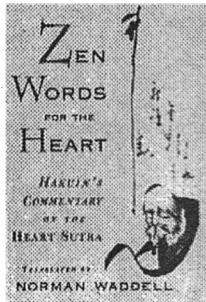


# Book Reviews



*Zen Words for the Heart: Hakuin's Commentary on the Heart Sutra*, translated by Norman Waddell. Boston: Shambhala, 1996. Reviewed by Stanley Lombardo, JDPSN.

This is the first English translation of this classic commentary, the Japanese title of which is "Poison Words for the Heart." The original title (which Norman Waddell had

retained in a manuscript version I saw about five years ago) is very much to the point. This is poison for our thinking mind. Here is Hakuin's first take on the heart of the Heart Sutra, the teaching that form and emptiness are not different: "A nice hot kettle of stew. He ruins it by dropping a couple of rat turds in it. It's no good pushing delicacies on a man with a full stomach."

This caustic and ironic style takes us back to Mu Mun's live words in his *kong-an* commentaries and to the spirit of other old Ch'an masters, a spirit which Hakuin (1689-1769) did much to revive centuries later in Japanese Zen. It's pretty potent stuff, if you can get it down. As Hakuin himself says, "One bellyful eliminates hunger until the end of time." As in the *Mu Mun Kwan*, the often acerbic prose commentary is set off by verse that can take quite a different turn. Hakuin follows his characterization of form and emptiness as "two rat turds" with a subtle poetic evocation of the elusiveness of form:

*A brush warbler pipes tentatively in the spring breeze;  
By the peach trees a thin mist hovers in the warm sun.  
A group of young girls, "cicada heads and moth eyebrows,"  
With blossom sprays, one over each shoulder.*

Coarse satire and exquisite lyric (and there are other modes)—Hakuin gets us coming and going. We never

know quite what to think, and this creates the opportunity just to perceive. Hakuin never apologizes for the poison he is giving us, and he never explains anything. This inspires trust. Hakuin composed this commentary when he was sixty years old; his comments clearly flow from hard practice and are directed towards everybody who has intentions of practicing hard. We know we are in good hands when we read the opening credits:

*Edited by HUNGER AND COLD  
Revised by COLD AND HUNGER*

And by the time we get to the end we have passed through

*A black fire burning with a dark gemlike brilliance,*

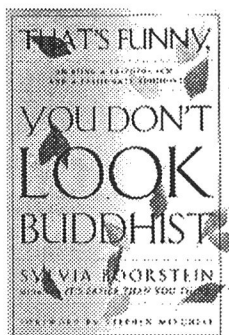
have marvelled at

*Ten worldfuls of ungraspable red-hot holeless hammer  
Shattering empty space into boundless serenity,*

and can only agree when the author admonishes us:

*And don't try to tell me my poems are too hard.  
Face it: the problem is your own eyeless state.*

Actually, although the bone of Hakuin's poetry is always clear, it is, with its occasional obscure allusions, sometimes too hard for us. But Waddell, a consummate scholar, elucidates all the references to Chinese poetry, history, folklore and philosophy in Hakuin's commentary, and explains as well the main points of the Heart Sutra itself. Waddell's translation is clear and vigorous, his notes and brief introduction right on target and at the appropriate scale for this slim volume, which is attractively produced and illustrated with fifteen or so samples of Hakuin's calligraphy and ink paintings. The paintings especially take their place as teaching vehicles alongside the text, reflecting its dry humor, piercing gaze, and deep compassion.



*That's Funny, you Don't LOOK Buddhist* by Sylvia Boorstein. Harper, San Francisco, 1997. Reviewed by Myong Wol Sunim

One Friday evening at *oneg shabbat* (coffee and pastry after the synagogue service), the large, round tables full of strangers and acquaintances finally started humming with conversation. Someone at my table mentioned attending a Buddhist retreat. Sudden-

ly there was an awkward silence.

Coincidentally, on the following Sunday, two Israeli teenagers dropped by the Cambridge Zen Center. They had recently come to this country to attend college. They were at the Cambridge Zen Center to do research for a comparative religion course. When someone suggested to them that meditation often enhances one's religious experience, one of the Israeli students took exception. "You can't be a Buddhist and a Jew at the same time," he told us adamantly.

What is the problem in these two situations? Although Jews have been prominent among those bringing Buddhism to this country, there is a tension, a question. Can there be a true synthesis of Buddhist practice and Jewish belief, or are we seeing merely a temporary dialectic, where diverse traditions converge briefly before an inevitable separation?

In her new book, *That's Funny, you Don't LOOK Buddhist* Sylvia Boorstein does much to clarify the murky waters of Jewish/Buddhist coexistence. Her approach is refreshingly personal and insightful, falling into neither the intellectualism nor the emotionalism with which this important topic is usually treated.

This fast-paced book is infused with first-hand knowledge of the many problems arising from opposites-thinking. The either/or assumption is not limited to the many Jews who are surprised at the interest in Buddhism within our communities. Many American Buddhists are surprised at the need of one of their own to take part in a traditional religion. After all, so many were moving away from tradition when they found Buddhism. As Sylvia Boorstein puts it, "Why," [my Buddhist friends] wondered, "would you want to complicate yourself with Judaism?"

And her answer: "It's not a question, for me, of *deciding* to complicate myself with Judaism. I *am* complicated with Judaism... the complication nourishes me. I love it."

Though especially pertinent to a Jewish audience, observant members of any tradition will find that Ms Boorstein's work addresses their concerns about the viability of dual membership as well. Can you be a Buddhist and still believe in God? Does meditation change your image of what God can be? Can a Buddhist have a *personal* relationship with God? Is Buddhist practice after all just a New Age form of assimilation?

In detailing many of her own experiences, Ms Boorstein tells of how her meditation somehow makes more tangible and immediate the very building blocks of traditional faith. She asserts, "I don't think it's possible to love God with all your heart and not love everything else. Complete loving mandates and rejoices in complete acceptance. I learned that doing Buddhist *metta* meditation."

The author shares with us intimate details of her own practice. In them, we find a mind which goes beyond mere coexistence of practices. We find strong evidence that all paths are ultimately the same. "I am sure," she says, "that the essence of clear mind is impartial lovingkindness and unwavering compassion. My experiences of intensive practices have included instances of being so bowled over by a rush of loving feeling for a person walking down the hall toward me—even a person I didn't know at all—that I've needed to lean against the wall to keep from falling over."

This work might have been enhanced a bit by the inclusion of some demographics. But then, it does not pretend to be the story of "How the Jews Found the Swans in the Lake."

The book is reminiscent of Rabbi Herbert Weiner's work, which demonstrated an especially wide, inclusive practice of Orthodox Judaism. One could almost hear him recite the *brocha*, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, Who has sustained us, brought us to this place, and given us meditation practice so that we can know ourselves, and help others."

