Zen Poetry

LET THE SPRING BREEZE ENTER

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
LUCIEN STRYK AND TAKASHI IKEMOTO

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With an Introduction and Afterword by

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To the memory of my cousin Stephen Ullmann

—LUCIEN STRYK

To the memory of my beloved brother Yukio

—TAKASHI IKEMOTO

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Preface

I

The temple, reached by a narrow mountain path five miles from the bus stop, was in one of the most beautiful districts of Japan. Surrounded by blazing maples, it appeared to have been rooted there for centuries. To its right was a kiln with a batch of fresh-fired pots, to its left a large vegetable garden where a priest bent, giving full attention to a radish patch. He greeted me warmly and at once asked me to stay the night. Talk would wait till evening, after his meeting with parishioners—farmers, woodsmen—to discuss a coming festival. Each, I noticed, brought an offering—fruit, eggs, chestnuts. That time I came with nothing. Twenty years later I brought a book of Zen poems, one of a number I'd translated since that first inspiring meeting.

Poetry had always been part of my life, and my interest in Zen poetry began as the result of that first visit. While teaching in Niigata, I'd been moved by a show of ceramics, calligraphy and haiku poems, and I'd asked a friend to take me to see the artist. The evening of my visit I discovered that the priest's life was devoted equally to parish, ceramics and poetry. He spoke with love of haiku poets—Basho, Issa—and mentioned great Zen masters who excelled in poetry—Dogen, Bunan, Hakuin, names unfamiliar to me.

I was intrigued when he compared their work to certain Western poets (he especially admired a particular passage from Whitman, quoted here near the end of the Introduction), and I resolved to learn something of Zen poetry. He was wonderfully

impressive then, and I found him even more so now, this priest-artist content with earth, pots and poems, seeking no praise of the world, his deepest care the people around him. I have owed him all these years a debt of gratitude, both for my feelings about Zen and for the lesson that one should make the most of the earth under one's feet, whether Japan or midland America, which have stemmed in large measure from our meeting.

My second lectureship in Japan, some years after that visit, was in Yamaguchi, the "Kyoto of the West." There, at the Joei Temple, where the great painter Sesshu had served as priest in the fifteenth century, came another meeting which would leave its mark. Takashi Ikemoto, a colleague at the university, and I were interviewing the master of the temple for what later became our first volume of translation from Zen literature. I said things about the rock garden behind the temple—laid down by Sesshu and surely one of the finest in Japan—which struck the master as shallow. Hé patiently explained that in order to grasp the meaning of so great a work of Zen, I would have to meditate, experience the garden with my being. I was intrigued and humbled. Familiar, through translating the literature, with the ways of Zen masters, I accepted his reproval as challenge. Thus I began a sequence of poems on Sesshu's garden, a discovering of things which made possible not only a leap into a truer poetry of my own but also a more effective rendering of Zen poems.

Years and Zen books since, I still think of those encounters as phases of rebirth. Now, after meetings with Zen masters, poets and artists, comes this volume, the poems translated in homage to those Zenists who insist that awakened life is not a birthright but something to be won through, along a way beyond the self. My experiences, however ordinary and lacking drama they may be, I give here because they are the kind that have always been important to Zen—leading to awareness of possibilities for art and life, which, as the poems reveal, are limitless.

II

Roshi Gempo Nakamura, master of Jishi-in, a sub-temple on the grounds of the important Rinzai temple Nanzenji in Kyoto, is a graduate in Chinese philosophy of Kyoto University. An expert in Chinese literature, especially early Zen poetry, he is a disciple of the late Shibayama Roshi, one of the great modern masters known in the West for his writings and lectures, particularly in the United States, which he visited several times. Shibayama Roshi, who died in 1974, was once master of Jishi-in, and his tomb lies behind the temple. Gempo Nakamura studied with him many years, receiving *inka* (testimony to his enlightenment), one of few so honored by the master, another being Taigan Takayama, a co-translator of *Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane's Bill.* Shibayama honored these men, calling them his rarest disciples.

