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The Way of Eating Fried Sausage

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The Way of Eating Fried Sausage

I am staying at the faculty club of the University of California at Berkeley while I serve for a few days as a short-term research associate and a speaker at a symposium. The history of the university, or of the people in the university, can be seen in the way the simple but refined Continental breakfast is served here; I do not have even the slightest dissatisfaction with it. For dinner, the students eat out at Chinese or Mexican restaurants in the university's lively neighborhood. If I eat at a restaurant operated by refugees who have no liquor license, I stop on the way home at a students' bar and drink beer poured from a pitcher. On the whole, as my disposition is that of a generation that learned to use self-control over the extravagant pleasures of good food, I find this arrangement more than adequate.

There is no need for me to cook here, but since I confine myself to my room over the weekend while working on the outline of my speech for the public seminar and checking its English translation, I find that it is a waste of time to cross the wide campus to the student center. Instead, I cook lunch at the visitors' kitchen. If I may tell you the truth, I cook and eat Korean instant noodles, stir-fried with frozen vegetables from Taiwan.

This type of modest meal, which I used to have when I was

living away from my family in my adolescent years, is quite familiar to me. Those meals were prepared in a very short time and eaten quickly. Even today, with a family of my own, I still eat in the same manner. At home, I attend formal dinner parties several times each year, and when discussions grow animated I often sense that the waitress or geisha sitting near the lacquered tables in front of me feels a restrained contempt for my ill manner of eating. It is nevertheless something I do not particularly pay attention to.

But now, as I eat here in the dormitory at a table that is also used for cooking, in the white kitchen that seems able to accommodate an operating table, I feel that I am undergoing some changes. With the tip of my tongue, I lick the pod of a soybean, a small tuft of broccoli, or a string of bean sprout, and slowly, ever so slowly, as if moving in a dream, I savor each taste. Then I call myself back—"Hey? Hey!"—and return to my usual hurried way of eating.

Meanwhile, my thoughts wander to Uncle Hyōei for the first time in quite a while. Because the ceramic bowl I eat from has no stand on its bottom, it is hard for me to hold when I pour hot water into it. After dinner, as I rinse the bowl, the water feels cool to my wrist, and without my understanding why, this feeling awakens thoughts of Uncle Hyōei once again. As I say to myself, "Hey? Hey!" while lightly washing the dishes, I feel a smile begin to stiffen the area around my cheekbones.

Truthfully speaking, this has been a frequent experience lately. After returning to my room, I lie on my bed; among the books I have brought along—like the household medicines one brings on a trip—I find a copy of *The Buddha's Last Journey*, the *Maha Pari Nirvana Sutra*, Iwanami Library edition. The book is a volume from Uncle Hyōei's *Ti Pitaka Sutra*, which he read throughout his life. And I decide to write about what is involved when I say to myself, "Hey? Hey!" as far as I can tell.

First of all, Uncle Hyōei is called "Uncle," but this is nothing more than a convenient way of addressing him. The correct usage of this term is another matter. My relatives have complicated feelings regarding Uncle Hyōei's life, particularly the way he lived during his later years and the way he died. I would like to warn you beforehand that there was no real uncle-

and-nephew relationship between Uncle Hyōei and myself. Still, when I called him “Uncle,” I always thought that I had the Chinese characters for “elder uncle” in my head.* Through Lévi-Strauss’s research on family relations, I became conscious of the fact that my actual relationship with Uncle Hyōei—who has influenced me deeply—can be understood as similar to my relationship with my mother’s older brother. At any rate, I will proceed by calling him “Uncle Hyōei.”

The very early stages of the war. A ceremony on New Year’s morning. Rice grains are placed on the small wooden stand, and rice cakes for offerings are piled atop one another on a fern, surrounded by tangerines, dried persimmons, and dried chestnuts. These foods are first offered to honor the gods or ancestors; according to our ages we would kneel in front of our grandmother and our parents (Grandmother and Father soon passed away and only Mother remained), and later, after bowing and choosing the one offering we liked most, we would clap our hands in worship and leave to eat anywhere we liked. That was how we celebrated New Year’s Day; our village on the island of Shikoku did not have such customs as giving money to children. In this remote valley, children could not have taken money to go shopping, eat out, or go to the movies; there were no shops, restaurants, or movie houses. Yet it was a very special day and one could feel a tense excitement in the air.

