

Book Reviews

Everyday Zen; Love and Work. By Charlotte Joko Beck, edited by Steve Smith. Harper & Row, 1989.

Reviewed by Ellen B. Gwynn

After reading a few pages of *Everyday Zen*, I realized that I had stumbled upon a Zen classic. This is a book that contains the essence of Zen teaching, conveyed in words that are as accessible to one who knows nothing about Zen as they are to long-time students. The combination of depth and simplicity in this book is comparable to that found in Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's classic *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

Everyday Zen comprises forty-two dharma talks, usually given during sesshin at the Zen Center of San Diego where Charlotte Joko Beck has taught since 1983. Some of the talks close with brief dialogues between Beck and students. Although the book is divided into a number of thematic sections (e.g. "Practice," "Relationships," and "Choices"), each talk encompasses the same theme: the present is perfect as it is and our lives are complete, and although we don't want to believe that, Zen practice enables us to learn that truth for ourselves. But it is not easy. The way to that truth is to just be with what *is* over and over and over, choosing not to "spin off" into habitual thought and drama. This of course sounds like a breeze but is in fact an absolute bear.

There are occasional Zen stories in these talks, and references to sayings of the ancestral teachers, but for the most part, you will find pure Zen teaching with little of the "stink" of Zen speech and imagery. An American who has experienced the challenges of raising four children as a single mother, Beck encourages committed practicing by talking about the events of our daily lives in a refreshingly straightforward manner. As the title suggests, you will not find examples from the monastic life

in these pages but instead from the jobs and relationships of Beck and her students. Instead of misty mountains and drinking tea, you'll find soapy babies and traffic noise. One unusual feature of these talks is the more than occasional yet unobtrusive disclosure about Beck's own practice. She is able to teach as well as convey that her own learning continues in full force.

As stated by the editor, "Devoid of pretension or self-importance, she teaches a form of Zen that manifests the ancient Ch'an principle of *wu shih* — 'nothing special'." Beck began practicing with Maezumi Roshi of the Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1965 and became his third dharma heir in 1978. She and her students seem to be developing their own version of American Zen, and have been eliminating or modifying some of the formal elements of Japanese Zen practice. An interesting description of Joko Beck and the Zen Center of San Diego may be found in Lenore Friedman's *Meetings With Remarkable Women*.

As every Zen student knows, although we may no longer seek the more typical forms of embellishing life such as fame and fortune, practice helps us see the more subtle means we use to add drama to each moment. Beck compares such constant self-preoccupation with the ink a squid produces to cloud the surrounding water. In every page of this book, she encourages us to notice the ink we produce and to return to the plain, unvarnished, undramatic and infinitely reliable present. Acknowledging the difficulty of this, Beck mentions a few times that Suzuki Roshi once warned his students that they shouldn't be too sure that they wanted enlightenment, since from their current perspective, it would look quite dull.

"To look at this structure we have built is a subtle, demanding process. The secret is, we like that unreal structure a lot better than we like our real life. People have been known to kill themselves rather than demolish their structure. They will actually give up their physical life before they will give up their attachment to their dream. Not uncommon at all. But whether or not we commit physical suicide, if our attachment to our dream remains unquestioned and untouched, we are killing ourselves, because our true life goes by almost unnoticed. We're deadened by the ideals of how we think we should be and the way we think everybody else should be. It's a disaster. And the reason we don't understand that it's a disaster is because the dream can be very comfortable, very seductive. Ordinarily we think a disaster is an event like the sinking of the Titanic. But when we are lost in our ideals and our fantasies, pleasurable as they may be, this *is* a disaster. We die."

To read *Everyday Zen* is to be repeatedly reminded that practicing Zen is a process of piercing dreams and fantasies not in order to find perpetual joy or unending wisdom, but simply to experience an undiluted life.

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A Buddha from Korea: The Zen Teachings of T'aego. By J.C. Cleary. Shambala Publications, 1988.

