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(preliminary draft)

POISON AND THE GREAT HEALTH: NIETZSCHE AND HAKUIN

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My address today announces first a paradox, poison and the great health, and it does so not dully rehearse the obvious, insisting that if you want to be healthy, if you want a really great amount of health, you should avoid poison. I want rather to address this “and” that conjoins both poison and the great health. In conjoining them, I want to explore the extent to which this “and” does more than merely append one to the other, as if one were simply listing things. I want to think the inner necessity that governs their belonging together, as if “poison” and “great health” were two different ways of thinking the same.

Secondly, my address announces a second “conjunction,” namely Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Hakuin (1686-1769).¹ What does Nietzsche and his godless joviality have to do with the great, almost singular, reformer and rejuvenator of the Rinzai tradition? They obviously could never have met each other and Nietzsche knew little

¹ The reported dates for Hakuin’s life vary greatly. I thank Jeff Shore for clarifying to me that such inconsistencies are chiefly due to the failure to distinguish lunar and solar calendars of the time. See also Michel Mohr, “Hakuin,” in *Buddhist Spirituality: Later China, Korea, Japan, and the Modern World*, ed. Y. Takeuchi, J. W. Heisig, P. L. Swanson, and J. S. O’Leary (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999).

about Buddhism. What little he knew, he considered deplorable, as if fundamental practice stemmed from the desire to opiate oneself and thereby desensitize oneself to a reality that one could not directly embrace. The Zen tradition and its great masters were wholly unknown to Nietzsche and his contemporaries.

Yet it will be my contention today that Nietzsche and Hakuin have much to say to each other. By means of a telling example, members of the justly renowned Kyoto School have always contended that Nietzsche had a profound Zen sensibility. Tanabe Hajime, in his magnificent *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (1946), claimed that Nietzsche was a Daoist sage and that “beneath the exterior garments,” Nietzsche had “the heart of a sage overflowing with infinite love.”² Nishitani Keiji wrote an early book on Nietzsche and drew careful attention to his proximity to the Zen tradition. “Even though there may be in Nietzsche a radical misunderstanding of the spirit of Buddhism, the fact that he considered it in relation to nihilism shows how well attuned he was to the real issue.”³

It will be therefore be my task today to bring these two strange conjunctions into greater clarity. I will begin by a consideration of two thematics in Nietzsche’s *Gay Science*, namely poison and the Great Health. I then turn to Hakuin, a master of many poisons, skillfully administered from the great overflowing sea of his own great Zen health.

I

² Tanabe Hajime, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori, with Valdo Viglielmo and James W. Heisig, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 113.

³ Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xxxiii. Nishitani further argues that “Ironically, it was not in his nihilistic view of Buddhism but in such ideas as *amor fati* and the Dionysian as the overcoming of nihilism that Nietzsche came closest to Buddhism, especially to Mahāyāna” (180).

In the second aphorism of the second (1887) edition of *The Gay Science* (originally published in 1882), Nietzsche asks pointedly, “What is it to us that Herr Nietzsche has again become healthy?”⁴ Indeed, what do we care about Nietzsche’s health. He is dead anyway. And don’t we care more about the book at hand than the cholesterol level of the person who wrote it? Why would Nietzsche’s health make a difference to *us*?

But this is to assume that we already know what is at stake in health as such. In a letter to his mother, Nietzsche, with his failing digestive system, chronic headaches and nausea, increasing blindness, and impending madness, claimed that he was the only healthy person in Europe. Indeed, the first aphorism announces an effusive gratitude for an unexpected convalescence [*Genesung*] and indeed speaks of the *Trunkenheit der Genesung*, the drunkenness of convalescence (KSA 3, 345). What kind of recovery is this that is experienced as a drunkenness that exceeds the conventional limitations of an elective bender?

Towards the end of the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche wrote magnificently of what he called the Great Health [*die große Gesundheit*]. It was the mark of “the new ones, the nameless ones”:

And now, after we have long been on our way in this manner, we argonauts of the ideal, with more daring perhaps than is prudent, and have suffered shipwreck and damage often enough, but we are, healthier than one likes to permit us, dangerously healthy, ever again healthy (KSA 3, 636)

⁴ *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* in the *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), volume 3, 347. Henceforth KSA, followed by volume number and page citation. Translations are my own responsibility.