On this brisk October afternoon, the maples on the temple grounds beginning to take on color from the sun, I look forward to my talk with Gempo Nakamura. Master of Jishi-in for thirteen years, since Shibayama Roshi left to serve as chief abbot of Nanzenji, he has tended it well, judging from the garden, one of the most renowned in Kyoto. Rocks placed harmoniously on raked sand, a touch of vivid shrubbery—so beautiful that it's no wonder many come to visit. Such places resemble, in some ways, the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, a great temple like Nanzenji having a number of small temples circling its main building. The sub-temples use the large refectory and the *Sodo* (meditation hall) in common, each sharing the upkeep of a united whole. From them abbots are chosen to lead the main temple and, as with Nanzenji, its subordinate temples throughout Japan. Rinzai, one of the three chief schools of Zen (the others being Soto and Obaku), has sects, the Nanzenji of Rinzai being one of the most important of these. One day Gempo Nakamura, as his master

before him, may be chosen to guide the Nanzenji complex of temples and subordinate temples.

Before our meeting, I wander through Jishi-in with a young disciple studying for the priesthood, who, in turn with fellow disciples, assists the master, greeting visitors and so on. He seems happy to be showing me the temple, which he clearly loves, his home for years to come, while I am awed by the openness of Jishi-in, whose garden can be readily viewed by all. (Most temples these days take entrance fees.) The young disciple has been instructed to take me on to Shibayama Roshi's tomb, for which I am grateful. The dedication in *The Crane's Bill* shows our respect for the late master. His tomb, a simple white stone in the heart of the garden, is destined to be a pilgrims' resting place for Zenists throughout the world. Now I go in to meet Gempo Nakamura, whose welcome is informal in the large reception room overlooking the pattern-sanded garden. Slight, not too carefully shaven, and like all Zen·masters disciplined in movement, he begins preparing tea: among many accomplishments, he is an expert in this art. We sip the aromatic tea, speaking casually of common friends. Now, he informs me, he is ready for my questions.

STRYK: As you know, I am interested in the different branches of Zen. Could you give me your idea of the three major sects?

NAKAMURA: The differences, alas, are better known than similarities: Rinzai's insistence on koan interpretation, its often-misunderstood austerities, its indifference to scripture. Yet, like the others, its chief concern is Zen itself. Really a matter of temperament, each offering a unique something to the seeker. The young, feeling need for what Zen offers, can, this day and age, choose, and it's by no means uncommon for students to change sects, in midstream, so to speak. That is, begin with a Rinzai temple or monastery and, for whatever reason, on discovering its ways are not for him (or *her:* you know we have our nuns in Zen),

can approach a master of Soto or Obaku, asking to be taught by him. Finding the right master, you see, may be the most important thing of all. Dogen spoke of the danger of dwelling on divisions, maintaining Zen itself the one concern. There—here I am, a Rinzai quoting a Soto master!

STRYK: What is your hope for those who come to train here?

NAKAMURA: That as the result of discipline they are able to live as Zenists—nothing less, or more.

STRYK: What does that mean to a young Japanese?

NAKAMURA: What it has always meant to young Japanese, always. Zen views, after all, are highly distinct.

STRYK: How many working with you are likely to achieve satori?

NAKAMURA: As you've no doubt discovered, there's great reluctance to talk of *that.* What, after all, does it mean?

STRYK: You surprise me. What satori means is surely no secret.

NAKAMURA: Very rarely, however, do we think of it in an absolute sense, and I believe that's what you have in mind. Such awakening is the rarest thing in the world, now as in the past.

STRYK: But the literature is alive with accounts of satori. Surely that's the whole point of discipline. When a master gives *inka,* when you received it from Shibayama Roshi, there's a very definite experience in mind, is there not?

