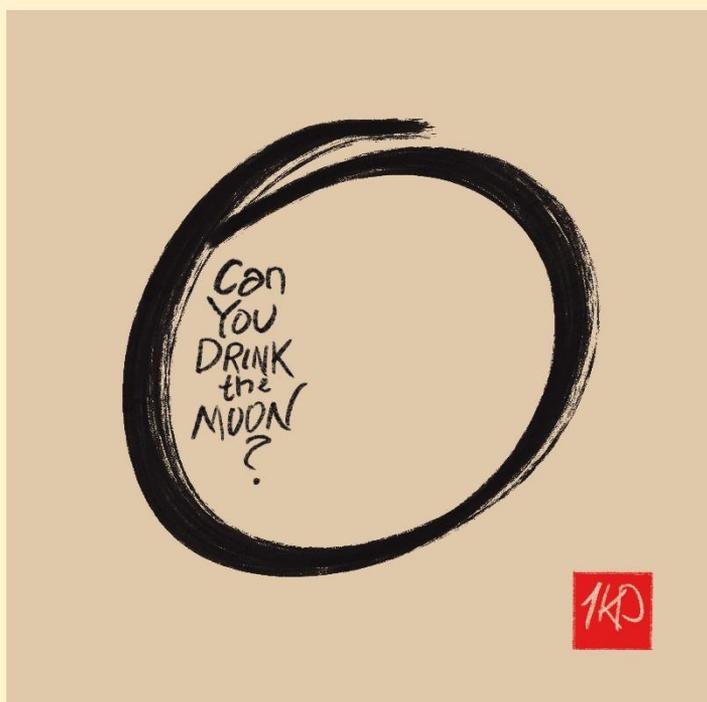


More (than) Zen Stories

New sprouts from old tales

Theodore K Phelps



The traditional stories used here are based in, or copied from *101 Zen Stories* and use the numbering presented there. That set is one of three books compiled by Paul Reps in the 1930s with the help of Buddhist scholar Nyogen Senzaki and later published (1957) in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: a collection of Zen and pre-Zen writings*, Charles E. Tuttle, Rutland, VT.

The “More (than) Zen” stories that continue the traditional stories are both envisioned and composed by Theodore K Phelps while the originals labeled as “recast” are recensions by Phelps closely following what is envisioned in the originals.

The Zen *enso* (brush circle) on the front cover, the “Self-portrait,” and “Mountains of Taiwan” on the back cover are by the author (artist name: TKPhelps).

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Brevity and Zen Stories

Once you see a few things from Zen, be it words, objects, or actions, you pick up on at least this theme: they are simple. And you know that means *deceptively* simple because you know Zen itself is hard. It calls on participants to go on long journeys of considerable psychological complexity. But the tools of Zen seem simple, if poetically charmed and confusing to look at. Its poems are Haiku. Just a few syllables. And the “Zen stories” that come down through the centuries are just a few sentences.

Brevity is the soul of wisdom in these stories. Happily, we can all get a good collection of them in the small book, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. The book contains a few other items as well as its main dish, the “101 Zen Stories.” These short passages, collected by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps in the 1930s, work their magic in our imaginations due in great part to their brevity.

“Is that so?” is all that Zen master Hakuin Ekaku says in the story by that name, the third and maybe most famous in the set. (Paul Reps has surely used “is that so” to translate the common Japanese phrase “そうですか”, pronounced ‘so dess-kah.’). Faced with a crisis that would send most of us reeling and twisting and yelling and going to a lawyer and consuming ourselves for years, here, Hakuin, a master of silence and compassion, says only three words, a phrase virtually empty of meaning, leading nowhere, conflicting in no way with the motion of others. He says it twice, first when accused and later when exonerated. The story as recorded by Reps is just 195 words. My own version trims it even more.

A punch has to be short in order to work. And Zen seems to like to punch in much of what it does. At least, so it appears to me, and to many who try to peek into its mysterious world through written words. Of course, anyone with any lasting

interest in things like Zen knows that the vision or insight that makes the whole ordeal worth anything—the *kensho*, the *satori*, the enlightened vision—is not to be boxed and wrapped and ribboned with words. The Zen idea is then, I believe, to make the ‘box,’ these stories, the *koans* and “cases,” be so small as to be *obviously* too small. One should know that the aim of the stories is not to *teach* wisdom, but to tickle the mind so that some more light will enter. The stories give a peek. And traditions of spiritual development often record that a peek, made at the right moment, can take the one who peeks to the top of a mountain, at least for a time. A peek at a peak.

