

Six Sticks of Ri

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Meditation is as a mirror which allows all things to arise within it. When we look with all-acceptance the reflections arise and pass away, they do not remain, the mirror stays clear. This mirror is none other than our own pure original nature.

The Most Excellent Mirror-Samadhi (C. Pao Ching San Mei Ko; J. Hokyoammai) was written by the Chinese Master Tung-shan Liang-chieh (807-869) whom we know by the Japanese rendition of his name as Great Master Tozan Ryokai, the 11th Chinese Patriarch in our Ancestral Line. Great Master Tozan Ryokai is regarded as the founder of the Ts'ao-tung tradition of Ch'an Buddhism in China.¹ It was this tradition that Great Master Dogen carried back to Japan where it became known as Soto Zen. In English we translate Soto Zen as Serene Reflection Meditation, so the fact that this particular Scripture about meditation (*Samddhi* = meditation) is recited each morning in temples of our tradition indicates its fundamental importance to us.

This Scripture was written as a poem, rich in simile and metaphor. It would have been easy for Chinese monks to memorise and recite. By reciting such scriptures daily they become a part of us and their meaning is illuminated by our own practice.

Having said this, however, it must be admitted that the style of language used in China over one thousand years ago is not as accessible to us now as it would have been to Great Master Tozan's contemporaries, and a little explanation is often helpful in finding our way to understanding this work.

Rather than attempting a line by line commentary I have chosen one section with the hope that, by demystifying some of the words used and pointing to themes in the Scripture, the reader will be encouraged to further investigate it for themselves. Of all the questions asked about this Scripture I would not be at all surprised if the most frequently asked was "What are the six sticks of ri?"

*When stacked, six sticks of ri
For ever move in mutual relations in extremes and centre;
Stacked three times,
Return again to the first pattern after changes five.
This as the five tastes of the chi-grass seems
And as the diamond sceptre's branches five.
The absolute "upright" holds, as it is,
Many phenomena within its own delicate balance.²*

In this section Great Master Tozan is referring to his own teaching of what he called *The Five Ranks* and illustrating it with symbols from the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes). The *I Ching* is one of the Five Classics of Confucianism. Its theme is the continuous change and transformation underlying all existence which is explained/illustrated, as I understand it, by a system of 64 hexagrams. A hexagram consists of six horizontal lines, each line either solid or broken, stacked vertically. The Japanese word 'ri' is 'li' in Chinese, and li is the name given to one of the hexagrams. Hence the "six sticks of ri". In Great Master Tozan's day this would have been a familiar image. "For ever move in mutual relations in extremes and centre" echoes the theme of the *I Ching*, the constant process of change and transformation, pointing us to the doctrine of

impermanence, the fact that all things come into being, change, decay and pass away. There is nothing that can be held onto, no satisfaction to be found in grasping at things. Liberation can only be found in acceptance of the ever changing nature of existence. The Scripture warns that even Enlightenment itself should not be clung to or we will "come too close" and be burned by the fire of attachment. Putting ourselves "too far away" we will fall into duality.

Opinions differ as to what the three stacks are and how the five transformations are executed. However, Great Master Tozan's purpose was to teach Serene Reflection Meditation, not a study of the *I Ching*, so I will return to what is being pointed at rather than continuing to study the finger. I think the important line is the next one: "return again to the first pattern after changes five". This refers to Tozan's *Five Ranks* teaching. The five ranks are really better described as five stages, or five positions, in training which one passes through, or cycles around. In her book, *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*, Rev. Master Jiyu describes how the five positions appeared to her in visions as five columns of light. I will give you a brief excerpt from the 50 or so pages that are devoted to the explanation of the five columns: this is the last paragraph of the section entitled "The True Being":

I stay thus until the morning. The five columns come out sometimes from the Buddha mark on my forehead and sometimes from the five points of the golden crown, or lotus, upon my head; at other times they form the column at the base of which is the Baby Buddha. I know the meaning of all five. They truly are the aspects of the monk; the first is earth penetrating heaven; the second, the knot of eternity; the third, heaven penetrating earth; the fourth, the putting on of the golden kesa which is within the fountain of the Buddha's Wisdom, the bathing within its radiance; the fifth, 'the ability to die whilst sitting and standing which transcends both peasant and sage'—the right to go to heaven or hell if the intention is right—to help all living beings. My wish for now is just to be a monk that I may take all beings with me to this exquisite place.³

For more detail on this subject, and for explanations of many aspects of training, I recommend *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom* to you.

"This as the five tastes of the chi-grass seems and as the diamond sceptre's branches five." Chi-grass is said to have five tastes, when you chew it you taste them all. A diamond sceptre, known also as a dorje or a vajra, has five prongs at each end, a central prong surrounded by four more prongs which all meet at the tip. Just so, the five positions are all really one within the Unborn.

This section of *The Most Excellent Mirror-Samddhi* is pointing us to the third position, the position that transcends the opposites, the "absolute upright" which "holds, as it is, many phenomena within its own delicate balance." This is the place that we can find when we truly meditate, when we are willing to let go of absolutely everything, even Enlightenment itself.

Notes

1. *The Record of Tung-shan*, trans. by William F. Powell (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, copyright Kuroda Institute).
2. *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, ed., 2nd ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990), pp. 62-63.
3. Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom* (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1993), p. 124.

Also of Interest

Great Master Keizan, "The Thirty-eighth Ancestor, Great Master Tozan Ryokai," *The Denkoroku*, trans. by Rev. Hubert Nearman (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2001), pp. 203-12.

Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, "The Sandokai and The Most Excellent Mirror-Samadhi," *The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives*, Winter 1994, pp. 8-26.

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