

Book Reviews

Master Yunmen: From the Record of the Chan Master "Gate of the Clouds," translated, edited and with an introduction by Urs App. Kodansha International, New York, Tokyo, London, 1994. 272 pp, 8 photographs. Paperback: \$12.

Reviewed by Stanley Lombardo

Urs App, a long-time Swiss resident of Japan, tells us that he wrote this book during the same period of time (c. 1985-1990) that reconstruction of the monastery buildings at Mt. Yunmen in Southern China was underway. The monastery was founded in the tenth century by the Chan master Wenyan who became famous under the name of the mountain. Yunmen means "Cloud Gate." We know him as Un Mun (Korean pronunciation), and if he sounds familiar it is because he appears in more kong-ans in the standard collections (17 cases in the *Blue Cliff Record* and five in the *Mu Mun Kwan*) than any other Chan master. In fact, as App makes clear in his splendid introduction, Un Mun more than anyone else can be considered the founder of kong-an practice. At the very least he ranks with such figures as Ma Tsu, Lin Chi, and Jo Ju as one of the luminaries of the classical age of Chan.

App translates about a fourth of the material—dialogues and talks—in the original Record of Yunmen—a compilation made by his students—including everything that made its way into the kong-an collections. So, for instance, we have the familiar:

Yunmen went up to the Dharma Hall, and on hearing the sound of the bell, he said: "The world is so wide and vast; why should I wear the seven-strip robe at the sound of the bell?"

This appears as Case 16 in the *Mu Mun Kwan*. But App also gives us a wealth of such previously unavailable gems as these:

Someone asked Yunmen, "Though this is constantly my most pressing concern, I cannot find any way in!" The Master said, "Just in your present concern there is a way."

Someone asked Master Yunmen, "What is the most urgent phrase?"

The Master said, "Eat."

Master Yunmen asked a monk, "Are Korea and China the same or different?"

Master Yunmen answered on behalf of the monk: "The Monks' Hall, the Buddha Hall, the kitchen pantry, the main gate."

To this last excerpt App appends a note cross-referencing other entries dealing with non-duality, as well as references to Kitaro Nishida, D. T. Suzuki, and R. DeMartino on the same subject. Most of the 285 selections have some kind of explanatory footnote. The selections themselves are arranged under various headings, according to type: Corresponding to the Occasion, Essential Sayings from the Master's Room, Statements with Answers in Place of the Audience, Critical Examinations, and Pilgrimage Record. Most of this is dharma combat of one sort or another, often caustic, sometimes dripping with sarcasm, always live words. Un Mun often answered his own questions when he couldn't get anything out of his monks. There are also a few talks, mostly brusque diatribes aimed at getting the monks to practice harder.

Helpful apparatus include an appendix cross-listing selections with four classical kong-an collections, a long note on the history of the text, a bibliography, and an introduction in three parts: A Brief History of Chan, the Life of Master Yunmen, and The Teaching of Master Yunmen. This last includes sections with headings like: The Basic Problem, Matching Concepts, Duality, What Can One Do?, Letting Go, Koan, The Pathless Path, Breakthrough, and Ways of Teaching. App does a very good job at pointing from many directions straight to the heart of Un Mun's teaching—What am I?—and presenting its original flavor. This is from his introduction:

Many talks and dialogues that came to be used as koans show the human situation in highly concentrated form, and seek to bring this to a point of coagulation in the practitioner, fan the fire of seeking and doubt, and simultaneously keep the seeker from getting sidetracked. And since everything that is an object—including all objects of thought, all Zen teachings, and what ever people say—is a sidetrack, Yunmen says: "Even if, in order to make progress, you sorted out all Chan teachings with their thousand differences and myriad distinctions, your mistake would still consist in searching for proclamations from other people's tongues.... In the meantime you cheat the master in your own house. Is that all right? When you manage to find a little slime on my ass, you lick it off, take it to be your own self, and say, 'I understand Chan, I understand the Dao!' Even if you manage to read the whole Buddhist canon—so what?"

This is pungent stuff, and no sidetrack. App has written an important book, both as research in Buddhist studies and as insight into the roots of our practice. ☸

Nothing Special: Living Zen

Charlotte Joko Beck with Steve Smith
Harper San Francisco, 1993.
273 pp, Hardback: \$20.

