's talks were attended not only by Zen students but by persons of all ranks and sects. He never quoted sutras nor indulged in scholastic dissertations. Instead his words were spoken directly from his heart to the hearts of his listeners. His large audience angered a priest of the Nichiren sect because the adherents had left to hear about Zen. The self-centered Nichiren priest came to the temple determined to debate with Bankei. 'Hey, Zen teacher,' he called out. 'Wait a minute. Whoever respects you will obey what you say, but a man like myself does not respect you. Can you make me obey you?' 'Come up beside me and I will show you,' said Bankei. Proudly the priest pushed his way through the crowd to the teacher. Bankei smiled. 'Come over to my left side.' The priest obeyed. 'No,' said Bankei, 'we may talk better if you are on the right side. Step over here.' The priest proudly stepped over to the right. 'You see,' observed Bankei, 'you are obeying me and I think you are a very gentle person. Now sit down and listen.'

5. If You Love, Love Openly

Twenty monks and one nun, who was named Eshun, were practicing meditation with a certain Zen master. Eshun was very pretty even though her head was shaved and her dress plain. Several monks secretly fell in love with her. One of them wrote her a love letter, insisting upon a private meeting. Eshun did not reply. The following day the master gave a lecture to the group, and when it was over, Eshun arose. Addressing the one who had written her, she said: 'If you really love me so much, come and embrace me now.'

6. No Loving-Kindness

There was an old woman in China who had supported a monk for over twenty years. She had built a little hut for him and fed him while he was meditating. Finally, she wondered just what progress he had made in all this time. To find out, she obtained the help of a girl rich in desire. 'Go and embrace him,' she told her; and then ask him suddenly: "What now?" The girl called upon the monk and without much ado caressed him, asking him what he was going to do about it. 'An old tree grows on a cold rock in winter,' replied the monk somewhat poetically. 'Nowhere is there any warmth.' The girl returned and related what he had said. 'To think I fed that fellow for twenty years!' exclaimed the old woman in anger. 'He showed no consideration for your need, no disposition to explain your condition. He need not have responded to passion, but at last he should have evidenced some compassion.' She at once went to the hut of the monk and burned it down.

7. Announcement

Tanzan wrote sixty postal cards on the last day of his life, and asked an attendant to mail them. Then he passed away. The cards read: I am departing from this world. This is my last announcement. Tanzan 27 July 1892.

8. Great Waves

In the early days of the Meiji era there lived a well-known wrestler called O-nami, Great Waves. O-nami was immensely strong and knew the art of wrestling. In his private bouts he defeated even his teacher, but in public he was so bashful that his own pupils threw him. O-nami felt he should go to a Zen master for help. Hakuju, a wandering teacher, was stopping in a little temple nearby, so O-nami went to see him and told him of his trouble. 'Great Waves is your name,' the teacher advised, 'so stay in this temple tonight. Imagine that you are those billows. You are no longer a wrestler who is afraid. You are those huge waves sweeping everything before them, swallowing all in their path. Do this and you will be the greatest wrestler in the land.' The teacher retired. O-nami sat in meditation trying to imagine himself as waves. He thought of many different things. Then gradually he turned more and more to the feelings of the waves. As the night advanced the waves became larger and larger. They swept away the flowers in their vases. Even the Buddha in the shrine was inundated. Before dawn the temple was nothing but the ebb and flow of an immense sea. In the morning the teacher found O-nami meditating, a faint smile on his face. He patted the wrestler's shoulder. 'Now nothing can disturb you,' he said. 'You are the waves. You will sweep everything before you.' The same day O-nami entered the wrestling contests and won. After that, no one in Japan was able to defeat him.

9. The Moon cannot be Stolen

Ryokan, a Zen master, lived the simplest kind of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal. Ryokan returned and caught him. 'You may have come a long way to visit me,' he told the prowler, 'and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.' The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. Ryokan sat naked, watching the moon. 'Poor fellow,' he mused, 'I wish I could give him this beautiful moon.'

10. The Last Poem

There he had passed on. Hoshin, who related this story, told his disciples: 'It is not necessary for a Zen master to predict his passing, but if he really wishes to do so, he can.' 'Can you?' someone asked. 'Yes,' answered Hoshin. 'I will show you what I can do seven days from now. None of the disciple's believed him, and most of them had even forgotten the conversation when Hoshin next called them together. 'Seven days ago,' he remarked, 'I said I was going to leave you. It is customary to write a farewell poem, but I am neither poet nor calligrapher. Let one of you inscribe my last words.' His followers thought he was joking, but one of them started to write. 'Are you ready?' Hoshin asked. 'Yes, sir,' replied the writer. Then Hoshin dictated: I came from brilliancy and return to brilliancy. What is this? The poem was one line short of the customary four, so, the disciple said: 'Master, we are one line short.' Hoshin, with the roar of a conquering lion, shouted 'Kaa!' and was gone.

14. Muddy Road Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling. Coming around a bend, they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection. 'Come on, girl,' said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud. Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. 'We monks don't go near females.' He told Tanzan, especially not young and lovely ones. 'It is dangerous. Why did you do that?' 'I left the girl there,' said Tanzan. 'Are you still carrying her'