

# Honolulu Diamond Sangha



Winter, 2024

## RECORD OF TRANSMITTING THE LIGHT THE SEVENTH ANCESTOR

Teishō by Michael Kieran

*The Seventh Ancestor, Vasumitra, placed a wine vessel in front of Micchaka Arya, made bows, and stood up. The Arya questioned him, saying, "Is this my vessel? Is this your vessel?" The master pondered.*

*The Arya said, "If you consider it my vessel, then that is your own innate nature. Yet again, if this vessel is your vessel, you ought to receive my Dharma."*

*Hearing these words, Vasumitra awakened deeply to unborn innate nature.*

Today I return to examining cases from *The Record of Transmitting the Light* or *Denkōroku* in Sino-Japanese. This text is a collection of accounts of awakening experiences of our Indian, Chinese, and Japanese ancestors from Shakyamuni down through Dōgen Zenji's successor, Koun Ejō. The text was compiled by Dōgen's grandson in the Dharma, Keizan Jokin.

Keizan Jokin (1264-1325) is considered to be the second great founder of the Sōtō stream of Zen in Japan. Keizan and his disciples are credited with beginning the spread of Sōtō Zen throughout Japan, away from the cloistered monastic practice characteristic of Dōgen's Eihei-ji and towards a more popular religion that appealed to all levels of Japanese society. But Keizan was not just a popularizer, he was a profoundly awakened ancestor of the Zen tradition. His Teishō in the *Record of Transmitting the Light* are penetrating and lucid, and his verses are some of the finest in all the literature of Zen.

Let's look first at the "Pivotal Circumstances" section of the case, "Pivotal Circumstances" by the way, translates the very interesting Chinese compound, 機緣 *jiyuan* [*kien* in Sino-Japanese]. I've spoken previously about the graph 機 *ji* which is used often in Zen writings. In regular

usage, 機 *ji* means trigger, catch, trip, or pivot point. In earliest usages *ji* meant a loom and in Daoist writings it can refer to "the loom of origins" from which all the 10,000 things emerge.

The second character 緣 *-yuan* usually means edge, border, or hem, and in the Buddhist context means conditions, pre-conditions, or circumstances. The sense here is that due to their varied karma and circumstances, different beings divide the world up differently, they have different borders or edges, capacities, and experiences of life.

In the Zen context, the compound term 機緣 *jiyuan* refers to the devices or circumstances that can precipitate an awakening for a particular individual at a particular time and place. By extension, the term also refers to the stories of such interactions between masters and their disciples, like the one we are investigating today.

It's worth noting that, in contrast to the significance placed on individual agency in Western culture, in the classical Chinese world view, within which Zen took form, the potential of the circumstance is seen as far more significant in influencing the outcome of a situation than the capabilities and agency of any particular individual. In the classical Chinese view, strength and weakness, courage and cowardice, etc. are more determined by the situation rather than being fixed traits inherent in the individual. Potential is circumstantial and it is with this recognition that our Zen ancestors took such care to evolve practice forms and conditions that provide optimal potential for awakening.

Regarding Vasumitra, the Pivotal Circumstances section of today's case tells us:

The Master Vasumitra was a man of North India, and his clan was Bharadvaja. He always wore clean clothing. In his hand he

carried a wine vessel as he wandered about the village, sometimes singing, sometimes whistling. People called him crazy. He did not let anyone know his family name.

In his *Teishō* on the case, master Keizan says, "the vessel was received and used by Vasumitra throughout the twelve periods of the day. He never discarded it. The wine vessel was a 'model' for Vasumitra." The Chinese graph translated here as vessel is 器 *qi*, which also means container, implement, utensil, instrument. And the graph translated as model—"The wine vessel was a *model* for Vasumitra"—is 準 *zhun*, meaning water level, instrument to measure water level; to measure, gauge, weigh, plumb; norm, standard, benchmark; and also a stringed instrument used to determine the pitch of bells.

So Keizan says the vessel was a "model" for Vasumitra. Aren't we rather like this too—day and night carrying around our benchmarks and measures, weighing other people and events of the world by models we have selected and carry around with us? Vasumitra carried around a wine vessel and maybe we too are a bit intoxicated with the models and standards we use to measure the world. I'm not saying this is wrong, but I think it's worth noticing. The universe we live in is so vast and wide, and our measures are so small and limited.

