

Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices
by Martine Batchelor, Son'gyong Sunim
Syracuse University Press, 2006

Reviewed by Judy Roitman, JDPSN

book reviews

The title is daunting: academic, sociological. The book is not. Written in two parts by Martine Batchelor, it begins with a memoir of her years as a nun in Korea, followed by a brief “as told to” autobiography of one of her teachers, the nun Son'gyong Sunim. It is a rare combination: both utterly charming and highly informative.

Around the same time that Zen Master Seung Sahn started teaching Westerners in the West, the Korean Zen master Kusan Sunim opened Songgwangsa to Westerners and was teaching them in Korea. Batchelor found herself practicing with him almost by chance—she had wanted to go to Japan but somehow the travel arrangements got fouled up and she found herself in Seoul. It was a serendipitous foul-up and she quickly became a student of Kusan Sunim, and almost as quickly decided to be a nun. She practiced as a nun in Korea for a decade until, sometime after Kusan Sunim died, she went back into lay life. She now lives in France with her husband, Stephen Batchelor (the author of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*), himself a former monk under Kusan Sunim; they lead meditation retreats world-wide.

Her short memoir covers a lot of ground in 74 pages. We get a brief history of Korean Buddhism, especially of the nuns' order; we meet a lot of important teachers, both male and female; we get personal matter-of-fact descriptions of hwadu practice as Batchelor's practice deepens and changes. We learn about monastic etiquette; such daily details as how one is supposed to wash (both self and clothes); four bowl style the Korean way (slightly different from ours); the yearly schedule with its alternating schedule of intense kyol che's and relaxed (by monastic standards only) hae jae's. There are translations of chants (some the same as ours, some different) and the special rules for nuns. And there are examples of Kusan Sunim's answers to the questions that Westerners would put to him. All of this is through recounting Batchelor's experience, so it is never dry and always alive. She reports on the rigors of her training in a completely un-self-centered way.

Quite striking is the enormous freedom she had as a nun. A typical sentence at the beginning of a chapter is, “During my third summer I decided to stay at Songgwangsa for the forthcoming retreat.” It is this freedom, and her use of it to travel and learn from many teachers, that enables her memoir to be such a valuable record of so many practice places and so many teachers and practitioners. While her status as a Western nun at times made her experience somewhat different from Korean nuns, this use of the rhythms of kyol che and hae jae to move back and forth is not that unusual.

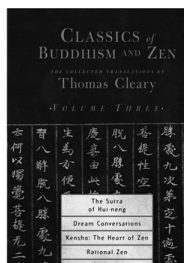
One of the teachers that Batchelor practiced with was the eminent nun Son'gyong Sunim. Batchelor felt a strong connection with her and conducted a series of interviews over several years with the explicit goal of chronicling her life.

She chose an excellent subject, whose life story parallels a shift within Korean society. Son'gyong Sunim, born to a peasant family, became a nun when she was eighteen—it was that or suicide. It was 1921, and she soon found herself an attendant to an old nun who did not particularly value meditation or sutra study, the preceptor of her preceptor, her dharma grandmother. So Son'gyong Sunim stayed illiterate, taking care of the elder nun for 15 years—not an unusual life for a nun of that time. Then, having heard of Man Gong's teachings, she begged to go to a women's temple near him; finally the elder agreed, and a year later, when Son'gyong Sunim refused to go back, the old nun changed her vision of what it meant to be a nun, joined her student, and began meditation practice. This part of Son'gyong Sunim's biography parallels a change in Korean attitudes towards women—while there had always been women of accomplishment, many women, especially women of peasant origin, had not had many opportunities, even within monastic orders, and were not necessarily encouraged in sutra study or in meditation. (The situation now is radically different.)

At this point, she gained the kind of freedom that Batchelor had, traveling from one place to another, one teacher to another. She studied with both male and female Zen masters, and gives accounts of both public and private (interview) encounters with them, as well as brief biographies. Her own description of her practice is both modest and startling in the unassuming way she describes practice of extreme intensity. Much of the time, despite the monastic setting, she is struggling on her own; private interviews with teachers are rare, and her teachers speak their words to her quite sparingly. She gets crucial encouragement from supernatural events: waking visions and dreams of bodhisattvas and other beings. The matter-of-fact way that she and others describe these—oh, that must have been Manjusri, yes he appears here sometimes—is one of the more striking aspects of this book. This portion of the book ends with a number of poems written by Son'gyong Sunim. To quote one in its entirety:

*Clear water flows on white rock.
The autumn moon shines bright,
So clear is the original face.
Who dares say it is or is not?*

In summary, this book is a fine introduction to many aspects of Korean Buddhist practice, written so gracefully that it can be enjoyed by anyone, even if they know nothing of Buddhism. And the dedicated practice of these women is inspiring to our own. ☸

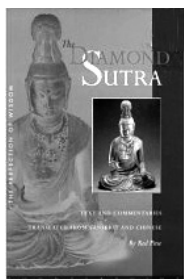


The Sutra of Hui-Neng
in *Classics of Buddhism and Zen*
Volume 3: *The Collected Translations of Thomas Cleary*
(*Classics of Buddhism and Zen*)
Thomas Cleary,
Shambala, 2005



Hui-Neng's Commentary on the Heart Sutra
in *Classics of Buddhism and Zen*
Volume 3: *The Collected Translations of Thomas Cleary*
(*Classics of Buddhism and Zen*)
Thomas Cleary
Shambala, 2005

The Heart Sutra,
Red Pine
Shoemaker and Hoard, 2004



The Diamond Sutra
Red Pine
Counterpoint, 2001

Reviewed by Judy Roitman, JDPSN

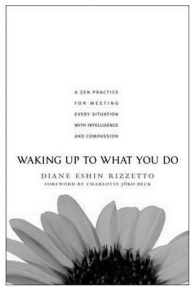
Thomas Cleary is a lucid (and prolific) translator of Chinese and Japanese texts, as well as Arabic (a *Qur'an* among other texts), Pali (he has a *Dhammapada*) and Gaelic. Red Pine (a.k.a. Bill Porter) is a lucid translator of ancient Chinese texts. These four translations are excellent for both the person just beginning to read classic Buddhist texts and those who are familiar with them.

Cleary uses the standard translator's format of a lengthy introduction followed by the text followed by notes. His introductions and notes are informative and reliable, and his translations of Hui-Neng's texts avoid obfuscations and excessive pedantry, being remarkably clear and readable. A good rule of thumb for any classic Buddhist text is: if a Cleary translation exists (either Thomas or his brother J.C.), read it.

Red Pine uses an unusual strategy of presenting the text first, followed by careful explication of the text, sometimes paragraph-by-paragraph, sometimes line-by-line, followed by notes. This allows him to take interesting detours which include information that ordinarily wouldn't make it into a translator's introduction. His explication is not limited to his own ideas, and he includes quotes from a wide range of commentators, from ancient times to modern. He is at times idiosyncratic—he emphasizes the narrative arc of Subhuti's spiritual progress in his commentary on *The Diamond Sutra* (a narrative arc completely absent from Hui-Neng and many other commentators), and he identifies Avalokitesvara with the Buddha's mother Queen Maya in his commentary on *The Heart Sutra*. But his generosity in presenting other points of view gives the reader far more intellectual freedom than most commentators allow, and his careful discussion of phrases that are problematic from the translator's point of view provide deep insights into the possible meanings of these ambiguous texts.

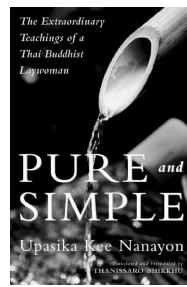
Unfortunately, Red Pine's *Diamond Sutra* is currently out of print, but it is not difficult to find online or at good used bookstore chains such as Half-Price Books. The latter deserves some mention for its excellent selection of Buddhist books, better than most standard "literary" bookstores. And of course, there's always the library. ☸





*Waking Up to What You Do:
A Zen Practice for Meeting Every Situation
with Intelligence and Compassion*
Diane Eshin Rizzetto
Shambala, 2005

Reviewed by Judy Roitman, JDPSN



Pure and Simple
Upasika Kee Nanayon
tr. Thanissaro Bhikkhu
Wisdom, 2005

Reviewed by Judy Roitman, JDPSN

Zen in America encompasses a wide variety of practices, largely differing in their emphases on the two aspects of being which are traditionally called the relative and the absolute. In particular, Joko Beck teaches a way of practicing that focuses on physical and emotional sensations, and on labeling ideas as they arise, in a way that seems to me reminiscent of Vipassana meditation (but having done neither practice, what do I know?). Diane Rizzetto is her student and dharma heir, and this investigation of the precepts extends her teacher's approach.