It was an event that also included so many complicating elements that one could call it theatrical. Both physically and psychologically, it was truly a theatrical performance. Each child would pick up his offering to the gods or ancestors from the wooden table and, in effect, ask for a forecast of his fortune, aspirations, and what his year might bring. The chosen offering served also as a symbol for the confirmation of his prayers and desires. The symbol operated only at the level of simple wordplay, linking the ideas in the child’s mind and the name of the food. Or perhaps it worked at the level of the play of

* Japanese distinguishes between uncles who are older than the parents and those who are younger. The Chinese characters for each are different, but the pronunciation is identical.

imagination that was directly evoked by the taste of the food, its resistance to the teeth, or its feel on the tongue.

Dried chestnuts, dried persimmons, tangerines: I know their names and flavors, but as to the meanings given to such material characteristics, all I can clearly remember now is the opposition created by placing a dried chestnut at one end of the table and a dried persimmon at the other. In particular, the symbolism of the dried chestnut, also called "victory chestnut," is etched painfully deep in my memory even now. The polarity and respective symbolism of the dried persimmon and the tangerines were so clear that it was unnecessary to inquire about them; because of that, I have no way of remembering what they were. I would concentrate on whether I should take the dried chestnut that year; the tension at the height of the ceremony was like the string of a New Year's kite, high in the sky, ringing in the wind.

Why was there tension? As I passed into adolescence, I fervently wanted, to the depth of my emotions and my senses, to choose the dried persimmon. During the war, local villages experienced a shortage of sweet things. Or, rather, an exhaustion. All the cells in my body craved sweets. Of course, my body was disturbed by uneasy thoughts, which were undoubtedly caused by my passing through a period of healthy growth. During wintertime, dried persimmons were the only sweets. The light juice of the tangerine could not be compared to the resplendent sweetness—I would have carved the adjective "resplendent" on my heart, had I known it then—of the persimmon. It was a special luxury. It wasn't that children would never get such dried persimmons; before spring, each child would probably be given four or five. But the sensation of biting into the dried persimmon, having it lie on your tongue, and letting it slip down your throat was such a sweet experience that perhaps this is why I remember it as an extremely unusual food.

The foods offered on the New Year's table to honor our ancestors and the gods of the common ancestors of the village were all special, though the dried persimmon was the most special. At our home, tart persimmons were picked from the old, tall tree on the slope down to the river behind the house. The war had progressed, and, since the food shortage, only a little

wheat and potatoes were cultivated in the fields. A branch would be caught using a long bamboo pole with openings cut at its tip, and the persimmons would be wrenched off. Grandmother and Mother would peel off the skins and hang the fruit on a straw rope to dry. There were only a certain number of fruit, and they varied in size. When one tore open the swollen, plump dried persimmons, the reddish-black, jelly-like, wet, smooth flesh of the fruit appeared; the seed was covered with a translucent membrane that looked as if it were still alive. Only the best persimmons were offered on the New Year's table, and they became objects for the children to choose. That is, any child could take a persimmon from the table and thereby receive it in a one-to-one communion with his ancestor or the god of the common ancestors. Then, in whatever corner of the house he chose, each child could savor the resplendent sweetness of the dried persimmon to his heart's content.

After the war began, however, I did not choose the dried persimmon from the New Year's table even once. It was only natural that my younger brothers and sisters would pick the dried persimmon, so I would take the Tamba chestnut, which was dried to a dark brown. Filled with regretful longing for the persimmon, I would spit out the dry, coarse outer skin and roughly peel and throw out the soft inner skin. Then I would chew the tasteless cold lump of chestnut meat, moistening it with saliva. I would taste a slight sweetness, like a dim light seen through closed eyes. However, the chewed-up chestnut meat would, for the most part, already have been swallowed.

Why would I take the dried chestnut instead of the dried persimmon? On New Year's Day, year after year, as I became so tense that my brain seemed to go numb, I would stretch out my hand, specially cleaned to the wrist, and snatch the dried chestnut; on the verge of tears, I would turn red, cast my eyes downward, and leave. I did this for victory, for no reason other than for the sake of national victory. The dried chestnut was a victory chestnut. On New Year's Day I chose the victory chestnut, because as a younger member of a nation at war I prayed to my ancestors and to the god of our common ancestors for victory in the Pacific War. After I took the dried chestnut, I would bow, clap both hands together, and say an

inner prayer. This prayer no longer had anything to do with the fate of the country. By picking the dried chestnut instead of the dried persimmon, I felt that I had fully accomplished my public obligations as a young citizen. What more could I do? My prayer was for my own unfolding destiny. I clasped the small dried chestnut, hard as a stone, and, trembling, prayed with a sad heart.

“To all my ancestors, all the honorable gods of the common ancestors, who live in the valley in the forest: you do not need to change the odd shape of my face or body. Instead, please make me smarter. You do not have to make me excessively intelligent, like Uncle Hyōei; just a little of his intelligence passed this way would be fine. I beg you to make me smarter.”