I admire all of that. But these stories have had almost a century in America, and several more in Japan and China. So, I don’t mind taking their punch and using it to tell another story, or to continue the tale that the old ones started. But, then, why not try to let them do a bit more than tell a tale? So, I have let them peer a bit into our hearts at what lies beneath the surface on most days and, if possible, to move us to a different place.

Each of these stories begins with my own title, such as “Not Enough Cups” followed by the original story title and number, such as, “Time to Die, #85”, followed by that story or my recension (recast) of it *in italics*. My recensions add a few historic details and cultural nuances from Zen and monastic life that would be known to Japanese Zen audiences. And then...my own story. It starts after the line, “**And then...**”

I wrote the first versions of these for live presentation at Deb Koffman’s monthly open mic, *In Words Out Words*, in Housatonic, Massachusetts. So, I bow to her and dedicate these sprouts to her and that greenhouse.

Theodore K Phelps
January 20, 2021
Valatie, New York

The Hermit of Moon Village

The Moon Cannot Be Stolen, #9 (recast)

Ryōkan Taigu (良寛大愚, 1758–1831, Japan) became enlightened at Entsū-ji monastery in Japan. He later lived as a mountain hermit. One night, under a full moon, a thief wandering far from the city came stumbling to Ryōkan's hut demanding food and treasure. Ryōkan had only his robe, the ordination garment from Entsū-ji, now threadbare. Ryōkan removed the robe and pressed it into the reluctant hands of his thoroughly bewildered guest and apologized, "I wish I could give you this beautiful moon!"

And then...

A few weeks later, the thief was caught stealing rice in the city, and his clothing was examined, revealing it was the property of a Zen master. The thief confessed, was given 10 lashes and escorted to Ryōkan, told to strip bare, fold his robes, and bow before the master, who said, "These clothes were my gift to you. But, truly, I wish I could give you the beautiful moon!" And with that the thief was released and sent running naked into the forest.

The thief was oddly affected by his two encounters with the master and vowed to live similarly, alone in a small hut. He chose a secluded spot atop the nearby mountain, in clear sight of the moon.

He hardly spoke to anyone, and five years had passed when, one evening while the Hermit was out gathering firewood, a young man came prowling around his hut. Observing this from behind a tree, the Hermit saw his own earlier life reflected there like the moon on a forest pond. He called gently, "Do not be afraid. Please do not run. Let me give you something to make your trip worthwhile." He asked the man to sit for tea. As the

Hermit placed a cup in the other man's hands, the tea reflected the full moon shining through the pines overhead. "Look!" he said, "This tea will last only a minute. But inside the cup, the moon." Then looking into the young man's eyes, "Can you drink the moon?"

The young man drank the tea and was so moved by it, he bowed low and then ran down the mountain in the moonlight all the way back to his master, a rich man for whom he was scouting out mountain locations for a new mansion. He told the Rich Man that the mountaintop contained a secret worth more than the mountain itself and, saying no more than that, urged his master to go there with him at the next full moon. This they did.

Arriving at the Hermit's hut, the Scout bowed and asked, "Please prepare for my master the cup of tea you gave me one Moon ago." The Hermit repeated what he had done before and again said, "Look! This tea will last only a minute. But inside the cup, the moon." Then looking into the Rich Man's eyes, "Can you drink the moon?" The Rich Man drank the tea and was so moved by it he knelt to the ground and fell asleep there under the stars and moon.

Returning home, the Rich Man resolved to build an excellent home for the Hermit. He visited him at each full moon, bringing clothing and food, then planks of wood, bricks and tiles, and then a caravan of artisans to build a fine home for the Hermit. For the first time in his life, the Hermit had a rainproof roof, a floor, walls with a door, and windows. And a real bed.

The story of Moon Tea traveled like fire in a dry wood. Soon others made the pilgrimage to the mountain and reported being healed both physically and emotionally by their visits. They built a teahouse and then an inn for the pilgrims, and in time small houses and a marketplace grew. By the time he was

40, a village covered much of the mountain. His house had become a complex maze of beautiful, high-walled structures with windows at the top to allow the sunlight, moonlight, and fresh air in. He was known throughout the country as The Hermit of Moon Village.

