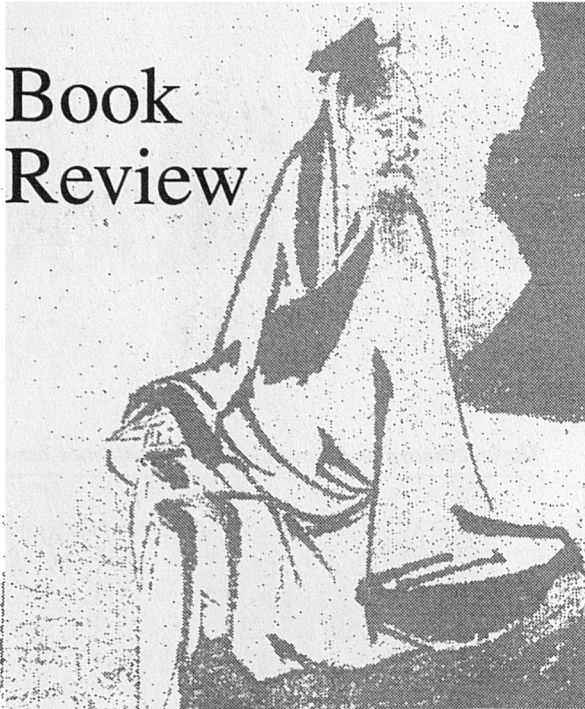


Book Review



Zen Letters: Teachings of Yuanwu
Translated by J. C. Cleary and Thomas Cleary,
Shambala, 1994.

Reviewed by Zen Master Wu Kwang

Some years ago, I was fortunate enough to be directed to a book of Zen letters by Zen Master Tahui entitled, *Swampland Flowers*. The translator was J.C. Cleary. Tahui was the successor of Zen Master Yuanwu (1063–1135 AD), a Sung Dynasty teacher in the Lin Chi line. I greatly benefitted from reading *Swampland Flowers* and have gone back to it several times over the years. I subsequently discovered that Zen Master Tahui had been an important influence on the great Korean Zen Master Chinul, who never met Tahui personally, but had obtained some of his writings. So it was with some excitement that I started reading *Zen Letters: Teachings of Yuanwu*.

In retrospect, I realized that I was subtly looking for *Swampland Flowers II*, and this presented some problems for me in taking the current book on its own terms. The teaching tone of Yuanwu, while similar to his successor, is also somewhat different, and needs to be digested and assimilated on its own. I found the latter parts of the book more compelling and interesting than the beginning sections, but this might have been due to the coloration of my initial expectations. Yuanwu is best known for his authorship of a famous kong-an collection of one hundred cases entitled, *Blue Cliff Record*.

The current book is a grouping of teaching letters, written by Yuanwu to a variety of Zen practitioners,

including fellow teachers, disciples and lay students. Included are letters to both men and women; people with families and worldly careers, as well as monks and nuns, advanced adepts, and beginning students. To give a taste of Yuanwu's style, I will summarize a few of his letters.

In "The Original Person," Yuanwu begins by saying that the "Great Teaching is basically quite ordinary," but usually we are

"[O]verloaded with conditioned knowledge and arbitrary views... If you are equanimous toward everything, including the ultimate ungraspability of mind itself, and your conditioned mind fades away and spontaneously comes to an end, then the perfect illumination of inherent nature appears whole without needing any contrived efforts to make it."

I find this wonderful and skillful advice, especially for those who are inclined to try too hard and haven't recognized that "letting go" is equally important. Further, Yuanwu says that "if you always let this naturally real essence appear amidst your daily activities, then how can you not be settled and secure?" He ends this letter with this piece of advice: "You must continue this way without interruption forever—this is best."

In the letter, "Make Enlightenment Your Standard," Yuanwu discusses sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation. I find this letter to have many similarities with the Korean teaching tradition of Zen Master Seung Sahn's style. Yuanwu says,

"If you want to pass through easily and directly right now, just let your body and mind become thoroughly empty, so it is vacant and silent, yet aware and luminous. Inwardly, forget all your conceptions of self, and outwardly, cut off all sensory defilements. When inside and outside are clear all the way through, there is just one true reality."

Further on he says that one should awaken to this mind first, and afterward cultivate all forms of good. This is likened to the eyes and feet depending on each other.

"Go on gradually nurturing this for a long time, perhaps twenty or thirty years. Whether you encounter favorable or adverse conditions, do not retreat or regress—then when you come to the juncture between life and death, you will naturally be set free and not be afraid."

As the saying goes, "Truth requires sudden awakening, but the phenomenal level calls for gradual cultivation."

Zen Letters is a welcome addition to the growing body of ancient teachings that are now being translated into English. It falls into the category of teachings that might be called "encouragement talks," and is both direct and timely. Its message is as relevant now as it must have been in Sung Dynasty China, and we are lucky to have access to it. ☸