Rizzetto examines eight of the ten precepts, using them as focuses of practice and as ways of transforming our lives. The statement of these precepts is somewhat different from the ways in which usually stated. For example, "I vow to abstain from taking life" becomes "I take up the way of supporting life." Thus promises of negative behavior ("I vow to abstain") become statements of current direction ("I take up the way").

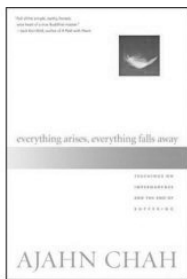
The first few chapters are an introduction to Rizzetto's general approach, including a chapter on what she calls "the dead spot" (a phrase used by trapeze artists), which closely resembles our notion of "don't know." The next eight chapters discuss each precept one at a time, beginning with a general discussion, moving to practice that focuses on the precept (practice that goes on both on and off the cushion, observing your actions as they happen), and ending with questions and answers between her students and herself. It ends with a brief concluding chapter, and a guide to basic awareness practice. ☸

Kee Nanayon (1901—1978) was one of the most famous Buddhist teachers in Thailand, a remarkable achievement given that she was a laywoman with little formal dhamma training. Beginning serious practice in adolescence, in early middle age she left her small business and moved with an aunt and uncle to a modest home in the country; it grew to become a large meditation center which is still thriving decades after the death of its founder.

This book consists of clear instructions on Theravada practice: concrete, simple, down-to-earth. It is deeply rooted in classic Theravada concepts, but remarkably free of technical terminology; when terminology is necessary, it is explained concisely and clearly. She forcefully and insistently points us past our distractions. For example, in a chapter addressed to people who are ill, she writes, "whatever disease you have, it's not important. What's important is the disease in the mind." In a chapter on attachment she writes, "The bombs they drop on people to wipe them out aren't really all that dangerous, for you can die only once per lifetime. But the three bombs of passion, aversion, and delusion keep exploding the heart and mind countless times." Strong teaching pervades nearly every paragraph, leaving no room for the usual excuses.

Fundamentally rooted in Nanayon's own deep practice, this is one of those rare books that transcend schools and ideology. Nanayon speaks in the language of purity and impurity, of defilement and craving on the one hand and nirvana on the other, but what she is pointing to is deeply human and completely universal. ☸





everything arises, everything falls away:
Teachings on Impermanence
and the End of Suffering
Ajahn Chah
Shambhala, 2005

Reviewed by Ken Kessel, JDPSN

Like a Cow Not Satisfied With Its Own Tail

Coming, no hindrance, going, no hindrance
Like a cloud in the breeze
Then what is the root of suffering?
Being born is already dying
What can you do?

Throughout *everything arises, everything falls away*, Ajahn Chah repeats the phrase, “Being born is already dying.” This struck me as a poignantly-worded teaching point, and I incorporated it as a recurring couplet in poems I wrote for a recent retreat. However, when I went to the text to find the citations for this review, I could no longer find it. Where did it go?

Ajahn Chah was a Thai forest monk, who was born in 1918 and died in 1992. He practiced and studied with the outstanding teachers of his and the previous generation, and in 1954, he established a monastery, Wat Pah Pong, which eventually drew students from around the world, including many of the now-senior teachers in the Western Theravadan lineage. But at that time, the countryside was poor, and he and his disciples had to endure extremely harsh conditions.

In 1979, he came to teach in America. When he was in New York, our Chogye International Zen Center had a large space on East 31st Street, and we were able to offer it to him for a public talk. We had built a podium for formal Korean dharma talks, but Ajahn Chah had the chance to inaugurate it. The dharma room was packed to capacity and into the hallway. I wish I could remember what he said. At that time, I was new enough to practice to be happy hearing him, but at the same time I was glad that it was Zen that I was practicing. But now, I think that if I had happened to hear him before I had encountered Zen, I would have ended up studying with him.

