



12-14-2017

Four Love Poems from *One Hundred Poems of the Dharma Gate* by Jakuzen


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Recommended Citation

Miller, Stephen D. and Donnelly, Patrick (2017) "Four Love Poems from *One Hundred Poems of the Dharma Gate* by Jakuzen," *Transference*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol5/iss1/5>

Stephen D. Miller and Patrick Donnelly
Four Love Poems from *One Hundred*
Poems of the Dharma Gate

Jakuzen
Hōmon *hyakushu*

Hearing the Name, longing to be reborn

65

when my dear lord may I come
where rumor says you are?

the pines of Iki—

though it's *you*
who exhausts your heart with waiting

THESE WORDS SIGNIFY that the power of Amida's will is such that anyone who hears the Name and longs to be reborn arrives in that land almost before realizing it, and achieves unshakeable faith.

How impatiently Amida must wait, sleeves of salvation moist, restless with longing! Anyone who understands Narihira's poem "I should never have left home" must vow to return there in haste. Because I've heard that Ikinomatsu is a long sea-road to the west, may I liken it to that land?

Never slept

68

inside this dream

grieving my bewildered heart—

how many nights

how many dawns

our eyes went without meeting

THE BODHISATTVAS WHO COULD SEE the white whorl of light emanating from between the Buddha's eyebrows didn't have hearts indifferent to seeking the Buddha-path, and this scripture says that they never slept.

But

for one on the path of love, lost in fleeting dreams, the fact that sleepless nights pile up is really of no benefit.

Thoughts of enlightenment alone, no other thoughts 69

where shall I rest my heart?
adrift on waves of thoughts—

then sunk, wondering—

is there something?
is there nothing?

THE *DAI* SPEAKS OF A PERSON practicing *samatha-vipasyana* meditation, considering only the true nature of the phenomenal world, and not mixing in thoughts about other things. Doesn't meditating upon "am I or am I not?" still the mind in the truth of the middle way?

Heart of longing, revering the Buddha path

70

longed-for face
from which I've been parted

come, appear even in dreams —

lip-of-the-mountain
moon

HE WHO DIED LONG AGO, becoming “original dew,” when I think of our unendurable parting—the leaves of his words lodged in my heart, causing me to drop dew again and again upon my sleeves—doesn't the clear form of this friend arise before me, in actual truth, when I'm unable to sleep?

And rises before me all the more whenever I think about when Shakyamuni was alive, a time when no one ever had enough of gazing on his form with its thirty-two aspects, nor ever tired of hearing directly the Law of unimpeded wisdom and the eight virtuous sounds.

But with the cremation wood exhausted, karmic opportunity faded up and away like smoke from the *śāla* trees, where is the person who wouldn't have plunged into thoughts of longing and reverence?

Having now entered into the latter days of the Law, for us to be sprinkled with blessing on this wondrous path is far beyond our reach, even if we hang our hearts on this figure of compassion, even if we're unable to sleep for grieving.

In this dream of life and death, why can't we see the face of the full moon?

Therefore it is written, “With single-hearted longing to see the Buddha,/they give their lives./Then with the companions of truth/I appear on Vulture Peak”—a saying not pertaining only to some heaven beyond the clouds.

If ever a time comes that the Buddha responds to the appeal of sentient beings, he will appear in our hearts on the mountain of the middle way.

Commentary

Jakuzen was a 12th century priest of the Buddhist Tendai sect, living in Ōhara outside the capital of Kyoto. He left behind three manuscripts of *waka* poetry; that forty-seven of his poems were published in several imperial poetry anthologies of the late 12th century and later is a mark of how highly they were regarded. One of Jakuzen's most famous collections is the *Hōmon hyakushu* (One Hundred Poems of the Dharma Gate).

As the first one-hundred-poem private anthology of *shakkyō-ka* (Buddhist-themed poems), the *Hōmon hyakushu* sits at the juncture between the Japanese court's ongoing literary and religious projects, exemplifying the late-Heian (794–1185) formula *kadō soku butsudō*: “the way of poetry is none other than the Buddha-way.”

Each of the hundred parts of Jakuzen's sequence is comprised of a *dai* (poem topic, in this case a short quote from Buddhist scripture in Chinese), a *waka* (31-syllable poem in Japanese) and a lyric prose afterword in Japanese on the same topic. The hundred sections of the *Hōmon hyakushu* are grouped into ten “books” of ten poems each (modeled on the imperial poetry anthologies), and the four selections here are from book seven, the Love poems (*koi no uta*).

Translating Jakuzen

Jakuzen's original text is in classical Japanese (and Chinese, in the case of the *dai*). What makes lexical research for this translation project—translating all one hundred sections and related *honka* (poems that Jakuzen alludes to in his own poems and prose)—interesting and sometimes challenging is that the themes of Jakuzen's poems are inherently Buddhist, and often contain terms that can only be found in Buddhist dictionaries.

The project of a *shakkyō-ka* in general is to inflect familiar poetic tropes—about the four seasons, congratulations, separation, love, complaint, etc.—toward reflecting on the teachings of Buddhism. It is especially interesting to observe how Jakuzen adapted the “library” of references and vocabulary associated with poems of erotic and romantic love (a topic Buddhism might be thought to deprecate, because of its potential

for dangerous, deluding passions and attachments) to depict a Buddhist practitioner's longing for enlightenment, or for union with Amida Buddha in the Pure Land.

