

Book Review

The Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo

By Kosho Uchiyama Roshi (author), Shohaku Okumura (author, translator)
Wisdom Publications, Somerville, Massachusetts, 2014

Commentary on the Song of Awakening

By Kodo Sawaki
Merwin Asia, Portland, Maine, 2014

Review by Arne Schaefer JDPSN

Two books by Kodo Sawaki Roshi, one of the most important and influential Soto Zen masters in twentieth-century Japan, have appeared in the last two years. The well-known *Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo* has been out of print since 2010, but a new extended edition was published in 2014 by Wisdom Publications.

Commentary on the Song of Awakening was only available in a French translation by Janine Coursin, but now that has been translated into English by Tonen O'Connor and published in 2015 by Merwin Asia. France was the base of Taisen Deshimaru Roshi, one of Kodo Sawaki Roshi's dharma heirs. He founded the Association Zen Internationale (AZI), a network of European Soto Zen temples well known in Europe. With the English translation, this text is now available to a larger audience.

The reason these two books were published is the 50th anniversary of Kodo Sawaki Roshi passing away in 1965.

Kodo Sawaki Roshi did not write either book, but rather his talks and sayings were collected, compiled and transcribed by his students and dharma successors. The books differ very much in their structure, but both books present Kodo Sawaki Roshi's unique style of presenting and explaining the Soto Zen teaching. Kodo Sawaki Roshi taught for 50 years in Japan. Uchiyama Roshi and Shohaku Okumara are both his dharma heirs and taught in the West. Uchiyama Roshi had a degree in Western philosophy, and his comments in the first book give the Western reader helpful and necessary insight into the background of Kodo Sawaki's statements.

The main part of the *Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo*, 56 sayings from Kodo Sawaki Roshi with commentary by Kosho Uchiyama Roshi, appeared already in 1967 in a Japanese newspaper. Fifteen additional articles have been integrated for the seventh anniversary of Sawaki Roshi's death. The first English translation was available in the late 1970s. In 1990 a revised English version was published by Shohaku Okumara under the by now very well-known title *Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo*.

Biographical Notes on Kodo Sawaki

The biographical notes in both books show that Kodo Sawaki did not have an easy start in his life. He was born in 1880 as one of seven children. He lost both parents very early, and was eight years old when he was adopted by Sawaki Bunkichi, a friend of his uncle, who also had died. Sawaki Roshi remembers him as "a weak and lazy man" and a professional gambler who had eleven wives (the one of the moment was a prostitute). In several parts in the *Commentary on the Song of Awakening* Kodo Sawaki refers to his difficult childhood, but always takes it as a positive: "Thanks to this I've forged a body that never fails and I never catch a cold" (p. 127). At the age of 13 he regarded his manner of living with horror and became interested in Buddhism and attempted to become a monk to escape his family: "I was orphaned at the age of eight and from the age of ten or eleven I had only one thought: to escape the sufferings of my miserable life. And I must say that the sole place on this earth where I could have found refuge was with the monks" (*Commentary on the Song of Awakening*, p. 78). At the age of 15 he ran away to Osaka and tried to get ordained near Eihei-ji Temple, but had to wait until 1897 to be ordained and become a monk under the name Kodo (Cultivating the Way) in Soshin-ji Temple in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu.

At the age of 19 he learned zazen practice from Rev. Fueoka, who also gave him private lectures on Dogen Zenji's writings and advised him first to study Buddhism in general. A year later he had to serve in the army for six years and was seriously wounded in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. In 1906 he was discharged from the military service, received dharma transmission at Soshin-ji and returned to his hometown and started to study Buddhism in Takada for two years and Yogacara (a school of Buddhism) at Horyu-ji Temple for four years, where he attained the highest status that priests from other Buddhist schools could reach. Besides studying Yogacara, he continued to study Dogen, whose teaching he considered essential, and practiced shikantaza (just sitting without any expectation of getting anything, even "enlightenment") and harmony without competing with others. After six years of studying Buddhism he dedicated himself to study Dogen's Shobogenzo thoroughly and started to teach for several years in different places. In 1923 he began traveling around Japan to give lectures and conduct sesshin retreats. In 1935 he was invited to become a professor of Komazawa University in Tokyo and was appointed instructor at Soi-ji Temple, the other main Soto monastery besides Eihei-ji. After World War II he became more fa-

mous in Japan, and in 1949 he became abbot of Antai-ji, a small Soto temple in Kyoto, where he retired at the age of 83 and died in 1965 after a life of extensive teaching and traveling throughout Japan.

