Nietzsche and Zen Master Hakuin
on the Roles of Emotion and Passion

Graham Parkes

Only fools think that dead sitting and silent illumination suffice and
that Zen consists in the source of the mind's being in tranquility.

This typically outspoken statement by the Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku, shocking
to his contemporaries in eighteenth-century Japan, would no doubt surprise
many readers in the West today, where the Sōtō school of Zen continues to be
better known than the Rinzai tradition. A distinctive feature of the latter is
the role it accords the emotions in the process of realizing one's "true nature"
and the part they play in subsequent, enlightened human existence. This feature
becomes powerfully salient in the ideas of Hakuin, who may be taken as
emblematic of the mature Rinzai school in this respect. It is generally not
appreciated that strikingly similar views of emotion were entertained in nine-
teenth-century Europe by Friedrich Nietzsche. A comparison between the two
recommends itself on the grounds that both Rinzai Zen and Nietzsche have
been subject to misunderstanding concerning their stance vis-à-vis the emotions. The stereotypical view—which sees, on the one hand, the Nietzschean
Übermensch overflowing with unbridled Dionysiac passion and, on the other,
the serene Zen master sitting in dispassionate contemplation, unperturbed by a
single affect—stands in need of correction. An examination of the distinctive
ways in which each side is responding to received views of the nature of emo-
tion in its respective tradition will enhance our appreciation of the subtleties of
both.

The role and function of the emotions and passions in the overall economy
of the psyche have been largely neglected, or else simply denigrated, in the
Western philosophical tradition. The general disparagement of the affective
side of life with which Nietzsche is faced has its roots in the ascetic aspects
of the Platonic tradition, proponents of which are perturbed by the way emotion
tends to work counter to the proper exercise of reason. In his rejection of Pla-
tonic and Christian metaphysics, Nietzsche gives the emotions and passions an
unprecedentedly important role, seeing them as providing ways to a more ful-
filling existence as well as to various truths concerning the human condition.
Instead of pitting the intellect against the emotions, he encourages the cultivat-
ion of a passion for knowledge and understanding (eine Leidenschaft der
Erkenntnis). 3

While the East Asian philosophical tradition has not been informed by a
comparable exaltation of the rational as the paramount principle, it nevertheless
displays a strong strain toward detachment from the affective sides of psychical
life. And while Zen warns against the distracting power of the emotions, it also
distinguishes itself from most Western philosophies in disparaging purely
rational or calculative thinking. Much of the revolutionary force of Rinzai Zen
comes from its reaction against the quietistic tendencies of some of the schools
of Buddhism that preceded it. Thus, in order to appreciate Hakuin’s ideas about
the emotions, it will help to look at how they were viewed by the Ch’an Bud-
dhist tradition before him, especially as embodied in The Platform Sutra
attributed to Hui-neng (638–713) and in the sayings of Rinzai. 4

Zen and Nietzsche share the premise that our ordinary way of being in the
world is permeated by delusion and that more fulfilling modes are possible.
Zen speaks of “seeing into one’s true nature” or of realizing oneself as the
“true human of no rank,” while Nietzsche is concerned with a transformation
that issues in the condition, or attitude, of the Übermensch. With respect to the
emotions, we may distinguish three moments in the process of self-transfor-
mation: the way each side views the function of the emotions in everyday,
ego-centered awareness, the role of the emotions in attaining liberation, and
their place in the constitution of the figures proposed as models by each side,
the Übermensch and the “true human of no rank” (nun shinjin).

Nietzsche would concur with many thinkers in the Buddhist tradition concern-
ing the drawbacks of the ego-centered emotions: they tend to blind us by dra-
tically narrowing our perspectives and obscuring our view of things, to carry us
away in sometimes dangerous ways, so that we risk inflicting damage on our-
elves or others; and, in general, they can move us to inappropriate behavior,
making us later regret what we have said or done. One of the Four Great Vows
in Buddhism is “to cut off all emotions and passions,” since only by eliminat-
ing “grasping,” or desire, can the false sense of the self as something substan-
tial be dissolved. But although there is in The Platform Sutra a line of verse that
reads, “Crush the passions and destroy them” (PS 36), and though Rinzai, too,
warns against the “binding power” of the emotions, there is more to it than this.
And while Hakuin speaks of the hindrances to enlightenment in terms of such
traditional classifications as the “five desires,” the “five coverings,” the “seven
misfortunes,” the “eight winds” that fan the passions, and the “ten bonds”—
with anger, envy, joy, grief, pain, and pleasure figuring repeatedly among
them—we shall see that detachment from, or circumvention of, hindrances
does not entail the extirpation of emotion.

The affective aspects of human experience are discussed by Nietzsche
throughout his works, and with ever greater frequency toward the end of his
career. His basic position on the “passions” (Leidenschaften) and the more
episodic “affects” (Affekte—closer to what we refer to as the “emotions”) is that
it is impossible to fulfill the task of “becoming what one is” if the passive-
affectionate sides of our nature are simply given free rein and allowed to dominate.
Nevertheless, Nietzsche is highly critical of the previous prescriptions that
have issued from his predecessors on this problem. Whereas the ascetic in
Plato condemned any situation in which emotions or passions are allowed to
tyrannize the rational part of the soul, the corresponding strain in the Christian
tradition concentrated on the prescription of “negative” emotions—and rec-
commended extirpation as the way to deal with them. Nietzsche brands both the
Platonic and the Christian prescriptions for human well-being as symptoms of
décadence, as a desperate response on the part of natures too weak to bring their
emotions under control.

