

Horin's Famous Mealtime Benediction for the Training Hall

Taishoku ge, Taijiki ge

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Introduction

This is a famous mealtime benediction by Horin, 1693-1741, a Buddhist priest of the Nishi Hongwanji in Kyoto. It was intended for use in the training hall where the trainees had their meals together. As anyone who has done any training knows, meals are the best time of the day, and this benediction no doubt imparted a distinctly Buddhist flavor. It is written in Chinese but some of the passages are obscure, and even when written out in Japanese there is no agreement as to how to interpret certain passages.

The above is a quick fix subject to later revision, with notes to the Buddhist allusions it contains. The Buddhist training hall in Japan today uses a more sterile kind of benediction that gives the meals a different flavor. The original text appears in several old documents such as Horin iroku, Shinshu Zensho 73: 570, and someone has now put the verse in Chinese on an internet site.

Horin's Mealtime Benediction

Grain by grain, all of them are the faith of the believers,
Drop by drop, all of them are the waves of believers.
As we are neither soldiers or farmers, builders or merchants,
As we have neither political power nor product to offer,
Were it not for the power of these buddha field robes,
How would we be able to partake this meal before us.
Never catch yourselves saying, oh, the soup¹'s too thick or thin,
Never catch yourselves saying, why, there¹'s only so much or so little.
This meal before us is the medicine that sustains our life.
A Zen shout may well stave off Hunger, but
If it ever occurs to you that it's not enough, remember :
Come perdition there'll be that cauldronful of hot iron balls a-waiting!

If it never occurs to you to recall the provenance of this meal,
You might just end up the next life a beast of burden.
Depend on these words of encouragement to practicers,
Never forget to say this benediction at mealtimes.
Pray that from the sustenance this meal provides
You'll live a long and healthy life.

Above us, the reaches of the Dharma citadel,
Below us, the raft on the sea of suffering.
Work to instruct and convert all sentient beings
So that you'll be born together in the Land of Peace and Happiness.

Notes

*** ***grain by grain***, refers to the grains of rice in the bowl or on the plate before them, each of which got their by the labor of farmers who believe in the religion that supports the trainees by donations of food and clothing and so on

*** **drop by drop**, every drop of soup or broth, the idea that the drops taken together make up the waves in the sea of the faithful

*** **buddha field robes**, the buddha field refers to the field of enjoyment cultivated by buddhas and bodhisattvas

*** **Zen shout**, katsu, but somehow katsu or Kwatz or KYAAH does not lend itself in English as a powerful expression and you would miss the Zen part, not to mention scaring the wits out of the person sitting next to you at table

*** **cauldronful of hot iron balls**, an allusion to the hot iron balls poured down the throats of sinners in Buddhist hell

*** **beast of burden**, overloaded ox or horse, to regress into the lower paths, what today we would rephrase as, You might just end up a hamburger in someone's Happy Meal

*** **raft**, the proverbial raft that shuttles the seekers to the other shore of nirvana