

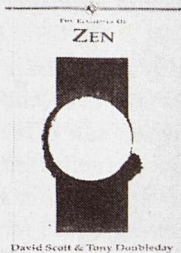
Book Reviews

The Elements of Zen

by David Scott and Tony Doubleday

Element Inc., Rockport, Massachusetts, 1992

Reviewed by Mu Soeng Sunim



This book is not likely to cause a revolution in Zen circles. At best, it is a sincere attempt at repackaging various elements of Zen, done more as a reconfigured recipe of a well-known dish rather than to offer any original insights. It is a charmingly produced book and indicative of the ways in which some people still see Zen as a novelty and try to fit

it into their own special areas of interest. David Scott, the principal collaborator of the book, is interested in Japan, martial arts, health and cookery, and his interests are reflected in the structure of the book: we get chapters on "Zen Food" and "Zen and the Martial Arts," in addition to the by now routine ox-herding pictures and Zen in daily life. A somewhat novel feature of the recipe here is "Common Questions": a personal culling of responses from various teachers, dead and alive, to questions most frequently asked by novices. Also included are various Zen vows and sutras chanted during services at Zen temples. In short, a helpful book for the first-time inquirer into Zen, especially the Japanese version.



Freeing the Goose in the Bottle: Discovering Zen through Science, Understanding Science through Zen

by Debra Jan Bibel

Elie Mietchnikof Memorial Library, Oakland, 1992

Reviewed by Mu Soeng Sunim

The author, Dr. Debra Jan Bibel, is a microbe research scientist and a student of Zen Master Seung Sahn. She has written a book which is hard to quantify. As she notes, "I am attempting a grand synthesis; my tactic is a pincer maneuver. This book covers the major scientific disciplines: yes, physics, but also chemistry, cosmology, biochemistry, molecular biology, evolution and development, ecology, immunology, and psychoneuroscience." Throw in an attempt to understand Zen Buddhism through

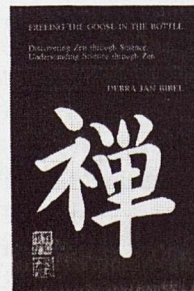
these scientific disciplines and vice versa, and the reader has a handful!

Dr. Bibel focuses on the central question of Zen Buddhism, "What is this thing called 'I'?", and attempts a synthesis of ancient Eastern wisdom and current scientific research which is at once personal and grandly ambitious. She writes, "The phenomena but ultimate fiction of self and individuality is the focus of this book . . . while the feeling or sense of individuality is real, self is a jovial illusion and sometimes a hazardous delusion of consciousness-mind." Since she is a trained scientist, Dr. Bibel notes, "Now, at the threshold of a new century and through noetic science (*noetic* refers to mind), the priest, the scientist-philosopher, and the physician-scientist are striving for a reconciliation or synthesis, a 'reenchantment of science.' Note that it is science that is opening to mysticism . . . By the mid twentieth century, the mounting paradoxes, the weirdness of subatomic behavior, and the fusions of once parted scientific disciplines had impelled even the most practical researchers into philosophical thought, philosophies that bear strong resemblances to those of the mystic. Today the world, increasingly more a global village, allows a dedicated student with either Western or Eastern training to follow both paths, seeking their union, or at least intersections."

The title of the book comes from the old Zen story of how a man once put a baby goose inside a bottle. There it grew and grew to the point that the bottle became too small for it. The challenge for the Zen student is to free the goose without breaking the bottle. Using this metaphor, if the author's attempt is to discover Zen through science and science through Zen without diminishing either, she has blazed a pioneering trail, one likely to be watched closely by others who might attempt a similar synthesis.

The book contains samples of Chinese calligraphy by the author which she learned from the noted calligrapher Kazuaki Tanahashi. As she writes, "I am fascinated with the poetic and artistic qualities of the Chinese language." This appreciation of Chinese language infuses her understanding of Zen and Taoist traditions with a grace and sensitivity all too rare among Western scientific researchers.