There is a stage during which all passions are simply damaging, when they
drag their victim down with the sheer weight of their stupidity—while at a
later, much later stage they are wedded with the spirit, and are “spiritual-
ized.” . . . To annihilate the passions and desires simply because of their stu-
pidity and the unpleasant consequences of yielding to their stupidity appears
to us now, today as itself an acute form of stupidity. . . . The Churchcombats
passion with excision in every sense: its practice, its “cure” is castration.
They never ask: “how does one spiritualize, beautify, defy a desire?” . . . To
attack the passions at their roots means to attack life at its roots: the practice of
the Church is hostile to life. (TI 5:1)

This may appear to set Nietzsche against the Buddhist as well as the Christian
position on this issue—especially since, in another work from the same year, he
claims that Buddhism and Christianity “belong together as nihilistic religions,
as décadence religions” (AC 20). But he goes on to distinguish Buddhism from
Christianity as having “[put] the self-deception of moral concepts behind it” and
as thereby standing “beyond good and evil”—which suggests that there may be
some important common ground between Nietzsche and Buddhism.

There is, at any rate, agreement between the two sides concerning the
deleterious effects of the emotions in ordinary, everyday existence: If simply
given free rein, they give rise to delusion and stupidity. For our present pur-
poses, the pertinent question concerns the extent to which the Buddhist pre-
scriptions concerning emotion entail a hostility toward life.
While some forms of Buddhism may be life denying in their stance toward the emotions, this is by no means true of Zen, thanks (at least in part) to the Sinicization undergone by Buddhism in its transplantation to China in the early centuries of the Common Era. There the soil was already rich in Daoist ideas, and thinkers like Zhuang Zi (Chuang-tzu) would later exert a particular fascination on Hui-neng and Rinzai. Of the texts of classical Daoism, the Zhuang Zi is richest in emotion—and the emotions celebrated there are perceptive ways of being open to the world rather than coarsely instinctual reactions to it. In the well-known story of Zhuang Zi’s being discovered after the death of his wife drumming on a pot and singing (ch. 18), his explanation is not that he was so detached as to be unaffected by the bereavement. Rather, he prefaced the account of his realization that his wife had “gone over to be companion with spring and autumn, summer and winter, in the procession of the four seasons” by asking: “When she first died, do you really suppose that I was not able to feel the loss?” The implication is that he was—so deeply, indeed, that it was now issuing from him in song and rhythms of the body.

An explicit formulation of the Daoist attitude toward the emotions is to be found in a passage by the famous commentator Wang Bi:

> That in which the sage is superior to ordinary people is the spirit. But what the sage has in common with ordinary people is the emotions. The sage has a superior spirit, and is therefore able to be in harmony with the universe ... but he has ordinary emotions, and therefore cannot respond to things without joy or sorrow. He responds to things, yet is not ensnared by them.

For the Daoists, to be ruled or ensnared by the emotions is to fail to realize one’s true humanity—and yet to become devoid of emotion altogether is not to be fully human either. The idea of a responsiveness to the world that is free of attachment is one that runs through the entire Rinzai Zen tradition, although a development in the attitude toward emotion is discernible as one moves from Hui-neng to Rinzai and then to Hakuin.

The name of Hui-neng is associated with the establishment of the Southern school of Ch’ an Buddhism which advocates “sudden enlightenment” as opposed to the “gradual enlightenment” favored by the Northern school. Both schools share the premise that, at bottom, human beings are essentially enlightened—that the “original self-nature” of sentient beings is fundamentally identical with “Buddha-nature”—and that the task of Zen practice is to realize (in the double sense of “making real” and “becoming aware of”) this original nature. The difference between the schools lies in the methods they prescribe, and is well expressed by two contrasting images from The Platform Sutra. The Northern school is said there to liken the heart-mind* to a clear mirror and the deluded state of ignorance to a condition where the mirror is encrusted with dust and dirt. In order to realize one’s true nature, one must polish the mirror assiduously (practice meditation) to let it reflect clearly, and keep polishing it so that no more dirt or dust may accumulate (PS 6).

Two images used by Nietzsche come to mind here that would seem to correspond to this idea. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra the protagonist speaks of the image that “sleeps in the stone” of every human being, and that can be awakened or brought to life if one hammers away the surrounding stone so as to reveal “the beauty of the Übermensch” that is potentially in everyone (Z II 2). And in Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche writes of the “strange and wonderful task” of “translating the human being back into nature,” which would involve working on “the eternal basic text of homo natura” that, like a palimpsest, has been “scratched on and painted over” with numerous “vain and enthusiastic interpretations and connotations” in the course of history (BGE 230). Both images signify a working to remove what surrounds or covers up some kind of original human nature, though the first also carries the implication—contrasting with the Zen image of constant polishing of the mirror—that once the accretions are removed, the original form would stand forth revealed and in need of no further work. The idea of homo natura as text, however, implies that further misinterpretations of it would continually be forthcoming and would have to be removed.\(^{10}\)

In contrast to the Northern school’s exhortation to polish the mirror, Hui-neng proposes a number of more natural images. Whereas the figure of constant polishing implies a causal relation between meditation practice and enlightenment, the Southern school denies this causality—while still asserting the necessity of practice as an expression of our original nature. One does not practice in order to attain enlightenment, nor does enlightenment occur as a consequence of practice: One simply practices, and, when the time is right, enlightenment will come. The spontaneous nature of the process is expressed in meteorological images, with deluded ideas or delusive emotions being represented as clouds and mists.