The stories of our Zen Ancestors often have this sort of allegorical feel and resonance, but it would be a mistake to see them as only allegorical. After all, as the Diamond Sūtra tell us, "This life is like a dream, a phantom, a flash of lightening, and a drop of dew."

Which is allegory and which is life itself? What is symbol and what is symbolized? The line between the two, if you can even find it, is fuzzy. The whole thing is life itself, in all its depth and shallows, fuzziness, clarity, and darkness.

The pivotal circumstances section of the case goes on to say that people thought Vasumitra was crazy, but it also tells us that even before meeting Vasumitra, the Ancestor Micchaka perceived him to be a great being, a mahasattva, who would become his dharma heir.

This perceiving before meeting sounds far fetched and fanciful, if we only see life as a succession of events, but if we can appreciate the non-sequential wholeness of life, it is not far fetched at all. The metaphor of Indra's net offers a non-sequential and more wholesome and liberated perspective of space and time. As I think most of you know the image of Indra's net is an image of the whole universe as a great net and at each junction or knot in the net is a mirroring jewel. In this way each of the thousands of millions of jewels is entirely unique and at the same time each jewel reflects all the other jewels so that all the jewels of the net are contained in a single jewel. Each jewel is not only a particular thing or space in the universe, but also all the different times and occasions of the universe. In this way, instead of our lives being determined by our past in a sort of one directional billiard-ball cause and effect manner, the great net operates in all directions at once so that our present and future determine our past just as much as the other way around. In this way even before meeting Vasumitra, the Ancestor Micchaka perceived him to be a great being, a mahasattva, who would become his dharma

heir. And in our own lives the stagnant eddies and various dead ends we have encountered, along with the many unaccountable twist and turns that have brought us to the path, from the perspective of the path, we can now see that all of it, all along, has been nothing other than the path, this great emergent wholeness, right here.

<Michael raises and lowers his kotsu/stick>

The Pivotal Circumstances of the case goes on to say that upon meeting the fifth Ancestor Micchaka, Vasumitra immediately asked him, "Do you know what this is that I have in my hand?" In other words: "Do you know what this is that I'm carrying around with me day and night?" The Ancestor Micchaka replied, "It is an unclean vessel, inappropriate for those who are pure." It is at this point in their encounter that the exchange recorded in today's case takes place:

The master Vasumitra, placed a wine vessel in front of Micchaka Arya, made bows, and stood up.

The Arya questioned him, saying, "Is this my vessel? Is this your vessel?" The master pondered.

The Arya said, "If you consider it my vessel, then that is your own innate nature. Yet again, if this vessel is your vessel, you ought to receive my Dharma."

Hearing these words, Vasumitra awakened deeply to unborn innate nature.

Let's explore this encounter carefully. When Vasumitra first met the Buddha Ancestor Micchaka, he asked him straightaway, "Do you know what this is that I have in my hand?" Micchaka said to him, "It is an unclean vessel, inappropriate for those who are pure." What does Vasumitra then do? He put the vessel that

he had been carrying and using day and night down in front of the Ancestor, made bows, and stood there respectfully. Beautiful!

Fittingly in his Teishō on the case, Keizan Zenji says, “at the beginning of his practice” Vasumitra asked, “Do you know what I have in my hand?” And when the Ancestor replied that “It is an unclean vessel, inappropriate for those who are pure” Vasumitra, without a word, put the vessel down, made bows, and stood there. Notice how Vasumitra didn’t extoll the virtues of his wine vessel, nor did he try to hide it or pretend he didn’t have a wine vessel that he was carrying around day and night. This setting down of what we’ve been carrying around day and night is the beginning of our practice—not just once but every time we practice it is the beginning of practice.

Keizan goes on, “Even if one understands that ‘mind is the way’ and clarifies that ‘body is buddha,’ this is still an unclean vessel.” How are these understandings unclean vessels? They are conceptual. It’s like when great master Huangbo addressed his assembly and said, “You people are all dreg-eaters. If you continue traipsing about as you do, how will you ever meet the matter of today?” The Chinese here is literally “slurpers of brewer’s lees.” Lees are the sediment that is left over from the fermentation process in making wine and other alcoholic beverages. Lees are notoriously foul and smelly, but actually quite nutritious. As master Wumen said in one of his comments in the *Gateless Barrier*, “Don’t you know you should rinse out your mouth for three days when you utter the name Buddha?”