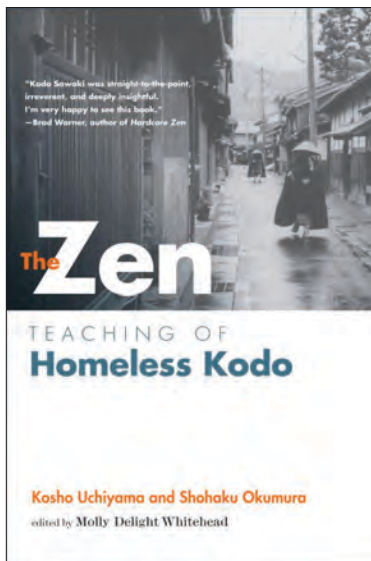
Sawaki Roshi taught in his unique way, with humor and using colloquial language, trying to make Zen Master Dogen's teachings accessible to many people outside the traditional monastic system by teaching laypeople as well as monks, and by giving lectures in prisons and universities. Shohaku Okumura stated that "he brought a breath of fresh air to moribund Zen by reintroducing the universal practice of *zazen*" (Commentary of the Song of Awakening, p. xxi). He also popularized the ancient tradition of sewing the *kasa* (*kesa* in Japanese). Since he never had his own temple and was always traveling, he himself called his activity a "moving monastery" and got his nickname of "Homeless" Kodo.

In his foreword to *Commentary on the Song of Awakening*, Shohaku Okumura also noted the difference as one who was born three years after the end of World War II in 1948. The educational system of Japan after losing the war had been changed and Americanized, which made it difficult for Shohaku Okumura to accept the idealized way of a warrior (*samurai*) in parts of Sawaki Roshi's teaching. Sawaki Roshi himself says, "I myself was a soldier during the Russo-Japanese War and fought hard on the battlefield. But since we lost World War II, and what we thought we had gained was taken away, I can clearly see that what we did was meaningless. There is absolutely no need to wage war" (*The Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo*, p. 47). I miss any admission that war is not only only meaningless but also causes a tremendous amount of suffering.

Kodo Sawaki Roshi gave dharma transmission (*shihō*) to five monks and three nuns: two of Sawaki's most influential students did not receive transmission from him, but received transmission from others after his death: Gudo Wafu Nishijima (1919–2014), the teacher of Brad Warner and Jundo Cohen, received transmission from Rempo Nira; and Taisen Deshimaru (1914–1982), who established the Association Zen Internationale (AZI) in France in 1967, got transmission from Yamada Reirin.

About The Zen Teachings of Homeless Kodo

It so happened that I had to read this book twice. I almost had finished it, with many of my marks in it, when I lost it on the train. So I had to get it again and read it again. Reading it the second time, I read it somehow differently. I enjoyed it more! Before, I compared it too much to the more familiar (for me) teachings of the Korean Zen tradition, and especially of Zen Master Seung



Sahn's teachings. So the first time I was a little disappointed. The second time I just read the book and got inspired by it. I enjoyed and appreciated his direct way of addressing things and making his points. One example is that he did not have any special issue about eating. When I received a wrong delivery at a Chinese restaurant while I was reading his book, it made me eat rice with chicken even though I have been a vegetarian for over 20 years.

The new edition still has 72 chapters, each two to three pages long, with one short saying by Kodo Sawaki Roshi at the beginning and sometimes additional sayings in the following text. Kodo Sawaki Roshi and Uchiyama Roshi both did use their own unique and contemporary colloquial expressions with examples reflecting their time and the difficulties of modern people's lives, so their teaching became popular in Japan. After the 72 chapters there is a more systematic overview of Kodo Sawaki Roshi's teaching by Kosho Uchiyama in two chapters, followed by another 12 pages of Shohaku Okumura's review of the *Life of Homeless Kodo*.

Responsible for the new edition and translation of *Zen Teachings* is Kodo Sawaki Roshi's dharma grandson, Dhohaku Okumura. For him the teachings of Kodo Sawaki and Uchiyama Roshi were the bridge to make the teachings of Dogen Zenji and Shakyamuni Buddha accessible. Okumura supports most readers in Japan and the West by giving further explanations and comments in the book as a help for all that are not familiar with the Japanese background, or with Zen in general and Zen Master Dogen's teachings in particular, so they can get the essential points of Kodo Sawaki's teaching. For some of Kodo Sawaki's sayings this is of value, especially if they are connected with Japanese history, culture and society.