As I lowered my voice in prayer, my relatives sat around the table: my father and my grandmother at the upper end, my mother at the lower. I recall that they all wore their family-crest kimonos and watched us intently. That was more than two years before the end of the war. In the autumn and winter of the year before Japan’s defeat, the two authority figures in my family, my father and my grandmother, passed away in succession, leaving behind my mother, who was in her mid-thirties, and myself.

Before that frightening year, when we had numerous storms and floods, it was already apparent, even to the children, that Uncle Hyōei was “excessively intelligent,” that he was a “social misfit.” At that time, Uncle Hyōei was on a leave of absence from Waseda University, where he was a student in the Department of Sciences and Engineering. He must have been on leave for two or three years by then. For more than thirty-five years, Uncle Hyōei was considered a “social misfit” by the inhabitants of the valley, young and old, male and female. He never modified his way of life and, unusually for a social misfit, he lived a long life and died a natural death.

Early on the day of my father’s funeral, Uncle Hyōei climbed the hill to our house. He was dressed appropriately, but smelled strongly of sheep—for reasons I’ll explain a little later. I was a young boy, still stupefied rather than grieving. Uncle Hyōei sat in front of me; from a cloth bundle by his side he took out some books. Now that I think of it, they were the type of books that

students of science and engineering were surely collecting just before the war: H. G. Wells's history of science, Julian Huxley's observations on the life of ants, *The Life of Madame Curie*, as well as books like Kazukiyo Yamamoto's or Hoei Nojiri's on the stars. Uncle Hyōei placed the books in front of me one by one and watched my response. Thinking that these books would help a child who had just lost his father to forget his sorrow, he hoped to give away those that interested me and take the remainder home.

Finally Uncle Hyōei took from his lap the cloth that he had wrapped the books in. He stood up and bowed deeply to my mother in the manner of a stranger, not, perhaps, because my parents had assisted him with his school fees when he entered Waseda University but because he was always in awe of my mother. Mother returned the same bow, and Uncle Hyōei's pale face, with its overgrown beard, flushed. He left through the back door, saying, "It was a mistake to think that one could measure a child's grief by material standards." Still dazed, I only remember timidly touching the books with the tip of my finger.

Now let me explain about Uncle Hyōei's school fees. The opinion in the valley, which had reached even the children's ears, was that my father's action was intrusive. I was happy with it, since I took pride in having a relative who had been admitted into a famous university in Tokyo, and I had great respect for Uncle Hyōei as well. As a child, I was indifferent to my family's long-standing status and rank, founded on our supposedly considerable wealth, and I ignored such gossip. At any rate, let me use what I know to reconstruct how the rumors came about and what they said. The house where Uncle Hyōei was born was located on a wide spread of land along a road in the ravine, downriver from the center of town. For generations, the rice fields below the house had been farmed by Uncle Hyōei's family, but the majority of the land was allotted to tenant farmers. Where the rice fields are obstructed by a dense cluster of cypress and white fir—that is, at the lower edge of the forest—and beyond the end of the stone road, stands a small uninhabited temple, virtually concealed. At this "Mountain Temple," the position of chief priest had traditionally been held by an unmarried member of Uncle Hyōei's family.

Uncle Hyōei's father was the village treasurer, and his uncle, who had died at a young age, was the last chief priest of the Mountain Temple.

In our region Uncle Hyōei was said to be fastidious, because he detested contact with women. For this reason, and also because he was the youngest of the male children in his family, everyone, including himself, had no doubt that he would go to the Soto Zen-affiliated university and become the chief priest at the Mountain Temple. While attending the regional metropolitan junior high school, he is said to have carefully read the *Ti Pitaka Sutra*. Because of that, he was considered eccentric and oddly mature; while he solved geometry and analytical entrance-exam questions, he read through the entire collection of books handed down through generations at the Mountain Temple. It was said that in scholarship he already surpassed the chief priest from the large temple above the river. In fact, the chief priest avoided getting caught in discussions with him, and rumor had it that during Uncle Hyōei's summer vacations from junior high school, he wouldn't dare come out into town.