So, Vasumitra put down the wine vessel in front of Micchaka, made bows, and stood there. Micchaka questioned him, saying, “Is this my vessel? Is this your vessel?” The master

pondered. Notice that Buddha Ancestor Micchaka just uses what’s given and enters there: “Is this my vessel? Is this your vessel?” This has been the way of Buddha Ancestors going back to Shakyamuni—fitting the teaching to the student.

There is no fixed doctrine or creed in the Buddha Way, but this does not mean it is arbitrary or capricious. The exquisitely particular events of our lives are the exquisitely living particulars of the Dharma—blonde and grainy in the teak floor boards, wispy and drifting in the incense smoke. The living Buddha Way is the free functioning of formless wisdom as boundless unfettered compassion.

A monk once asked the great master Yunmen, “What is the Buddha’s lifetime teaching?” Yunmen said, “A fitting remark.”

At Micchaka’s precise and piercing question, Vasumitra pondered. In the pivotal circumstances section of the case it says, that when Micchaka questioned Vasumitra asking: “Is this my vessel? Is this your vessel?”—at that moment, suddenly the vessel could no longer be seen. That’s how perfectly Micchaka’s response fit Vasumitra’s presentation of the wine vessel. “Is this my vessel? Is this your vessel?”

As Vasumitra pondered, Micchaka said, “If you consider it my vessel, then that is your own innate nature. Yet again, if this vessel is your vessel, you ought to receive my Dharma.” It would be easy to say too much about this marvelous utterance of the Buddha Ancestor Micchaka. Suffice to say, regarding “If you consider it my vessel, then that is your own innate nature” of course, what other nature could it be? “Yet again, if this vessel is your vessel, you ought to receive my Dharma”—as Aitken Rōshi says in the opening pages of

*Taking the Path of Zen:*

It is essential at the beginning of practice to acknowledge that the path is intimate and personal. It is no good to examine it from a distance as if it were someone else's. You must walk it for yourself.

If this vessel is truly your own, you have already received the ancestors' dharma. As the old Chinese proverb says: "The treasure of the house doesn't come in through the gate." The imagery of someone being a spiritual vessel is not unfamiliar to us in the West, however our Western conception tends to be dualistic and monotheistic—like a container or conduit holding or carrying truth from a separate, often transcendent source. To be a vessel of the dharma is not like this. To be a vessel of the Dharma is to have no boundary or surface, no shape or form. In his *Teishō Keizan Zenji* says:

One who is truly a pure person does not establish purity, and for that reason also does not establish a vessel. ... At this time, there are not two things, no separation. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of a vessel; the vessel is not seen.

Some translations of this case say, "the vessel disappeared," but this is not quite accurate. It is not that the vessel or the self is here at one time and then not here at another time. It is here and not here at the very same "time."

When the vessel is not seen this corresponds to Vasumitra awakening deeply to "unborn innate nature." Keizan comments on this saying:

Today, if you are able to arrive at this fundamental ground, then you are not your former body and mind. Thus, it is also difficult to speak of "past or present." How much less so "birth and death," or "going and coming?"

Keizan evokes this matter of unborn innate nature vividly in his verse:

As a bell in the frosty dawn rings the very moment it is struck,  
so from the beginning, there is no need for an empty cup.

"As a bell in the frosty dawn rings the very moment it is struck" —there is no gap at all. Gaps and separations are created by concepts. This is how concepts work. There's nothing wrong with concepts. They're really quite marvelous. The problem comes when we mistake our concepts for something other than concepts.

The ring of the bell is not a concept. <Michael ask the Jikijitsu for the Inkin> Listen!  
<RINGGGGGGGGGGG> There is not even a speck of concept in this sound.  
<RINGGGGGGGGGGG>

Of course you may think up concepts about the sound or about what I'm saying, but they are not the sound. <RINGGGGGGGGGGG>

The absence of any concept in the sound is immediate and boundless. The sound does not remove concepts or push them out of the way. It doesn't do anything with concepts. It has nothing to do with concepts. The same is true for standing up and sitting down, for the taste of tea, and the warm afternoon air.  
<RINGGGGGGGGGGG>

As Hakuin says in his *Song of Zazen*:

...turn yourself about,  
confirm your own self-nature—  
self-nature that is no nature—  
you are far beyond mere argument.  
*The oneness of cause and effect is clear,  
not two, not three, the path is put right;*

The oneness of cause and effect is clear ...

