

Interview with Doshō Port

Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stan Lombardo)

The following is a conversation about Doshō's recent book, *The Record of Empty Hall: One Hundred Classic Koans* (Shambhala, 2021).

Zen Master Hae Kwang: Welcome, Doshō. Most of us had never heard of Xutang Zhiyu's *Record of Empty Hall* before your translation appeared from Shambhala in February. Tell us how you learned about it. And what motivated you to translate and comment on it?

Doshō Port: Xutang for me, too, was an unknown. I'd stumbled on his name at some point. The thing with a lot of these Chinese teachers is that they have multiple names, and you've got the Wade-Giles and the pinyin spellings, as well as the Japanese and Korean pronunciations, and so it's all quite confusing. Hakuin refers to him quite frequently, saying he was the greatest Zen master ever—but I'd never heard about this guy and really didn't have a clear sense of who he was. So I started digging, and found that the *Record of Empty Hall*, one section of a ten-volume work, seemed really important. I dug some more and found a translation of it by Yoel Hoffmann from the 1970s, the same guy who published a book with "answers" to all the koans. I was a little suspicious, but I thought it was worth looking into. From the point of view of koan work, I might want to try to make clearer what was actually going on in Xutang's koans. It was the 1970s, so Hoffman's was a "version 1.0" translation. It was great that he got it out there, but I thought I'd want to try to do something myself with the original text.

More important, I was looking at this right at the beginning of the Trump era, and there was so much ugliness and divisiveness, I just wanted to try to do something that would offer people a view of the world different from the Twitter bitter world. And these koans, well, I think there's just an incredible amount of joy and beauty in them. So I wanted to do what I could to put that out there.

ZMHK: Well, thank you very much for doing so; we're certainly grateful for it. I really like Xutang Zhiyu's death poem that you translate and post right after the title page. What else do we know about him aside from his authorship of this koan collection?

DP: Let me share that poem. I'm glad you like it. I do too.

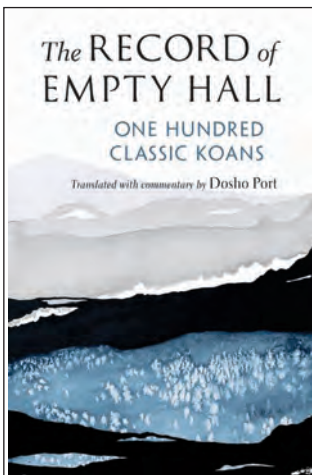
*Eighty-five years
Not knowing buddhas and ancestors
Walking casually with arms swinging
Extinguishing great emptiness.*

For a thirteenth-century monk with those really long sleeves that they're always supposed to keep their hands in, walking with arms swinging was a very free, casual expression. I can just see him. As a young monk, he trained mostly in the Linji tradition. But he studied widely before he found his teacher, Yun'an, and he had a couple of powerful enlightenment experiences with him and then went on to have a fruitful career. He was a clear-eyed Zen master, but he also would have had to be an astute bureaucrat and politician because he was the head of all ten of the main Chinese monasteries. He was part of this elite group that included monastics, intellectuals, ministers, and the military, as well as the aristocracy—so he was a member of the ruling group in China in the thirteenth century.

His influence was wide, and he also had a number of disciples—particularly many Chinese disciples that went to Japan. I'm not sure about Korea, but certainly to Japan. There had been a lot of exchange between China and Japan at this time, and due to the pressure of the Mongols in the north, emigration was looking pretty good. So some of his disciples and other people that worked with him who weren't direct dharma heirs wound up going to Japan.

And there were also Japanese monks who came to China and worked with him. One particular monk was Daio, also known as Nampo Jongmyo, who studied with him for nine years before going back to Japan. And it's through him that we have the main line of modern Japanese Rinzai Zen—"main" in the sense that it's the one that survived and continued. It's said that there were twenty-four different transmissions from China to Japan, though the actual number is probably greater than that. But of those twenty-four, Dogen's Soto school and Daio's Rinzai school are really the only two surviving from that early transmission. So he had this powerful, long-lasting impact on Zen.

Xutang's influence also continued because he was a master of verse samadhi—going to zero and saying something; going into the koan case in these examples and expressing the vivid aliveness of the case. And that also had a powerful impact on a lot of practitioners in his generation, including Dogen and a little before that to Hongzhi, both of whom were very interested in this point—creat-



ing from the meditation experience, doing something to express and share the vividness of nondual experience. I think that is why this strongly influenced the transmission in Japan, in both Soto and Rinzai. I think that's why it was successful, why a successful transmission occurred. Because they're not only doing something with dharma, but also doing something that people widely could connect with—this beautiful, incredible art that flowed from the practice. So I think that's something for us to pay attention to.

