

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE WOMEN

Buddhist Teachers in America,
Lenore Friedman, 1987,
Shambhala, 288 pages,
Paperback, \$12.95.
Reviewed by Dhananjay Joshi

*If you are afraid of being grabbed
by God, don't look at a wall.
Definitely don't sit still.*

- Roshi Jiyu Kennett

*If you need good words to feel
good about yourself, then it's
devastating when someone gives you
bad words. Neither one needs to
touch you. Your mind doesn't have
to move with either. You are right
there the next moment...that's the
goods you get from sitting and practicing...being able to answer the next
moment with no trace of the last.*

- Bobby Rhodes

I finished reading this book and it was a wonderful vision. It felt like I had seventeen chairs in the living room and that we just had one of the most fulfilling encounters one would dream of...seventeen remarkable women sharing their life's journey with you. 'Meeting' doesn't quite describe the feeling!

Let us forget for a moment that these are all women. As one reads these interviews one cannot but see a great quality that is common to all of them. They are teachers! Oh, yes! Each one of them is different in her own way and has a unique method of 'transmitting' what should be so obvious if only we care to open ourselves to that truth. But this diversity is only natural. We must look beyond the diversity and we must look with clear eyes. "What prevents us from seeing clearly? What prevents us from being what we could be?" Maureen Stuart confronts us like a 'warrior'. "I strongly urge you to...cut off, cut off, cut off (our illusions)... she says and you feel the urge. "It is possible for a human being to 'see', not just think about it."

Toni Packer teaches, "But you have to sit...and just look and listen internally, without knowing." A student of Bobby Rhodes remembers her saying in a dharma talk... "Remember, whatever happens...no matter how far out your mind gets, just believe what's in front of you. That's your direction." And there is one of Ruth Denison's students describing her, "Ruth would wade through the mud to get to the stars and tell her students to do it too, but with the proviso, 'Do it with awareness, dahlings.'" "Practice...is not to be done sloppily" Sharon Salzberg's teacher, U Pandita, taught her, requiring absolute moment to moment mindfulness.

This is the inspiring thing about these teachers. They confront us and lovingly convince us to do our absolute best. This is a level that is very pure and independent of anything else. It is in this light that they have transcended femininity. It is not that they have denied it, which is an important factor. Indeed, Lenore Friedman's excellent introduction provides us with a historical and current perspective on the issues concerning the role of women in Buddhism today, especially in the United States. The dynamics of shaken traditional structures and changes introduced by some of these teachers in their respective schools only signify a refreshing lack of stagnancy. Of course, they have met with resistances, but that has never stopped true pioneers. The balance is needed. Jack Kornfield calls it "a return to the heart, the validation of feelings and emotion, receptivity, and connection to earth." This is the positive effect we all seek.

Aitken Roshii acknowledges that "in Far Eastern culture, the female virtues in women and men tend to be covered over." What does this all really mean for the role of women in American Buddhism (or Buddhism) in general? We can look to these teachers as the nucleus that can provide a direction that is "correct" in bringing a harmony between the absolute and the relative. Buddha talked about "skillful means." Christina Feldman, a Vipassana teacher from England, talks about the fact that women do spend a major part of their lives "establishing a relationship of integrity" with the world. If we use our lives as vehicles of understanding, then there is the beginning of a balanced approach. It is in this background that Ayya Khema's work in establishment of an International Women's Center in Sri Lanka attains great importance.

I must mention that I immensely enjoyed Lenore's intimate descriptions of the daily lives of these teachers. Bobby Rhodes talks to her while folding laundry. Maureen talks about cooking, giving interviews and also dharma talks and saying that it all just happens. Ruth is ready to make bread for the retreatants at midnight after a long day's work. It is all very charming. As a practitioner herself, Lenore has captured this unique view along with their teachings.

This is a remarkable book!

NINE-HEADED DRAGON RIVER by Peter Matthiessen (Shambala, Boston. PB 287 pages, \$12.50)

Reviewed by Mu Soeng Sunim

Peter Matthiessen is a naturalist, explorer, environmentalist, champion of American Indian causes, novelist of distinction, and a student of Zen Buddhism. His latest book, *Nine-Headed Dragon River*, as luminous a book as his earlier National Book Award-winning, *The Snow Leopard*, is a paean to his Japanese and American Zen teachers: Nakagawa Soen Roshi, Eido Shimano Roshi, Taizen Maezumi Roshi, and Bernard Tetsugen Glassman. Above all, it is a celebration of the genius of Dogen Zenji (1200-1252), founder of the Soto branch of Zen in Japan.

Nine-Headed Dragon River, a collection of 'Zen journals' Peter Matthiessen kept from 1969 to 1982, gives us a glimpse into the evolution of Zen itself in America. Like most students, he got involved in Zen by accident when one day in 1969 "three inscrutable little men" turned up in his driveway on Long Island. They were guests of his wife and turned out to be roshis (Zen masters) Soen, Yasutani, and Eido. The earlier part of the journals is a moving account of his wife's bout with cancer and her eventual death, and the pain and loss he felt in that experience, some of which was recounted in *The Snow Leopard*.