Nietzsche was healthy even in his sickness. His health was not the absence of sickness but rather a healthy beyond the duality of health and sickness, a great health, a kind of *Übergesundheit*, a trans-healthiness that governs the manner in which one is sick and healthy. Such a health is not found. It is not the result of jogging and tofu. It is unleashed. “This art of transfiguration *is* precisely philosophy” (KSA 3, 349). Health is not the achievement of a particular state of being. One is always ever again healthy, on the way to the overflow of life that is the eternal return of the great health.

In this way, one could say that the great health divides sentient beings into an immanent typology of the fundamentally healthy or the fundamentally sick. Someone is of the sickly type, is sick in a sick way and healthy in a sick way. Their would be health, the things that they celebrate when they celebrate health, are further symptoms of their sickness. To speak to this type of the great health is simply to make them sicker. Nietzsche’s poison, his philosophical shipwrecks, are lethal to the sick. In this sense, sickness always carries with it among its many symptoms, the following, quite revelatory indication. Sickness is the inability to hear anything healthy about the great health. With the “great health,” however, one is sick in a healthy way and one is healthy in a healthy way. Even death itself – or perhaps more frightening: madness – belong to what is joyfully affirmed in the great health.

In the remarkable pages that follow, Nietzsche responded to the misery and distress of the modern human. Nietzsche marked this “misery [*Not*]” with quotation marks, signaling the things that distress and invade the alleged health of the modern human and therefore the things that the would be healthy ones avoid. But to avoid distress is to become further distressed. “The recipe against ‘misery’ is called: *misery*

[*Das Recept gegen 'die Not' lautet: Not*]” (KSA 3/414). The line of escape unleashes *die Not* contained within the parameters of “*die Not*.” It releases the joy of the affirmation of pain beyond the seriously maintained distinction between pain and pleasure. This *Übernot* beyond *Not* and *Unnot* is the eruption of affirmation, of love.

II

In his *teishō* on the beginning of the last line of the incomparable *Heart Sūtra*, which reads, “Therefore, I preach the *prajñāpāramitā* [Perfection of Wisdom] mantra,” the equally incomparable Rinzai Zen reformer Hakuin Zenji (1689-1769) retorted, “Well, what have you been doing up till now!”⁵ Hakuin was already famous for being a severe critic of lazy, “do-nothing Zen” – he was a kind of Rinzai Luther in his chiding of self-absorption and various Zen “indulgences” and slothful shortcuts. But is this not too much? Hakuin is not excoriating a vain monk or corrupt priest or dogmatic and routinized Rōshi. He is admonishing the *Heart Sūtra*, the “heartpiece” or *shingyō* of the *prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, which is chanted on an almost daily basis by all Zen practitioners! How can he disrespect perhaps the most concise and direct formulation of *śūnyāta* or emptiness, namely, “form is emptiness and emptiness is form”? Is this not going too far?

In fact, Hakuin had earlier in his *teishō* responded to this formulation of *śūnyāta* by exclaiming, “*Phuh!* What could a little pipsqueak of an Arhat with his measly fruits possibly have to offer? Around here, even Buddhas and Patriarchs beg for their lives.”⁶ Pipsqueak of an Arhat? Buddhas begging for their lives? The *Heart Sūtra* as slothful

⁵ *Zen Words for the Heart: Hakuin's Commentary on the Heart Sutra*, trans. Norman Waddell, (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 83. Henceforth HC.

⁶ HC, 29.

preaching? What manner of *teishō* is this? What manner of “reading” the *Heart Sūtra* is this? What are we to make of Hakuin’s free willing poison and his own great health?

III

After upbraiding the *Heart Sūtra* for the torpor of its preaching, Hakuin continued, “It’s like having a teetotaler forcing wine down your throat. You don’t get the real taste of the drink swilling cup after cup.”⁷ Preaching the *Heart Sūtra* - just simply announcing that this is a good teaching and a true and wise doctrine – is like swilling wine. It is not rooted in a deep, intimate, longitudinal experience of *sūnyāta*. To put this in more properly philosophical language, *sūnyāta* is more than a true proposition that is as such because it accords with the nature of things. It is more than a fact about the world. It is more than a warranted idea about the *ideata* given in human experience.

In this sense, the *Sūtra*, despite being at the heart of the *prajñāpāramitā*, is about much more than *prajñā* or wisdom. It is rather, literally at the heart, forming not only the core wisdom, but also the very cardiovascular root of its manner of speaking. It speaks from the heart about the heart of things. It is a core discourse and hence in the idiom of *prajñā*, but it is more fundamentally expressive of the no longer repressed heart [*kokoro*]. After all, “*shin (kokoro)*” simultaneously names both the intellect and the heart. In a way, it is the love of wisdom (the literal meaning of the Greek *philosophia*) as the revelation of the wisdom of love.

