

五位

The Five Positions

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Attributed to Dongshan

a translation in progress
by Joan Sutherland

The Five Positions is often translated as the Five Ranks, but the Chinese title has more a sense of where you're standing and the view from there, rather than of a hierarchy of experiences. Hakuin said that this poem contains "the main principle of Buddhism and the essential road of meditation." Dongshan is said to have received it from his teacher Yunyan in a secret teaching; it was Dongshan's successor Caoshan who at the least preserved and developed it. There's a Japanese tradition of correlating the verses with *Yijing* trigrams, which are included.

五 Chinese : Wuwei

位 Japanese : Go-i

The Five Positions

FIRST CYCLE : THE PARTICULAR & THE UNIVERSAL¹ 偏正

1 正中偏 The Particular within the Universal

When night's third watch begins,² before the moon's light,
it's not strange to meet without recognizing each other,
yet secretly recall the beauty of earlier days.



2 偏中正 The Universal within the Particular

Missing the dawn, an old woman encounters the ancient mirror
and clearly sees her face — there is no other reality —
never again confused about recognizing reflections.



3 正中來 Emerging from the Universal

There is a road in the vastness that cuts through the dusts of the world.
Just avoid mentioning the emperor's name,³
and you'll surpass those ancients who left people speechless.⁴



4 兼中至 Meeting in the Center

Two blades cross, no need to retreat:
an adept is like a lotus in the fire,⁵
with a natural determination to soar to the heavens.



¹ These two words are sometimes translated Absolute and Relative, but they literally mean Straight and Crooked, Upright and Bent; see the chart below

² At midnight

³ There was a taboo against speaking the name of the current emperor

⁴ Literally, those who cut out tongues, a common Chan expression for eloquence

⁵ An image from the *Sutra that Vimalakirti Speaks* of something very rare, the bodhisattva's vow to practice in the midst of passions

5 兼中到 United in the Center

Who dares to reconcile with not falling into being or non-being?
People yearn with all their hearts to leave the constant flux;
transform this and return to sit by the charcoal fire.⁶

正	偏
Straight	Crooked
Upright	Bent
Universal	Particular
Absolute	Relative
One	Many
Real	Apparent
Noumenal	Phenomenal
Principle	Appearance
Identical	Different
Essence	Function
Unmoving	Moving
Mind	Thoughts

As a koan asks, "The ancestors walked a straight road; why did they sing a crooked song?"

⁶ Some commentators think the character translated as 'charcoal fire' is a misprint for a similar character meaning 'mountain peak', so the phrase would read: "... and return to sit high in the mountains," which gives a very different flavor to the meaning

SECOND CYCLE : ENLIGHTENMENT AND MERIT 功勳

1 向位 The Position of Orientation

The Buddha transmits the way of Emperor Yao:⁷
he governed with propriety and bent the dragon.⁸
He found culture flourishing in the marketplace,
and the sacred dynasty celebrated everywhere.

2 奉位 The Position of Honoring

For whom do you bathe and make yourself beautiful?
The voice of the cuckoo is calling you home.⁹
Hundreds of flowers fall, but her cry never ends —
Still clear even in the wildest mountains.

3 功位 The Position of Inherent Enlightenment

Flowers bloom on a withered tree in a spring beyond time;¹⁰
you ride a jade elephant backwards, chasing the winged dragon-deer;¹¹
now as you hide far beyond innumerable mountains —
the white moon, a cool breeze, the dawn of a fortunate day.

4 共功位 The Position of Our Common Enlightenment¹²

Ordinary beings and buddhas have nothing to do with one another;
mountains are high of themselves; waters are deep of themselves.
What do all our distinctions and differences reveal?
Where the partridge cries, many flowers bloom.

⁷ Yao was the heroic founder of China's first dynasty, the semi-legendary Xia, predating Shakyamuni Buddha

⁸ That is, channeled the Yellow River to prevent floods

⁹ The cuckoo was believed to keep singing until its throat bled; the blood it spit dyed azaleas red

¹⁰ Lit., *kalpas*, immeasurably long epochs that run in endless cycles

¹¹ The mythological *qilin*

¹² In the sense of the enlightenment of all beings together

5 功 功 位 The Position of Enlightenment upon Enlightenment

It's already too much when horns sprout from your head;¹³
how shameful to focus your mind and seek the Buddha!
In the empty kalpa,¹⁴ there's no one who recognizes [enlightenment];
why go south in search of the fifty-three?¹⁵

¹³ That is, when enlightenment becomes visible

¹⁴ In the cycle of kalpas, the epoch between the destruction of the previous world and the emergence of the next one

¹⁵ Sudhana's 53 teachers in the *Avatamsaka (Lotus) Sutra*; or the 53 buddhas of the past referred to in some sutras (sometimes called the 33)