On a certain level, *Nine-Headed Dragon River* is the most sincere attempt yet by an American Zen student to come to terms with his Asian heritage. The unfolding of Zen and other forms of Buddhism in America has not been without its growing pains. For one thing, there has been a built-in conflict between the personalities of the oriental teachers, the structures they brought to this country, and the gift of their teachings. The issues are familiar to anyone who has practiced Zen for any length of time in America: the problem of language, the seemingly personal quirks and eccentricities of the teachers, at times even misuses of power and trust. Matthiessen refuses to

delineate these latter issues. "Eido Roshi, whose comportment (which will not be the business of this book) has caused dismay among his students..." Again and again, though, one senses his reservations about completely accepting his Asian heritage. "... if I had found an American Indian teacher—not some medicine man but a true teacher—willing to work with me, I might well have chosen a North American tradition over an Asian one."

Matthiessen's disenchantment with his first Zen teachers from the Japanese Rinzai Zen tradition led to his leaving the sangha of Eido Roshi and joining Maezumi Roshi at the Zen Center of Los Angeles. Maezumi Roshi, though belonging to the Soto branch of Japanese Zen, emphasized strong koan practice. Matthiessen later helped Maezumi Roshi's dharma-successor Bernard Tetsugen Glassman, Sensei to start the Zen Community of New York, and presently is a 'shuso' or head monk at ZCNY.

The second half of *Nine-Headed Dragon River* is an account of Matthiessen's pilgrimage to Japanese temples in Tetsugen Sensei's company, as part of Tetsugen's training. During these travels, one feels Matthiessen is genuinely comfortable in Tetsugen's company, an American who speaks the same language from the same culture. "Like most American students, I have been attracted to the flavor of Asian Zen, so removed in its enigmatic self-containment from the wasteful sprawl of Western life, but I adjust more quickly than I expected to the idea of a non-Japanese Zen teacher—Bernie Roshi! How different this man is, in style, manner and appearance, from a quixotic 'classical' Zen master..."

An important part of the book is the ruminations on Dogen Zenji's teachings by Tetsugen and Matthiessen. Quoting from Tetsugen:

"For Dogen, the Zen of our everyday life, moment after moment, is truly the way of enlightenment. His teachings hammer that idea over and over, and at the same time his *practice* manifests it so sincerely that it serves others as a model. Dogen's great contribution—and his own life was an example—was the perception that daily practice and enlightenment are one.... In a single sentence, he talked from both points of view, the absolute and the relative, the universal and the particular. He was not only living in both, he was switching so fast between the two that he was in *neither!* He was entirely free!"

Matthiessen's admiration for Dogen as a writer and thinker is equally inspired.

"... not until recent decades has it (Dogen's *Shobogenzo*) been

perceived as a unique and shining vision that far transcends its original purpose as a synthesis of thirteenth-century Buddhist thought. Yet Dogen continues to receive more praise than appraisal, and he remains all but unknown in the West, not because his language is opaque—it is brilliant, lucid and poetic—but because he has attempted to convey a set of concepts—not even concepts or even perceptions, but intuitions, **ap-prehensions**—for which no suitable vocabulary exists. To approach this formidable masterwork is to seek an ascent to a shining peak, glimpsed here and there against the blue through the wild tumult of delusion. With each step forward, the more certain one becomes that a sure path toward the summit can be found...."

"Dogen is many centuries in advance of his pre-medieval epoch, and his vibrant efforts to transcend the old limits of language, like his insistence on the identity of space and time, would not be appreciated until seven centuries later. Like all born writers, he wrote for the sheer exhilaration of the writing, in a manner unmistakably fresh and poetic, reckless and profound. Though the risks he takes make the prose difficult, a mastery of paradox and repetition, meticulous nuance and startling image, swept along by a strong lyric sensibility in a mighty effort to express the inexpressible, the universal or absolute, that is manifest in the simplest objects and events of everyday life."

Matthiessen's informal descriptions of the temples he visits during his pilgrimage, and their place in the larger history of Japanese Zen, are extremely readable and add enormously to our knowledge of Japanese Zen. Whether as a history of Japanese Zen and its movement to America, or as a glimpse into the life and teachings of Dogen Zenji, *Nine-Headed Dragon River* is an invaluable addition to the literature of American Zen. Present and future generations of American Zen students will no doubt be grateful to Peter Matthiessen for the deep feelings and insights he brings to his understanding of the Buddha Way.

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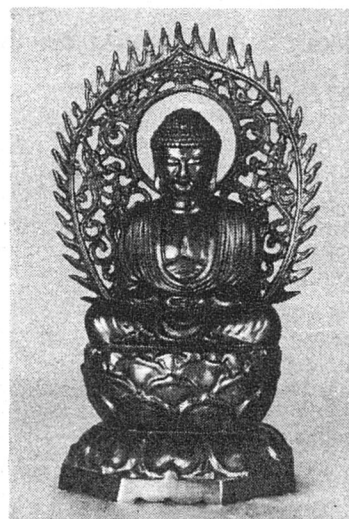
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