And one day, when the Hermit had grown old, a young boy came to him saying he lived alone on the neighboring mountain, without parents, brother, or sisters. The Hermit invited the boy to live with him and be his grandchild. But that night, in the dawning hours, the Hermit awoke to the sound of the boy crying into his pillow. “I miss the woods,” he whimpered. “I miss the moon.”

A tear filled the Hermit’s heart, and an ancient song, an aching, shivered in his voice, and his eyes moistened. “Me too,” he whispered, “Let’s take a walk outside.” Hand in hand, they walked through the long hallways, past the great dining hall, and the living room where the embers were falling asleep in the fireplace, past classrooms, kitchens, and store rooms, until they came to a large double door that opened onto the expansive view of the neighboring mountain. Dawn was rising, and floating just above the mountain, the warm ivory ball of the setting full moon.

The boy ran out like a bird from its cage and then flew back to the arms of the Hermit, shouting, “Hurry up! The moon is flying over the mountain. We have to ride with it.” The Hermit filled with tears, and the boy said, “Oh, father, I see the moon swimming in your eyes!” The Hermit lowered his head, holding the boy’s hands as scenes passed through his mind of his long, extraordinary life, all that had passed, and all that was now, and what was yet to come. When at last he opened his eyes, he saw that his hands—no longer holding the boy—were folded together. The boy was gone.

Yet, the setting moon still floated above the mountain, as if waiting. “I wish I could give you the beautiful moon,” he whispered, and at that, the moon face became the face of the boy. “Are you there?” he asked. The boy smiled, and his face became Ryokan’s. “Oh!” And Ryokan became his own face which then merged into the silent sphere of light floating in the sky.

The moon in a great black cup of tea.



Look!

This tea will last only a minute

But inside the cup, the moon...

Can you drink the moon?



Not Enough Cups

Time To Die, #85 (recast)

Ikkyū Sōjun (一休宗純, 1394–1481, Japan) was a Rinzai Zen master from Kyoto who became an iconoclastic folk hero who would greatly influence Japanese culture, especially the tea ceremony.



Ikkyū by Bokusai

When he was five, he was separated from his mother and taken to live with the monks in a Zen temple. He was mischievous and clever, sometimes outsmarting even the elders. One day while cleaning the kitchen, Ikkyū accidentally broke his teacher's favorite teacup, a rare and precious antique. He took the pieces, wrapped in a cloth, outside to bury in the garden. But, seeing the master approach, Ikkyū hid the bundle behind his back. "O Master," he

said, in the style of the monks at evening lectures, "Why do people have to die?" The elder cited the Buddha's teaching about impermanence, how all things eventually end. Ikkyū quietly produced the broken parts and placed them on the chopping block by the woodshed. The master took a deep breath and was about to speak when Ikkyū held up a finger, in the style of a teacher, and said, "It was time for your cup to die."

And then...

The abbot looked at the boy. "Hmmm...I see. The fine old teacup died. I see. Maybe it was, just as you say, time for it to go. Hmmm..."

The evening bell rang, and the monks began moving from their work back to the great hall. The abbot called to the old

woodchopping monk leaving the woodshed. “Koh-Shun, please join me for a moment at the wood block.”

“Yes, Abbot.”

Taking the axe from the log, and giving a serious wink to the woodchopper with a head gesture indicating the trembling Ikkyū watching from behind, the abbot commanded, “Now, Koh-Shun, place your right hand on the chopping block and tell it, ‘Today is your end, my precious servant. Today it is your time to die.’”

The old monk had seen the abbot’s tricks before and played with him, “Shall I place it this way or this way, Abbot?”

“Yes, rest your hand just like that. Excellent. Or wait...” He stretched out his own arm, pulling back the long sleeve of his robe, and placed his hand on the block. “It is time for my hand to go. Not yours. This afternoon, the old teacup that long warmed my hand has died. So...”

“I understand, Abbot,” the old chopper said, as he took the axe. He lifted it high and held it with two straight arms, his eyes rooted on the abbot’s.

Ikkyū burst forth, “No, Master!” He ran to the abbot and almost knocked him to the ground shouting, “No, Master! I am sorry. Please. You can take my hand. It was my hand that broke your wonderful teacup. And if I live, I will get you a new one, a very fine one. I will learn from the potter to make you a teacup even better than the one I broke. Master, Master, I will make a cup for everyone. Everyone in the world.”