The book contains a thoughtful foreword by Daido Looi Sensei, abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery at Mount Tremper in New York. He correlates the discovery of *hologram* and the "holographic reality" to descriptions in *The Flower Garland Scripture (Avatamsaka Sutra)*, "which describes a universe in



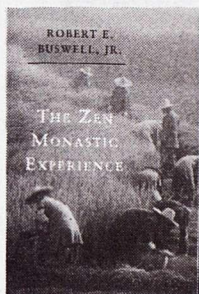
which everything interpenetrates everything else, in identity and causal interdependence; where everything needs everything else and there is not a single speck of dust that does not affect the whole.”

By focusing on the intersection of the two paradigms of religion and science, Dr. Bibel offers a holographic way of perceiving our world in which everything impacts everything else through interpenetration and interdependence; a new way indeed of looking at oneself and at others both for the Zen student and the scientist!



**The Zen Monastic Experience:
Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea**
by Robert E. Buswell, Jr.
Princeton University Press, 1992

Reviewed by Mu Soeng Sunim



In the West, our understanding of Zen monasticism is rather limited. A primary difficulty in such an understanding is the fact that no Asian Zen monastic insider has found it useful to describe life in a Zen monastery. To them, life in a monastery is to be lived and not described. Dr. D. T. Suzuki's *The Training of*

the Zen Buddhist Monk was one of the first attempts to give outsiders a glimpse of what goes on inside a Zen monastery, but his book is focused more on anecdotes and exchanges between Zen master and students, in the style of kong-an collections from medieval China, rather than the daily struggles and joys in the life of a modern Zen monk.

As with a general trend in available literature on Zen Buddhism, information on Zen monastic life in Korea is almost non-existent. Professor Buswell fills this gap most admirably. Buswell belongs to an exclusive group within the transmission of Buddhism in America: American academics who have been Buddhist monks earlier in their careers and are now teaching and writing about Buddhism from the perspective of insider training. Buswell trained as a monk at Songgwang-sa, the premier Zen monastery in Korea, and is now a professor of Asian studies at UCLA; he is also the leading clarifier of Korean Buddhist tradition to the West.

The style of *The Zen Monastic Experience* is sober and considered, rather than racy, as Zen literature sometimes tends to be. Buswell has skillfully interwoven his personal experiences during five years of monastic training

at Songgwang-sa in such a way that his book transcends the limitations of an anthropological field study, yet is likely to remain our primary source of understanding about Zen Buddhism in Korea and the training of its monks for some time to come.

One of the most fascinating sections in this book deals with the struggles of contemporary Korean Buddhism, specifically the long-range impact of the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1911 to 1945 and its attempts to remold the ancient Korean Buddhist tradition to its own political needs. The major impact of the policies of occupation was to create a sangha of married monks in Korea; the tension between the married monks and celibate monks, in the years since liberation from Japan in 1945, has been the major focus of reform and readjustment within contemporary Korean Buddhism. At times this struggle has turned violent, and Buswell gives an excellent account of two decades of internecine strife among Korean Buddhist monks. A major casualty of this strife was Korean Buddhism itself, for Buddhist monks paid scant attention to the wider Korean society during these years and allowed militant Christian missionaries to gain many converts.

The life of Zen Master Ku San and his impact on Korean Zen's opening to the West is the central piece of Buswell's book. In the process, he gives us an exhaustive and observant insider's look at life inside Songgwang-sa, where Zen Master Ku San was resident teacher. The rhythms of daily life at the monastery in the 1970's had remained practically unchanged since its founding in 1198. These rhythms of life were the last remaining links with daily life in Ch'an (Zen) monasteries of China in the eighth to the tenth centuries, the so-called golden age of Ch'an. In recapturing these rhythms in his book, Buswell allows us to wander into the Middle Ages with a sense of ease and wonder.

Buswell pays equal attention to postulants, novice ordinations, Bhikshu ordination, post-ordination career, family ties after ordination, etc. Nor does he forget mundane things like monk's clothing and food. The administrative infrastructure of the monastery is dealt with in great detail, as is the economic support of the monastery by the laity. The formal training of the Zen monk occupies, appropriately so, a major segment of the book.

With little variation, daily life and formal training of a Zen monk at Songgwang-sa differs little from the life and training of monks and nuns at other Korean temples. Buswell's book thus offers us a wide-angle lens to look at the Zen monastic experience in Korea, and makes a lasting contribution to our understanding of Korean Zen.

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