Thus in the Love section we find familiar references to waiting all night for the lover's arrival (often in vain), to rituals of betrothal, to the tortures of inconstancy, to painful separation from the beloved, to "sleeves wet with tears"—but all metamorphosed into the fervent spiritual relationship the practitioner forms, or neglects to form, with the Buddha and the teachings. Translating these poems has required familiarity with both the original secular tropes and models, then working to express how Jakuzen adapted these to a Buddhist worldview, in such a way that the original models can still be felt.

It is a poetic truism that great love songs can be redirected toward longing for the divine, and conversely great hymns can repurposed to praise a human beloved. In the case of Jakuzen's recycling of the love poem project in the context of an overall Buddhist poetry project, his deployment of erotic tropes is simultaneously ironic and sincere. He knows that inflecting erotic longing toward religious feeling creates a grinding of rhetorical gears, in a witty (if not comic) way. But the adaptation is also sincere in that Jakuzen enacts an emotional relationship with ultimate spiritual reality, rather than a mental, theoretical, or legalistic relationship. It's the *Song of Songs*, rather than *Leviticus*.

Any translator attempting to render a classical Japanese poem into English must first face a very fundamental difference between the two languages, which has exerted a strong influence on the poetics of each. In Japanese every syllable receives the same amount of stress, but English is characterized by the alternation of strong and weak stresses. It was natural—inevitable—therefore that syllable-counting became a primary characteristic of Japanese poetry. By contrast, English poetics developed a conscious attention to the arrangement of strong and weak stresses. Because syllable-counting represents a minor cul-de-sac of English poetics, rather than the main road—and because we wanted our translations to work well as English poems—we chose not to imitate the 31-syllable form of the original poems.

The translator must address a second fundamental difference between poetry in Japanese and English: Japanese poetry may be written in vertical or horizontal columns, where-

as English poetry is invariably written in horizontal lines. The syllables in *waka* are understood to be broken into groups of 5 - 7 - 5 - 7 - 7, and these groupings are sometimes rendered as five lines in English translations. But we chose to let the syntax in English take precedence over the original arrangement, drawing on a variety of line and stanza management strategies from English poetry, while still trying to achieve a small footprint for the translation.

We did wish to reflect in English some of the constraints that the *waka* form imposed on Japanese writers. For instance, we avoided capitalization except in the case of proper names, and limited punctuation to question marks, long dashes (m-dashes) and a few commas, quotation marks, colons, parentheses, exclamation points and italicized passages for syntactical clarity or emphasis. We broke these self-imposed constraints in a few instances, but only for good cause. Above all, we wished to honor the poems' breathtaking brevity and compression, which successfully hints at far more than is said outright.

When these poems were written, they were not antique; we strove not to make them sound so in our translations. It was our limited goal—difficult enough—to convey the emotional and spiritual arguments of these poems in idiomatic, musical, contemporary English, in versions that are also accurate enough to satisfy the scholar.

A few notes about the individual poems:

In the afterword to poem 65, Jakuzen quotes a poem by Ariwara no Narihira from the *Kokinshū* (KKS 969), part of which reads *sato oba karezu*, “I should never have left home.” In the *Hōmon hyakushū*, Jakuzen constantly alludes to other, older poetry; in this case he uses Narihira's poem to invoke the trope of a woman waiting in vain for her lover to appear. Narihira's poem is in the voice of a man who expresses regret for leaving his beloved waiting in that way; in Jakuzen's poem, the beloved who waits is Amida, the Buddha of the Western Paradise. In the poem, we translated Ikinomatsu, a place name, as “the pines of Iki,” to give a sense of how in Japanese the word *matsu* means both “pine (tree)” and “to wait (with longing),” a pun that works in both Japanese and English.

The afterword of poem 68 refers to “white whorl of light emanating from between the Buddha’s eyebrows” (Sanskrit, *ūrṇā*; Japanese, *byakugō*), which was one of 32 marks of an enlightened being, often described as a curl of hair that emits light.

The afterword of poem 69 refers to *śamatha-vipasyana* (“calming-insight”) meditation (Japanese, *shikan*). According to Yamamoto Akihiro’s *A Complete Annotation of the Hōmon hyakushu by Jakuzen* (*Jakuzen Hōmon hyakushu Zenshaku*, Kazama Shobō, 2010), Jakuzen recorded—in another of his poetry collections, *Yuishimbōshū*—that he studied this form of meditation at Raigō-in temple in Ōhara, under the instruction of Ennin Shōnin. Thus Raigō-in is one of the few places where we can definitively place Jakuzen during his lifetime.

In poem 70, as in many Buddhist poems, the moon symbolizes the Buddha himself, as well as his teachings; therefore the hidden moon is a metaphor for times of trial for the Buddhist practitioner. In the afterword, Jakuzen repurposes the love-poem trope of “sleeves wet with tears” (in this case, wet with dew, a metaphor for tears) to depict the grief of the practitioner after the Buddha’s physical form was hidden from view. The afterword also refers to the “latter days of the Law” (Japanese, *mappō*), a period of time prophesied in Buddhist scriptures, which was thought by many Asian cultures to have begun in 1052. According to this prophesy, during this age accessing and acting upon the teachings would become an extremely arduous task. The passage Jakuzen quotes near the end of the afterword is taken from the 16th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, “Life Span of the Thus Come One.”

Source text:

Jakuzen Hōmon hyakushu zenshaku, Yamamoto Akihiro. Kasama Shobō, 2010, pp. 124–25, 129–30, 130–32, 132–34.