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Letting Go: The Story of Zen Master Tosui (review)

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(Review)

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Letting Go: The Story of Zen Master Tōsui. By Peter Haskel. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. Pp. xv + 167. Hardcover \$45.00. Paper \$17.00.

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In his latest book, *Letting Go: The Story of Zen Master Tōsui*, Peter Haskel has taken on the task of translating the traditional biography of an obscure and eccentric Japanese Zen monk of the seventeenth century, the *Tōsui oshō densan*, which was compiled by the celebrated scholar-monk Menzan Zuihō (1683–1769). Haskel has added an impressively comprehensive critical introduction, extensive footnotes, and a concluding essay. The translation of this collection of anecdotes is accurate and very readable, and the supporting critical apparatus is a concise survey of recent critical scholarship concerning the turbulent world of Zen Buddhism in early Tokugawa Japan.

The first half of Tōsui's life was unremarkable: he traveled and met various teachers and then was recognized as a master in his own right. He was eventually invited to preside over a Sōtō Zen training temple, where he settled down and led meditation retreats for five years. By the end of this time he was attracting many disciples, including some very well known monks, when suddenly he simply disappeared. At the end of a training season, instead of presiding over the usual elaborate ceremonies, he stuck a poem to the wall, and without a word to anyone walked out with just the clothes on his back. Even the earlier facts of his life are sketchy, but from this time on all we have are stories that Menzan himself acknowledges cannot be arranged in a clear chronology. According to one tale, after an extensive search, two of his closest disciples found Tōsui living among beggars. His hair and beard were wild, his Buddhist robe was tattered, and his begging bowl was broken. Tōsui berated the two for interfering with his desire to be left alone and stalked off. One disciple continued to pester him; Tōsui relented, and they set off together. At the side of the road Tōsui discovered the body of a dead beggar and set about to bury him with his own hands. He then insisted that the disciple accompany him in eating what food remained in the beggar's bowl, but the disciple was overcome with disgust. Tōsui sent him off with instructions to go study under the émigré Chinese master Kao-ch'uan, an important teacher of the newly imported Chinese Buddhism (called Ōbaku Zen in Japan). As is always the case with these stories, there is no explanation of his actions: no indication of why Tōsui chose this teacher or if there was any significance to sending his student to a teacher in another lineage.

Various people continued to attempt to find Tōsui over a span of many years, but he refused to teach or even talk to most of them. Besides anecdotes like this, we have only a few short poems and ripostes that give a flavor of his irreverent style. In response to a merchant who wanted to know how to do Zen meditation, Tōsui would only say, "Soy sauce should be made in midsummer; miso should be made in winter." If people persisted in trying to see him, he simply disappeared rather than deal with them. He lived in tiny rented rooms in towns working as a maker of straw sandals, doing day labor or simply begging for his sustenance. He rejected all offers of support, and if someone attempted to get around his refusals by leaving money or

clothes nearby, he distributed everything to the beggars among whom he lived. As he got older he relented a bit and allowed a follower to provide a meager living for him making vinegar, using the ruse that it wasn't patronage since the rice used for making the vinegar would otherwise have been discarded. When Tōsui died, his funeral was presided over by Kao-ch'uan (the Ōbaku teacher to whom he had entrusted his former students), and his remains were interred at Kao-ch'uan's temple.

The core of the book is this translation of a collection of stories about Tōsui put together by Menzan nearly a hundred years after Tōsui's death. Menzan had woodblock drawings made and wrote a stock, Zen-style Chinese poem for each woodblock. He also wrote a few pages as preface to explain that he decided to put together this collection out of respect for his own ordination teacher, a nephew of Tōsui, who had asked Menzan to compile the stories and have them printed. Haskell translates all this as well as two short, pro-forma biographies that appeared in earlier collections of biographies of monks. Menzan's text is all that is known of Tōsui: the prior biographies are mere sketches, and he appears in no other early material.

