

NISHITANI KEIJI

The Cold Mountain Poems

Reflections of a Zen Philosopher

Translated by
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Translator's Introduction

THIS VOLUME, containing Nishitani Keiji's reflections on the *Hanshan-shi* (*Cold Mountain Poems*), emerged from a personal and editorial relationship spanning many years—a rare privilege for which I remain deeply grateful. During much of that time, I worked closely with Nishitani Sensei on the editing and translation of articles for *The Eastern Buddhist*—many submitted by contributors, others translated from Japanese sources, and occasionally essays written by Nishitani himself.

Marking Nishitani's final major publication, this volume stands apart from his more systematic philosophical works, such as *Shūkyō to wa Nanika* (titled *Religion and Nothingness* in the English translation). While grounded as firmly in Zen thought and experience as his formal philosophy, these reflections take the form of meditative commentary rather than systematic argument. They draw the reader into the poetic and spiritual world of the reclusive poet-sage Hanshan, whose writings have fascinated East Asian readers for centuries and, in the postwar period, have captivated Western audiences as well.

Although Hanshan's poetry received relatively little sustained attention in China until recent times, it has been revered in Japan since its first publication there in the fourteenth century. His collected verse—some three hundred poems composed in a plain, largely vernacular style that incorporates elements of colloquial Chinese—resembles in many respects the classic Zen records. For generations, these verses served as a spiritual touchstone for seekers, poets, and scholars alike.

The figure of Hanshan—the semi-legendary “Cold Mountain” recluse traditionally associated with China's Tang dynasty—has long

occupied a distinctive place within the Zen tradition. Although little can be established with certainty about his life, he is said to have dwelt in seclusion near Guoqing Temple in the Tiantai Mountains of present-day Zhejiang province. Hanshan and his companions, Shide and Fenggan, later became enduring figures in Zen art and folklore, embodiments of a spiritual freedom unconstrained by convention.

Some three hundred poems attributed to Hanshan survive. Written in language at once plain and resonant, they reflect on nature, impermanence, human folly, and the search for awakening. According to legend, many were inscribed on rocks and trees—an evanescent literature that gradually took on canonical standing within the Zen tradition. Following the deep veneration the poems had long enjoyed in Japan, they reached a wide Western readership in the mid-twentieth century through translations by Arthur Waley, Gary Snyder, and Burton Watson, whose differing approaches to the work shaped their reception among this new audience.

Nishitani Keiji's engagement with Hanshan's poems emerges from a profound grounding in Mahayana philosophy and sustained Rinzai Zen practice. His essays reveal not only the imprint of the Kyoto School and his formal training in Rinzai Zen—he received Dharma transmission from two Rinzai roshis—but also a deep and longstanding devotion to literature, both Asian and Western, that preceded his philosophical vocation. As a young student, he considered majoring in English literature, and I was repeatedly struck by his facility in reading difficult English poetry and by the depth with which he grasped it. It is therefore fitting that some of his later writings turn from systematic philosophical exposition toward the lyric and evocative resources of Zen and Zen-inflected literature—Zen *geju* (verse) and haiku, Bashō and Dōgen, and here, Hanshan.

My involvement with Nishitani Sensei began in the mid-1960s, a year or so after I arrived in Japan. I had just moved to Kyoto from a teaching job at a university in Tokyo to join the editorial staff of *The Eastern Buddhist*. Founded by D. T. Suzuki in the 1920s as a vehicle for

introducing Western readers to the Mahayana tradition, the journal had been discontinued during the war years but was revived early in the 1960s, with Suzuki, then in his mid-nineties, at its head and Nishitani effectively serving as chief editor. Characteristically, Nishitani declined the title, preferring to be listed as one of the four or five associate editors. Under his guidance, the journal served as a key source of articles on Mahayana Buddhism and translations of Buddhist texts for Western readers, while also providing a forum for religious and philosophical dialogue.

We published two issues annually. As deadlines approached, I would go to the Nishitani home to engage in editorial work. These sessions often lasted deep into the night—sometimes for a week or so at a stretch. We revised articles and essays and edited and corrected translations—including my own—with breaks for tea, coffee, and the dinners Mrs. Nishitani would kindly bring on trays into the small room where we worked. The room at the front of his house could barely accommodate two or three visitors; yet the physical narrowness only amplified the reach of Sensei's effortless discourse in response to the steady stream of callers who came to seek his counsel, recalling the tiny four-mat room where Layman Vimalakirti famously held forth. These sessions were arduous and intense—at least from my perspective; Sensei possessed a timeless view of such work and seemed able to continue almost indefinitely—yet they were also inspiring. Walking back late at night to my house on the opposite side of Yoshida Hill, I often regretted that I had not jotted down what I had just heard. The meetings left a lasting impression on me.

In the mid-1970s, during one of those marathon sessions, he showed me the galley proofs of his forthcoming book on the Cold Mountain poems. His publisher, following a common practice at the time, had placed him in temporary seclusion—a custom known as *kanzume* (literally “canned”)—at a modest *ryokan* near Ginkaku-ji. There, free from daily distractions, he could focus fully on the work, and it was during a visit to this inn that the idea of a translation was

first broached. Sensei himself suggested that it be published serially in *The Eastern Buddhist*.