As a bell in the frosty dawn rings the  
very moment it is struck,  
so from the beginning, there is no need  
for an empty cup.

<RINGGGGGGGGG>

Regarding the empty cup, there is this well  
known story:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the  
Meiji era (1868-1912) received a university  
professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's  
cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow  
running onto the table and then onto the  
floor until he no longer could restrain  
himself and cried out: "It's full already.  
No more will go in!"

"Like this cup, Nan-in said, You are full  
of your own opinions and views. How  
can I show you Zen unless you first  
empty your cup?"

Yes, empty yourself of your opinions and  
views... and then please, throw away the  
empty cup too! Let the wind blow all the way  
through. Let the sound of the bell be the taste  
of your own bones.

Mu is not a device to empty your mind.  
Counting the breath is not a concentration  
technique.

<RINGGGGGGGGG>

... from the beginning, there is no need for an  
empty vessel.

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## HAKUIN'S OLD SAGE On the dharma name Rōsen

*"Old Sage"*

by Clark Ratliffe



*His temple is snow white even before the great  
beginning,  
His face unknown even to the ancient emperor sages.  
With a Chen-feather robe, a wolf-fang mace  
in his hand,  
He's much keener on killing you than on giving you  
life.*

This is a poem written by Hakuin Zenji for "Zen  
man Chū" of which nothing else is known. It was  
written in 1733 and appears in a voluminous  
collection of Hakuin's essays, talks and letters to  
students and supporters of his temple called *Poison  
Blossoms From a Thicket of Thorns* (Waddell, 2014).

Some of you may know Hakuin Zenji only as the  
thirteenth name down from Shakyamuni on the  
abridged ancestor dedication we chant during our  
sutra service. While there are many more  
generations from Shakyamuni to Hakuin, Hakuin  
is only about ten generations of teachers back from  
our own founder, Aitken Roshi. During sesshin we  
visit him at the end of each day when we recite  
Hakuin's poem, *Song of Zazen*. Then, still more  
intimately, there are those of you who have been

asked to respond to the Sound of a Single Hand, a koan he was said to have coined.

Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1768) was a towering force in Japanese Zen. He was known far and wide for his extraordinary determination and uncompromising dedication to reviving a Zen that was in a state of deep stagnation and decline. He was a prolific writer, painter, and calligrapher.

Hakuin was born into a commoner family of low status in Hara, in present day Shizuoka Prefecture. He was the youngest of five children of the Nagasawa family, who lived beneath Mount Fuji. His family ran a supply store that stabled and supplied packhorses for travelers. His mother was a devout Nichiren Buddhist. He described her as “a simple, good-natured woman ... who took pleasure in spontaneous acts of kindness and compassion.” (Waddell, 1999)

Many stories of Hakuin’s youth revolve around an overwhelming fear of death and retribution that arose for him at age 11 when he heard a Nichiren priest describe in detail the terrible punishments inflicted upon sinners who fell into one of the Eight Hot Hells. Hakuin said that it was this fear that consumed him and drove him into practice as a means of escaping such a fate.

Apparently the Hot hell had a ground of burning metal. The Eight Hot Hells are:

- Reviving Hell
  - Black Line Hell
  - Crushed Together Hell
  - Crying Hell
  - Great Crying Hell
  - Hot Hell
  - Unbearably Hot Hell
  - Interminable Hell
- (Buswell and Lopez, 2014)

When Kathy and I were in China in 2012, we visited a temple somewhere along the Yangtse. I don’t remember exactly where. In most of the temples we visited in China, the Buddha Halls looked much the same with shiny, large, newish looking Buddha and attendant figures. These figures looked as though they were all recently made in the same factory from the same mold, and probably were. I think this is because during the cultural revolution many old figures and temples were destroyed, but are now being rebuilt. Anyway, at one temple, behind the pristine main Buddha figure, through a small door to the side, was a series of old dusty life-sized shadow box rooms depicting various hells. There were dozens of old wooden carvings of figures in various states of agony and grotesque torture. Heads being cut off, severed limbs, intestines strewn about, people boiled alive and on and on. The further we went the worse it got. Even though the paint was old and faded it was realistic and gruesome. I imagine it was a scene like this that was described by Hakuin’s Nichiren priest.