To this fifty pages of translation and illustrations, Haskell adds over one hundred pages of supporting essays and notes. His introduction reviews the Japanese government's tight control of Buddhist institutions and the disputes about correct practice and precepts that were current among Buddhist clerics of the time. He continues with brief biographies of other celebrated Zen monks of the Tokugawa and concludes the introduction with a discussion of the new Ōbaku Zen movement and the influence it had on the Rinzai and Sōtō Zen establishments. He emphasizes that the boundaries between schools of Zen were quite fluid, unlike the later rigid separation of the Zen lineages, and that Tōsui was not unusual in having extensive contact with Zen monks outside his own Sōtō line. After the translation, Haskell adds a "Biographical Addendum" in which he tells the life of Tōsui again, providing further background in addition to the material in the footnotes for the places and people of importance to Tōsui's story. Haskell also adds his own comments about passages in the story and discusses the similarities between Tōsui's life and other Zen monks who were outside the strict Zen institutional hierarchy.

Haskell's translation reads quite well, and at the same time it allows the rather uneven quality of the original to come through. His footnotes and supporting essays show how Japanese Zen in the seventeenth century was in the throes of major changes in its practices and thinking. For many years this period of Japanese history was seen as a dull backwater and a time of Buddhist decline, but now it is becoming clear that there were many colorful figures and that major works of intellectual and religious sophistication were written. Any addition to the available translations from this period is to be applauded, especially when it is as well documented and carefully translated as this one.

Haskell could have strengthened his work by first establishing a reliable text. He has apparently used the version found in the first published edition of the standard Sōtō collection, which is full of misprints. He probably should have made use of the much improved revised edition of this collection as a base text, while consulting the

woodblock text originals, which are available in a number of libraries, as supplementary material. He chose to rearrange the order of the text, putting Menzan's prefaces at the end. This is a small point, but preserving the form of the text would have allowed the reader to make his own choice about whether to skip over the preface before reading the main story. When Haskel is dealing with technical matters of the Zen ceremonies and rank in the Buddhist clergy there are a number of places that could have benefited from better contextualization. For example, on page 61 Menzan mentions that Tōsui gave his student Zekan the bodhisattva precepts. Haskel notes that this was a popular practice in the middle ages in Sōtō Zen, but does not go on to explain that in this setting the transmission of precepts is equivalent to the recognition of attainment of awakening and the mark of an important stage in the career of the monk. On the other hand, there are occasional excesses of detail: in a footnote to a passing reference to a jug of soy sauce, Haskel writes a paragraph summarizing the history of soy sauce (p. 77). The final section, "A Biographical Addendum," tells Tōsui's story all over again, adding some additional background material and discussing problems with the chronology. It would have been better to incorporate the new material in either the footnotes or the preface: going over Tōsui's life twice seems redundant.

The *Tōsui oshō densan* is of historical interest because of its unusual subject, but it is difficult to know quite what to make of the piece. Menzan's prose here is undistinguished, and the poems are stock, Zen-style Chinese verses of rather pedestrian quality. Is this collection of stories about Tōsui a piece of literature, a work of Zen teaching, or an account of historical interest? It is hard to see it as any of these, since it is little more than a collection of plainly told stories that made the rounds. Haskel has treated it as if it were a text about a figure of historical importance, attempting (often in vain) to track down the obscure temples visited, the places mentioned, or the other Zen figures that appear. One is left wishing that Haskel had devoted more of his space to discussing broader questions of what it means in Zen to be an outsider, and why a story like Tōsui's is so exceptional. There is a kernel of truth in the idea that Zen is about rejection of learning and wealth, and indeed of any regular religious practice, but in fact Zen has long been a very conservative institution with close ties to the government and has been historically identified with an emphasis on strict rules of conduct. Haskel also chooses not to address the question of whether or not Tōsui's sudden disappearance was due to some kind of mental breakdown. The abrupt change seems very similar to the plight of people we see on the streets today who were leading a productive life until they were suddenly felled by mental illness. To see Tōsui as Zen master struggling with mental illness brings up many problems of interpretation, but this kind of question is appropriate to consider, and it might make his story of greater interest to modern readers.

Letting Go is both an introduction to Zen Buddhism of the Tokugawa era and a carefully researched translation of the story of one of the oddest members of the clergy of this colorful and turbulent era. As such it is a welcome addition to the range of materials available that presents Zen in a clear historical context rather than something mystified in timeless transcendence.