Reviewed by Judy Roitman

Several years ago, a remarkable book on Zen appeared. Titled *Everday Zen: Love and Work*, it was written by Charlotte Joko Beck, a Zen teacher who runs a center in San Diego. It was remarkable because it avoided nearly all specialized terminology, was rooted in the daily lives of Americans, yet was very clear in its teaching. It is the book I recommend to anyone wanting a first book on Zen, clearly delineating the human predicament and what practice is about.

Unfortunately, Charlotte Joko Beck's second book, *Nothing Special: Living Zen*, is a disappointment. Like the first book, it is a collection of dharma talks edited by her student, Steve Smith. Like the first book, it is relentless in its exposure of the games our minds play trying to avoid recognition of reality, and hard-nosed about what it means to truly accept and be open to our lives—no easy comfort here. These are its strengths. But it has serious weaknesses that undercut its conscious message.

"Language is a virus from outer space."
William Burroughs

Anyone who has done kong-an study remembers that first realization — confused, maybe a little desperate — that language the way we usually speak it *doesn't work here*. Do not cling to words! Do not mistake language for reality! Buddha is Buddha. Buddha is mind. Buddha is dry shit on a stick. Buddha is three pounds of flax. Which one do you like?

But Joko Beck clings to language. She develops metaphors — whirlpools, cocoons, electric baseboards (that's us, by the way, waiting for things to be plugged in), icy couches, melting ice cubes, castles and moats, locked doors — metaphors which would be powerful if they were said in passing, but which are developed for paragraphs, for pages, for entire dharma talks. Her language becomes a trap, for both her and the listener/reader.

(holding up one finger)
Zen master Guji

Zen master Guji answered every question by holding up one finger. One day while he was gone, his young helper answered a question the same way. When Guji got back and heard about this, he cut off his helper's finger. As the boy, sobbing in pain, stumbled out of the room, Guji called out to the boy. The boy turned and Guji Zen Master held up one finger; the boy was enlightened.

Here is Joko Beck in a typical exchange with her students.

"Joko: When we are in touch, on the other hand, our lives are more like that of the natural man. What does it mean?"

"Student: It means a sense of appropriate action.

"Joko: Yes. What else?"

"Student: Greater openness. Natural intelligence takes in information through the senses and functions as part of everything else

"Joko: Yes. We tend to see clearly..."

We are very far from Guji here. Joko Beck has opened a conversation that can only exist on an abstract level. And rather than try to pull her students back from this level she encourages them by agreeing with whatever they say. Throughout the book there are many conversations with students, and most of them follow this pattern. Maybe this works if you are there, physically present, but on the printed page it seems flaccid, as if the finger pointing at the moon has lost its muscle tone.

"Someday you die."
Zen master Seung Sahn

Joko Beck is big on physical tension — when your mind is trying to deny reality, this manifests itself physically as tension. Well, sure. Well, so what. She points out frequently that Zen is not therapy, but her rhetoric undercuts her. She is really great on accepting the body in all its pain and general yuckiness, but then makes this pain and yuckiness a symptom. Students converse with her about necks and shoulders tense, not from practice, but from emotional problems. She realizes the absurdity of this, pointing out that if Zen were about alleviating tension everyone could just go to massage therapists. But she keeps falling into this language again and again.

"And the monk was enlightened."
Nearly every Zen story you ever heard

Most American Zen teachers don't want to even mention enlightenment. We've had enough people stuck in some transcendent experience that they can't get out of after reading D.T. Suzuki or Philip Kapleau. Enlightenment is tricky for all kinds of reasons. Joko Beck tries to talk about it — she calls it joy. And for this she is to be applauded. But she wants to describe it, she wants to tell you what it's like to live in what she calls joy. Nearly every Zen story you ever heard *ends* with the words "and the monk was enlightened." They don't begin there, and they don't develop the theme. For good reason.

"Life is irritating."
Buddha, tr. Stanley Lombardo

Joko Beck is great at teaching the basics of Buddhism without any Buddhist taint. Here is a quote at random: "Feeling that something is wrong and seeking ways to fix it — when we begin to see the error in this pattern, serious practice begins." We've got in this one statement the four noble truths, Buddha's great realization — "all things, just as they are, are complete" — and a steady gaze at the heart of Zen practice. Joko Beck is simply terrific at bringing things together this way. She is merciless at tracing out all the ways we try to evade the truth. She does not try to pretend that reality is pretty or conforms to our desires. These are the great strengths which made her first book so remarkable. Here these strengths remain evident, but they are intertwined with rhetoric that ultimately weakens them. ☉