

Zen Story II

Hello, my name is Kaneko, your navigator.

Today we bring you the second installment of our stories about Zen monks. I hope you will feel free to listen.

One of the Zen monks of the Edo period was Sengai Gibon (1750-1837). In recent years, Sengai's Zen paintings, which are full of Zen flavor, have been introduced overseas and have received high acclaim.

Sengai died at the age of 88, and his disciples surrounded him on his deathbed.

One of his disciples asked him, "Master, please leave us some good words at the end of your life.

The monk said, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die".

"I don't like that kind of unsightly thing from a man who is a famous monk in the world. Please do something a little better".

Sengai replied, "Really, really".

I would like to tell you about the death of another great monk of the Meiji era, Gazan Hashimoto, the chief abbot of the Tenryuji school of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism.

Before he drew his last breath, he gathered all of his disciples together. On his deathbed and said

"You should take a good look at this. Dying is a painful thing. I don't want to die, I don't want to die". He taught his disciples the pain of death".

The Zen monk Ikkyu of the Muromachi period (1336-1573), famous for his "tonchi" (a kind of Japanese pun), said in his dying words, "I will not die. It is said that his dying words were "I don't want to die".

When you are in character, you may not be able to say what you really feel because you are trying to be cool. Being able to put that into words without hesitation is, in a sense, a state of enlightenment.

We want to die quietly and solemnly. But it is not as we want it to be. It is a strange desire to try to do what cannot be done as we wish.

We give up on the inevitable reality that we can't control it. Death is scary for everyone. I believe that a true Zen monk is one who can truly be afraid of that fearful thing.

It doesn't matter whether you die in a good way or in a frightened way, it doesn't matter.

It is very Zen to realize that it doesn't matter how you die.

Shiki Masaoka, a Meiji-era haiku poet, had this to say.

Shiki was ill with spinal caries from before the age of 30 until his death at the age of 34. Shiki suffered from physical pain, sometimes screaming and crying. One day, he suddenly realized something.

“I had misunderstood what is called enlightenment in Zen Buddhism. I had thought that enlightenment meant dying with no problems at all, but I was wrong”

Some people think that being prepared to die with equanimity at any time, to look at death rather than life, is Zen, but it is not.

In Buddhism, "suffering" is defined as things that do not go one's way.

What is not as you want it to be, leave it as you want it to be. Accept everything and live with it. I think that is what Zen is able to do.

The Buddhist sermon series was given by Hirokazu Kaneko. Translation and voice in English by Hirokazu Kosaka.