However, from the end of his third year of junior high school, Uncle Hyōei began studying for the university entrance exams, aiming to enter the Department of Sciences and Engineering at Waseda University. My brother was one of those entrusted with this secret; I saw this, and as his younger brother I felt proud. After Uncle Hyōei passed the entrance exams, his father refused to pay his school fees. If Uncle Hyōei had entered the Buddhist university that he was originally supposed to attend, there would have been no need for entrance and tuition fees. Uncle Hyōei's father probably felt that taking this stern position would cause his son to return to his original course. Our family was poorer than Uncle Hyōei's family, yet we decided to offer support. In April, on the day that all the villagers take an excursion to view the cherry blossoms, there was a sake party beneath a beautiful cherry tree at the dilapidated temple; suddenly Uncle Hyōei's father dashed off to our house, where he stood in front, yelling insults at my father. My father liked to drink a large cup of sake before bed, but he never went to the afternoon cherry-blossom parties. When he appeared in the doorway with a sour look on his face, the treasurer's attitude changed completely.

He began to thank my father repeatedly while reaching out to squeeze his hands. "What kind of parent would put a child in such a predicament?" he exclaimed in a loud voice. During the summer vacation, Uncle Hyōei returned home with a Waseda University cap on his large head. He gave me a children's comic book called "Fuku-chan," about a child who wore an oversized cap.

About that time, my mother, while trying to control herself, had to express her opinion to my father. (I didn't hear about this until long after my father's death.) If he were to assist Uncle Hyōei against the treasurer's wishes, problems would be likely to arise; it is children's immediate families who are most concerned about their lives, and so we surely shouldn't intervene. My father did not oppose mother's reasoning, but responded in this way: "Uncle Hyōei is a great man." (My father, like all the relatives, referred to him as "Uncle," which caused some confusion. Probably even Lévi-Strauss's theory can't explain how a person can be an uncle to both my father and myself.) "He plans to study the natural sciences and combine this with the study of Buddhism," my father continued. "Uncle Hyōei says that he has already studied as much Buddhism as they teach at the university. It seems that Buddhism and the study of the natural sciences were originally closely related. Because I am not as learned as Uncle Hyōei, I am not in a position to oppose him."

As he told my mother, she also did not possess the scholarship to oppose Uncle Hyōei's intention to study the natural sciences and Buddhism together. But my mother was the sort of person who raised her children by any means possible; she knew how to live and had common sense. She harbored misgivings about Uncle Hyōei's future, and her common sense was shared by most people in the valley. Uncle Hyōei soon began to confirm their fears. Little by little he began to decline, and there were probably many who watched this development intently.

Uncle Hyōei returned to the valley in the summer of his second year at the university, and when fall came around he took no steps to return to Tokyo. He devoted himself to self-education. Again he restricted his reading to the domain of Buddhism; he also read the Bible. There was also talk that

he read the Koran, in order to understand it clearly, though I don't know what type of translation he could have obtained at that time.

Uncle Hyōei was exempt from military service—because of tuberculosis, everyone believed at first. But it soon became known that the reason was actually a mental disorder. It may have been in reaction to this rumor that Uncle Hyōei stopped asking my brother over to talk, and consequently I could no longer listen in on their discussions. Uncle Hyōei became an entirely solitary person. He had a sheep, whose back he would bundle with books; instead of using the big concrete bridge over the ravine, he would lead the sheep over the temporary bridge that people working in the fields had built by piling up rocks and placing planks over them. Then he would turn the sheep loose on the other bank, which was overgrown with grass, and read. Only when it had become completely dark would he return home, and then he would cross the larger bridge.

There were two kinds of rumor circulating among the children regarding Uncle Hyōei's behavior. One of these was not particularly harmful, but if the other were to reach the ears of an adult woman or her daughters, it might have serious consequences. The first rumor was that Uncle Hyōei walked around pulling a red string that was invisible to the normal human eye. Someone claimed to have heard the name of this string in Hindi. In order not to get the red string tangled up, Uncle Hyōei would pull it all in before he went to bed, and he avoided passing the same place twice in a day. This explained why he led his sheep across the wooden bridge in the early morning. This was the nicer of the two stories. The other rumor was that Uncle Hyōei stayed at the grassy area until dark because he would fornicate while standing up with the female sheep, which had already borne many lambs. That was why Uncle Hyōei gave off an extremely strong odor that was worse than the smell of anyone else who raised sheep.

I did not believe this story. An upper-grade student, with a big lunch box that would have been adequate for a mountain laborer, came from the neighboring village expressly to convince me: "A human's cunt and a sheep's are very similar. In the case of humans, we are accustomed to seeing it from the front; in the

case of sheep, they are accustomed to looking at it from behind. That is the only difference.”

I was not at all accustomed to looking at a woman's reproductive organs from the front. And if a ewe's genitals, which I glimpsed now and then from behind, were the same as a woman's, a great mystery of life would have been revealed by trivial chance. According to this story, Uncle Hyōei would drop his old trousers to his heels and hold on tight to the terrified ewe—an image that seemed so sad it made me want to cry. At that time I thought well of Uncle Hyōei; maybe it was because he somehow understood this that he gave me those valuable books when my father died.

