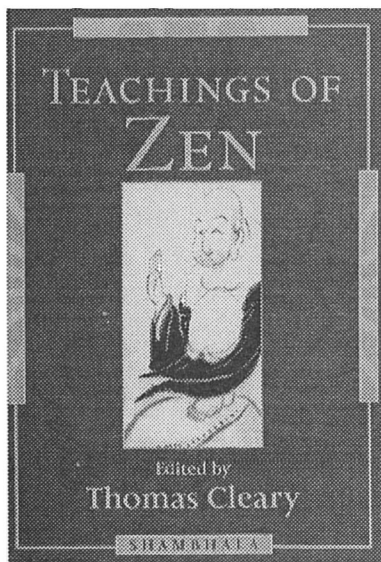


# BOOK REVIEWS

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*Teachings of Zen*  
Compiled and  
translated by  
Thomas Cleary  
Shambhala  
Publications,  
Boston, 1998

~ ~ ~ Reviewed by Wu Kwang Zen Master

Here is yet another book by the prolific translator Thomas Cleary. Cleary has performed an invaluable service for English-speaking students of Zen, Buddhism, and Chinese culture by making so many ancient texts accessible and available to us.

The job of a translator of Zen writings, is to be able to be true to both the spirit and the letter of the original texts. Of these two, the spirit, vitality and energy of the original is primary. Several years ago, I asked Maezumi Roshi what he thought of Cleary's translation of the great Japanese Soto Zen Master Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo*. Maezumi Roshi didn't answer me directly, but said "when Thomas Cleary is good, he's really good." In the current volume, Cleary

brings to life the flavor and character of the Tang and Sung dynasty Chinese Zen tradition, as well as some later teachings. The readings begin and end with Fu Shan-hui (487–569) and end with selections of Yuan-hsien (1618–1697).

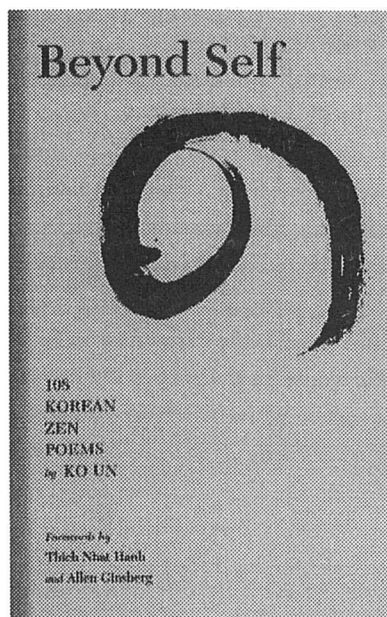
One Christmas a few years ago, my daughter gave me a gift called "the Zen Calendar." It was one of those desktop calendars where you pulled off the page of the preceding day to reveal the current date. Each page had a short saying or paragraph by some Zen Master, or other luminary whose theme seemed to be Zen-like. Cleary's *Teachings of Zen* has a similar feel to it. Most of the selections are one page or less. The longest piece is a translation of Zen Master Ma-Tsu's (709-788), "The Normal Mind Is the Way," which is four and a half pages. Some pages contain no more than three or four sentences, leaving the rest of the page blank. For example, page 43 has Ku-shan's (d. ca. 940) "The Object of Investigation":

Ku-shan was asked, "What is the basic object of investigation?" He replied, "How one has gotten to such a state."

If you are interested in a book that contains short readings of an inspirational or "wake up" quality, then the present volume is to be recommended. Here is another example:

"The Normal Mind"

Chao-chou was asked, "Is a person with a normal mind still to be taught?" Chao-chou said, "I don't go through such a person's door." The questioner asked, "Then wouldn't it be someone sunk into the beyond?" Chao-chou retorted, "A fine 'normal mind'!"



