

白隠慧鶴

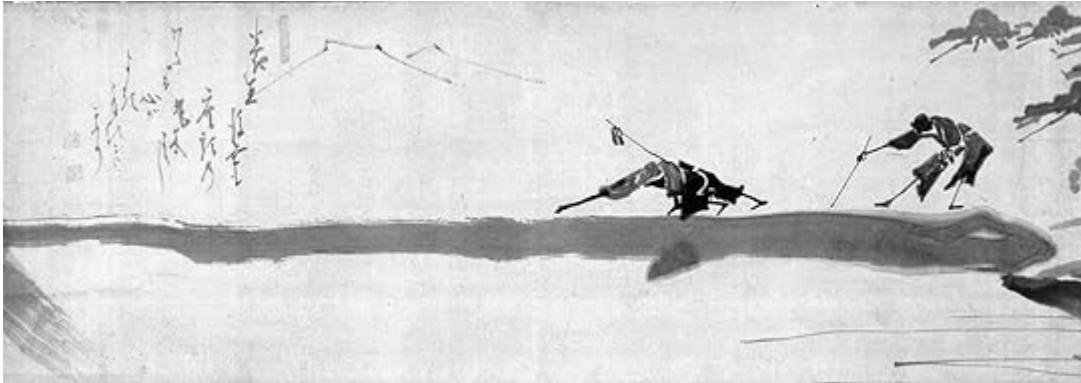
HAKUIN Ekaku

1685–1768

Two Blind Men Crossing a Log Bridge

Edo Period (1615-1867 A.D.)

Hanging scroll(s), ink on paper 28 x 83.8 cm



Hakuin painted this subject several times with varying numbers of blind men.² For example, a well-known version in the Chikusei Collection has three blind men, though a versions with nine and as few as one solitary figure both exist. The Gitter-Yelen Collection example, shown above, is one of two known paintings with two figures. Despite this, there is little variation in the treatment of the landscapes, which appear like the example here, as a spare and empty chasm with a few encroaching trees or loosely defined mountains in the distance for scale and perspective. With relatively little brushwork, however, Hakuin is able to conjure a vast emptiness that can only be traversed—very carefully, slowly, and with great deliberation—via a round log. This “vast emptiness” has often been related to Buddhist metaphors of gorges and rivers (symbolic of *samara* and the ignorance of the unenlightened), which must be crossed in a vessel, typically a boat. This empty vessel is meant to symbolize the teachings (or sacred images) of the Buddha, which can ferry the observant across to the shores of enlightenment.

As Hakuin’s inscription instructs, students of Zen should proceed slowly and methodically across the “log bridge” of life, implying that, without the enlightenment of the Buddha, we are all effectively blind, riddled with uncertainty as we carefully inch forward across the log bridge. Interestingly, Hakuin’s metaphor also implies that enlightenment—the crossing of the bridge—could occur suddenly and at any moment, for the blind men do not know when they will reach the other side.

The metaphor of blind men and blindness in general were often invoked by Hakuin in his sermons. They also appear throughout his writings, used most frequently as shorthand for the unenlightened. As noted by Stephen Addiss, Hakuin also applied this analogy—the hazardous bridge that may end at any moment—to the ephemerality and unpredictability of life, writing:

“Both the health of our bodies
and the fleeting world outside us
are like the blind men’s
round log bridge—a mind
that can cross over is the best guide.”³

—*Bradley Bailey*