Soon after the war was lost, something happened to Uncle Hyōei, a temporary change that transformed him. My older brother had once been his conversational partner, while I listened in. But now my brother had returned from military training camp and was contemptuous toward Uncle Hyōei. He had become a soldier, he said, while Uncle Hyōei was playing around with his sheep in the grassy thicket at the riverbank. So Uncle Hyōei made me his pupil. The big change was that he began working as a substitute teacher of English at the new-system junior high school in the valley. Uncle Hyōei was assigned to the grade I was in, and in his mind I was the only student. Another substitute teacher, who had emigrated to the valley from the city, used an American conversation textbook. Choruses of “Hello, nice to see you!” could be heard as far as the playground. But Uncle Hyōei centered his teaching on the basics of pronunciation. “As far as teaching English is concerned, I don't know about the other children, but for the future study of foreign languages, it is important for you, K-chan, to know the basics.” He mimeographed the pages on pronunciation from the textbook he had used as a student at the old-system junior high school, and used those to teach the class. For a full year we memorized the phonetic symbols and devoted ourselves to practicing pronunciation. Although this was a natural method, the classes were so dull that they became painful. Since even I—Uncle Hyōei's chosen student—felt this way, there is no need to say how the others felt. A year went by, and it was clear why Uncle Hyōei was not reappointed to his position. As if nothing

had changed after the chaotic end of the war, he once again began living in seclusion with his old, feeble sheep, which could no longer provide milk.

Because I was a favorite of Uncle Hyōei's, I felt ashamed at not having opposed his expulsion. Very early in the morning, while I was still in bed, I would hear Uncle Hyōei crossing the wooden bridge and scolding the sheep he had loved for many years. (The entrance to the bridge was built over a wide shoal right behind our house.) When I heard this, I would hold my breath and listen, feeling guilty. "Hey! You're a complete fool! Can't you understand when I tell you this?" (I would hear the sheep's feet stamping in fright on the planks, hear its pathetic cry.) "Hey, you, hey! That's the morning sun shining on the water! It isn't a knife to cut your throat with! Hey, you, hey! No matter how time passes, you're still a fool, aren't you? Around here everybody's a fool!"

Shortly afterward I left the valley to attend the new-system high school in the neighboring village. Although I planned to return to the village soon, it has been more than thirty years already since I've been back to the valley except for school holidays. According to Eliade, the village that a person leaves in childhood or adolescence assumes a mythical form. Even now, while staying at the Berkeley Faculty Club, I have dreams of returning to the village with my Tokyo-born children. Uncle Hyōei's class has left one mark: when I talk to someone in English, my tics of pronunciation create confusion—in other words, I have not been able to correct the distorted pronunciation taught by Uncle Hyōei. For example, I couldn't really learn to pronounce the uncommon, narrow sound of the first syllable of "Berkeley" without converting it to one of the basic phonetic sounds.

What was my relationship with Uncle Hyōei later, in the real world? Except for that first year after Japan's defeat in the war, Uncle Hyōei lived in seclusion, beginning midway through the war on. I was closer to Uncle Hyōei during his last years, even if only geographically, than were any of his immediate family. We even spoke several times. Suddenly, nearly twenty-five years after the war, Uncle Hyōei came to the capital. When he reached

Tokyo, he led a vagabond life, first at Takadanobaba Station, near Waseda, where he had attended the university, and later on the grounds of the Shinjuku train and subway station.

A newspaper article appeared; perhaps some of you may remember it. "Pulled by five sheep, an old Buddhist philosopher heads toward Tokyo from the depths of the Shikoku forests." That was indeed what Uncle Hyōei did. He had taken five descendants of that ewe who had mistaken the reflection of the morning sun for the glistening of the slaughterhouse knife and trained them for a long time—angrily scolding them as he encouraged them to pull the cart—just as he had studied for the Department of Sciences and Engineering entrance exams.

Uncle Hyōei's family was indifferent to his journey. As Uncle Hyōei was preparing to leave the valley, his nephew (now the head of the family) and the others had predicted that the sheep would probably refuse to go on after leaving the valley, since they had resided in the forest for generation after generation. Uncle Hyōei was setting out for Tokyo, but he probably wouldn't get any farther than the ferryboat port. Even if he got that far, the ferryboat would probably not allow on board a cart pulled by five sheep and packed with cooking utensils, bedding, and books. In short, no one could take seriously the extremely capricious action of this elderly recluse. On the morning he set off on his long journey, he had walked down the stone road from the Mountain Temple, where he had been living. As he passed the kitchen of the main house, his nephew's wife turned and looked over her shoulder for just an instant while preparing breakfast. In an indifferent voice, she called out, "You're leaving? You're really leaving?" The sky surrounding the forest was completely clear, and a cool wind was passing over the village.