*Beyond Self:*  
*108 Korean*  
*Zen Poems*  
*by Ko Un*  
*(translated by*  
*Young-Moo Kim &*  
*Brother Anthony)*  
 Parallax Press,  
 Berkeley, 1997

~~~~~ *Reviewed by Judith Roitman*

“What could a little pipsquak of an Arhat with his measly fruits possibly have to offer? Around here, even Buddhas and Patriarchs beg for their lives. Where’s he going to hide, with his ‘Hinayana face and Mahayana heart’? At Vimalakirti’s, he couldn’t even get his manhood back. Surely he can’t have forgotten the way he sweated and squirmed?”

Hakuin (tr. Norman Waddell)

“When the children get cranky and whiny  
 I vow with all beings  
 to stop what I’m doing and cuddle  
 and show them I know times are tough.”

Robert Aitken

“Magnolia flowers, I *know* you are there, and that makes me very happy.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

“Wow! You recognized me.”

Ko Un  
 tr: Young-Moo Kim  
 and Brother Anthony

The Korean poet Ko Un has lived a dramatic life, a life marked by severe disruption and suffering, as has been the life of his country. To quote from Alan Ginsberg’s *Foreword*, “A precocious scholar, then conscripted Peoples Army worker, then alms begging monk ten years... then published poet, then temple Head Priest... took off his robes in nihilist despair... headmaster, then prolific writer and drunk, then would-be suicide, then militant nationalist rebel... then detainee & political jailbird,... then at age 50 a husband and father... prisoner... epic poet” and adds “‘Widely acknowledged to be Korea’s foremost contemporary poet,’ according to his translators.” A life made for legend and, as the *Introduction* by Ok-Koo Kang Grosjean makes clear, a life already a legend (“Overwhelmed by the suffering, Ko Un roamed the hills and mountains... Ko Un read the book every night for seven days, deeply moved by its grief and suffering... In his dark cell, he realized the interconnectedness of all beings...”)

A trip to the university library gave me a better perspective. Ko Un is one of Korea’s better known contemporary poets and perhaps its most prolific; “foremost” is a bit of hyperbole. While his life, marked by a period of alcoholism and several serious suicide attempts, has been particularly dramatic, the combination of serious religious practice with political commitment is not unusual. Ko Un is one of many Koreans, including the current President, who have been political prisoners threatened, explicitly or implicitly, with death, and one of many Korean poets (including Chogye order monks) whose work is marked deeply by spiritual practice. While Ko Un himself claims a radical linguistic poetics (see below), the bulk of his work is concerned with returning poetry to the vernacular. Much of it focuses on politics and, especially in recent years, on the lives of ordinary people—in his ongoing project, *Ten Thousand Lives*, he has pledged to write about every person he has ever met in his lifetime.

*Beyond Self* is the second collection of Ko Un’s poetry to be translated by Young-Moo Kim, a professor at Seoul National University, and Brother Anthony Teague, of the monastic Order of Taize and also of Sogang University in Seoul. The first collection, *The Sound of My Waves*, focused largely on political poems and vernacular sketches. Published by the Cornell East Asia Series, it did not sell widely. *Beyond Self* focuses mostly on explicitly Buddhist poems, which tend to be shorter and much tighter than Ko Un’s other work, and, with its forewords by Thich Nhat Hanh

and Allen Ginsberg, is being marketed to a general Buddhist audience.