A connoisseur of wine, a master of enological wisdom, so to speak, is first and foremost a *lover* of wine and it is the love of wine that orders and gives contour to the demands and skills and practices of knowing that enable the pleasure of drinking wine. In this sense, Hakuin, that irrepressible critic of “intellectual Zen” and “book Zen” and

“cocktail party Zen” and “Philosophy 101 Zen,” is a kind of paradoxically crass and sophisticated *dharma* wine, continuously drinking from the well of *dharma* and knowing and acting from its intoxicating transformation of the experience of things.

This is further evidenced by the dramatic setting of the *Heart Sūtra*. Shariputra, one of the Buddha’s most accomplished and most *prajñā* rich disciples, requested that *Kannon* (Chinese *Kuanyin*, Sanskrit *Avalokiteshvara*), the Bodhisattva of compassion and here also referred to as *Kanjizai*, the Bodhisattva of Free and Unrestricted Seeing,⁸ speak to the “heart [*shingyō*]” of the *prajñāpāramitā*. The dramatic setting of Hakuin’s *teishō* further complicates the discourse, for Hakuin is speaking from his about what is at the heart of the Heart Sutra, which is about what is at the heart of the *prajñāpāramitā*. Furthermore, *teishō* itself is, in a way, to speak from the heart, but in the deeper sense of speaking from *mushin*, from one’s Zen mind. It is to speak from the heart-mind (*shin*, *kokoro*) of one’s Zen mind (*mushin*) and thereby to speak from the depths of one’s Zen experience. The *tei* of *teishō* means to “offer or present” while *shō* names the act of recitation. Hence, *teishō* is not a “lecture” as the term is customarily translated. It is not the transmission of information but a presentation, traditionally during *sesshin* (the “gathering” of *shin* or *kokoro*, that is, an intensive session of meditation, lasting multiple days) of one’s *mushin* or Zen mind.

Furthermore, this *mushin* cannot be acquired, as if one were simply adding on a preferred predicate to one’s subject position. One only sees the moon when the house burns down. *Mushin*, the *dharma* that cannot be directly transmitted, requires the gaining of a loss, the acquisition of a shipwreck that unblocks the Zen mind, the “original face,”

⁷ HC, 83.

⁸ See HC, x.

that was already there. To use Kierkegaard's analogy, it is as if we were starving because our mouths were so filled with food that we could not close them. The last thing that we need is more food. Rather we need to lose something, to shed our toxic condition. In this sense, one can think of Hakuin's *teishō* as a kind of beneficent poison, a liberating reproach. After all, Hakuin called this *teishō* the *Dokugo shingyō*, or something like the *Poison Words for the Heartpiece*. It is a kind of toxic *teishō*, a cataclysmic destruction of the *shingyō* – as well as everything else, including the reader or auditor, even the universe itself – in order to release the sublimated force and life not only within the *shingyō*, but also within all sentient beings. In this way, we can see that Hakuin's venom seeks to occasion what the Mahāyāna tradition dramatically called the Great Death.

In this sense, Hakuin upbraids the *Heart Sūtra* for becoming preoccupied with impermanence per se. When Kannon tells Shariputra that all things are empty appearances, Hakuin objects that “It's like rubbing your eyes to see flowers in the air.” That all things are illusory is even itself per se illusory! “If all things don't exist to begin with, what do we want with ‘empty appearances’? He is defecating and spraying pee all over a clean yard.”⁹

The *Heart Sūtra* is not therefore merely transmitting a philosophical doctrine. Rather it too, like Hakuin, speaks from the depths of Zen experience that open up in the wake of the administration of medicinal toxins. “Unable to return for ten full years, you forget the way you came.”¹⁰ The depths of Zen experience obscure the means of its awakening – philosophical or otherwise – as its force overwhelms any of the paths or means used along the way. Hakuin asks, “So who's is the wine for? We're all drunk to

⁹ HC, 37.

¹⁰ HC, 83.

the gills.”¹¹ In this reactivation of a kind of drunken original face – a primordial but heretofore sublimated drunkenness – one encounters something like what Nietzsche once called *Übermut* – drunkenness beyond sobriety and drunkenness. This is not to say that *satori* makes one drunk. Rather, one was already drunk before one began drinking. This is not the sad person’s embrace of drunkenness to escape sobriety. This simply reaffirms, via a brief vacation into the spasmodic enthusiasms of inebriation, that one is fundamentally a sober person and only occasionally and accidentally a drunken person. Rather Hakuin’s poisonous barbs unleash the drunken and recklessly compassionate heart of Being itself. *Satori* is not a wise investment of one’s time that provides a salutary return. It is the eruption of the drunken forces of unrelenting compassion that give everything to the Other and demand nothing in return.