Shinjuku Station is where he was living when I went to visit him. He had drunk a little beer or sake and seemed somewhat uninhibited; when I talked with him, he responded. It was an unusual opportunity for me to listen to him; usually he said little. He said that his nephew's wife had been wearing her high-school-aged daughter's T-shirt. The way she turned her neck to look over her shoulder was nice and sexy, said Uncle Hyōei, as if he had reverted to his Waseda days. "It was a Felix the Cat shirt," he added. By the time he began his journey, Uncle Hyōei

had overcome his fastidious abhorrence of women, and he was in a frame of mind in which he could generously accept even something that was slightly sexy. As I mentioned earlier, among the books I have with me is the Iwanami Library edition of *The Buddha's Last Journey (Maha Pari Nirvana Sutra)*. As the Buddha traveled for the last time on earth, he met a prostitute, Ann Pavari, who served him "delicious food to chew and drink." The Buddha gladly accepted her kindness. Uncle Hyōei's nephew's wife did not offer even a bowl of miso soup—she only turned around, revealing her neck and shoulders and the shirt she was wearing with Felix the Cat—but . . .

Even people who knew of Uncle Hyōei's long reclusive life and who thought that such a whimsical person was not the type to be taken seriously began to think that he might achieve some success, perhaps in preaching to the public. It was the newspaper article I mentioned earlier that was responsible for this change. The regional metropolitan newspaper, the only one in the prefecture, had ignored him when he passed through. But an article with a postcard-sized photo of Uncle Hyōei appeared on the national page of a central paper. According to our relatives, the bureau reporter, who was an alumnus of Waseda University, seemed to be in an antiestablishment mood of the time. When I read the paper that morning, I saw the whitish beard and the closed-collar jacket of Uncle Hyōei, who looked exactly like Ho Chi Minh with his thin yet big-boned body and his ears that stuck out on either side of his childlike face. Having felt a blood kinship in the picture, I was convinced that I would someday look like this old man. Furthermore, at Uncle Hyōei's knees were the triumphant faces of the sheep. "Surely they cannot be Uncle Hyōei's children?" I couldn't resist asking this indecent question.

Even the bureau reporter, who was friendly to Uncle Hyōei, said that he spoke very little. The article mentioned that he was traveling with his sheep to Tokyo with the intention of elucidating the teachings of the Buddha to the people, especially to confused youth; otherwise it did not give much specific information. Uncle Hyōei "lived on ascetic meals of sheep's milk and bread crusts. When I invited him for a meal and a cup of sake at a restaurant, he just sat without speaking, but he

good-heartedly accepted my invitation.” So the article ended. In the *Maha Pari Nirvana Sutra* there is a strikingly similar phrase: “The Buddha maintained his silence and indicated his assent.” The newspaper that printed the article takes pride in having the largest circulation of any paper; because of its influence, Uncle Hyōei had no trouble boarding the ferryboat. From Takamatsu, he safely crossed over to Uno. He was now on the mainland. No longer separated from Tokyo, Uncle Hyōei and his sheep could reach the city on foot merely by advancing in the right direction.

During the harsh winter months—it was a year of heavy snowfall in western Japan—Uncle Hyōei and his five sheep took shelter at the Akashi Temple; this prolonged the journey considerably. In mid-April, I received a phone call from the village. I was told that Uncle Hyōei had reached Tokyo, had already left Takadanobaba Station, and had begun to live the life of a vagrant at Shinjuku Station. As soon as I laid eyes on him at the east entrance of the station, I knew this was the life he had adopted. It had been a long time since I had learned English pronunciation from him at the new-system junior high school. Uncle Hyōei looked up at me—a man now, no longer a youth—with suspicion, but also with an expression that revealed an inner poise. He sat like an Indian yogi, his lap covered with old quilts and rags, with his back against a square pillar. The place was well chosen to avoid the wind. Uncle Hyōei’s whole face seemed to have grown darker: his cheeks, his chin, even his gray beard. Frankly, he was black with dirt and filth, but his odor was cloaked by a quaint, musty smell, strong but not unpleasant, as if he had been burning incense. His glittering eyes seemed to reveal a certain indomitable spirit. As he turned those deep eyes on me, I gradually began to recognize in him the Uncle Hyōei I had known.