Is it worth reading? Sure. This is no-bullshit stuff, with a lot of clarity, clearly aimed at waking the reader up. The introductory material and translator's notes focus on Zen (refreshingly called "Son") in Korea, most welcome indeed (but perhaps not entirely fair as a representation of Ko Un's life).

"Wow! You recognized me" is an entire poem (entitled *A shooting star*). Forget the title and stare at the line. It is its own hall of mirrors. Or consider

*A rainbow*

There are such things, straightening clothes

or

*Beyond*

Without you  
how can I possibly live?

Most of the poems in this book, unlike the ones I have quoted above, are explicitly immersed in Zen practice and references. Within modern Buddhist poetics it stands clearly in the tradition of classical Ch'an texts.<sup>1</sup>

*Idle talk*

Dharma's father was Hui K'o.  
Shen Hsiu and Hui Neng were Hung Jen's  
fathers.  
Shen Hsiu had fun in the palace.  
Hui Neng had so many fathers  
that the southern rivers and lakes got dizzy.

A really immoral family!

While the Buddhist references in this poem are more compressed than in most of the poems in the book, its rough language, skewed imagery, and militant stance against piety are typical. Also typical of many of the poems in this book is the way the language turns against itself, cutting against expectation—you were maybe expecting

the word "immortal" in that last line?

But this brings up a small problem. The language Young-Moo Kim and Brother Anthony have chosen is natural and fresh. As English, it reads well—no small achievement. But the puns and near puns make one wonder what is going on in the Korean. The *Translator's notes* focus on explicating the Korean Son tradition, and more power to them, but does not deal with issues like this, except to say the usual things about how impossible translation really is. Something more specific would be welcome.

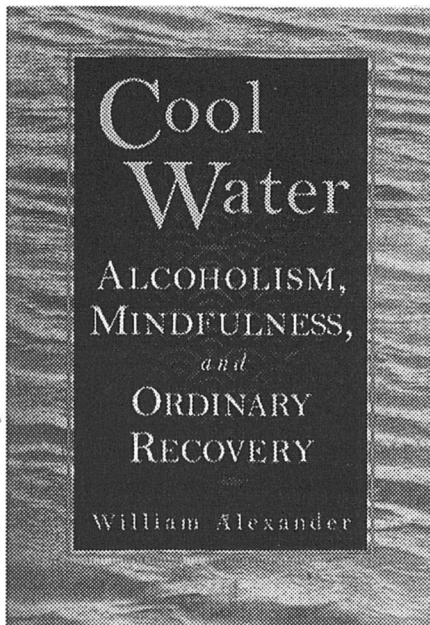
Ko Un's poetics, as expressed in his *Preface*, lead the American reader to expect something quite different. Ko Un writes, "Son offered the means by which the importance attached to the acts of speaking and writing could be overthrown in a powerful grassroots movement of rejection... Son literature is an intense act of the mind liberated from the established systems of speech and writing, a new and completely unfamiliar system... This vitality underlies the fascinating tensions, the urgency, and the outrageous ellipses that strongly characterize Son poems..."

In American poetry, remarks like this would lead the reader to expect grammatical implosion, marked disjuncts, open referents, and the deconstructed self (and this sort of poetic practice can in fact be found in the work of the Korean poet Yi Sang<sup>2</sup>). But to Ko Un, overthrowing the acts of speaking and writing refers to returning to the speech of ordinary people, heightened by the directness of Son practice and the realization, integral to Son Buddhism, that language never quite works.

*Acknowledgment: I would like to thank Walter K. Lew of UCLA for his kind assistance in pointing me in the right directions.*

<sup>1</sup> The first three epigrams were chosen to exemplify other Buddhist poetics, and yes I know Hakuin wasn't writing a poem there, but the excerpt does exemplify a poetics.

<sup>2</sup> Anthologized and easily accessible (tr. Walter Lew) in *Poems for the Millennium*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris. Should the reader be curious about Korean-American poetry, s/he might want to check out the work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and of Myung Mi Kim, both of whom are quite influential in the general contemporary American poetry community.



*Cool Water:  
Alcoholism,  
Mindfulness,  
and  
Ordinary  
Recovery*  
by William  
Alexander  
Shambhala  
Publications,  
Boston,  
1997

