

Six Poems

Jakuzen

**trans. Patrick Donnelly and Stephen
D. Miller**

Between the early tenth century and the fifteenth century, the

Japanese emperors ordered the compilation of twenty-one anthologies of poetry. These anthologies contained anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand poems. The poems below by Jakuzen, a 12th century Buddhist priest, were collected in the *Shinkokinwakashū* (*Shinkokinshū* for short, “New Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems”), the eighth such anthology, commissioned in 1201 by retired emperor Go-Toba and officially presented in 1205.

The compilers of the anthologies, in addition to arranging the poems under thematic headings (seasons, love, grief, travel, etc.), gave many poems a short prose preface. These prefaces, which addressed the poems’ thematic content or the occasions of their composition, are now considered aesthetically inseparable from the poems themselves. (In the *Shinkokinshū*, some prefaces are quoted directly from Buddhist scriptures; this is the case with many of Jakuzen’s poems.) In our translations, to join preface to poem in a way analogous to English poetry, we’ve presented prefaces as the poem’s “titles,” while retaining their prosy quality.

The Japanese originals of these poems (like most poems in the imperial anthologies) are *waka*, the thirty-one syllable form that was primary in Japanese poetics for over a millenium. Because Japanese poetry is written in vertical columns, there are no “lines” as such, but in *waka* the syllables are broken into groups of 5 - 7 - 5 - 7 - 7. These groupings are often rendered as five lines in English translations, but we chose to let the syntax in English take precedence over the poem’s original form. Likewise, our translations don’t imitate the syllabic form of the originals, on the reasoning that there isn’t a strong tradition of syllabics in English poetry. In part, this is because English, unlike Japanese, is a language in which the alternation of

strong and weak stresses is important, a fact that gave accentual rhythm precedence over syllable-counting in English prosody. Our goal was to create interesting English poems that convey the emotional and spiritual arguments of the Japanese originals.

The author of these poems, Jakuzen, a priest of the Tendai sect, resided outside the capital of Kyoto in Ōhara. His two brothers, Jakuchō and Jakunen, were also poet-priests. Together, the three were known as the Ōhara sanjaku (the three “jaku” of Ōhara). Jakuzen left behind three manuscripts of waka poetry, and forty-seven of his poems were published in several imperial poetry anthologies of the late 12th century and later. One of his most famous collections, *Hōmon hyakushu* (*One Hundred Poems on the Dharma Gate*), consisted of one hundred waka based upon short sections of various Buddhist texts, followed by contemplative prose afterwords.

***Shinkokinshū* 1952/1953**

kumo harete
munashiki sora ni
 suminagara
ukiyo no naka o
meguru tsuki kana

A bodhisattva is a pure moon playing in a sky supremely empty

because clouds cleared,
emptying the sky—

the MOON cycles round

the sad world glistening
and alive

***Shinkokinshū* 1953/1954**

fuku kaze ni
hana tachibana ya
niouran
mukashi oboyuru
kyō no niwa kana

And with a wind scented by blossoms of sandalwood

one can scent flowers

on the wind—orange blossoms
probably—reminding me
of one long-past yesterday

O in the garden of today

***Shinkokinshū* 1954/1955**

yami fukaki
ko no moto goto ni
chigiri okite
asa tatsu kiri no
ato no tsuyukesa

**When he had delivered these teachings, he returned to another
realm**

on root and trunk of every tree,
deep shadow where

a vow was made:

morning mist that hung,
lifted, left a dew-flow

of traces

***Shinkokinshū* 1959/1960**

oto ni kiku
kimi gari itsu ka
iki no matsu
matsuran mono o
kokorozukushi ni

Hearing the Name, longing to be reborn

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

***Shinkokinshū* 1960/1961**

wakarenishi
sono omokage no
koishiki ni
yume ni mo mieyo
yama no ha no tsuki

Heart of longing, revering the Buddha path

longed-for face
from which I've been parted

come, appear even in dreams—

lip-of-the-mountain
moon

***Shinkokinshū* 1962/1963**

ukigusa no
hitoha naritomo
isogakure
omoi na kake so
oki tsu shiranami

On the prohibition against stealing

don't hope for
even a single secret leaf

of floating seagrass—keep off

the beach you pirate
white waves