The sun and moon are always bright, yet if they are covered by clouds, although above they are bright, below they are darkened, and the sun, moon, stars, and planets cannot be seen clearly. But if suddenly the wind of wisdom should blow and roll away the clouds and mists, all forms in the universe appear at once. The purity of the nature of man in this world is like the blue sky; wisdom is like the sun, knowledge like the moon. Although knowledge and wisdom are always clear, if you cling to external environments, the floating clouds of false thoughts will create a cover, and your own natures cannot become clear. (PS 20)

There are remarkable parallels between this passage and meteorological images used by Zarathustra in a similar context. As a lover of wisdom, Zarathustra’s
kinship with the sun is established from the very beginning of the prologue to that work (§ 1) and is reaffirmed throughout the text. The precursor of the image of the clear sky in Zen is the Daoist notion of tian (heaven), which figures in the exhortation to full awareness in terms of “seeing things in the light of tian.” Comparable is the open sky to which Zarathustra offers praise in the chapter entitled “Before Sunrise,” which begins: “O heaven above me, you pure one! you deep one! you abyss of light!” (Z III.4). Zarathustra goes on to inveigh against the clouds (which he later associates with ideas of good and evil—sources of emotional reactions) that soil the purity of the open sky:

“And whom should I hate more than drifting clouds and all else that stains you? And I even hated my own hatred since it itself stained you!

... [the drifting clouds... steal from you and me what is common to us—the vast and unbounded Yes- and Amen-saying.” (ibid.)

Zarathustra’s Yes-saying would correspond to the Zen affirmation of all things in their “suchness.” Less patient than the Zen master, however, Zarathustra is not content with waiting for the wind of wisdom to blow away the clouds of delusion—though he does urge his disciples to emulate the storm-wind that clears the air of gloom (IV.13, § 20). He imagines getting rid of the clouds by pinning them together with jagged wires of golden lightning so that he can, like thunder, play the drums on their kettle-bellies. The Zen master would surely appreciate this wonderfully strange image, with its implications for a symphony of karmic accretions.

A commonality between sky and soul is intimated in The Platform Sutra, in the context of a discussion of the original vastness of the heart-mind, whose capacity is said to be “broad and huge, like the vast sky” (PS 24).

The ten thousand things are all in self-nature. Although you see all men and non-men, evil and good, evil things and good things, you must not throw them aside, nor must you cling to them, but you must regard them as being just like the empty sky. The wise man practices with his mind. There are deluded men who make their minds empty and do not think... (this, too, is wrong. The capacity of the mind is vast and wide, but when there is no practice it is small. (PS 25)

What is recommended here is an acknowledgement of evil and good things (again as potential stimulators of emotional responses): not a rejection of them, but an acknowledgement without attachment. The attitude of openness without attachment allows one to see things “in the full light of heaven” and to realize that the openness of the heavens is coextensive with the vastness of the heart-mind itself.

The realization of the vastness of the soul is a major theme in Zarathustra. In the prologue, Zarathustra confesses his love for “him whose soul is overfull, so that he forgets himself, and all things are in him: thus all things become his going under” (§ 4). He speaks later of the highest soul as “the most comprehensive soul, that can run and wander and roam farthest within itself... the one that loves itself most, in which all things have their flow and counterflow, their ebb and flood” (III.12, § 18). Insofar as raw emotion is generally a response to something attractive or repulsive “out there,” the realization that everything is also “in here” conduces to detachment from such emotional responses.

The Dionysian overflowing that pervades Zarathustra ends up dissolving the bounds of the soul in such a way that “all things” may be in it. This overflowing is imagined as an outpouring of love in the form of rivers flowing to the ocean:

“My impatient love overflows in rivers, downward, toward rising and setting... And may my river of love plunge into pathless places! How should a river not finally find its way to the sea?

Indeed, a lake is in me, solitary and self-sufficient; but my river of love tears it away, downward—to the sea!” (II.1)

In line with a tradition of imagery in Western thought that has its source in Plato’s likening erës to a stream or river, Nietzsche often imagines the passions and emotions as flows of water. Fully aware of their potential for damage if they are allowed to run out of control, Nietzsche emphasizes repeatedly that an indispensable first step on the way to “becoming who one is” is mastery over the passions and emotions. But such control is a means rather than an end in itself, and must be clearly distinguished from suppressing emotion and passion altogether. A note from 1888, in which he criticizes the “insanity of religious moralists” in wanting to extirpate the passions, sums up Nietzsche’s attitude well:

This most shortsighted and pernicious way of thinking wants to make the great sources of energy, those wild torrents of the soul that often stream forth so dangerously and overwhelmingly, dry up altogether, instead of taking their power into service and economizing it. (WP 383)

The verb ökonomistereö not only suggests that the energy of the passions needs to be retained and channeled within the “grand economy of the soul,” but, with its roots in the word oikos (household), it also connotes the domesticating of their wildness. But ultimately the economy of the soul will merge with that of the universe as a whole—as expressed in the image of the lake flowing through rivers into the ocean. The task would then be to channel the currents of passion and emotion in such a way that they become one with the larger currents of the energies that comprise the cosmos.
We find imagery corresponding to this idea in *The Platform Sutra*, in another passage containing the image of clouds obscuring the sun. It is claimed that even “people of shallow capacity” may attain enlightenment on hearing the Sudden Doctrine if they attend to their own original natures rather than to externals:

Even these sentient beings, filled with passions and troubles, will at once gain awakening. It is like the great sea which gathers all the flowing streams and merges together the large waters and the small waters into one. *(PS 29)*

The flow of the passions may therefore carry one to “the great sea . . . of the original natures of sentient beings” *(PS 28)*—or, in Nietzsche’s terms, to the vast ocean of will to power.14

Again, in Zen, the crux is detachment, planting a foot on “the other shore” so that one may negotiate the sea of life without being overwhelmed by it.

When you are attached to environment, birth and destruction arise. Take waves arising on the water—they are something that occurs on “this” shore. Being apart from environment and putting an end to birth and destruction is like going along with the flow of the water. . . . If you practice [this wisdom] for one instant of thought, your own body will be the same as the Buddha’s. Good friends, the very passions themselves are enlightenment (*bodhi*). *(PS 26)*

The idea of “going along with the flow” echoes the Daoist ideal of *wu wei* (nonobstructive action), which—far from implying quietism—might better be thought of as flowing with rather than simply “going” with the flow. There is a parallel here with Nietzsche’s praise of *Strömen* (streaming), which suggests a powerful flowing. In contrast to the real philosopher, the passionate thinker, the mere scholar is, for Nietzsche, a pathetic creature: He is

like one who lets himself simply go along rather than flow; and precisely before the person of great streaming he stands with all the more cool reserve—
his eye is like a smooth and reluctant lake in which there is no ripple of sympathy or delight. *(BGE 206)*

Such a person, afraid to let emotion move him into the stream of life, unaware that the passions may themselves enlighten, will not be party to any great revelation from existence—and would correspond to what *The Platform Sutra* calls “the deluded person” or the “person of shallow capacity.”

*III*

The major figure in Chinese Zen between Hui-neng and the founding of the Rinzai School by Linji was Ma-zu Dao-i (709-788), who developed the idea of “straightforward mind” in *The Platform Sutra* (secs. 14 and 34) into an explicit equation between Buddha-nature and “ordinary mind.” Ma-zu is renowned for having injected a considerable physical dynamism into the Zen of the Patriarchs, and this emphasis on the somatic aspects of practice brought with it a greater concern for the emotions, which move between the spheres of the psychical and the physical. In opposition to the quietistic tendencies of the Northern school, Ma-zu introduced shouting (Jpn., *kaisai*) and physical violence (tweaking of noses, hitting with fists, blows from the master’s staff) into Zen practice. Just as we talk of being “struck” by a feeling or a bright idea, so for the Zen practitioner to be struck by the master’s staff could shock him into the realization of his “true nature.” A century later, Rinzai would assign such physical activity—and the thundering shout especially—an important role in the practice on which his school was founded.

Rinzai’s way of presenting the central idea of Mahāyāna Buddhism was shocking in its directness: The “true human” is not to be sought in the Buddhas and Patriarchs of the tradition, nor in some ideal to be attained in the future, but rather in the very persons of the individuals listening to his speeches. “Do you want to know the Patriarch-Buddha?” he asks; “He is none other than you who stand before me listening to my discourse” *(RL 10).* When Rinzai says of the “true human of the Way” that “merely according with circumstances as they are, he makes use of his past karma,” one can assume that such a person has “seen through” the delusive emotions in a way that allows things to present themselves as they are, while at the same time his “accordance” is informed by appropriate affect. He responds to things (to paraphrase Wang Bi) with joy and sorrow, but without enslavement.

Rinzai was an admirer of Zhuang Zi, and many of his discourses contain strong Daoist elements. (He often addresses his students as “learners of the *dao*.”) Two complementary mentions of the ocean—the emulation of water is a prime virtue for the Daoists—convey a good sense of the way the Zen path employs emotion after undoing its binding power. Rinzai quotes a verse from a fifth-century source:

If you love the sacred and hate the secular
You’ll float and sink in the birth-and-death sea.
The passions exist dependent on mind:
Have no mind, and how can they bind you? *(RL 18)*

Elsewhere he says: “Even though you bear the remaining influences of past delusions or the karma from [having committed] the five heinous crimes, these of themselves become the ocean of emancipation” *(RL 12).* In the context of the traditional Mahāyāna idea that nirvana is not different from samsara, Rinzai employs the image of the ocean to emphasize that the obstructions and enslavements of the samsaric world can conduce to the process of liberation.

Rinzai’s tactic of constantly focusing his listeners’ attention on their own immediate experience implies that the goal of Zen practice is not a condition of *apatheia* but rather one as vibrant with affective force as our liveliest everyday awareness.
The human being who is right now listening to my discourse . . . is without form, without characteristics, without root, without source, and without any dwelling place, yet is brisk and lively (koppatsu paityu). As for all his manifold responsive activities, the place where they are carried on is, in fact, no-place. (RL 14)

The term “brisk and lively” (used again in RL 18) comes from Chinese Buddhism and connotes the spontaneity of a leaping fish as well as a sense of being sharply focused. The “manifold responsive activities” of the true human will not exclude the appropriate emotional reactions. That they take place in “no-place,” however, means that the emotional responses have ceased—to speak in Nietzschean terms—to restrict or tie us down to any particular perspective. Being carried on nowhere, they free us to move anywhere.