This new edition reflects three generations of Soto Zen teachers and their personal experiences. But it also fills the book with more comments and reduces the amount of Kodo Sawaki's original words in the book.

Kodo Sawaki had a very critical perspective on modern Japanese society. He criticizes its educational system, their group identity and the belief in technological advancement, but also the rites and customs of ordinary Buddhism. "Most people don't live by their own strength. They merely feed off the power of organizations. Those who make a living by their titles or status are wimps" (p. 115). He states the educational system was causing trouble because it grades students and classifies them. For him "there is nothing more ridiculous" (p. 33). Later he says in his typical way that "eating rice isn't preparation for shitting; shitting isn't preparation

for making manure. And yet these days people think that high school is preparation for college and college is preparation for a good job” (p. 144). With the expression “group stupidity” he points at the Japanese tendency to form and follow groups, leading to rather a kind of paralysis, which in his view “is also true for religious groups and institutions. To practice zazen is to become free of this group stupidity” (p. 35).

Shohaku Okumura comments that Sawaki Roshi and Uchiyama Roshi were criticizing “not only the traditional Buddhist institutions that had lost their vitality like withered old trees but also the new movements that enticed people with promises of wealth, success, and good health” (p. 44). Consequently Sawaki Roshi questions the value of technological advancement, since the people have not become better and “achieved greatness of character.” He considers civilization and culture not more than the collective elaboration of illusory desire. So consequently he reasons that “human beings are idiots” (p. 50).

Yet the main issue of this book is to outline what correct Zen practice is (zazen) and what it is not, by using many examples from our everyday lives. Here are some typical and unique quotes of Kodo Sawaki Roshi and their comments, to give an original impression of the book itself:

We cannot exchange even a fart with another, can we? Each and every one of us has to live out our self. Who’s better looking, who’s smarter: you or I? We don’t need to compare ourselves with others.

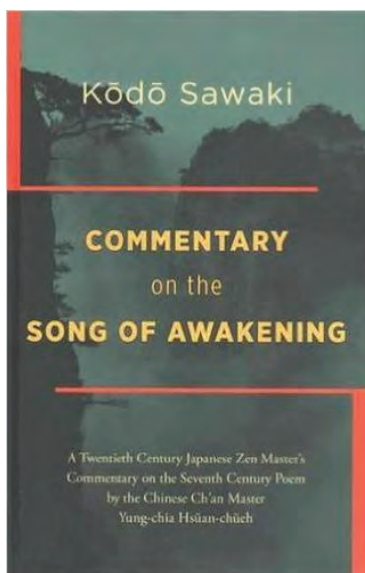
Comment by Shohaku Okumura:

Japan has become one of the richest countries in the world, but more than thirty thousand Japanese commit suicide each year. I’m convinced the system that demands young people work hard, compete, get rich hasn’t made the Japanese happy in the long run (pp. 25–26).

To study Buddhism is to study loss It’s a big mistake if we become Buddhist monks hoping to be successful in the world. No matter what, we monks are beggars from head to toe.

Comment by Shohaku Okumura:

These teachers chose a life based not on conventional ideas of gain and loss, success and failure, happiness and sadness, but on simply working so much as possible for the sake of the Dharma and receiving whatever was offered by life (pp. 101–3).



One of the most famous quotes of Kodo Sawaki Roshi is from chapter 45, “Zen Is Good for Nothing”:

What is zazen good for? Nothing! We should be made to hear this good-for-nothingness so often that we get calluses on our ears and practice good-for-nothing-zazen without expectation. Otherwise, our practice really is good for nothing (p. 138).

About *Commentary on the Song of Awakening*

The “Song of Awakening” (Jap. *Shodoka*) is one of the most popular classics of Chinese Zen literature, a long poem composed by Yung-chia Hsuan-chueh (Jap. Yoka Daishi), an eminent disciple of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng. Kodo Sawaki Roshi explains that “the work is actually a series of individual poems or statements about the nature of reality . . . , they are Yung-chia’s hymn to his profound awakening.” (S.1).