NAKAMURA: Yes and no. You see, one works under a master for years—there are many ways of demonstrating attainment. *Inka* is given only when the master is assured, over a long period, that transformation, sudden or gradual, has occurred. The literature you speak of—and I admit it tends to emphasize awakening—usually concerns a specific event, proper to such literature. But all those things which came before and happen after are, if anything, more important. The daily life of the disciple, the way he conducts himself in and out of the temple, is everything. The master's always sizing up, quite unconsciously: the young man

who took you to the *roshi*'s tomb, for example, was, I'll confess, observed. Also I wanted to look at *you* before our meeting! In other words, not quite the drama that the literature, especially all those anecdotes about sudden enlightenment, would make it seem. *Inka* is given after many years of close judgment and, yes, friendship. In giving it, the master testifies in no uncertain terms a disciple's training has been satisfactorily completed, that in his judgment he is now able to teach himself. That's almost the prime consideration, for there must be successful transmission if Zen is to be kept alive.

STRYK: Very illuminating, even to one who has lived the literature for years! Attainment, whether leading to a clearly recognized satori or not, is measurable then?

NAKAMURA: Observable may be a better term. All involved in the discipline gain immeasurably, and from the first days of training, it is possible to determine who is likely to succeed. You must understand that only those showing great capacity for sacrifice and hard work are received for training in the first place. This may be during *sesshin,* a few weeks in the coldest and hottest times of year, when those not able to cope with the regimen are noticed and informed that they should not continue. Indeed, only a few expect to give up their conventional life for temple or monastery. Yet things aren't as clear-cut as all that. Often one, unable to cope at first, returns to find he can.

STRYK: And he is permitted to do so?

NAKAMURA: Of course—such people often make the best disciples.

STRYK: Was Shibayama Roshi a strict master?

NAKAMURA: The strictest, and we revered him for that. He encouraged us to think of Zen life as made up of two phases—the attainment of true self, followed by a life of service.

STRYK: Our friend Taigan Takayama would seem to be a good example, wouldn't he? I have in mind the way he serves his community, together with his work as priest. I recall he is director

of the council for social welfare of Yamaguchi, as well as that of the prefectural association for the protection of cultural properties. And to top it off, he directs the Yamaguchi orphanage, on the grounds of his temple, Toshunji. I remember how dear he was to those children, a father. Then there is his great interest—one you share, I know—in Zen poetry.

NAKAMURA: Yes, Shibayama Roshi, all of us, were inspired by his dedication. Often Takayama returns for meditation in our *Sodo.* A remarkable man—who does not think himself that at all. Things of little merit, he always says.

STRYK: Is it usual for an enlightened man to come to his home temple for meditation?

NAKAMURA: For meditation, and friendship. Shibayama Roshi encouraged the practice. Without it, one gets caught up in activities, forgetting gradually the primal experience which led to all in the first place. Taigan Takayama believes firmly in the necessity of *zazen,* at which he always excelled.

STRYK: Excelled?

NAKAMURA: Yes. There are differences even when it comes to so basic a part of our life. Takayama sat perfectly while a disciple; everything he did, the humblest task, was performed in the spirit of meditation. He lives as he does today, doing all those things you mentioned, because his meditation was deep and lasting. A true Zenist.

STRYK: Like Takayama, you are interested in the arts, especially Chinese Zen poetry. Could you give me some idea of the way the arts of Japan have been conditioned by Zen?

NAKAMURA: A tall order! Well, I know of your interest in Zen art, and am aware of the way most Westerners associate Zen and art. I would caution against assuming that the connection is absolute. Far from it. There's nothing intrinsically Zen in any art, in spite of the way some seem to reflect Zen principles. It is the man who brings Zen to the art he practices.

STRYK: I see, but surely some arts would not have developed

as they did had it not been for Zen. Haiku, for example. Basho was profoundly Zenist, an enlightened man, and quite possibly for that reason haiku became an important art.