A striking feature of Rinzai Zen is the vehemence with which its founder inveighs against what he regards as the stultifying dogmatism and rigidity of the conventional Buddhists of his time. His language is often reminiscent—in tone as well as content—of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra’s diatribe against advocates of “the world beyond”:

There are a bunch of blind shave-pates who, having stuffed themselves with food, sit down to meditate and practice contemplation: arresting the flow of thought they don’t let it rise; they hate noise and seek stillness. This is the method of the heretics. (RL 17)

Hakuin was faced with a corresponding degeneration of the Rinzai teachings, and his critique of the “Hinayanists of old” is similarly trenchant—though leavened with a little irony:

It was only because the direction of their practice was bad, because they liked only places of solitude and quiet, knew nothing of the dignity of the bodhisattva . . . that the Tathāgata compared them to pus-oozing wild foxes and that Vimalakirti heaped scorn on them as men who would scorch buds and cause seeds to rot. (ZMH 35)

It will be clear by now that the practice advocated by the Rinzai school, far from suppressing the emotional life, is concerned to transform and enhance it.

IV

Like Rinzai, Hakuin emphasizes that practice undertaken in peaceful seclusion, which he refers to contemptuously as “dead sitting,” is useless in comparison with what he calls “practice in the midst of activity” (ZMH 30-34). Followers of the latter way are contrasted with “those fools who starve to death on mountains, thinking that dead sitting and silent illumination suffice and that Zen consists in the source of the mind being in tranquility.” Such people, he says, “fail to see into their own natures” (ZMH 57). They fail to understand that life is itself a manifestation of Buddha-nature, and that this can be realized through an appropriate transformation of perspective. Just as The Platform Sutra maintains that “the very passions themselves are enlightenment,” so Hakuin writes that “the five desires themselves will be the One Vehicle [that leads to a realization of one’s self-nature]” (ZMH 36). But whereas the earlier Zen writings have little to say about the nature of the transformation that is required, the later ones provide a few pointers.

Hakuin makes it perfectly clear that quietism is not the way: “A person who fanatically avoids the objects of the senses and dreads the eight winds that stimulate the passions unconsciously falls into the pit of the Hinayan and never will be able to achieve the Buddha Way.” But before delusions and karma can be realized as “the ocean of emancipation,” “the barriers of the ego-centered self have to be broken down; and one reason “the eight winds” are not to be shunned or still is that the energy from the emotions, as the most powerful motive forces in the psyche, may help to effect the breakthrough—and this in two rather different ways.

The student of Nietzsche who contemplates what has been aptly called the “psychodynamics” of Zen practice according to Hakuin will find strikingly familiar two contrasting yet complementary features there, both of which have significant emotional correlates. One concerns the importance of sickness—suffering, incapacitation, lack of power—as a facilitating factor in the process; the other concerns the necessity of cultivating what Nietzsche calls “the warrior spirit,” which infuses one with a feeling of power, with the courage to see things through.

Of the forces that move our souls, the emotions are among the somatically most significant, with the closest ties to the body. They also have a special connection with pathology, being capable themselves of engendering illness as well as participating in its cure. The comparable estimations of the importance of sickness on the part of Hakuin and Nietzsche may derive from a similarity of physical and psychical constitution: Like Nietzsche, Hakuin placed such intense demands on his body and mind in the relentless pursuit of his task that he suffered a series of breakdowns which brought him to the verge of complete despair and physical collapse. What is important is not the similarity of the psychosomatic disturbances but the fact that both sufferers came to regard their incapacitations as instructive and beneficial for their respective tasks. Just as Nietzsche frequently expressed his profound gratitude to the illnesses that plagued him for the insights they afforded into life, so Hakuin in his “Letter to a Sick Monk” quotes the words of another sick monk: “This severe illness of mine has been an honored good teacher.” Here is an excerpt from one of Hakuin’s firsthand accounts of the sufferings that supervened upon his resolve to “stake his life” on assiduous practice.
My heart began to make me dizzy, my legs felt as cold as if they were immersed in ice and snow. My liver felt weak and in my behavior I experienced many fears. My spirit was distressed and weary. My amours were perpetually bathed in sweat and my eyes were constantly filled with tears. This account could easily pass for one of the numerous passages in Nietzsche’s letters to his friends concerning the physiological tribulations occasioned by his resolve to keep on writing books. For Nietzsche, such afflictions correspond in part to the psychological effects of abandoning the security of traditional ways of thinking and embarking upon the “vast ocean of becoming.” In Zarathustra’s words: “Now finally there comes the great terror, the great sickness, the great nausea, the great sea-sickness” (Z III.12, § 28).