Reading about Hakuin’s practice trajectory over his life is very interesting. Most of this can be found in *Wild Ivy* (Waddell, 1999), a spiritual

autobiography that he wrote at the age of 80, two years before his death. This writing was very unusual. In the 1700's—and even today—priests were usually tight-lipped about their personal stories. Autobiographies from teachers at this time are nowhere to be found. Hakuin, particularly in the later decades of his life, seemed to have had no such reticence. Hakuin created a very particular persona through his writings, many self-portraits, and letters.

When he was about 23 he had an awakening experience while doing a solitary sesshin in an old shed at the back of the temple. After this glimpse, he spent the next several weeks strutting around the temple, as he described it “puffed up with a soaring pride, bursting with arrogance...and swallowing whole everyone I encountered, regarding them contemptuously as so many lumps of dirt.” (Waddell, 1999) However, when he met the elderly priest Shōju Rōjin, it didn't take long to deflate the young lion's pride and disabuse him of the notion that his training was over.

When he was 41, living in a broken down ramshackle temple, he had another profound experience and only then began to teach. Hakuin's student Tōrei described him as having “the heavy, deliberate motions of an ox and the



penetrating glare of a ferocious tiger.” (Waddell, 1999)

There is a life-sized statue of him in the Founder's Hall at Shōin-ji in Hara that confirms him as a large, imposing man with a stubble beard and penetrating eyes glaring.

Hakuin did not leave Zen as he found it, but organized it into a course of practice and training based on the koans. Zen in his day was a hodgepodge of practices, some of which pricked Hakuin's sensibilities. The mixing of Pure Land elements into Zen incited him to particular ire. He said:

In Zen it is as though giants were pitted against one another, with victory going to the tallest. In Pure Land it is as though midgets were set to fight, with victory going to the smallest. If the tallness of Zen were despised and Zen done away with, the true style of progress toward the Buddha mind would be swept away and destroyed. If the lowness of the Pure Land teachings were despised and cast aside, stupid, ignorant people would be unable to escape from the evil realms. (Yampolsky, 1971)

He was also contemptuous of Zen teachers who espoused what he called “dead sitting.” At one point Hakuin said to his monks that anyone who would call himself a teacher of Zen must first achieve kensho—realization of the Buddha's Way:

If a person who has not achieved kensho says he is a teacher of Zen, he is an outrageous fraud. A swindler pure and simple. I have a verse that pours scorn on this odious race of pseudo-priests:

Earth's vilest things? From which all men recoil?  
Is it crumbly charcoal? Firewood that's wet?  
Watered lamp oil?  
A cartman? A boatman? A stepmother?  
Skunks?  
Mosquitoes? Lice? Blue flies? Rats?  
Thieving monks. (Waddell, 1999)



Despite these strong words, Hakuin did not condemn universally. In fact he welcomed all and met them wherever they were, as long as they were sincerely seeking. His temple was small and rustic in the small rural town where he grew up. He turned down many opportunities to lead big important temples, preferring to remain where he was—free to be open and available to all. I'm reminded of a koan in the *Blue Cliff Record*.

Case 52: Zhaozhou's Stone Bridge:

A monk said to Zhaozhou, "I have heard about the stone bridge of Zhaozhou for a long time. But I've come and found just a simple wooden bridge."

Zhaozhou said, "You only see the simple wooden bridge; you don't see the stone bridge."

The monk asked, "What is the stone bridge?"

Zhaozhou said, "Donkeys cross; horses cross."

In spite of his previous excoriation of Pure Land practices, in a letter to a Pure Land layman who asked him about liberation he wrote:

Whether you sit in meditation, recite the sutras, intone the dharani, or call the Buddha's name, if you devote all your efforts to what you are doing and attain to the ultimate, you will kick down the dark cave of ignorance, destroy the evil bandits of the five desires, smash the illumination of the Great Perfect Mirror. (Yampolsky, 1971)

So let's turn to Hakuin's poem, *Old Sage*:

His temple is snow white even before the  
great beginning,  
His face unknown even to the ancient  
emperor sages.  
With a Chen-feather robe, a wolf-fang  
mace in his hand,  
He's much keener on killing you than on  
giving you life.

