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Haskel/Letting Go

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As with so many of the acquaintances who brighten one’s life, I encountered Zen Master Tōsui Unkei (d. 1683) quite by accident—much as did the nameless beggars, day laborers, and assorted townsfolk who chance upon him in the pages of his colorful biography, the *Tribute.* In the course of researching the life of the noted priest-poet Taigu Ryōkan (1758–1832), Tōsui’s name surfaced as a largely forgotten earlier Zen figure who embodied many of the traits for which Ryōkan was celebrated—a staunch independence and indifference to hardship, a rejection of the monastic world for a life among the common people of Japan, and a keen understanding of Zen combined with an at-times childlike naïveté. Like Ryōkan, Tōsui was a member of the Sōtō school, and undertook long and grueling years of Zen study, receiving the sanction of a distinguished teacher, only to finally abandon the religious establishment. But while Ryōkan returned to settle in his native district of Echigo, where he lived surrounded by patrons, admirers, and friends, Tōsui seems to have been a confirmed loner, a drifter who valued untrammeled freedom above all else and who, even in old age, fought stubbornly to shed all constraints—material, personal, or institutional. So extreme was Tōsui’s stance that he has been acclaimed by one modern Japanese writer as unique in the history of Japanese Zen, a history admittedly boasting a great many distinctive characters. Some have likened Tōsui to Saint Francis of Assisi, or even hailed him as the “original hippie” (hippi no dai sendatsu) and his biography as a “hippie primer” (hippi no nyūmon).

The details of Tōsui’s life are arresting indeed. By the time he had reached the pinnacle of his career, he had spent virtually his entire life as a priest, entering the temple as a child, training in monasteries, traveling on pilgrimage to study under a variety of notable teachers, finally receiving his master’s sanction of his realization and the transmission of his school of Zen. Having become a Zen master in his own right, he had
received abbacy of a temple as well as the patronage of a powerful daimyo and could look forward to a secure and distinguished old age. Yet at this juncture, without any explanations or good-byes, Tōsui suddenly left his temple, his disciples, and his comfortable life as a Buddhist abbot, effectively abandoning his position within the Sōtō school. He seems to have settled for a time at Manpukuji, the chief monastery of the recently established Ōbaku line, whose immigrant Chinese teachers were attracting the notice of many idealistic Japanese Zen monks. But in the end Tōsui left Manpukuji as well and henceforth relinquished temple life altogether and even the outward trappings of a priest, disappearing into the towns and cities of Japan to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence as an itinerant beggar, vendor, and day laborer. Pursued by anxious disciples, who discovered him living in Kyoto, homeless, ragged, and unkempt, Tōsui refused all pleas to resume his role as teacher and declined to accept any material assistance that might circumscribe his cherished freedom.

Once having left the temples, Tōsui never turned back. Right to the end, he fiercely maintained his independence, rejecting any help that was not completely unconditional, that might leave him beholden to any person or group. Yet for all its solitude, poverty, and physical discomfort, Tōsui never regarded his way of life as a form of trial or penance, but purely as a source of delight, a manifestation of what the Tribute’s author extols as “oneness with the principle of cosmic play” (yugyōzanmai). When Tōsui died in Kyoto, operating a vinegar stand in the city’s northern suburb of Takagamine, his final poem expressed only the sense of a lifetime of joy and of the beauty of the autumn evening that shimmered before him.

As it has come down to us, Tōsui’s life as a Zen master hidden in the world rather than from it seems not merely the record of an exceptionally free-spirited and uncompromising personality, but a silent rebuke to the Zen of his day, and even a challenge to that of our own. In particular, it suggests that Zen practice and enlightenment need not depend on a temple establishment, a priesthood, or any external organization but can be integrated seamlessly and often invisibly with one’s daily life. Perhaps, Tōsui’s story implies, this is itself the most direct form of Zen teaching.

Unfortunately, Tōsui, unlike Ryōkan, left behind no written legacy. That we know about him at all is largely because of a single biography, the Tribute, composed some fifty years after Tōsui’s death by the Sōtō
Zen master Menzan Zuihō (1683–1769). Menzan had spent years collecting information about Tōsui, interviewing monks who had known the Master firsthand and others who had heard stories about him from colleagues and teachers who had themselves been his disciples and associates. The resulting facts and assorted anecdotes Menzan assembled in rough chronological order to produce a sort of impromptu biography. Of Tōsui’s actual views regarding Zen, Zen practice, and the various issues confronting the Zen monks of his day, Menzan’s account records nothing apart from a handful of verses and a few, albeit telling, offhand remarks. Yet what survives in the accumulated vivid detail of Menzan’s record is something far more compelling than words or thoughts, namely Tōsui himself. Tōsui’s life, as we have it, the Tribute makes plain, was his ultimate teaching, his true Zen legacy.

Tōsui’s biographer, Menzan, was the most celebrated Sōtō scholar of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) and at the time of his death possibly the leading figure in the Sōtō school. The author of more than fifty sectarian works, including textual studies and biographies of Dōgen Kigen (1200–1253), Japanese Sōtō Zen’s founder, Menzan was also an ardent practitioner and an active Zen master, principal heir to the early Tokugawa movement that sought to renovate the Sōtō temples by establishing an orthodoxy inspired by Dōgen’s original teachings. Indeed, the Sōtō sect as it exists in Japan today is in many respects the creation of Menzan and his colleagues in this movement, which became the prevailing force in Sōtō Zen.