~~~~~ Reviewed by Tony Somlai

There is a genre of writing aimed at individuals who live at the marginalized edges of society. This type of writing is based on the narrative of illness that is met with great valor. Usually they are autobiographical and present the personal accounts of an individual's ability to overcome some sort of illness or disability. What is problematic with many of these stories is that they continue to focus on a sense of self that triumphs over adversity. Sadly, the voice found in these narratives is that of an author who has become an authority on how to win the battle over human suffering. They present a formula for overcoming the inconvenience of the human condition. While a model of conquering adversity follows rational logic and at first read seems appealing, I can't help but wonder what happens to those people who follow the words of the authority and continue to suffer,

who continue the futile search to find the meaning behind their miserable condition. The concern is that one's narrative of success over suffering does not isolate those who cannot achieve that same narrative's success. While the human experience of suffering doesn't vary much (OUCH!), the perception (what we think) surrounding that suffering does. William Alexander, in his personal narrative *Cool Water*, provides a testimony that points to the original root of human suffering by shattering what we think about recovering from alcoholism.

There are two very striking, and appealing, aspects of Alexander's book that need mentioning. First, this narrative does not ask for pity or sorrow. There are no excuses for the life that William Alexander lived. While he explores this life deeply, he never asks you to become traumatized by his ordeal. This is the story of an ordinary man pointing at a life that is not special. There are no "superheroes" here, and that is refreshing. Second, Alexander is not an authority. Lately there have been a number of books written that "marry" Zen with other approaches. Quite often, these authors fail to mention the direct influence of their Zen teachers. Much to his credit, William Alexander clearly and concisely gives his many teachers the respect of acknowledging their teaching.

Very simply, William Alexander is a recovering alcoholic who has married the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous twelve-step program and the mindfulness tenets of Buddhism into a program called "Ordinary Recovery." His voice is authentic in that he tells us that this book is about his alcoholism and his experience of Zen as he teaches Ordinary Recovery. He makes it clear that he is not a Zen teacher and that he is a "beginner in Zen and in AA" and hopes to always stay that way.

"Mindfulness," in the style of the well-known Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching, is at the center of Ordinary Recovery. To be fully in the present moment is the medicine path given to overcome the "oppressive demands of a national and world culture of increasing materialism, consumerism, and continued violence." What William James, the founder of AA, calls a spiritual awakening, Ordinary Recovery points to as what you are doing right now.

Alcoholism is an acute and chronic black hole of self-involvement that foolishly supports the myth that you can control your dependence. However, there is this constant

gnawing feeling that something is missing. Alcoholism forces continued isolation from the world, it is an energy that stops one's dharma light from shining outward. It suppresses compassion and replaces it with denial and fear. The alcoholic believes the myth of "my life, my situation" to be the truth. Alexander points straight to the heart of the problem when he says that, "the real definition of my alcoholism is that when I drink, my life goes down the toilet. How about you?" Very simple wisdom from a man who has directly experienced it. Alexander has the disease of alcoholism but he is not alcoholism. What is he then? He answers, "So, rather than being either defective because of genes or gin, or perfect because of Buddhism and recovery programs, I discover that I am merely human."

Earlier in this review I referred to Bill Alexander as a recovering alcoholic because that is what my training and experience have brought to me in wanting to describe the frame of reference for this narrative. However, he does not describe himself in this manner. Rather, he believes that recovery ends in a spiritual awakening and that the end of recovery is "the beginning of intimacy." Many people are shopping around for answers to their suffering questions. They will go to many different retreats offered by many different teachers. One day they're Buddhist, the next day they're Taoist, and then the next day they are Sufi masters. This kind of round and round shopping behavior can only lead to more suffering. Alexander finds the same is true for the differentiation between recovering and recovered alco-

holics. He finds that addiction to recovery can become a subtle trap where alcoholism is no longer the addiction but recovery is. He finds that the end of recovery occurs when you realize that you will recover from alcoholism but never be cured. The end of addiction is the beginning of the awareness of addictions that are endless. For Bill Alexander "the process after awakening is about staying awake, a constant round of letting go."

Human beings, by nature, are not invalids or victims of what life has to offer. The Buddha attained this at the moment of his realization that the roots of suffering are contained within our desire, anger and ignorance. Each moment provides another opportunity to explore this intimate attainment of the Buddha. You are not an orphan left to wander on your own, chasing from one delusion to the next. The whole point is to completely digest this life, this human condition, so that your true nature, your true job can be attained. Then the issue of meaning in your life truly becomes meaningless. William Alexander's life narrative points to the effort of simply doing what needs doing. Perhaps if he had never gone down the path of alcoholism and Buddhism he would never have realized how ordinary the whole thing really is. *Cool Water* points to the refreshing possibility of each moment, the opportunity to come back and help others. If you have the opportunity, please read the story of an authentic voice that no longer seeks to be an authority but speaks from the direct experience of a very ordinary life.

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