Reviewed by Mu Soeng Sunim

The monk Taego Pou (1301-1382) occupies a unique position in Korean Zen: he is the monk to whom all Korean Zen monks trace their lineage. Until recently, this lofty position was reflective more of Taego's political achievement in merging the disparate "Nine Mountain Schools" of Zen into one single school, the Chogye School, than of a great enduring legacy as a teacher of Zen. Cleary's book fills that gap in our knowledge of Taego the Zen master quite admirably. For this alone, the book would have been a valuable addition to our growing knowledge of Korean Zen; what makes it doubly important and interesting is the long (77 pages) introductory chapter called "T'aego's world", in which Cleary outlines the context in which Buddhism in East Asia grew and functioned for more than a thousand years, from the early fourth century to T'aego's own time, the end of the fourteenth century. The economic, political, and religious forces at work in East Asia during these years shaped Buddhism and were in turn re-shaped by Buddhism. It is a succinct and sympathetic view.

Zen came to Korea between 825 and 935 when Korean monks, who had trained long years in China and received transmission from the patriarchs there, returned to establish their own temples at different mountain locations. This was a time when "State Buddhism", which had dominated the religious scene in Korea for nearly five hundred years, was in tatters; the returning monks were able to introduce a sense of vigor and creativity which had gone out of Buddhism. Then the vitality of the nine Mountain Schools itself went into decline for a number of reasons, and for the next four hundred years several reform movements, particularly those led by the monks Uichon and Chinul, tried to correct the internecine squabbles that went on within Zen schools and also between the Zen and Sutra Schools. In his introductory chapter, Cleary lays out the complex background to this decline, resurgence, and reform quite clearly and effectively.

It fell to Taego, when he was a Royal Teacher at the court of King Kongmin, to urge the king to unite the Nine Mountain schools into one single school of Zen. The nine schools had not differed on any profound ideological basis; their differences were more along territorial lines. Finally, in 1356, the Chogye school was created to unify all nine schools, and Taego was appointed as its first patriarch. As a standard for the reformed Zen community, he proposed the adoption of "The Pure Rules of Pai-Chang", the model which had served the Ch'an communities so well ever since the Ch'an period. As Cleary himself admits, it is difficult to separate Taego the Zen teacher from Taego the political activist. It is a recurring theme in Korean Buddhist history. Korea has been the only country in East Asia where Buddhism was the unchallenged religion; as a result, the interests of monks and court officials converged to such a degree that it is

often difficult to separate the two. The monk Chinul (1158-1210) has been the only notable monk in Korean Buddhist history to escape this dilemma.

The second part of the book, "The Collected Sayings of Taego" introduces us, for the first time in English translations, to the wide range of Taego's poems and insights. It is pure pleasure. As a sample:

Hermitage of Realization

No wall in any direction
No gate on any side
Buddhas and patriarchs do not get here
Sleeping at ease among the white clouds

The Path of Emptiness

This emptiness is not empty emptiness
This path is not a path that can be considered a path
Where peaceful extinction is totally extinct
Perfect illumination is complete and final

No Attachments

Going on this way, fundamentally without seeking
Going on otherwise, also independent
East, west, south, north, the road of perfect
penetration
Every day exultant, free to go or stay.

Both for its explanation of the historical background and for its translation of Taego's Zen teachings, Cleary's book is a wonderful and welcome addition to the Buddhist bookshelves in the English-speaking world.

Errata

We inadvertently left out two lines in "The Adventures of Frog and Duck", which appeared in the June 1989 issue of PRIMARY POINT. Our sincere apologies to Robert Genthner, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim, author of the story. The last section should read:

"Frog sat and sat determined, half crazy, but unable to let go. What is real? What is real? What is real? The question deepened.

When all of a sudden.....Crack!!!

The bathroom door burst open as a child struggling with his pants flopped onto the toilet.

Frog jumped.....Splash!

A voice cried out "Dad...dad, could you please give me a wipe?"

It wasn't long before Frog emerged soapy, wet, and a little dazed. He toweled off, helped his son finish, put on his shirt and tie, and went to work.

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