

# Hakuin's Pipe

On the subject of personal guiding lights, environmentalists and corporate leaders have both shown me the way. Buddhists and Baptists have opened inner doors. In valuing the wisdom of so many, status has mattered little. Herr Dr. Fries, who had three different doctorates, guided me out of the darkness of “street smarts” to help me see that I actually was able to apply the rigor of logic and scholarship. Phil the janitor, having survived only the sixth grade, reintroduced me to street smarts. Zen teachers of all ranks and stripes kept knocking me off my horse, and still do.

Reflecting upon those who have so inspired us, saved us, taught us, turned our heads, can (and usually does) lead us into a sort of selective memory, a hagiography. As these persons continue to cross our minds in unexpected ways, arising unbidden in cameo appearances linked to memories, familiar smells, perhaps a snapshot or similar trigger for déjà vu, we tend to sanitize both our relationship with them, and their lingering image. I must try hard to remember that grandfather Dominic was a mean, domineering man as well as an incisive teacher regarding human habits and tendencies. Only the many delightful moments and assumptions of the best intentions present themselves when I first consider the boss I had in my last corporate job. While he was arguably the best people manager I ever saw, his more selfish and darker qualities must be mined out carefully by my memory in order to present a more realistic human being.

If this rather rose-colored tinting occurs with those we have actually seen, worked with, been with in a great mix of places and circumstances, how much more dyed and air-brushed must be our inner portraits of the great Zen masters, especially those we admire the most, those who have inspired us in the important moments, those who have been our personal spiritual beacons. We clearly can create rather idealized portraits of these great practitioners, and in the process we can overlook their humanity. We find ourselves shocked that they may well have harbored political views that we now feel do not square with our image of a solid Buddhist position. We are disappointed that they may have had personal habits that were less than glowing. We may even discover in ourselves some sense of rejection when we corner them acting out of their personal desires. Yet it is possibly right there, right in their human frailty and imperfection, that their greatest gift to us may be found: They have struggled with the very same flaws that we ourselves have been struggling with, and they have transcended these to a greater degree than we have, even if the traces of their baser humanity remain for us to see and to agonize over.

It may be safe to say that any “composite” great teacher – like a personal guide created out of the best features of all those who have helped us along the path – must include Hakuin Zenji. He was Japanese, died about the time of our American Revolution, and was renowned even in his own lifetime as the leading Zen teacher in Japan. He rebuilt fallen-down temples and revitalized the koan system. He even invented new koans that are still used today. Hakuin wrestled Zen out from under the weight of a growing Pure Land influence, and protected it from what he called the “do-nothing Zen” that was growing in popularity at the time. He had, he himself says, eighteen major awakenings and countless minor ones. He was a famous calligrapher, painter, poet, lecturer, and man

of letters. He single-handedly turned back the downward slide of Rinzai Zen. His greatness has inspired countless practitioners – certainly this one. I could safely say that among all the masters he has moved me the most, has burned brightest as a spiritual light.

But, as another guiding light of sorts once said, “If the world were perfect, it wouldn’t be.” Outside of Hakuin’s awakenings themselves, and his short training time spent with Master Shōju, one of the great events in his spiritual autobiography, *Wild Ivy*, is his bout with what he calls “Zen Sickness,” suffered in his late twenties while he was a monk in training. This illness is of mysterious origin and the symptoms are vague (a nervous breakdown, tuberculosis, and pleurisy have all been proposed by scholars).

None of his Zen teachers could offer him comfort, so he took to the mountains and finally enlisted the help of the hermit named Hakuyu. It seems clear that Hakuin took the hermit’s advice, added some practices of his own, and finally recovered. Hakuin’s description of all this reveals that he was scared, doubtful, distrusting, and clearly naive during this period – and that the whole experience was necessary to his spiritual growth. Writing about this as an old man, he seems to see his younger emanation through a somewhat hagiographic lens himself.

Just as one tells and retells stories of close calls – say, of an auto accident one narrowly avoided – and attributes to the person in the moment of crisis calmness and judgment that almost certainly could not have been present, so Hakuin the elder glosses over the younger’s ill and panicked state of mind. He not only was human and frail enough to have gotten so ill and psychologically out of sorts as a young man, but he slants the experience somewhat in his own recollections as an old man – as probably any old man might.

Hakuin also praises his root teacher Shōju up and down, though he spent only eight months with him. But more, Hakuin left this teacher, though he was asked to stay on, and apparently never visited him again, though Shōju lived for another thirteen years.

Theories abound as to why, but this lack of contact was certainly not polite, respectful, nor the norm in Hakuin’s Japan. Was he proud? Did he think himself fully realized, fully developed, fully trained? He gives no hint, and we shall never know. There are many examples of students and teachers “splitting” permanently, and in many cases what transpired between the two will never be known. But it needs to be highlighted here that at least some of these splits were for personal reasons that might not reflect well on the parties in play, might run against the grain of our idealistic image of even the likes of Hakuin. Again, we will never know.

Hakuin drank *sake*. We are told that Japanese priests of Hakuin’s era very often were fond of *sake*. So Hakuin was part of the culture of his time, though we are told that his disciple Torei adhered more closely to the precepts in this area. Hakuin smoked a pipe. While not explicitly forbidden in the precepts, this was not seen as a healthy or desirable personal habit for a priest or teacher of monks even in Hakuin’s Japan. Apparently, he agonized about its running counter to the precepts himself, and one day dramatically

buried his pipe in the mud, poking it lower and lower in the muck with his staff. It's the sort of scene many of us who have addictive personalities have repeated: the dramatic moment of willful, often white-knuckled, separation from a habit that we see has a grip on us. Hakuin never writes of this; his disciple Torei is left to relate the incident.



Personally, I find great inspiration in Hakuin not only through his teachings, but through his struggle with these karmic forces. I love sweets and I eat too much, and while this is karmic/genetic heritage from both the Russo and Maccedone clans (I am skinny by any measure among my relatives), I struggle with both the spiritual and health issues associated with these habits. It does my heart good to see that even someone of Hakuin's stature and depth struggled in a similar way. Scholars speculate that his death was diabetes related – he had a famous sweet tooth.

Having Hakuin in his entirety as a guiding light, one can realize that one does not – perhaps realistically cannot – develop profound spirituality, deep insight, great humanitarian and even moral qualities, and somehow in the process just leave behind those rather mundane (if not base) human foibles we all struggle with. One of the great values in taking the old masters as our personal guiding lights is the realization that they wrestled with the very same human conditions that we do. They doubted themselves, they struggled to keep the precepts, they did stupid things. And sometimes all this even after deep realization. They lived in the real world and they were forced to work with it, just as we are. How does that line go in the Repentance Ceremony? “. . . *they were like us*, and we will in the future become Buddhas and Boddhisattvas.” Seeing these masters as the humans they are can give us even greater hope, even deeper respect. We can admire them all the more, seeing that they, like us, struggled with their humanness, and still transcended this body and mind. May they be guiding lights for us all.

Oh – Hakuin's disciple Torei writes that Hakuin, as an older man, again took up the habit of smoking the pipe. But he couldn't bring himself to admit to his transgression publicly. Torei writes of often coming unexpectedly into Hakuin's quarters only to catch the master hurriedly hiding his still lit pipe behind his back.

—Sensei Sevan Ross