NAKAMURA: There is, to be sure, a strong taste of Zen in his best poems, and it's true he studied Zen with the master Butcho. Perhaps he best illustrates the point I'm making. He brought Zen to the art of haiku, which was well-established before he came onto the scene. It was not really there before him.

STRYK: It might equally be said, would you agree, that there was not true haiku before him? Surely, from Basho on, there's something characteristically Zen-like in the form itself. The greatest haiku contain the sense of revelation we associate with Zen, and there's compression, which resembles that of sumie [ink-wash] painting of artists like Sesshu.

NAKAMURA: Such art is the expression of Zen spirit, whether painting or poetry—and all types of poetry, tanka as well as haiku. Many haiku, those of its finest practitioners, have no Zen whatsoever. No, it is man who fills a poem with Zen. Always man.

STRYK: As that's a problem which most interests me, may we pursue it? I have in mind the various *do* [Ways]—*Kado,* the Way of poetry, for example. As I understand, one follows a particular Way to the heart of Zen. For Eugen Herrigel, it was the Way of archery. Coming to Japan to learn something of Zen, he was informed the best way to grasp it might be through an art, working with a master. It seems he succeeded.

NAKAMURA: I'm familiar with Herrigel's book; it is very convincing, but you must bear in mind he was following his natural bent—since he was deeply interested in the bow. And of course he was fortunate working under one of its greatest masters. I would insist it was he who brought his growing sense of Zen to archery, for there's absolutely nothing in that activity itself which leads to achievement in Zen.

STRYK: Isn't that rather like the old question—Which came first, the egg or the hen?

NAKAMURA: I am being adamant on the point because I feel strongly that Zen is done a disservice by the easy association many make, here as well as in the West, between it and the arts. The problem is more complex than one would suppose. I'm simply maintaining that few works of so-called Zen art, including haiku and *sumie,* have true Zen. It's precisely the feeling that led Professor Awakawa to publish, a few years ago, his remarkable volume *Zenga* [Zen Painting], where he isolates the *sumie* that are true *zenga,* giving reasons, making distinctions. The same might be done with poetry and all other arts. Awakawa quotes, by the way, a fine story concerning one of the Kano School painters who would always tell disciples they must be in a constant state of enlightenment. One day, it appears, while the master lay sick in bed, though it was raining hard, his disciples came to visit. Suddenly the conversation was interrupted by loud singing in the street. "An interesting man," the master said. "Do you understand his state of mind as he walks singing in the downpour? *That's* how you should feel when painting?" The greatest practitioners of the arts we're discussing were profound Zenists—none would deny that. It doesn't follow, however, that when a man lifts brush or pen he is automatically engaging in Zen activity. He may not be the kind to sing in the rain!

STRYK: What, then, if he is in fact a Zenist, meditating, following principles?

NAKAMURA: Wouldn't matter in the least—though perhaps it should.

STRYK: Thus it may be possible for one without knowledge of Zen, even antagonistic to it—I'm being very hypothetical—to produce a true Zen work, something perhaps superior to work of a practicing Zenist.

NAKAMURA: It happens constantly, though I must add at once that, here in Japan at least, there's little of what you call antagonism. We are not a dismissive people, except in politics! Nevertheless, it is certainly possible that one without active interest in Zen might very well produce a superior work.

STRYK: Could it then be truthfully claimed as Zen art?

NAKAMURA: Why? One knows at once whether work has Zen dynamism balanced by composure. One doesn't consult a biography to determine the artist's qualifications. There is *zenki* [Zen spirit] or there isn't, whatever the man calls himself.

STRYK: You put your argument strongly.

NAKAMURA: With good reason. For too many years such associations have been casually made, often by people who should know better. Ours is a distinct Way, its expression in any form unique, rare. Just as attainment is.

STRYK: It must be irksome then to hear people claim to have discovered the truth of Zen?

NAKAMURA: Irksome? Hardly. In any case, I would have to know the people before passing judgments.

