

## Book Reviews

### *Rational Zen: The Mind of Dogen Zenji*

Thomas Cleary

Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1993

Reviewed by Mu Soeng Sunim

While the writings of Zen Master Dogen (1200-1252) are in danger of becoming a cottage industry in graduate schools across America, a new translation by Thomas Cleary is nonetheless a welcome addition to our understanding of Dogen, if only for the long introduction he has provided for the book. Cleary is the preeminent translator of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist texts into English of our generation. In introducing us to the "rational Zen" of Dogen, Cleary has brought a lifetime of understanding of the farther reaches of East Asian Buddhism to the Western perspective.

Dogen is the greatest religious genius produced by Japan. His *Shobogenzo* is a rare combination of religious insights and literary merit. "Neither the extraordinary literary quality nor the consummate metaphysical adroitness of this work has even been surpassed in Japan; it stands on a par with the greatest of parallel literature throughout the world... not only a landmark in Japanese and East Asian intellectual history; it also ranks in sophistication with similar achievements taking place at more or less the same time in Europe, West Asia, and Central Asia in the use of Catalan, Persian, and Tibetan languages to express the sacred knowledge of gnostic Christianity, Sufism, and Tantric Buddhism."

The term "rational Zen" and its practice is of special significance to Western practitioners. However much we may romanticize the "irrational" shock tactics of Ma-tsu and his Hung-chou school during the formative, golden years of Ch'an, the fact remains that these "crazy wisdom" encounters took place in a religio-societal context that is alien to Western sensibilities. The premise of "rational Zen" is that a genuine breakthrough can take place through deep stillness and reflective study. Historically, this "quietism" has been denounced by followers of Rinzai tradition. Cleary points out (as have others) D.T. Suzuki's disregard of Dogen's writings in his own voluminous writings, which has "resulted in correspondingly distorted views of Zen and the Japanese culture and mentality." Not until recently did there begin to develop widespread recognition of Dogen's work, "still perceived but dimly through linguistic and conceptual barriers."

A understanding of "rational Zen" is important for

followers of the Korean Zen tradition. Zen Master Chinul (1158-1210) is the founder of the native Zen tradition in Korea and an older contemporary of Dogen. Chinul's three awakenings came from reading the Platform Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra and the writings of Ch'an Master Dahui. Chinul's lifelong mission became the reconciliation of sutra study with Zen practice, and his writings echo the verisimilitude of Dogen's combination of authentic insights and "quotations and allusions from pan-Buddhist and Zen lore."

This is a rather small book in terms of the materials translated. Selections from *Eihei Koroku* (Universal Book of Eternal Peace) occupy 27 pages, while selections from *Shobogenzo* (Treasury of Eyes of True Teachings) occupy 45 pages. Of the two books, Cleary notes, "*Shobogenzo* is bilingual, written in Japanese with an admixture of Chinese; *Eihei Koroku* is recorded in Chinese, as was customary among learned Buddhists in Japan at that time. *Shobogenzo* is relatively prolix, like most literary Japanese, its main language; *Eihei Koroku* is generally laconic, which is more typical of Chinese, especially Zen Chinese. *Shobogenzo* is more innovative in form, *Eihei Koroku* is more traditional in form. *Shobogenzo* demonstrates Dogen's virtuosity as a master of pan-Buddhism; *Eihei Koroku* shows his mastery of Zen."

Cleary points out that while Dogen played several roles in Japanese Buddhist history, his most outstanding contributions were his reconciliation of Zen with the larger pan-Buddhist tradition and his "explicit illustrations of logical procedures in Zen koan meditation. Dogen exploded the myth, popular then as now, that Zen awakening is an irrational process, thus laying the foundation for a more balanced and complete understanding of Zen Buddhism." This is also the greatest contribution made by Zen Master Chinul in the Korean Zen tradition. Given that the Western sensibilities are more in tune with the "rational" Zen of Dogen and Chinul rather than the "irrational" Zen of Ma-tsu, the present study of Dogen goes a long way toward providing a more balanced understanding of the tradition for the Western mind. ☉



***Zen Antics: 100 Stories of Enlightenment***

Thomas Cleary

Shambhala Publications, Boston, 1993

*Reviewed by Tony Somlai*

Thomas Cleary is well-known writer and translator of such Zen Buddhist literature as *The Blue Cliff Record* and *Rational Zen: The Mind of Dogen Zenji*. This collection of 100 short Zen stories is in keeping with Cleary's reputation of bringing clarity and simplicity to Zen teaching.

*Zen Antics* is a subtle and rich collection of enlightenment stories and anecdotes. The reader will want to slowly digest these stories and teachings rather than just quickly read through them. They are straightforward and elegant in their simplicity. Zen Master Bankei's death in "Passing of a Master" is a very lucid teaching about the relationship between a teacher and students. Zen Master Bankei's students asked him to give a parting verse before he died. He spoke to them about being genuine, about not having to copy others, and then died. It is an elegant example of how a teacher can still give clear teaching at a time that is very difficult for most humans.

*Zen Antics* is the kind of book that slowly draws the reader in. Each story is like a light pastry that gradually dissolves into the reader's consciousness. For example, in "Night Rain" Zen Master Ranryo teaches his students with, "My Way is right there, wherever I happen to be, there is no gap at all." This has been a classic teaching of Zen, back to the Buddha's time. However, the depth of this teaching never misses its mark on students.

Cleary could have helped the transition and flow of *Zen Antics* by providing some commentary. The reader goes abruptly from one anecdote to the next without any rationale as to the order. Some additional information about the Zen Masters and schools of Zen would also help the reader get a clearer perspective on the stories. While the book draws from a wide variety of sources, it needs to provide the reader with an appendix of these sources for further study.

*Zen Antics* is a book of subtleties, appreciated when read bit by bit and gradually absorbed. It is an excellent resource for dharma teachers looking to spice up their dharma talks with illuminating anecdotes. Take the time to read this book in detail and enjoy the depths of the great teachers Thomas Cleary has been able to bring together. ☉

A MESSAGE FROM

## THE DALAI LAMA

Brothers and sisters,

We are all just human beings. Like everyone else we seek to find happiness and avoid suffering. This is both our right and the very purpose of our lives. As a Buddhist monk I try to cultivate love and compassion in my own practice and it seems to me that these are the very source of peace and happiness for myself and others.

The force of different circumstances has resulted, at the present time, in increasing interdependence within the global community. On the other hand, we are witnessing a new era of freedom as peoples long suppressed seek to assert their liberty and preserve their distinct identity. At such a juncture, understanding and mutual respect, natural expressions of the love and compassion central to Buddhist teachings, are absolutely necessary for the survival of our world. We must learn to live together in a nonviolent way that nurtures the freedom of all people.

As you know I have a longstanding moral responsibility for the six million Tibetan people, who have suffered under ruthless occupation for decades. They continue to look to me and the international community to help peacefully resolve their predicament. Meanwhile, however, the situation in Tibet remains extremely grave and the very survival of the Tibetan religious, cultural and national identity continues to be at risk.

I feel sure that many friends in the American Buddhist community will share my concern at this crucial time in Tibetan history. Therefore, I ask you and everyone interested in justice and freedom to include in your prayers and activities support for human rights worldwide, and particularly the well-being of the people of Tibet.

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