ZMHK: I'm glad you've brought it to our attention. Thank you. So this koan collection, the *Record of Empty Hall*, how does it compare to the three classic koan collections most Zen students are familiar with—the *Gateless Gate*, the *Blue Cliff Record*, and the *Book of Serenity*? Are there any overlaps? Any significant differences? How do they compare?

DP: The *Blue Cliff Record* is like the basis; it was earlier, about a hundred years earlier, more or less, than the other most widely known collections. And Yuanwu from the Linji lineage took the cases and verses from Xuedou in the Yunmen lineage. So there was an interesting mix there. And then he added several layers: pointers, capping phrases for almost every line, and then commentary both on the koan and the verse. It became a really complex, rich, literary work—so much so that Dahui, Yuanwu's successor, had it burned. Apparently, people were getting so distracted by the beauty of it that they weren't doing the work of awakening. Fortunately, it was reconstructed later. It's hard to keep a good book down. It wiggled its way somewhere and found the sunlight later on.

The *Gateless Gate* (also called the *Gateless Barrier*) and the *Book of Serenity* were written about the same time as each other, about a hundred years later in the 1220s. And the *Record of Empty Hall* was also written about that time. So Xutang must have known about the *Blue Cliff Record*. He probably also knew about the *Gateless Gate*, because it was from a closely related lineage and was probably floating around the same monasteries that he was in. He probably didn't know about the *Book of Serenity*, as that was in northern China. In contrast to the many levels of these texts, he cuts it all away in *Record of Empty Hall*, and has just one capping comment to the koan. His style in approaching the literature is vastly different than either Yuanwu or Wansong or even Wumen.

And then also the koans that were selected are distinct from those in the other collections. The *Book of Seren-*

ity has a third overlap with the *Blue Cliff Record*. So the *Book of Serenity* in a way is like a commentary on the *Blue Cliff Record*. And even when the cases differ, it's basically the same set of Zen teachers; there are the same forty Zen teachers out of the hundreds or even thousands of masters of the Lamp Transmission. The three standard collections actually present a narrow range of what's in the Lamp collections, both in terms of the Zen teachers and the types of encounter dialogues that are selected. In the *Record of Empty Hall*, on the other hand, Xutang presents a very different character of Zen. The koans have a kind of subtlety to them. And a kind of a quirkiness—even kinkiness is a word that comes to mind. For example, Nanquan, in addition to killing a cat, did all these odd things that resulted in odd koans. Xutang doesn't shy away from that, but actually goes into the oddness and into the brokenness. Xutang seemed to be looking for cases that were about the bits and broken pieces, and rehabilitating brokenness seems to be one of his main themes in the record.

ZMHK: You've given us a lot there. And you just pointed out that Xutang's own commentary was very short, just phrases, maybe capping words, or something like that. And so what we have here mostly are your commentaries. And when I read them, they seem very much alive, that they come from dharma talks, live words rather than being literary essays. So I'm curious. How has your work on the *Record of Empty Hall*—both in terms of the commentaries, but also in general—how has it intersected with, influ-

enced perhaps, your own teaching?

DP: Well, they were written, although I have given talks about a number of cases here. And we're in the process now of working through them all. But my process with them was to write them rather than to work from transcription. Even if I had given a talk about it previously, I'd sometimes look at my notes, but I found that it actually can feel more alive if I write it freshly, rather than work from a transcript. It's such different media, giving a verbal talk and writing something, that I prefer to do them separately. And I think one way it's impacted my teaching now is in the clear brevity of it. In the Soto tradition, talks are usually at least an hour. Katagiri Roshi used to go on for an hour and a half or two. It wasn't unusual for him to talk for two hours. So that's where I grew up. It's inspiring to me to try to keep it simple.

ZMHK: Much appreciated. As you know, I do a lot of translation myself from various languages. And so I'm really interested—can you tell us a little about what your translation process was like, any particular problems you



Photo: Courtesy of Wisdom Publications

encountered? And maybe you can give us an example or two of important words or phrases that are difficult for anyone to translate?

DP: Well, there's a lot of problems out there. I was recently listening to an interview with David Hinton, who is a wonderful translator, mostly of Chinese poetry, classical poetry.

ZMHK: I'm reading his *China Root* right now.