The woodchopper lowered the axe, and the abbot folded the arms of his robe around Ikkyū until his breathing slowed. “Good. Good. ‘Everyone in the world’ you say! That would be a fine gift. We have so much tea. So much tea! Not enough cups.”

There is Seed and There is Seed

Is That So? #3 (recast)

The Zen master Hakuin Ekaku, (白隠 慧鶴, 1686–1769, Japan) who revived Rinzaï, the great Japanese Zen tradition, was once, even as abbot of his temple, falsely accused of getting a local girl pregnant.



Hakuin Ekaku, self-portrait

The girl's parents were angry. They owned a food store nearby and knocked on the gate and scolded Hakuin loudly so all would hear. The master of silence and compassion simply said, "Is that so?"

When the baby was born, they took it to him, and despite the disgrace he bore in doing so, he cared well for the newborn, receiving milk and supplies from a few neighbors. After a year, the mother broke down and told her parents the truth: that the father was a young man in the fish market. They went straightaway to Hakuin and apologized at

length. Hakuin, placing the child in the mother's arms, looked in her eyes and said, "Is that so?"

And then...

Born in autumn, the girl had been called Momiji. She faded out of view after a few years.

One night, some fourteen years later, after soup and rice and tea in the room above the food store, the grandfather of Momiji said to his wife, “Old Mother, there is seed *and there is seed.*”

“そうですね” [so dess-kah, “Is that so?”] she said and got up to wash her bowl and unfold the bedding.

“I can’t stop thinking about Momiji and the monastery and Hakuin Sensei.”

“Shh! You will wake the girl.” Momiji had returned that morning. She was now rolled up under a blanket by the window.

“Look at her, Old Mother! We have not seen her in ten years or known where our daughter had taken her. Then today, she appears at the door. Look at her! Like a princess in rags. That scoundrel at the fish market may have given the seed that brought her to this world. But there is seed *and there is seed.* Look how she walks: She *glides.* How she sits: She *floats.* How she speaks: Like a *bird*, like the breeze in the pines. She carries a seed of the monastery.”

“Is that so. Go pee, and then we will sleep.”

Even now, at 15, Momiji knew little of the world. But she knew she had long ago lived for a while in the famous Shoin-ji monastery in Hara-juku near her grandparents who supplied the monks with salt and sometimes rice. She held memories, musty and dark, of a time when she was covered in wool and lay in a basket by a fire with the sound of men singing in the distance.

Did she remember a man sitting on a cushion beside her all through the night and going out in the snow with her wrapped to his back as he fetched wood and water? She had come back to Hara to bring news to the grandparents about the hermetic life she and her mother led in the foothills on the other side of

the great mountain, but also, to put her eyes for a moment on the man of the monastery.

Momiji awoke before dawn and walked to Shoin-ji temple. She climbed over the gate and glided like a monk to the meditation hall. A candle flickered golden light on the Buddha. She hid in a corner behind a stack of blankets, a shawl covering her hair.

The gong sounded. A monk entered and lit sticks of incense. He did not see Momiji, and she did not breathe. Soon others approached, bowing at the entrance and then standing in two lines looking inward to the center until the abbot, the “First Monk,” entered. He dressed like the others, but in his walk Momiji could tell. All against her will, she gasped. She stood up, and the shawl fell from her head. Forty monks turned to see what was there.

Momiji stepped backwards and bowed low at the entrance and darted out into the dark.

The abbot called to her, “My child, wait!”

Her knees weakened when she heard that voice, and she fell to the ground. She was weeping. Two monks brought her back inside.

“Come here. Sit beside me,” Hakuin said.

She approached him, head bowed. Then looked into his eyes and said, “I am your Momiji, kind sir.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, father. Yes, it is so.”

“Yes, you are right. It is so,” he said. “Sit with us.” Then giving her a closer look, said, “Perhaps you would rather have some warm soup. Your journey has been hard.” He took her by the arm. “Second Monk, lead the meditation. I am going to help our sister find something to eat.”

Twenty Years and Nothing

No Loving-Kindness, #6

There was an old woman in China who had supported a monk for over twenty years. She had built a little hut for him and fed him while he was meditating. Finally she wondered just what progress he had made in all this time.