I began the translation and still remember how daunting some of Sensei's philosophical asides could become. Still, the text as a whole seemed more approachable than his purely philosophical writings, and its themes resonated deeply with my own interests. Viewed in this light, *The Cold Mountain Poems* is not an anomaly in his body of work but a late return to something essential. Nishitani Sensei's profound and wide-ranging **love** of poetry—Japanese, Chinese, and Western, with a particular fondness for Goethe and Shakespeare, as well as Zen and Zen-related forms such as Bashō's haiku—stretched back to his high school days.

Alas, the project did not bear fruit at the time. Life intervened, and the work was set aside. Sensei's Japanese text first appeared in 1974 under the title 『寒山詩』 (*The Cold Mountain Poems*), in a two-volume collection titled *Zenke-goroku 2* (Chikuma Shobō), an anthology of classic Zen texts that Nishitani edited in collaboration with Yanagida Seizan. It was republished as a separate volume under the same title in 1986 and later included in 『西谷啓治著作集』, vol. 12 (Sōbunsha, 1986–1995). The galley proofs he had given me were boxed away.

A few years ago, I finally returned to the galley proofs he had given me, which had long since been boxed away. I had just completed an edition of R.H. Blyth's writings and was looking for a new project—something meaningful enough to sustain the long hours that translation demands. I had started, and abandoned, several projects. Then I remembered the box containing the *Hanshan-shi* galleys. Seeing them, now brittle with age, rekindled the spark I had felt almost half a century earlier.

Translating these reflections has enabled me to retrace the steps of a long and close association. It has let me recall Nishitani Sensei's presence once again, seated quietly in that book-filled room at the foot of Yoshida Shrine, and recapture the resonance of his voice—which, like Hanshan's, continues to speak wisely and compassionately across time.

This translation is offered in the hope that readers might discover some similar resonance—perhaps even get a glimpse of Cold Mountain itself.

I should add that in the galleys he gave me, Nishitani Sensei marked a number of passages—mostly digressions and detailed discussions of linguistic nuances in the Chinese text—that he thought could be omitted from the English translation. Although I translated some of them, in two instances I followed his suggestion, omitting several pages.

I would like to express my appreciation to Ian Hamilton who with characteristic generosity suggested many improvements and offered valuable advice. Translations of Japanese and Chinese texts are my own unless otherwise noted, except for the haiku, of which all but one or two are borrowed from the works of R. H. Blyth.

Normal Waddell
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Preface

FROM A MODERN perspective, the *Hanshan-shi* (*Poems of Hanshan*) remains veiled in uncertainty; virtually nothing is known regarding its authorship, date of composition, or the circumstances of its compilation. It is clear, however, that by roughly the ninth century, the poems had become closely associated with Zen Buddhism, eventually being recognized as a foundational text of Zen literature—or at least a work deeply imbued with its spirit. A significant moment in the history of the poems occurred with the publishing of *Kanzan-shi Sendai-kimon*, a commentary by the Japanese Zen master Hakuin (1685–1768). This work framed the Zen interpretation of the poems and solidified their place in the Zen tradition.

In recent years, scholars of Chinese literature have begun to approach the poems strictly as a work of poetic literature, de-emphasizing their connection to Zen. This trend toward re-evaluating the poems from a purely literary standpoint

has gained wide acceptance, and today it is no longer possible to ignore such a perspective. At the same time, we cannot set aside the long-standing tradition of reading Hanshan through the lens of Zen. This connection is inherent to the poems themselves, emerging as a matter of course from their content. The states of mind expressed in the verses are deeply intertwined with Zen experience; indeed, the basis of this resonance is embedded in the very fabric of the collection. To truly understand these poems—to move beyond their surface meaning to their inmost spirit—one must consider their relation to Zen.

Ultimately, anyone attempting to engage honestly with Hanshan today is caught in a dilemma. While the modern literary approach and the traditional Zen approach each offer essential insights, their coexistence places us in the difficult position of being unable to wholly commit to one at the exclusion of the other.

If the Hanshan collection is to be regarded as one of the traditional Zen records, it is essential to present its Zen aspects as coherently as possible. This requires a careful and sustained engagement with Hakuin's commentary. Accordingly, in my own treatment of the poems, I have chosen to give prominence to Hakuin's Zen perspective. My aim has been to draw out the Zen understanding implicit in his interpretations, thereby preserving the character of the *Poems of Hanshan* as a Zen record. There were occasions, however, when I found it difficult to follow Hakuin's Zen reading and felt compelled to depart from it.

Despite these efforts, the dilemma persists. I have attempted to bridge the divide between these two conflicting approaches, though in some sense they remain fundamentally irreconcilable. I address this issue briefly in the latter half of the opening section.

The commentaries on individual poems often run to undue length. Although I initially intended to abridge them, I ultimately left them in their original form, partly in deference to the editors' suggestion that they might serve as a broader guide to the reading of Zen records.

I am deeply indebted to Iriya Yoshitaka's *Kanzan* (Iwanami, 1958) and to the *Kanzan-shi* edited by Iritani Sensuke and Matsumura Takashi (Chikuma, 1970), both for their interpretations of the poems and for their annotations of unfamiliar vocabulary. Without these works, a mere amateur such as myself could not have undertaken even this modest inquiry into Hanshan's poems.