



Peter Haskel, *Sword of Zen: Master Takuan and His Writings on Immovable Wisdom and The Sword Tale*

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THE WORD “Zen” has now become part of everyday vocabulary in the global context. It can represent a variety of entities, including interior design, lines of cosmetic products, or Asian things in general. The English phrase “Being Zen” indicates a kind of lifestyle that is simple, peaceful, and is good for body and mind. What Peter Haskel introduces in *Sword of Zen*, however, is of a much more serious nature, and directly concerns the matter of life and death.

The subject of the present book, Takuan Sōhō (1573–1646), was a monk of the Rinzai Zen school. He lived in Japan from the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries, a period in which Japan experienced a drastic transformation from an age of disturbances marked by the rivalry of warlords to political unification under the Tokugawa Shogunate. Takuan was born to a warrior family in Tajima province (present-day Hyogo Prefecture). He became a monk at the age of ten and received dharma transmission from Ittō Jōteki (1539–1606) after harsh training under several masters. At the age of thirty seven, he was appointed as abbot of Daitokuji, the main Rinzai Zen temple in Kyoto. The name of Takuan is familiar to many Japanese due to the monk’s close relationship to the third shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651) and to Iemitsu’s sword master Yagyū Munenori (1571–1646). The stories about his witty and refined conversations with them, including some apocryphal anecdotes, have been handed down to the present.

Peter Haskel’s *Sword of Zen* is a book about Takuan’s life and teachings, and it consists of three parts. The introduction provides an overview of the historical background and a commentary on Takuan’s two writings on the art of swordsmanship, *Record of the Marvelous Power of Immovable Wisdom* (*Fudōchi shinmyōroku*;

generally abbreviated as *Record of Immovable Wisdom*) and *The Sword Taie* (*Taiaki*), followed by Haskel's translations of these texts and a brief biography of Takuan. *Immovable Wisdom* was originally written for Yagyū Munenori, and is considered to have had a major influence on Munenori's famous writing on martial arts, *Art of the Sword* (*Heihō kadensho*). *Immovable Wisdom* presents Takuan's idea of the oneness of Zen and the sword (*ken-zen ichinyo*) as it emphasizes the importance of mastering the mind in both practices: "If you stop your mind for even a second, a moment, an instant—whether it's at [the thought of] being attacked by an opponent or of attacking [an opponent], of the person who is attacking or of the sword that is being wielded—your free functioning will be completely lost and you can be killed by your adversary" (33).

According to Takuan, one needs to keep the original "empty mind" (*mushin*) without being attached to any given circumstances. The term "immovable wisdom" (*fudōchi*) refers to this sort of unrestrained free mind, which ultimately is also the purpose of Zen training.

There are already several English translations of both works, including a partial one by Suzuki Daisetsu. Regarding the reason for undertaking a new translation, Haskel explains that existing ones "fail to convey the full character and vitality of Takuan's original" (x). Haskel's rendering, in fact, is more faithful to the original, reflecting its refined language and classical register.

Haskel's historical account and commentary on Zen teaching based on a wide range of materials is informative. Of particular interest to me was his reference to the role of swords in Japanese history. Although swords are generally considered to be an indispensable part of warrior life, it was in reality weapons such as arrows, lances, and rocks that were preferred on actual battlefields. The art of swordsmanship, according to the author, developed separately from practical combat techniques, and with the end of warfare it gained popularity among the warrior classes as a way of self-discipline and self-cultivation. Haskel's explanatory description of Takuan's teaching is detailed and elucidating, and is enriched by Haskel's own experience as a Zen practitioner. Yet, the provision of such a detailed exegesis, in my view, does not work in the most effective way, as it ironically prevents the reader from appreciating Takuan's own writings, making them look rather repetitive.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book, in scholarly terms, is Haskel's biography of Takuan. The so-called Purple Robe Affair (*Shie jiken*) in 1629, in which the monk played a leading role and for which he was consequently exiled, is generally understood as a conflict between the Edo government and the imperial court over the authority to appoint Daitokuji abbots, one result of which was to reinforce the government's control over the court and the monastic establishment. Haskel's account of the affair, however, offers another perspective by viewing the incident through Takuan's eyes. Namely, it can be seen as his battle to retain the autonomy of Zen tradition against the interference of secular powers. The author stresses this point and does a good job of connecting this historical event to Takuan's lifelong commitment to his own convictions and his resistance to secular authority.

Sword of Zen is a gratifying and stimulating read, appropriate for use in the undergraduate classroom. With its comprehensive coverage of studies in the field, the

book is recommended not only for practitioners of martial arts and Zen meditation, who will find Takuan's teachings inspiring, but also for students of Eastern philosophy and Japanese history, for whom it will provide a useful reference. Hopefully, future reprints of this insightful book will include visual images such as Takuan's calligraphy, particularly because calligraphy and painting have been valued in Zen as the immediate representation of one's intuitive experience.

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