This poem was written at the request of the monk Chū. He was perhaps an itinerant monk staying at Hakuin's temple for awhile. Chū was planning to soon return home to his old teacher Rōsen (Old Sage) and asked Hakuin to write a verse on the theme of this dharma name. Hakuin said that since Rōsen was a friend of his, he was unable to refuse, but he kept putting it off and Chū "kept pestering me about it like a whining child." So he dashed off the poem. About that time a visitor came and saw the poem and asked if there really was such a person. Hakuin said, "Rōsen is just such a fellow." He said that every word a Zen teacher speaks must accord with ultimate truth. If they don't, then his teachings become "wild, reckless talk, acts of dishonesty and deceit." And typical of Hakuin's way of expressing himself, "If you could write those (wild, reckless) words on a rice cracker and throw it to the dogs, even they wouldn't touch it."

He admonishes us all to turn and examine our own original self and ask, "What does 'old' in Old Sage mean? What does 'sage' mean? ... If you go to the bottom of this you will experience a marvelous joy and wonderful clarity." (Waddell, 2014)

Case 9, Qingrang's Non-attained Buddha in the *Gateless Barrier* has something to say about what it is to be a sage:

A monk asked the priest Qingrang of Xingyang, "The Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom did zazen on the Bodhi Seat for ten kalpas, but the Buddhadharma did not manifest itself, and he could not attain Buddhahood. Why was that?"

Qingrang said, "Your question is right on the mark."

"But he did zazen on the Bodhi Seat," the monk persisted. "Why couldn't he attain Buddhahood?"

"Because he was an unattained Buddha," responded Qingrang.

Wumen's Comment:

I approve the old barbarian's realization, but disapprove his understanding. An ordinary person who knows is a sage. A sage who understands, is an ordinary person.

Wumen's Verse:

Better than knowing the body is knowing the  
mind of peace;  
when the mind is realized, the body is no  
longer anxious.  
When body and mind are fully realized,  
why would a saintly hermit want to  
become a noble?

What does a sage know and what does an ordinary person understand? In the beginning of Hakuin's Song of Zazen he says:

All beings by nature are Buddha,  
as ice by nature is water;  
apart from water there is no ice,  
apart from beings no Buddha.

Can Buddha become Buddha? If someone was to ask me, Clark, "Would you please become Clark?" How exactly do I do that? Can water get

wetter? In the *Blue Cliff Record*, Case 7: Huichao asks about Buddha:

A monk approached Fayen and said, "Huichao presumes to ask the master, what is Buddha?" Fayen replied, "You are Huichao!"

Furthermore, this sage is not just any sage, but an old sage. How old is no beginning...no end? If you are beyond birth and death, how old are you? Zhaozhou makes the same point in another way:

A monk asked, "What is the unending depth of the Deep?"

The master said, "Your questioning me is the unending depth."

Another time Zhaozhou was asked:

"When the satori flower has not yet opened, how can True Reality be discerned?"

The master said, "It is opened." (Green, 1998)

Let's look at the first line of Hakuin's verse, "His temple is snow white even before the great beginning." During winters here in Hawaii we see pictures of snow from friends on the mainland. Expanses of pristine unsullied whiteness are particularly striking. The Old Sage's temple was a place of pure and true dharma from the very beginning. And this pureness exists even before the great beginning—outside of time itself. Timeless. That is really old, isn't it.

The second line, "His face unknown even to the ancient emperor sages." Indeed to echo Wumen "why would a saintly hermit want to become a noble?" This Old Sage has dropped completely out of sight. He is nowhere to be found. What more could he want?

And Hakuin concludes with, "With a Chen-feather robe, a wolf-fang mace in his hand,

He's much keener on killing you than on giving you life." A Chen-feather is apparently poisonous. And a wolf-fang mace is a weapon from ancient China. The old sage needs these implements to kill you in what has been called the Great Death. On the altar in our zendo is Manjushri holding a sword—a sword that cuts delusions. It is the sword that takes life and the sword that gives life. What life is taken? What life is given?

Hakuin then told the visitor:

If you direct your light within, and examine your own self, you will discover that this is how your mind is—it is an "Old Sage."

The visitor was apparently flabbergasted, so Hakuin told him, "Next time you come, I'll write a verse and award you a name... I'll call you Lyman Flabbergasted."

The visitor laughed and Hakuin said, "I wrote this for him as well, in hopes that he will make his way to the farthest reaches of the Buddha Way."