STRYK: Does the rebirth, East and West, of Zen give you much satisfaction?

NAKAMURA: As Shibayama Roshi's disciple, how could it fail to? You know how important it was to him.

STRYK: Yet you seem skeptical about the nature of Zen experience?

NAKAMURA: I am a teacher; my life work is to assure the spread of Zen, guiding others to its truth. The claims you speak of do not distress me, so long as those who make them benefit to some degree.

STRYK: That would be enough?

NAKAMURA: Considering what life is for most, more than enough.

STRYK: That makes the master's role very special, doesn't it? Like that of psychoanalyst.

NAKAMURA: No, for we do not treat the ill. Our assumption is not that those coming to us need such attention, but that they seek as conscious beings something beyond self, thus finding the true self. There is an overabundance of analysts in Japan; we do not compete with them. You must bear in mind we accept for

training only those who, in our judgment, are clear-visioned, able to train successfully. For the most part, superior persons who might do well at most things.

STRYK: Superior? Surely they must feel some lack to take on a discipline as arduous as Zen.

NAKAMURA: Precisely, because they *are* superior. They feel restless, uncertain, things all feel—but they take action. What they seek, however, is not help with personal problems, of whatever kind, but a Way to truth which makes all such things unimportant. Until they know that Way, they grope in darkness. Yes, what the Zen aspirant seeks is light.

STRYK: And sometimes it flashes suddenly before one?

NAKAMURA: More often it is a small light at the end of a tunnel, approached gradually, becoming larger, brighter, as one nears.

STRYK: To the layman that sounds more like Soto than a Rinzai point of view.

NAKAMURA: Less a lay than Western misconception, I'm afraid. Zen seems so easily understood when such distinctions are made—Soto's gradualness, Rinzai's suddenness, Obaku's middle-of-the-roadness. In reality there are no such distinctions, or at least they are not so profound as some assert. As I've said, there is only Zen and the temperaments of those seeking it. I'm very much afraid most Western books on Zen—many of which, with Shibayama Roshi's help, I've read with care—too often stress dramatic differences. Simple, colorful, but far from truth.

STRYK: That's very humbling, especially to one who writes on Zen! My final question concerns something which interests us both so much, Zen poetry. Would you agree enlightenment and death poems of the masters, Chinese and Japanese, are the most important expressions in the literature of Zen?

NAKAMURA: I would indeed. Especially the death poems, which give the very essence of a life, a brush of wind, and are often pondered like koans by students of Zen. We have always

learnt from them; they are infinitely precious. You are right to be interested in them.

III

If the mountain priest of Niigata inspired me to feel Zen poetry, meeting Master Nakamura, some years later, opened my eyes to the oneness of Zen and the arts, so that when Takashi Ikemoto and I moved into this collection we were tracing poets clearly "singing in the rain." Little is known of the personal lives of the Chinese masters and laymen herein, other than that they were Zenists whose path well prepared them for enlightenment. We chose meditation and death poems from those whose lives seemed most fully centered in Zen, and who could express themselves effortlessly within such brief forms. Each poem was to become a precious spiritual document destined to be passed on, generation to generation, to the now.

Records of Japanese masters and haiku poets are, for the most part, more accurate in time and place. Here again, we sought out words that touched the heart of Zen and that, of equal importance, would be seen as poems valuable as works of art. From Shinkichi Takahashi, considered by many to be the most original Zen poet of the century, we chose lines most fully expressive of an extraordinary vision.

When asked in a recent interview, "Could one say that the more highly charged the 'spiritual energy' of a text—such as one tends to find in Zen poetry—the more open to interpretive possibility the translator should be?" my response was, "That's exactly what I have to do as translator . . . rise to the challenge; rise with passion, even tact, when that is called for. I've never thought of a translator as someone who should be an apologist, always worried, hat in hand, about the degree of faithfulness to the original. But as someone who when working intensely can spark those magical moments, when in fact he is the equal of the person he is