It's not that the teaching is better or worse, either way. It's that Ajahn Chah's teaching rings profoundly true. He is direct, unassuming, and colloquial, eminently accessible. He speaks in everyday life terms of the link between impermanence, attachment, suffering and liberation, always pointing at how to look at practice, how to look at life. He sheds light on these points through stories about his own experience, stories about his students, and stories about the Buddha. The book breathes.

everything arises, everything falls away (the title is all lower-case) is a compilation of Ajahn Chah's teachings, taken from memory (in the preface) and tapes in the Thai and Lao languages (in the body of the book), translated by Paul Breiter. Breiter was a monk in the Thai Forest tradition from 1970 to 1977. He studied with Ajahn Chah and served as his translator for much of this time. Breiter provides a preface that lovingly mirrors his teacher's clarity and simplicity. It serves as a capable introduction to Buddhism and the Theravadan tradition. Old black-and-white photos of Ajahn Chah grace the book at the front and between sections, and add to the feeling of presence in this volume.

In his picture on the frontispiece, he sits upright in a chair, leaning forward, arms crossed, hands clasped at his waist on the left. His smile is broad, his eyes engaging, and with his black horn-rimmed glasses, he bears a striking resemblance both physically and in manner to Zen Master Seung Sahn. Other pictures of him preface sections of the book, and at different times, these call to mind Suzuki Roshi, Sasaki Roshi and Maha Ghosananda. And while he clearly speaks from the Theravadan tradition, what he says transcends sectarian distinctions. One could find something on any page that opens into the path of the dharma. I offer here a few selections that shed light on Ajahn Chah's personality and idiosyncrasies, which make the journey more human:

I would think about the lives of beings in the world. It all seemed very heartrending and pitiful. (I felt) pity toward rich and poor alike, toward the wise and the foolish—everyone living in this world was in the same boat.... I felt I was different from others. When I saw others with their worldly involvements, I thought that was truly regrettable. I came to have real faith and trust in the path of practice... and (it) has supported me right up to the present.

If you tell (people) about not-self... they immediately want to argue the point. Even the Buddha, after he attained awakening, felt weary at heart when he considered this.... But then he realized that such an attitude was mistaken. If we don't teach such people, who will we teach? This is my question, which I used to ask myself at those times I got fed up and didn't want to teach anymore: who should we teach, if we don't teach the deluded? There's really nowhere else to go. When we get fed up and want to run away from others, we are deluded.

If we *are* the dharma, then we just see heaps of earth, water, fire and air. Well, we're pretty far from

this, aren't we? This is not just joking around. I'm saying these things for those of you who want to get the essence of the dharma. The point isn't merely having a comfortable life as your reward for good works.... Today I'm speaking bluntly and directly. Anyone who doesn't have the right outlook will feel like his neck is being broken. This is the Dharma for grownups.

There was once a donkey who used to listen to crickets sing. The donkey thought, "How wonderful to be able to sing like that!" He asked the other animals what the crickets' secret was, and they told him that the crickets drink dew. So every morning he went around licking the dew on the grass, and finally one day he opened his mouth to sing. But he still brayed like a donkey.

In response to a student who was complaining about another teacher being lazy:

"Right.... Just like me. I've got a lot of defilements. I like to fool around." Although I realized he was putting me on, I was startled to hear such talk and didn't know what to say. Ajahn Chah went on bending his head toward me, lowering his voice, and speaking in mock confidentiality. "Listen: I'm planning to disrobe, and I want you to help me find a nice woman."

To a hog farmer, complaining about the rising cost of feed and the falling cost of pork:

Don't feel too sorry for yourself, sir. If you were a pig, then you'd have good reason to feel sorry for yourself. When the price of pork is high, the pigs are slaughtered. When the price of pork is low, the pigs are still slaughtered. The pigs really have something to complain about. Think about this seriously, please.... The pigs have a lot more to worry about, but we don't consider that. We're not being killed, so we can still try to find a way to get by.


Finally, on relating to phenomena:

Our emotions of love and hate never bring us satisfaction. We never feel we have enough, but are always somehow obstructed. Simply speaking, as we say in our local idiom, we are people who don't know enough.... So our minds waver endlessly, always changing into good and bad states with the different

phenomena we encounter, like a cow not satisfied with its own tail.... This world of beings has nothing of its own. Nothing belongs to anyone. Seeing this with correct view, we will release our grip, just letting things be. Coming into this world and realizing its limitations, we do our business.

An attraction of many Asian teachers of the previous generation, who helped bring Buddhism to the West, is that while speaking fully in and from their tradition, their teaching went beyond this tradition, beyond Buddhism, to the heart of the dharma. Experienced practitioners will find much to cherish, much to smile about, much to reflect on. Those new to Buddhism will feel simultaneously welcomed and challenged by a gently inspiring yet fiercely uncompromising teacher. ☸

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