Indeed, what Hakuin calls “Zen sickness” may be seen as a physiological correlate to the “Great Doubt” (daigi) and the “Great Death” (daishi), stages that he insists must be passed through on the way to enlightenment. In another letter, he offers the following, nicely understated remarks on the process:

When you call forth this great doubt before you in its pure and uninvolved form you may undergo an unpleasant and strange reaction. However, you must accept the fact that the realization of so felicitous a thing as the Great Matter . . . must involve a certain amount of suffering. (ZMH 145)

In order to drive through the Great Doubt to the Great Death and beyond, it is necessary to “cut off the root of life.” If this sounds like a case of what Nietzsche denigrates as “attacking life at its roots,” we must remember that such cutting off is merely a means and not an end. Hakuin explains his exhortation as follows:

Sometimes it is called illusory thoughts, sometimes the root of birth and death, sometimes the passions, sometimes a demon. It is one thing with many names, but if you examine it closely you will find that what it comes down to is one concept: that the self is real. (ZMH 134)

With the idea that the self is unreal, we come upon another crucial point of similarity between Zen and Nietzsche, who emphasizes throughout his works that the “I,” or ego, is a mere fiction. Hakuin stresses the difficulty of attaining this realization of the illusory nature of the ego-self:

If you are not a hero who has truly seen into his own nature, don’t think that [non-ego] is something that can be known so easily. . . . [you must be prepared to let go your hold when hanging from a sheer precipice, to die and return again to life. (ZMH 135)

Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is—at least on one level—an account of the process in which one dies to the ego-self, or “goes under” into the abyss, in order to cross over to the condition of the Übermensch (Prologue, § 4). Hakuin continues, using some remarkably Zarathustrian imagery:

Supposing a man should find himself in some desolate area where no one has ever walked before. Below him are the perpendicular walls of a bottomless chasm. His feet rest precariously on a patch of slippery moss, and there is no spot of earth on which he can steady himself. He can neither advance nor retreat; he faces only death. . . . His life hang as if from a dangling thread. . . . Then suddenly you return to life, there is the great joy of one who drinks the water and knows for himself whether it is hot or cold. . . . This is known as seeing into one’s own nature. (ZMH 135)

One is reminded here of the crucial role that courage (Mut)—as well as the concomitant affects of melancholic depression (Schwermut) and exuberance (Übermut)—plays in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in the protagonist’s final engagement with the thought of eternal recurrence. It is only through courage that Zarathustra is able to overcome his archenemy, the “spirit of gravity,” whose weight would drag him down into the depths of the abyss:

There is something in me I call courage . . . . Courage that attacks: for in every attack there is ringing play. . . . Courage even slays dizziness at the edge of abysses: and where would human beings not be standing at the edge of abysses! Is seeing not itself—seeing abysses? (Z III.2)

The mood of the warrior (albeit complemented by certain “feminine” traits) was initially encouraged by Zarathustra’s realization that “[his] enemies too are part of [his] bliss”:

And when I want to mount my wildest steed, it is always my spear that helps me up the best . . . My spear, which I hurl against my enemies! How grateful I am to my enemies that I may finally hurl it! (Z II.1)

There is a suggestion that Zarathustra’s “enemies” refers not only to those of his listeners who have distorted his teachings, but also to the general human leanings toward self-deception and the comforts of illusion. The range of Hakuin’s attack is perhaps even greater, and he mounts it in imagery that is, again, resonant with Zarathustra’s and serves to banish any misconceptions of the mood of Zen practice as apathetic.

How does one obtain true enlightenment? In the busy round of mundane affairs, in the confusion of worldly problems . . . behave as a valiant man would when surrounded by a host of enemies. Mount your steed, raise your lance, and, with a good showing of your courageous spirit, make up your mind to attack, destroy and annihilate the enemy. . . . At all times in your study of Zen, fight against delusions and worldly thoughts, battle the black demon of sleep, attack concepts of the active and the passive, order and disorder, right and wrong, hate and love, and join battle with the things of the mundane world. (ZMH 65)

These passages from Hakuin’s writings make clear that enlightenment comes about in the medium of the energies associated with the affective pas-
sivity of sickness and impotence as well as of those that drive the martial activities of the Zen warrior. For a detailed understanding of how these energies are channelled and configured, one would have to consider Hakuin’s understanding of kōan practice, which is central to the Rinzai tradition; but that is a topic too complex to go into here.22

When Hakuin advocates detachment from the passions in terms of “cutting off the root of life,” he is employing a horticultural metaphor that echoes images found in The Platform Sutra. Since Nietzsche also uses vegetal imagery to convey what he sees as the most fruitful way to deal with the forces of emotion and passion, it will be best to remain in this field in order to round out our comparison.

A section near the end of The Platform Sutra relates how, just before his death, Hui-neng recited to his disciples a series of four-line verses composed by the Six Patriarchs of Zen (PS 49). Referring to the transmission of Buddhism to China, and predicting the advent of five more patriarchs, Bodhidharma wrote: “One flower opens five petals, / And the fruit ripens of itself.” The remaining five verses all center on imagery of seeds in the ground of the mind which eventually grow and blossom into flowers. Hui-neng’s own verse ends, “The fruit of enlightenment matures of itself”—echoing the spontaneity with which the wind of wisdom blows away the clouds of delusion.

A similar image appears in one of Nietzsche’s earliest writings, at the end of a fragment entitled “New Year’s Eve Dream” from 1864, where a disembodied voice says to the narrator, “When you are ripe, the fruit will fall, and not before!” The motif of ripening fruit runs throughout Nietzsche’s works, and is especially prominent in Zarathustra; but it is overshadowed by a more active strain of horticultural imagery. The art and science of horticulture depends on the maintenance of a dynamic balance between work and observation, doing and not-doing, between intervening and letting be. In spite of Zen’s emphasis on the spontaneity of enlightenment, there is a counterpart to horticultural work in the emphasis on practice itself.