Who here is an Old Sage? ... All of you, each and every one, without exception!

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## *Life and Death is the Great Matter*

by Lish Troha



**Rusty Johnston, *Iliahi*, 2024. Watercolor.**

On New Year's Day 2024, our long-time friend and temple cat, Iliahi, made her departure from this world. I am grateful to be among the many

who, perhaps like you, spent time petting her pale-peach fur, admiring her balance on the lanai rails, and opening cans of food for her as she looked on, impatient. The Pālolo Zen Center was her home.

As a PZC resident, Iliahi was also one of my roommates. And, as with all roommates, perfect harmony was not a given. There were times—say, at about 3 AM, when Iliahi’s bellowing meow woke me and the other residents from our sleep, begging the question as to why practicing Buddhists would have a cat in the temple. She did not honor our agreed-upon hours of noble silence, nor did she help with samu. She often wandered up and down the dokusan line just to see who was in it. During sesshin, she sometimes wandered into the zendo during meal services, utterly lackadaisical, confident that she should be there. But, as Kathy explained at Iliahi’s January 15th memorial: Iliahi *chose us*.

When she first arrived on our grounds about 7 or 8 years ago, our Temple Keeper, Michael Hofmann, tried to ensure that Iliahi made it back to her rightful home... and yet, Ili kept making the walk back to PZC. After some time of this back and forth traveling from her home to PZC, her original caretakers accepted Iliahi’s decision to move to PZC, and we became her sole caretakers.

Home, Iliahi decided, *was* our temple. Maybe she found her way to the zendo much the same way many of us did—serendipitously, coincidentally. Karmic Tradewinds may have blown us in, but after all, didn’t it feel *right*? During her many years at PZC, Iliahi brought joy and comfort to an untold number of visitors. Neighbors walked up to pet her daily. She greeted people in the parking lot and on the

walking path. Orientation participants often lit up when they saw Iliahi; they asked all about her and were quick to give her pats. To some, the presence of a calm, well-cared for pet was a sign that the surrounding humans were safe. In this way, she unknowingly acted as an adorable little buffer, softening the landing for those who were new to our space.

Iliahi exuded a quiet wisdom, as so many animals do. When she ate, she only ate; when she slept, she only slept (though I must reiterate—this was not always at the same time her roommates slept!). I believe we all strive to embody this lesson, and pets display it readily: *Be what you are*.

Another Iliahi life lesson: *When you need someone, speak up*. Iliahi’s meows were loud and seemed random. She announced herself unabashedly, wherever she went, at all hours. It made me wonder: What *was* she after in the middle of the night, or when she already had a full bowl of food?

The answer might have been the same for her as it is for me when I call my friends out of the blue. Haven’t we all, in our own ways, cried out because we needed to *not* be alone, or because we needed attention? Ili knew and felt no self-consciousness about it: If it’s affection you seek—connection with another—simply ask. A friend is likely to invite you inside. And so she did just that—MEOW!

With her passing so near to the start of Rohatsu, the timing at first seemed challenging. But when is death ever convenient? The hum of sesshin prep was well underway. Though as we hurried to take care of Ili as she was dying and then find the right time for her burial, it felt like she’d chosen the timing of her passage intentionally, auspiciously. This, I believe, was Iliahi’s final

gift. After years of companionship, of showing how to receive affection, how to greet strangers, and how to simply nap in the warm Pālolo Valley sun, Iliahi left us with an important reminder of how to practice Zen—*give up your ideas*. That morning, I had to drop my ideas for how the day would go. I had to set aside my lazy New Year’s Day plans, none of which included an emergency dash to a veterinary clinic, or the writing of a notification email to our sangha about her death. We all had to adjust. We had to pay *attention* to death and its corresponding ripples—just before Rohatsu.

Iliahi’s death was not an untimely “issue” to be hastily dealt with and set in the background as we continued our Rohatsu preparation. On the contrary, it was right on schedule, right there for us to look at and respond to—right there as we got the oryoki bowls down and found pillows for visitors.

There is a boulder behind the bodhi tree in the back yard where other temple cats have been laid to rest. Just after morning zazen on January 2nd, with early light setting the greenery aglow, we lowered Iliahi into the ground—a beautiful grave dug lovingly by Casey. All the residents, plus a few other sangha members, dropped flowers into her grave, landing on her peaceful body.