IV

This was not always Hakuin’s experience and hence he sometimes lamented that he had begun Buddhist practice in an effort to avoid damnation. When Hakuin was young, his mother took him to a Nichiren (1222-1282) temple in Hara, where he learned of the horrors of hell. The priest spoke vividly of the Eight Scorching Hells and “He had every knee in the audience quaking, every liver in the house frozen stiff with fear. As little as I was, I was certainly no exception. My whole body shook in mortal terror.”¹² Hakuin wanted *satori* because he did not want to go to one of the Eight Scorching Hells. *Satori* sounded like a good thing to get out of life, a good experience to have. Yeh, I “did” *satori* and *I* feel much better.

¹¹ HC, 83.

¹² *Wild Ivy: The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin*, trans. Norman Waddell, (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 9. Henceforth WI.

Hakuin later did a remarkable calligraphy that reads “Homage to Hell, the Great Bodhisattva”¹³ Why did Hakuin speak of Hell as a force of compassion? On the one hand, it was the idea of Hell that first drove Hakuin to meditate, although this motivation was itself born of the ego. Even though it was the ego that drove Hakuin to seek *satori*, it was a use of the ego in which the ego is eventually used against itself. The great Mādhyamika philosopher Śāntideva taught that one has to use the *kleśas* or defiled emotions against themselves. One has to be impatient in one’s desire to cultivate patience. One has to be angry at anger and learn to hate hate. In so doing, one inaugurates a movement that overcomes its origin. Hakuin’s ego drove him to meditate but meditation overcame the ego of the one who had originally sought the Pure Land of *satori*.

V

In the Mahāyāna tradition, emphasis is placed on both wisdom (*prajñā*) training and compassion (*karunā*) training. The Bodhisattvas, for example, were said to surrender their *satori* and emancipation from the cycles of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*) in order to love all sentient peoples and to endeavor to eliminate their suffering. Yet it would not be technically correct to speak of this as a duty or obligation. *Karunā* is the free movement of *Mushin* and it does not require deontology. As Nishitani Keiji explained it, “The sun in the sky makes no choices about where to shine its rays and shows no preferences as to likes or dislikes. There is no selfishness in its shining. This lack of selfishness is what is meant by non-ego, or ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyāta*).”¹⁴

¹³ Vide WI, 11.

¹⁴ *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan van Bragt, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1982), 60.

Karunā was a chief concern of Hakuin. He had been an assiduous practitioner and achieved *satori* at a relatively early stage. This experience filled him with pride and it was not until much later, after he achieved an even deeper *satori*, that he realized that *satori* is not some kind of personal achievement or a job well done. Deep *satori* is not something that happens to me. In the eclipse of the ego's reign, it is the becoming Other-centered. "When hearsay and book learning satisfy your needs, the patriarchal gardens are still a million miles away. So I beseech you great men, forget your own welfare!"¹⁵

Hakuin, as we have already noted, relentlessly castigated indolent, self-absorbed, "do-nothing Zen." He had no patience for monks who just sat around and meditated. Meditation was for the sake of *kenshō*, Enlightenment, but *kenshō* was not a personal accomplishment. It was the awakening of *karunā* from the ashes of the ego. Reflecting, as we have seen, that his original motivation for meditating had been to avoid hell, he laughed in appreciation when his disciple Tōrei latter told him that his motivation for meditation was "To work for the salvation of my fellow beings." Hakuin admitted that this was "A much better reason than mine."¹⁶ In his old age, Hakuin became a tireless teacher, working, "To devote my energy to liberating the countless suffering beings of the world by imparting the great gift of the Dharma; to assemble a few select monks capable of passing through the barrier into genuine *kenshō*; to strive diligently toward creating conditions for the realization of a Buddha-land on earth and, in the process, carry into practice Bodhisattva vows."¹⁷

¹⁵ HC, 85

¹⁶ WI, xxii.

¹⁷ WI, 84.

Hence, Hakuin concluded his *teishō* on the Heart *Sūtra* by clasping his hands in prayer. “In mind, sweep clear the demons of illusion everyone, and benefit without rest the vast suffering multitudes.”¹⁸

¹⁸ HC, 87.