I knelt at his side and continued to talk to him. It could scarcely be called a conversation; Uncle Hyōei “maintained his silence and indicated his refusal.” He did finally tell me that all of his sheep had been killed by a pack of stray dogs on a hillside at the Yokohama Foreigners’ Cemetery. “There aren’t even any mountain dogs in the depths of the forest!” he lamented angrily. He was referring to the strays in the valley, whose numbers had increased rapidly after the war when food shortages made it

impossible for families to keep their dogs. The children in the valley called these strays “mountain dogs” and were terrified of them. I remembered this with a deep nostalgia. In addition, I felt that Uncle Hyōei and I had established a connection through our shared experiences in the village in the valley.

This was our first meeting. I continued to pay calls of respect to Uncle Hyōei at Shinjuku Station, sometimes accompanied by my wife. Uncle Hyōei’s nephew and my mother asked me to try to persuade Uncle Hyōei to return home. Uncle Hyōei’s nephew himself came to Tokyo to urge him to return, but Uncle Hyōei “remained silent, indicating refusal.” His behavior grew increasingly obstinate; I suspected that he was suffering from a psychological disorder.

I could get only a small number of words out of Uncle Hyōei during the hundred days that he lived at Shinjuku Station. He had planted himself on the ground right in the stream of commuter traffic, as if it had been his home for many years. It was extraordinarily painful to squat down while exchanging words with Uncle Hyōei. (If you try squatting, you’ll see why.) When passers-by bumped into my back, they would glare much more at me than at the vagrant beside me, with eyes that frowned upon any antisocial existence. After a month of living at Shinjuku Station, Uncle Hyōei became indistinguishable from any other vagrant who publicly urinated and got drunk—in fact, he finally became worse than the others. And yet, when I would urge him to return to the village, Uncle Hyōei always stood firm and “remained silent, indicating refusal.”

At this time I was feeling aloof to Uncle Hyōei. My decision to leave him among the vagrants rather than pursue a more constructive plan had much to do, I think, with the fact that I was now over thirty. It was a period when I began to think that each person has to find his own way of living; even if what he does deviates from common sense, there are things that one cannot interfere with from outside. This holds true even if the person is elderly. Sometimes, when I passed through the eastern subway entrance of Shinjuku Station, I happened to see Uncle Hyōei leaning against a square pillar, trying to sleep or to cover himself with rags. He was practicing what he had taught us. “At any rate, Uncle Hyōei, ‘Like a rhinoceros’s horn, you walk alone,’” I’d

mutter. (That was a Buddhist expression the young Uncle Hyōei had taught my older brother.) I even harbored encouraging thoughts about the way he was living. If my relatives wanted to call me irresponsible in my conduct toward him—which, in fact, they did—well, so be it.

Unlike me, my wife often went to give him a little money or to replace his underwear and medicine. She later took over the principal responsibility of passing along information about Uncle Hyōei to the village in the valley. The family leaned toward having Uncle Hyōei taken away by the police so that he might be forced into a hospital or some sort of institution. According to my wife, only my mother thought that we should let him be as he wanted to be for a while.

Once when my wife went to call on Uncle Hyōei, she couldn't find him in his usual place. My wife has a unique way of dealing with circumstances: instead of inquiring with the police or the station authorities, she went around asking the vagrants, and eventually found Uncle Hyōei beside the public rest room, far from the station grounds. Uncle Hyōei told her about the enthusiastic student demonstrations that were frequently taking place at the station at that time. These demonstrations were causing some problems: "Last night, 'There was not even enough space to insert the tip of a rabbit's hair,'" explained Uncle Hyōei, once again using an expression from Buddhist scriptures. However, his migration had nothing to do with the student demonstrations; rather, he was suffering from diarrhea. On that day he was particularly pleased to accept the underwear. Uncle Hyōei, who seemed to have become talkative, especially with women, said that on the Buddha's last journey, which led to his death, he had contracted a severe case of diarrhea after eating a meal of mushrooms offered by the blacksmith Gunda. So Uncle Hyōei could accept his diarrhea as something to be expected. But then he suddenly became angry. "Don't people in Tokyo know what to throw away and what not to throw away? They shouldn't be throwing out things in clean paper bags that people will pick up and eat and get a stomach ache from! Dogs can tell by smell what is safe to eat and what isn't. But humans have lost this sense!" In recalling this incident, my wife said to me, "You should grow into an old man who can get magnificently angry

like that.” In saying this, she was displaying a strange logic, as if she were nostalgic about something that lay ahead in the future.