To find out, she obtained the help of a girl rich in desire. “Go and embrace him,” she told her, “and then ask him suddenly: ‘What now?’”

The girl called upon the monk and without much ado caressed him, asking him what he was going to do about it.

“An old tree grows on a cold rock in winter,” replied the monk somewhat poetically. “Nowhere is there any warmth.”

The girl returned and related what he had said.

“To think I fed that fellow for twenty years!” exclaimed the old woman in anger. “He showed no consideration for your need, no disposition to explain your condition. He need not have responded to passion, but at least he should have evidenced some compassion.”

She at once went to the hut of the monk and burned it down.

And then...

The monk hid in the trees watching the bent form of Old Mother flickering black against the orange light. Neither of them moved until the hut had dropped to a pile of embers. Then Old Mother raised her arms to the stars, her voice bouncing off the forest walls, “Míng Xīng (ming-shing)! Twenty years and nothing! *Twenty* years and *nothing*!” Then she disappeared down the mountain path.

Míng Xīng sat on the leaves and meditated. He took Old Mother’s question into the rooms of his heart and let it ring there like a temple bell, like a new koan: *Twenty Years and Nothing*. When the morning birds sprinkled the forest with

songs, he lay down in the leaves and slept. He did not know this was the day he had been born 30 years earlier.

But Old Mother knew. She was the one who had found him on his first night, dumped naked and crying in a bush at the edge of town, peppered in mosquito bites. She had named him Míng Xīng because of the bright stars that lit her way through the night as she carried him to the gate of the mountain monastery where she herself had been raised. Every year on that same day, she would visit the monastery to give money, always watching the boy at a distance, never meeting him or telling the abbot that it was she who had found him.

In those days, she had been known as “Yīng Huā” in the cities and villages. “The Cherry” was a favorite among those who traded with women “rich in desire.” She had first learned the value of desire at the far edges of the monastery’s farm fields and left at sixteen to trade with men and women for handsome sums of money.

After burning the hut of the mountain monk, the now aging Yīng Huā went to a public house, and when she was drenched in wine, she spoke loosely to her companions, “I showed him what a woman can do for a man, and he said, ‘No Warmth!’ Can you believe it? No warmth after *twenty years* sitting up there all alone. Twenty years and nothing. Well, I gave him some warmth! I burned him down. Right down to nothing.”

The girl whom Yīng Huā had sent to tempt Míng Xīng heard this and pummeled the old woman, shouting “What have you done, you witch?!”

Yīng Huā scratched at the girl’s cheeks and breasts, shrieking, “Yaahh! I see now what it is. You, little girl, you yourself do not have any flame! You could not light my boy, that frail stack of twigs! It is *you* who are nothing. Nothing!”

The men laughed at the old pro speaking this way to a fresh, young girl. But they enjoyed the game and joined in, “Good old Yīng Huā! She sure knows her stuff! Look at that rag girl, there! Do any of us hearty men feel the warmth when we look at that sad mess. Hah!” They pulled on her hair and opened her hands. “These paws are too rough to touch me, I would say!” They kept at it until the girl’s face was swollen with tears. They whacked her on the backside and threw her out into the mud.

The girl ran all night into the mountain to the place she had last seen the monk, Míng Xīng. She found him lying limp by the ashes of his hut. His lips were cracked. A bird was pecking at his foot.

“Míng Xīng!” she cried. “Wake up! You must go. *We* must go.” But he did not awaken.

She lay on him to give him warmth. No one knows how many days and nights passed with her wrapped that way before the two moved into a new life together.

The Invitation

If You Love, Love Openly, #5 (recast)

A Zen master, twenty monks, and one nun practiced Zen in a monastic order governed by the rules laid down by the Buddha for monastic life, rules which, among hundreds of matters, distinctly forbid intimate and romantic relations. The nun, known as Eshun, being the only woman among so many men, kept the precepts with extraordinary care. She was spirited yet to-the-point, earning her admiration from all and thoughts of love from a few. “If I were not a monk and she were not a nun...” they might think, but then, as their Zen practice teaches, they let thoughts pass into the task at hand and later dissolve in the sound of the meditation bell.

One night, for one monk, the thoughts of a fuller life with Eshun would not go. In the early hours, he wrote a love letter that invited her to a private meeting. A private meeting! That could have had them be thrown out the gate, even in the snow, never to be let back in.