Corresponding to the Buddhist idea of “cutting off the emotions” is what Nietzsche calls “overcoming the passions,” which is the title of an aphorism from 1880.

Just as Hakuin’s “cutting off the root of life” is a preliminary to “returning to life,” so overcoming the passions is, for Nietzsche, a preparatory stage to planting and then cultivating the same forces of life in a different way. The possibility of such transformation is developed in an aphorism from Dawn of Morning (1881), in which Nietzsche speaks of the various ways of practicing a horticulture of the drives: “One can deal with one’s drives as a gardener and . . . cultivate the seeds of anger, pity, curiosity, vanity as fruitfully and productively as a beautiful fruit-tree on a trellis” (aph. 560).

An unpublished note from 1886 is a good statement of Nietzsche’s later stance vis-à-vis the emotions (die Affekte)—and prompts an important question from the Zen perspective:

Overcoming the affects?—No, not if that means their weakening and annihilation. But to take them into service: which involves tyrannizing them for a long time . . . Eventually one gives them back their freedom with confidence: they love us like good servants and ultimately go where our best interest inclines. (WP 364)

The important question, put in a Zen-like form that Nietzsche is himself fond of employing, is this: “Who is it that overcomes the passions and does the new planting?” or “Who is to tyrannize the affects and then take them into service?” Nietzsche’s answer, as expressed in another note from the same year, would be “the will”: “The greater the will’s power of mastery, the more freedom may be given to the passions” (WP 933). However, this would be the will not in the sense of the willing ego but, rather, in the sense of will to power—the matrix of forces that animate all sentient beings.

The most succinct presentation of Nietzsche’s attitude toward the emotions is to be found in one of the last works he prepared for publication, Twilight of the Idols (1888). The theme is not prominently presented, and, indeed, one of the advantages of pursuing the parallel with Zen is that it draws our attention to Nietzsche’s final position on this issue. It is a matter of a quasi dialectical progression, the initial state of which is “the inability to resist a stimulus—one must react, one follows every impulse” (TI 8, 6). The next phase is characterized by “not reacting immediately to a stimulus, but taking control of the inhibiting instincts that are able to cut off [reactions].” This corresponds to “overcoming” the passions or “cutting off” the emotions. By the end of this stage one will have attained the “Dionysian state” in which “the entire affect-system is energized and enhanced”—a state that is characterized, interestingly, by “the inability not to react” (TI 9, 10). But after the prostrated tyranny of the second stage, these reactions will be spontaneously appropriate to the situation, rather than the immediate, uninformed reactions of the initial state. One will have effected the “return to life” that Hakuin talks about, and one’s actions will be (in Rinzai’s phrase) “brisk and lively.”

The human being who has overcome the passions has come into possession of the most fruitful soil. . . . To sow the seed of good spiritual works on the ground of the subdued passions is then the urgent next task. The overcoming is itself only a means and not an end; if it is not so viewed, all kinds of weeds and devilish stuff will quickly grow in this cleared, rich soil, and soon there will be more rank confusion there than ever before. (HA II.2, 53)
Nietzsche offers a paradigm of the Dionysian human being, a man of the most powerful drives who has "disciplined himself into a totality, [and] created himself," in the person of Goethe (TI 9, 49). Goethe's greatness lies in his ability to "dare to grant himself the full range and richness of naturalness." He can dare to do this because he has practiced sufficient self-discipline to be confident that, on being "granted their freedom," his emotions will go "where his best interest inclines."

What the perspectives of Hakuin and Nietzsche have in common, then, is an appreciation of the vital power of the emotions and a refusal to let that power be lost through the reduction or extirpation of affect. There is a shared sense that the emotions are dynamic forces that can be channeled to effect a breakthrough in our normal ways of being in the world. It is difficult to find a precise counterpart in Zen to the many descriptions of tyrannizing the emotions one finds in Nietzsche, and it could be argued that Zen is more relaxed in this area, inclining toward Daoist spontaneity rather than Teutonic discipline. The appropriate place to look would be in the area of kōan practice, a major component of which is the dissolution of barriers between the various psychological functions and the opening up of a dynamic continuum ranging from conceptual reflection to emotional response.

The similarities between Hakuin and Nietzsche that have been outlined above are all the more remarkable in view of the striking difference in their modi operandi. While the practice of Zen involves close interaction between master and student or master and master, Nietzsche was, for most of his productive life, more solitary and divorced from human intercourse than any Zen master of the order of Rinzai or Hakuin. Indeed, the Rinzai tradition was born out of an intensification of the relationship between two practitioners, and it was from the physical vitality of the engagements between master and pupil that the school's "warrior spirit" emerged. The major episodes surrounding Rinzai's enlightenment, for example, are characterized by frequent and sudden loud shouts, as well as by violent exchanges between Rinzai and his teacher Obaku and another master, Daigu, involving violent striking and jabbing with heavy sticks (RL 50-56). In Nietzsche's case—and this was surely a factor behind his eventual collapse—the enormous affective energies stemming from his work had to be confined within the circuits of his own psyche.

In any case, the point of this comparison has been not to show that Hakuin and Nietzsche are "saying the same thing" about the emotions but to show that each is saying something different from what he has usually been taken to be saying. To the extent that their respective positions on the roles of emotion and passion are now somewhat clearer, the comparison will have served its purpose.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay, shorter and with a different emphasis, appeared under the title "The Transmutation of Emotion in Rinzai Zen and Nietzsche" (Eastern Buddhist 23[1]), and thanks are due to the editors for their permission to reproduce some of that material here. I am grateful also to Peter Hershok for helpful comments on the earlier version.