DP: Just as an aside, I think Hinton overplays his case, quite a bit, asserting that Taoism was the predominant, or even exclusive influence in early Chan. It turns out that the influence might well have been the other way around. I've heard from scholars who study the issue that some Taoist texts were back dated so as to appear to influence Chan. In any case, it seems to me to be quite a selective understanding of Chan to set aside the profound influence of the Diamond Sutra, Surangama Sutra, and Lankavatara Sutra especially. Rather than the primacy of any particular influence, which is pretty hard to know retrospectively, it seems reasonable to acknowledge many sources of influence coming together. Nevertheless, Hinton is very clear with Chinese characters, really digging deeply into the root of the characters. He argues that translation is a practice of failure. I think it totally is, so we can only do our best. In that sense, Zen practice is really good training for translation. So just that try-mind again and again.

One example of how difficult it is to translate from a language like classical Chinese into modern English is that ancient Chinese is a broad-gate kind of language; word context is everything. English is much more specific and requires a subject, verb, and object. Chinese, not so much. Also the tenses—past, present, or future—are very clearly delineated in English. In classical Chinese that's not the way it is. A sentence is going in multiple dimensions. So when you're pressed to take something that has multiple dimensions, and put it into a language like English that's more like two dimensions, that's part of where the failure comes in. You have to come down on some side to make it English. And so, based on Zen training, I tried to come down on the side that helped point to and open up the koan as much as possible.

For example, a simple word like Tao is usually translated "road" or "path," but it can also mean "truth" or "reason." It also means just that somebody said something. It's totally dependent on context. What I do in my translation process is to go really slowly. I enjoy hanging out with these old dead Zen masters, anyway, so I take my time, and just let it percolate. I've played Go a little and it is that same kind of mind: just hanging out there with the circumstances and then suddenly, oh, the move becomes clear.

Another word that comes up a lot, which is also central to Chinese philosophy, is *li*, often translated as "principle" or sometimes "*noumenon*." But I think *noumenon*, as I understand it, is as if there were some essence. So *noumenon*

is confusing, I think. Hinton translates *li* as "inner pattern," which I think is a powerful way to render it.

ZMHK: You have to like the Italian saying, *traduttore traditore*: a translator is a traitor.

DP: [Laughs.] That's great.

ZMHK: Well, thank you, Dosho. Those are all the questions that I actually had. But is there anything else you'd like to address? Do you have any other projects on the horizon that you're working on now?

DP: One thing that comes to mind, and this is what I tried to say in several talks that I was able to give about the book, is that one of the things that the literature of Zen/Son/Chan shows is that there's a rich collection of resources for all of us. And so there are lots of possibilities to find our shared Zen route. It's important—and important to me personally—to maintain the different lineage styles, but at the same time not to get so divided. I think it is important to find one Zen school, and then embrace the lineage traditions that are coming to us as we go forward in this more ecumenical spirit.

ZMHK: So are you actually thinking of writing something along these lines?

DP: Yeah, yeah, I am. And one of the projects that I'm working on now has that kind of covert agenda. I'm translating something by Wansong, a thirteenth-century teacher in the Caodong lineage. He did for those writings what Yuanwu did for the *Book of Serenity*, pulling it all together. I was going to do the *Book of Serenity*, because I don't think Cleary really got the rough tone of Wansong, but it's already been done. So I thought I'd rather do something else that hasn't been done, because there are so many possibilities. So this is called the *Going through the Mysteries: One Hundred Questions*. A Japanese monk came to study with Wansong and asked him a hundred questions. Wansong answers each question. So it's a big project to make this one point, but yes, I am working on it.

ZMHK: I look forward to that. And I want to thank you again for the *Record of Empty Hall*, Dosho, and for this interview. We'll meet again in ten thousand years! ♦

Dosho Port, also known as Dōshō Rōshi, began practicing Zen in 1977 and now co-teaches at the Nebraska Zen Center with his wife, Tetsugan. Dōshō also teaches with the Vine of Obstacles: Online Support for Zen Training, an internet-based Zen community. Dōshō received dharma transmission (authorization to teach Zen) from Dainin Katagiri Rōshi, and inka shōmei from James Myōun Ford Rōshi in the Harada-Yasutani lineage. Dōshō's translation and commentary on the Record of Empty Hall was published in February 2021 by Shambhala. He is also the author of Keep Me in Your Heart a While: The Haunting Zen of Dainin Katagiri (Wisdom, 2009). You can find Dosho's blog, Wild Fox Zen: Living the Dream, at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/wildfoxzen/>