

Books



*Hardcore Zen:
Punk Rock, Monster Movies,
and the Truth About Reality*
by Brad Warner
Wisdom Publications, 2003

Reviewed by Judy Roitman, JDPSN

My introduction to Brad Warner was in the pages of the Fall 2003 issue of *Buddhadharma*, which published a brief description of his awakening experience: “The universe was me and I was it... I had no need to confirm it with anyone.”

Who, I wondered, is this egomaniac?

As it turns out, on the evidence of this book and his web page, Brad Warner is not an egomaniac but a serious (and seriously funny) practitioner and Zen Master, living in Tokyo, in the Soto Zen line of Gudo Nishijima. This book is a combination of autobiography, encouragement to practice, and commentary on Buddhist teachings. A man whose teenage years in Ohio were dominated both by the notions of authenticity that drove the punk rock movement, and by a consuming love for Japanese rubber costume monster movies, should not be expected to simply explicate something he heard somewhere else, and Warner speaks from his own experience not because he is an egomaniac, but because he wants you to deeply touch your own deepest experience—yours, not someone else’s. He speaks scathingly of teachers who encourage students to be reliant on them. Against the impression of the extract in *Buddhadharma*, the notion that enlightenment is a special state to strive for, and the notion that those who attain it are special beings, are anathema to him. He clearly prefers questions to answers and exhorts everyone to question everything deeply. He promises nothing, and tells his readers that when they open to the truth it will necessarily be unlike—not better or worse, but radically unlike—anything they imagined. He writes well and crisply, and his explications of traditional Buddhist topics are both colloquial and clear. For example, here is a small part of his chapter on the Heart Sutra (he is discussing the phrase “in the three worlds,” the three worlds being past, present and future):

So what about that present moment? The Diamond Sutra tells us that the mind of the present is unknowable. What’s that mean? We think we know the mind of the present—after all, here it is! But we don’t really know it. We can’t really see it.

Wholly in the midst of something, you can’t possibly see it. As I write this my eyes look at the keyboard (if I’d learned to type correctly, they’d be watching the screen) but I can’t see my own eyes any more than I can bite my teeth. I can only see their reflection and experience their effects. Trying to see one’s present mind is just like that. I can only see the reflection of my mind in the universe or in my own past.

In keeping with his roots in pop culture, he heads each chapter with terrific quotes from non-standard sources, from various punk rockers, to Raymond Burr’s character in *Godzilla*, to Bart Simpson, to—how could he not appear here?—Philip K. Dick... and that’s just the half of it. “Wickedly funny, profane, and iconoclastic,” says the reviewer in *Publisher’s Weekly*, and s/he’s right.

Japanese Soto has a notion of priesthood which allows for a substantially lay life. Nishijima, who spent much of his life working in finance, is in this tradition, as is Warner, who is lucky enough as an adult to work for the heroes of his youth, the Tsuburaya family, creators of the rubber costume hero Ultraman. Much of *Hardcore Zen* is organized autobiographically, and since Warner has had an interesting life (I learned a lot about both the business of punk rock, and the business of Japanese pop television and movies), these sections will sustain the interest of people who come to the book from somewhere other than experience with, or interest in, practice. The autobiographical sections of *Hardcore Zen* have additional interest in their description of the development of deep practice done in the context of a decidedly lay life. Which, to Warner’s credit, he nowhere seems to see as special.

Warner also has a web page (<http://hardcorezen.org>) in which he posts dharma talks, has links to his music, a link to Nishijima’s web page, a link to the late Kobun Chino’s web page (which, strangely, doesn’t mention his death), and, rather generously, a link to a PDF introduction to Zen practice by another student of Nishijima, Mike Leutchford.

All of which brings up a question: why doesn’t everybody like this guy? Clearly, not everyone does. Two examples that I’ve run across are a one-star (and that just barely) reader review on Amazon.com, and the review in *Buddhadharma*, which did not seem entirely happy with this book.

One reason is his rhetoric, which I find refreshing but other folks might find a little bit, shall we say, over the top. For example, a piece on the web, about the dangers of thinking other people have it and you don’t, is named *Whack the Dalai Lama*. This is clearly not to everyone’s taste. But Buddha spoke of 84,000 kinds of expedient means, and surely one of them is a rhetoric which appeals to people who (as one of the blurbs put it) are “put off by the placid lake-and-lotus-blossom tone of everything [about Zen] I’d read.” Placid lake-and-lotus-blossom isn’t to everyone’s taste either.

A second reason is the one thing that I wish he would change: his tendency to put down all traditions except his own. Despite occasional disclaimers, in his enthusiasm for his own tradition, he shows a lack of respect for monastics, for other Zen traditions, for other non-Zen Buddhist traditions, and more generally for the concept of religion and most of its manifestations. This is more than a little jarring, especially in the context of the deep respect he has for his own teachers and lineage. ☸