Menzan tells us in his introduction to the Tribute that he had often heard about Tōsui from Kohō Ryōun (d. 1717), who was not only Menzan’s early teacher but also Tōsui’s nephew and the heir of Sengan Rintetsu (n.d.), one of Tōsui’s Dharma brothers. Tōsui seems to have guided his nephew’s spiritual development, bringing him at age ten to train under Sengan and later sending him to study at Manpukuji under the émigré Zen master Kao-ch’üan. Kohō, in turn, revered Tōsui and had intended to honor him with a formal biography but died before undertaking the task, which Menzan resolved to complete in his late teacher’s place. Menzan also states that he was anxious to expand the available accounts of Tōsui’s life, which he regarded as hopelessly inadequate, an apparent reference to the brief and nearly identical profiles included in two collections of Sōtō priests’ biographies published in the first decades of the eighteenth century.
But aside from setting the record straight and showing respect to his first teacher, the preface makes clear that Menzan wished to convey something of his own heartfelt enthusiasm for Tōsui and that he deliberately presented the Master’s story in a way that he felt would appeal not only to Zen monks and nuns but to ordinary lay men and women. Tōsui’s biography was one of the few popular works Menzan composed in the course of his long and prolific career. It is not only written in an easily readable, unvarnished, and occasionally colloquial style, but provided with illustrations in the form of twenty woodblock prints depicting various episodes from the text. The Tribute, to my knowledge, is the earliest biography of an Edo-period Zen priest to be published with narrative illustrations.

As a quintessential “establishment” figure, Menzan might seem an unlikely champion for a maverick like Tōsui, who essentially turned his back on the Sōtō temples and his position as a Sōtō abbot. But whatever Menzan’s sectarian concerns and convictions regarding Sōtō orthodoxy, his remarks in the Tribute leave one in no doubt that he felt Tōsui’s story had something of real value to say about Zen and that he hoped to see the work disseminated as widely as possible both inside and outside the temples.

The Tribute, as noted before, is not just the best account of Tōsui’s life but the only account, for all practical purposes. The two earlier, capsule biographies, though they have at least the virtue of having been compiled shortly after Tōsui’s death, are uncritically assembled patchworks of fact, legend, and hearsay, offering little more than fragments of often dubious or garbled information. Subsequent biographies of Tōsui, including those that have appeared in the modern period, are based entirely on the two early accounts and the Tribute, and essentially add nothing to the record, apart from occasional unsupported speculation. The best of these works, Tanaka Shigeru’s 1939 Beggar Tōsui (Kōjiki Tōsui), exposes various baseless assertions marring the other Tōsui biographies, both modern and premodern, but then proceeds to introduce undocumented speculation of its own.

Menzan’s work itself, for all its pleasures, suffers from a variety of imperfections. The Tribute’s narrative consists for the most part of anecdotes grouped roughly by period and suggesting an ordered chronology; but the actual placement of the stories within each grouping is often, as Menzan concedes, purely random. The Tribute supplies few fixed dates,
and Menzan confesses that for the latter part of Tōsui’s career there is no way of knowing where the Master was at a given time. Yet the text repeatedly offers figures for the number of years covered by various periods in Tōsui’s life—five years, six years, thirty years, and so forth—numbers that, in the context of the narrative as a whole, fail to add up in any coherent fashion. All in all, present-day scholars may justifiably carp at the chronological contradictions and inconsistencies that reveal themselves in Menzan’s account. But it should be borne in mind that while often failing to match the needs of modern historical research, the Tribute fully accords with the actual purposes for which its author intended it. Menzan’s aim in the work was not so much to provide a careful and consistent chronology of Tōsui’s career as to offer a “tribute” (san) to Tōsui’s character as revealed in various episodes from the Master’s own life, a tribute that might serve, in turn, as inspiration to both Zen monks and laypeople.

Because the Tribute is itself primarily a biography and the basis for nearly all we know of Tōsui’s life, in introducing the text I have deliberately refrained from doing more than touch on the broad outlines of the Master’s singular career. To do otherwise, to discuss Tōsui’s story in greater detail, would not only be repetitious but anticlimactic, anticipating and inevitably diminishing the original’s lively and entertaining account. Readers interested in an extended examination of Tōsui’s life as represented in the traditional sources are referred to the biographical essay that follows the translation.

No personality, however original, exists in a vacuum, and distinctive as Tōsui was in many respects, he remains very much a man of his period, the seventeenth century, itself a peculiarly colorful time in the history of Japanese Zen. Because we lack virtually any record of Tōsui’s own religious practice or outlook, it is not possible to relate him directly to any of the movements or trends in the Zen temples of his day or to know to what extent he was influenced by the many famous priests whom the Tribute tells us he sought out and studied under. We can, however, delineate something of the atmosphere of Tōsui’s world by examining certain of the forces that shaped Tokugawa Zen and, in particular, by focusing on those Tokugawa teachers whom Tōsui himself is said to have encountered. By adopting such an approach in the introduction, I have tried both to fill in background pertinent to the Tribute and to call attention to personalities, issues, and institutions that may
have informed Tōsui’s own development as a Zen master.

At the same time, the special character and flavor of Zen in Tōsui’s period cannot be conveyed without some sense of Japanese Zen in the period immediately preceding, that is, the late Middle Ages. Nearly all of Tōsui’s teachers shared a sense that Japanese Zen had failed during the previous centuries and needed to be revived, even reinvented. This attitude seems to have been a reaction to particular developments in late-medieval Japanese Zen, and for this reason, the introduction begins with an overview of certain features of the still only dimly understood Zen of this period, including the distinctive, and at times bizarre, forms of koan study and secret transmission prevalent in the late-medieval Rinzai and Sōtō temples.

It is, of course, perfectly possible to enjoy Tōsui’s story purely on its own terms, and the forthright, untrammeled spirit revealed in the Tribute speaks to us clearly across the centuries. But I believe that appreciation of Tōsui is greatly enhanced by viewing him within the broader context of the Zen of his time, of the figures and forces that animated the Zen temples in early Tokugawa Japan.