When Uncle Hyōei first undertook his journey to the capital, he had expected to have students and other young people as his audience; however, they nonchalantly betrayed his unrealistic hopes. That Saturday, the students gathering on the station grounds ran into trouble with the station authorities. The newspaper reported that the police had been called in, and also that a vagrant who lived in the station had been injured in the clash. I had a strong suspicion as to who this vagrant might be, and on Sunday I went down to the station. I searched thoroughly and discovered Uncle Hyōei by the underground food stands of the department store nearby. He was lying on some newspapers on the landing of a short staircase, curled up to protect the injured right side of his belly and using his elbow as a pillow. He seemed to have shrunk a size and to be avoiding pedestrians as he lay close to the wall. He was intently watching a piece of dust that was being swirled around by the wind along the base of the wall, and did not respond to my call.

That evening my wife went to the station with a boxed meal, some tea, and an aluminum can of sake. Uncle Hyōei had already returned to his former spot and was sitting upright against his pillar. In front of my wife, he drank the can of sake in one swallow. When she asked if he would like her to go and buy another, he declined. He said that the students had no knowledge of Buddhism. They were headstrong and unwilling to listen to other people; the windows of the five senses, which should be open to the wisdom of truth, were closed. The night before, Uncle Hyōei had joined one of the many small groups of youths in the demonstration. When he challenged the group, they treated him like a nuisance and pushed him aside so roughly that he fell. The pain in the side of his abdomen seemed to be persisting. My wife urged him to see a doctor, but he said quietly that if he did he would be forced into an institution or sent back to the country. He said that he might have broken a rib. “However, when people are my age, their bones, and their muscles, too, are already wearing out, so even if I am left alone in this condition, I will be able to live through my allotted portion of life as well as I can, won’t I!”

For the first time, he even began to talk about my work. Uncle Hyōei called me “K-chan” as he had when I was a new-system junior high school student. “Broken bones, broken muscles, why think so much about fixing them? It’s all the same: everything will pass away. Tell K-chan not to think too much about useless things. Just keep on with his ascetic training—that’s my advice!” Here he was quoting a passage from the *Maha Pari Nirvana Sutra*. Uncle Hyōei, at any rate, considered my writing novels to be one form of ascetic training.

About ten days after this incident, I was leaving Shinjuku Station by the east exit on my way to speak at a university assembly. Uncle Hyōei would have thought it a sheer waste of time, since our students were no longer eager to learn. It was late in the afternoon on a day that felt more like the beginning of winter than the end of autumn; where the light from outside and the illumination of the station subtly merged, I saw Uncle Hyōei sitting in the rusty golden light.

Uncle Hyōei was reverently holding something that looked like the ear of a cattail, which he ate slowly, savoring the taste ever so slowly with his mouth and tongue. I stopped about ten meters away, not wanting to interrupt what I saw. With his right arm Uncle Hyōei held a chopstick in front of his chest, keeping his elbow by his side, and slowly, as if in meditation, ate the fried sausage that was stuck onto it, savoring the chewing, the flavor, then swallowing. He protected his other side with his left arm; sitting in the familiar position of a yogi, with his long white beard covering his face and with the fried sausage held before him, it was as if he had been fossilized in his firm thoughts and vast loneliness. Only his mouth and Adam’s apple were slowly, stiffly, reverently continuing to move.

I left for the meeting and gave my talk, but when I returned home I quickly acted on a plan I had been thinking about even during my lecture. I phoned my mother in the valley and told her that this seemed to be a good time to take Uncle Hyōei back to the Mountain Temple; if we worked on it now, he wouldn’t resist and would peacefully come home. The next day, Uncle Hyōei’s nephew and his wife flew to the capital. I don’t know how to explain this, but my strong conviction was entirely correct: just as I had predicted to my mother, Uncle Hyōei did not object to

returning to the forest. He settled down, not in a corner of the reconstructed Mountain Temple but in a wing on the grounds of his nephew's house. A doctor in our family confirmed that Uncle Hyōei's ribs were broken and had penetrated the surrounding tissue. Even so, he did not enter the hospital. During the first severe cold snap of the winter, Uncle Hyōei caught pneumonia. I would like to write that he died without suffering much.

Well, now I am living at the faculty club on the grounds of an American university. Actually—I've been reluctant to write this until now—I am staying at the Women's Faculty Club. Occasionally, while eating frozen vegetables stir-fried with instant noodles, I savor the tiny pieces on my tongue, one by one, slowly, without hurrying. There are times when the gestures of this middle-aged body and soul still repeat those of Uncle Hyōei. Then I say, in a muffled voice, "Hey? Hey!"

—*Translated by Mari Hoashi with Masao Miyoshi*