The comments are talks that Kodo Sawaki Roshi gave on this text. For him the “Song of Awakening” reflects the spirit of Zen teaching outside the sutras. He explains that the transmission from mind to mind between two beings could only be possible by the resonance of poetic language. In this sense he considers the Shodoka as extraordinary. Read in Chinese it would sound clear and strong, be rhythmic and melodious. Since it was also much simpler and more stripped down than the kong-an collections *Pi-yen Lu* (Jap. *Hegikan Roku*; Eng. *Blue Cliff Record*), *Tsung-jung Lu* (Jap. *Shoyo Roku*; Eng. *Book of Serenity*) or the *Wu-men-kuan* (Jap. *Mumonkan*; Eng. *Gateless Barrier*) he names it one of the jewels of Zen literature.

The book has two parts: The first 40 pages are the needed preparation and background for the lecture. There are acknowledgments; foreword; preface; information about the transcription; a biographical note on Kodo Sawaki; and Kodo Sawaki’s introduction to the text and its author, Yoka Daishi.

At the beginning of the second part is the text of the “Song of Awakening” in its English translation on only 17 pages, followed by almost 300 pages of Kodo Sawaki Roshi’s commentaries. To get a flavor of the book here are two examples:

#32

Entering the deep mountains, I live in a hermitage.
Under a great pine on a steep peak overhanging
the abyss. I sit tranquilly and without care in my
humble abode. Silent retreat, serene simplicity.

[25

Kodo Sawaki's commentary:

It's a mistake to think that the mountain is an ideal place to find calm. I knew an abbot who'd made this choice. He yawned constantly: "Oh! How long the days are! If only a visitor would think to bring me some sushi!" It might be a good idea to live deep in the mountain if they weren't infested with demons ceaselessly prowling in the vicinity. They quickly visit, and the solitude doesn't last long. . . . When they speak of an isolated place, I always think of a toilet. There also it's the deep mountain. No one. No link to anything. Alone with yourself. Such is the Way of authentic religion. When we're face to face with someone, we go on stage and play a role (#32, pp. 132-33).

#41

Do not search for truth, do not cut off illusion. Understand that both are empty and devoid in character.

Kodo Sawaki's commentary:

We wish to escape from a world we judge detestable, but after having left it, we miss it like the lost paradise. Men always want to leave for somewhere else and upon arriving at the destination they feel like the rat in a sewer. The country from which they've come appears

once again wonderful. . . . When one seeks nothing, even satori, one has no tensions and is at ease. It's very important to experience this well-being. If one has need neither of money, nor renown, nor social status, nor satori, nor even of life, one experiences a sense of well-being without equal (pp. 176-77).

Kodo Sawaki is clearly a Soto Zen master and his mission in promoting Soto Zen as the only correct way of practice is present throughout both books like a mantra: *zazen, zazen, zazen* . . . He often called Zen "wonderfully useless," discouraging any idea of gaining or seeking after special experiences or states of consciousness, emphasizing a rigorous *zazen*, in particular the practice of *shikantaza*, or "just sitting." He does not spare strong words opposing other Buddhist paths or teachings. Here is one example: "Do you know how to resolve Joshu's koan 'Mu'? One response that was permitted was to get down on all fours and bark 'Bow, wow!' Can there be anything more stupid? It means that they do not understand the origin and history of 'Mu'" (p. 27).

Readers from backgrounds other than Soto Zen may not always want to follow Kodo Sawaki Roshi's arguments, but they will still enjoy his wit and strong determination to awaken his audience to perceive the true way. Kodo Sawaki's standpoint is clear and is never obscured, which makes it easy to follow him and his explanations, even if you have a different point of view. ♦



Summer Retreat Program 2016

In Europe. May 27 - September 3

Ku Bong Sa, The Peak, England	May 27 - June 11
Dorfgastein Mountain Hut, Salzburg, Austria	June 12 - June 18
Soen Mun Sa, Vrážné, Czech Republic	June 19 - July 2
Buddhist Retreat Center, Beckske, Hungary	July 3 - July 9
Sufi Kanka near Vepriai, Lithuania	July 9 - July 23
Ku Bong Sa The Peak, England	July 23 - 31 July
Surya Centrum, Mor. Lieskové, Slovakia	August 1 - August 7
Bori Sa, Garrotxa, Catalunya, Spain	August 7 - August 13
Wu Bong Sa, Warsaw, Poland	August 14 - September 3



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