After Rohatsu, we held a formal memorial ceremony for Iliahi, which was attended by several of her neighborhood friends and other sangha. It is rare, I think, for an animal’s life to be recognized in such a wholesome, thoughtful ceremony. We individually approached our makeshift, outdoor altar next to her grave to receive lit incense from Kathy. While looking at her picture on the altar, we said our farewells to Iliahi. Together we honored her life as best we could, we accepted its completion and we chanted our Four Infinite Vows.

Friend, roommate, wise being, cat: I count myself lucky that you chose to join the Sangha, and become a PZC resident.

**Administrator, HDS:** Jake Morrow  
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**Editorial Board:** Kathy Ratliffe, Clark Ratliffe and Michael Kieran



## Highlights from the Calendar

PZC is open for zazen and dokusan on Sunday mornings from 9 to 11 am and Wednesday evenings from 7 to 9 pm and Monday through Friday mornings from 5:30 to 6:30 am. Deviations from this schedule and important dates are listed below. Please check our website for the complete calendar and for updates: [www.diamondsangha.org](http://www.diamondsangha.org)

### February 2024

- 2/18: Sun. 8:30 am to 4 pm.** Hui Pū Mai, Zazenkai, with Michael. Bring a lunch.
- 2/25: Sun. 9 am to noon.** Samu followed by lunch..
- 2/28: Wed. 7 to 9 pm.** Zazen, dokusan and Q&R with Michael.

### March 2024

- 3/2: Sat. 9 am to noon.** Ko'olau Mt. Watershed class.
- 3/15: Fri. 5 pm.** Gather for Spring sesshin.
- 3/16 to 3/20:** Spring sesshin. Temple closed.
- 3/23: Sat. 9 am to noon.** Orientation to practice. Signup in advance required. Please contact administrator at [info@diamondsangha.org](mailto:info@diamondsangha.org).
- 3/26: Sun. 9 am to noon.** Samu followed by lunch.
- 3/27: Wed. 7 to 9 pm.** Zazen, dokusan and Q&R with Michael.
- 3/29: SIGNUP DEADLINE FOR HELE MĀLIE.**
- 3/30: Sat. 9 to 11 am.** Zoom. Zazen and Dharma talk by Joe Fichter.

### April 2024

- 4/7: Sun. 9 to 11 am.** Hanamatsuri, cake and tea to follow.
- 4/14: Sun. 9 to 11:30 am.** Annual Meeting.

- 4/20: Sat. 9 am to noon.** Orientation to practice. Signup in advance required. Please contact administrator at [info@diamondsangha.org](mailto:info@diamondsangha.org).
- 4/23: Sun. 9 am to 4 pm.** Hiking zazenkai. Trailhead TBA.
- 4/24: Wed. 7 to 9 pm.** Zazen, dokusan and Q&R with Michael.
- 4/25: Thurs. 7 to 8:30 pm.** Foundations of Practice 1.
- 4/27: Sat. 9 to 11 am.** Zoom. Dharma Talk by Michael Kieran.
- 4/28: Sun. 9 am to noon.** Samu followed by lunch.

### May 2024

- 5/2: Thur. 7 to 8:30 pm.** Foundations of Practice 2.
- 5/9: Thur. 7 to 8:30 pm.** Foundations of Practice 3.
- 5/12: Sun.** Hele Mālie travel day.
- 5/13 to 5/17:** Hele Mālie sesshin.
- 5/17: Fri. SIGNUP DEADLINE FOR SUMMER SESSHIN.**
- 5/18: Sat. 9 am to noon.** Orientation to practice. Signup in advance required. Please contact administrator at [info@diamondsangha.org](mailto:info@diamondsangha.org).
- 5/19: Sun. 9 am to 4 pm.** Hiking Zazenkai. Bring lunch. Trailhead TBA.
- 5/25: Sat. 9 to 11 am.** Zoom. Zazen and Dharma Talk by Kathy Ratliffe.
- 5/26: Sun. 9 am to noon.** Samu followed by lunch.
- 5/24: Wed. 7 to 9 pm.** Zazen, dokusan and Q & R with Michael.
- 5/28: Sun. 9 am to noon.** Samu followed by lunch.
- 5/31: Wed. 7 to 9 pm.** Opening of IPP.



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