The next morning, after meditation and the master’s teaching in the hall, Eshun stood. She looked into the eyes of the monk and said, “If you really love me so much, come and embrace me now.”

And then...

“If you really love me so much, come and embrace me now.” Eshun’s words hung in the cold air and echoed off the wooden beams and planks of the small meditation hall in the monastery set high in the mountains overlooking Biwako, the great lake that borders Kyoto. It was early morning in the first month of winter.

The monk who had written the love letter was called Koshun, a Tendai ordination name meaning “Luminous Moment.” He lowered his eyes allowing Eshun to look directly at him. He felt the heat of her eyes like rays of sun bearing

down on his shaved head. The other monks, as well as the master, remained where they were, still as lizards in winter.

The room was silent, even more silent than meditation, so silent that Eshun could hear the large flakes of snow falling on the roof.

Koshun, however, could hear only the pulsing in his chest. He waited, listened for a long in-breath and the rustling of the robes from the master. But still, only the thumping in his chest, like the knocking of a visitor at the monastery gate. He thought of his own knocking, plaintive and long, five years earlier in snow like this, as he sat outside the walls for three days asking to be admitted to the community of monks.

Eshun peered through the darkness at Koshun. She saw a brief flicker of lamplight reflected off a drop of water on his cheek. “Oh,” she mused, “This tear is now his luminous moment!” And with that thought, Eshun’s heart began to pound. The pulse filled her ears chanting as if a wooden drum, “Koshun! Koshun! Koshun!” And under its thrumming sound her mind called out to the monk.

“Why do you *sit* there? I know there are others right in this room who think about me the same as you do. But only you had the will to sneak this fine sheet of rice paper and then—without knowing much calligraphy or anything about the art of courtship or how to write a poem—you wrote me this simple letter, this invitation. Was that just a passing thing, a salty luminous moment? Or will you stand up here before them all and embrace me?” And thus did Eshun’s heart quietly call to the monk across the room.

And as she did, her hand, all on its own, reached into her robe and pulled out the letter. She held it outstretched toward her monk, still sitting with his head down.

The crinkling of the paper broke the silence. Koshun raised his head. He looked at the master through watery eyes. The

master nodded. Koshun stood and turned to Eshun, whose right hand remained outstretched to him holding the incriminating letter. He took a step toward her. Then a second step. Then a third. And at that moment, his heart sat back down in his chest, like the monastery cat settling for a nap.

Koshun's ears opened. He heard the snow. He heard the flakes forming in the clouds, each one tumbling through the wind, each one alone, each one falling by itself to end itself in the ground and merging with the hills. He heard a drop of water fall from his cheek onto the planks of the wood floor. He heard the shifting of his robes around his neck as he lifted his head to look, for the first time, the first time since last summer with Eshun at the well, to look into the warm blackness of her eyes.

Koshun heard the rustling of Eshun's sleeve as she raised her other arm. He saw, then, *two* arms opened to him, *two* eyes opened to him—a sight he had not seen, even once in the monastery, never once from *anyone* there, not even the master. Not ever, indeed, from anyone throughout his life, except that one time from his mother that final day with her when he had turned and looked back at her just as he started up the mountain path to begin his life as a monk.

He walked across the hall to Eshun and gently lowered her outstretched arms. “Sister,” he said in a strong, clear voice, “I embrace you,” as he put his palms together and bowed. They each bowed to the master and then to the Buddha on the alter.

The morning light was breaking, and out in the garden, the cook pulled back the massive log to sound the bell calling the monks to their morning meal.

“Form is emptiness,” the master reminded them.
“Emptiness is form. Let's eat!”

And Then...

Muddy Road, #14 (recast)

Tanzan and Ekido were walking from one town to the next in a heavy rain. The road was flowing with water and mud. At an intersection, the water and mud were so severe that a young woman in a silk kimono and sash was stopped, unable to cross. She was crying.

“Come on, I will help you,” Tanzan said as he lifted her in his arms and carried her across the mud.

Ekido did not speak until they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. “We monks don’t go near females,” he said, “especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?”

“I left her hours ago and in a place far from here,” Tanzan said. “Are you still carrying her?”

And then...

(now it is your turn...)



Self-portrait, TKPhelps



Mountains of Taiwan, TKPhelps