1. "Rinzai Gigen" (approx. 810-866) is the Japanese name of Linji I-xuan, the Chinese founder of a school of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism that arose in the late Tang dynasty. Many of his sayings are recorded in the Lin ji lu (Jpn., Rinzai-roku), which has been translated into English by Ruth F. Sasaki under the title The Record of Lin-chi (Kyoto, 1975) and by Imzard Schloegl, The Zen Teaching of Rinzai (Berkeley, 1976). Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768) is the leading figure of the later Rinzai School and is responsible for its revitalization in the eighteenth century.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, aph. 374; see also Beyond Good and Evil, aph. 210. Nietzsche's works will be referred to by abbreviations of their titles and the number of the aphorism (preceded, where applicable, by the chapter or section number).

3. The ideas of Hui-neng (638-713), who is believed to have been illiterate (a rare distinction among Zen masters), are set down in The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch (hereafter abbreviated "PS," followed by the section number).

4. The term corresponding to "emotions and passions" in the Chinese formulations of this Vow is fan niao, which connotes the vexations and distress that the emotions—whether positive or negative—inflict upon one's being.

5. The Record of Lin-chi (hereafter abbreviated "RL," followed by the number of the discourse), 18.

6. The Zen Master Hakuin (hereafter "ZMH"), 34, 35, 44.

7. Sanguozhi, ch. 28, Commentary; cited in Fung Yu-lan 1948, 238.

9. Inelegant though this compound may be, it is hard to find a better translation for the Chinese *xin*, which connotes the affective-emotional as much as the mental-intellectual aspects of psychical life. As used in Zen texts, the term might well correspond to “soul” (*Seihe*) in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

10. Both *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil* contain passages that enhance or develop these images. In a psychological-alchemical mode, Zarathustra advocates the use of fire to rid the self of detrimental accretions: “You must want to burn yourself up in your own flame: how could you wish to become new unless you had first become ashes!” ([ZI]7). Nietzsche also writes of the way the “material, fragments, superfluousness, clay, dirt, nonsense, and chaos” within the human being have to be “formed, broken, forged, torn, burned, made red-hot, and purified” ([BGE] 225).

11. See, especially, *Zarathustra* I.22. For a detailed treatment of the force of the solar (and other meteorological) imagery in *Zarathustra*, see Parkes 1994, ch. 4. Zarathustra’s wisdom is also frequently imagined as lightning—a fine image for “sudden illumination” (IV.13, § 7; II.1; III.12, § 30; III.16, § 1). Two more lines from *The Platform Sutra* with a strikingly Nietzschean tone—“Within the dark home of the passions, / The sun of wisdom must at all times shine” ([PS] 36)—remind one of Nietzsche’s claim that in every passion is a “quantum of reason” ([WP] 387).

12. *Zhuang Zi*, chapter 2; also ch. 17.

13. There is a significant correspondence between Nietzsche’s idea of will to power and Platonic *erōs*: see Parkes 1994, ch. 6.

14. The ocean is used as an image of the totality of will to power in a number of Nietzsche’s works, and especially in *Zarathustra*; see Parkes 1994, ch. 4.

15. See Kasulis 1981, ch. 8. This offers an excellent account of Hakuin’s aims and methods.

16. In the third of his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche quotes a pertinent line from Meister Eckhart, who is regarded by many Japanese scholars as the Western thinker who comes closest to Zen: “The beast that bears you fastest to perfection is suffering.”

17. One might compare Hakuin’s emphasis on “nourishing the body” and “the art of nurturing life” ([ZMH] 42-44) with Nietzsche’s emphasis on the body, and especially with his idea that the true Self behind the ego is precisely the *Leib*, the lived body ([ZI]4).

18. *ZMH* 77. See also the section entitled “Zen Sickness” in Dumoulin (1988-1990, 2:376-79). The *locus classicus* for the expression of Nietzsche’s philosophical debt to his illnesses is the Preface to *The Gay Science*.


20. There is something corresponding to this triad of courage, depression, and exuberance in the emotional swings undergone by Hakuin in the progress of his practice. At one point he reports on a breakthrough as follows: “I felt that I had achieved the status [of the former Masters]. . . . My pride soared up like a majestic mountain, my arrogance surged forward like the tide” ([ZMH] 118). He then presents himself to his Master to have his “enlightenment” authenticated—upon which the Master laughs, tweaks his nose, and dismisses him with the exhortation to keep practicing. His subsequent practice involves a succession of further breakthroughs, each flanked by experiences of total despair and boundless joy.

21. Zarathustra’s quasi-heroic characteristics are complemented throughout by some less conventionally heroic traits, including a matrix of feminine images having especially to do with pregnancy and labor—which are again related to sickness and suffering.

22. See the numerous discussions of *kōan* in *The Zen Master Hakuin*; see also Miura and Sasaki 1966.

23. This is a crucial question to keep asking in the context of Zen practice, in view of the Protean tenaciousness of the ego, which persists in re-presenting itself in various guises and disguises. The Rinzai Zen answer to the “who” question would be “the true human without rank” who depends on nothing (*mu*).