

Book Review

Great Doubt: Practicing Zen in the World

By Boshan, translated and introduced by Jeff Shore,

foreword by Brad Warner

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Review by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

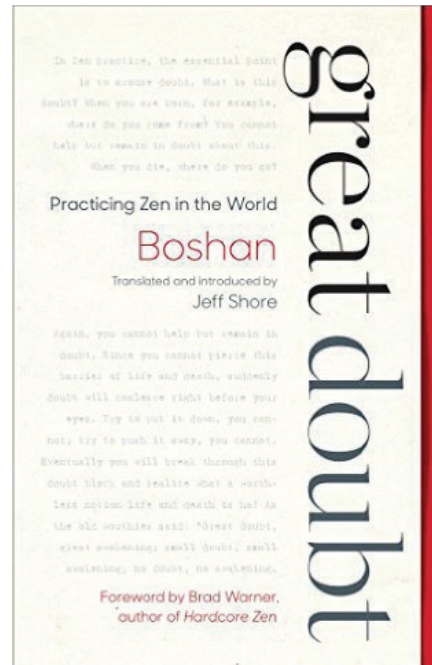
After the first flourishing in the Tang dynasty, the history of Chan/Soen/Zen goes something like this: uncompromising teachers arise but their inspiration dissipates over the generations until uncompromising teachers arise but their inspiration dissipates . . . Dogen in Japan, Hakuin in Japan, and Kyong Ho in Korea are perhaps the most famous examples of this phenomenon, but they were not alone. Toward the end of the Ming dynasty, Wuyi Yuanlai (1575–1630) was part of a similar reformation. Following custom, he was known by the name of the mountain on which he first taught: Bo Shan (Shan = mountain).

His translator, Jeff Shore, is a lay successor of the late Japanese Rinzai teacher Keido Fukushima Roshi. Shore lives in Japan and is a professor at Hanazono University in Kyoto, which is affiliated with the Rinzai school. He runs a worldwide organization of more than 30 Zen groups called Being Without Self. He has a number of other published books on Zen, and some of his writing and talks are available on his website as downloadable PDFs; a rough draft of this book is available in two parts at <http://terebess.hu/zen/boshan.html>.

The book at hand consists of two short, clearly related texts, *Exhortations for Those Who Don't Rouse Doubt* and *Exhortations for Those Who Rouse Doubt*, part of a compilation whose title can be translated as *The Chan Exhortations of Boshan*. This larger text was translated into both Japanese and Korean; Boshan's influence was widely felt.

Doubt is fundamental to Zen. The three essentials of Zen practice are great doubt (a.k.a. great question), great faith (a.k.a. great trust), and great courage (a.k.a. great effort). Traditionally, doubt plays two roles in Zen. In *hwaatou* (*hwadu* in Korean, a.k.a. great question) practice, it is the thing that grows and grows until it bursts and shatters everything. And it is the fundamental state of mind that is essential to living clearly in the world, that is, don't know mind.

Five hundred years before Boshan, the great master Ta Hui, who essentially founded the kong-an tradition, delineated what he called the ten sicknesses associated with practicing with kong-ans. In some sense these summarize everything that can go wrong with practice, and have been referred to ever since as a handy shorthand. Boshan delineates ten diseases for those who don't raise doubt, and ten diseases for those who do, thus both imitating Ta Hui and doubling the stakes. Each collection of *Exhorta-*



tions in this volume has ten short chapters, one for each disease. Each chapter is at most two pages long.

The text is formulaic. All of the chapters in *Exhortations for Those Who Don't Rouse Doubt* begin the same way: "If you're unable to rouse doubt when practicing Zen, you may . . ." [insert description of disease, e.g., "fall into self-indulgent and wild ways"] and continue "this is simply your wavering mind; it is not Zen." Then there's a further description of the symptoms of the disease, ending with either a suggested course of action ("find a true Dharma friend"), a warning (e.g., "you'll become as one demon-possessed"), or the fruit of a cure ("When your Dharma eye opens, you'll see . . .").

The chapters in *Exhortations for Those Who Rouse Doubt* all begin, "Rousing doubt when practicing Zen, one accords with dharmakaya. Then . . . [name fruit of practice here, e.g., "the whole world is radiant without the slightest hindrance"]." This is followed by an explicit or implicit but . . . For example, "the whole world is radiant, without the slightest hindrance"; *but* "then you try to take control and can't let it go." And so on. Following the description of each error, Boshan states, "Sick through and through, this is not Zen." He then gives instruction on what to do, ending each chapter with either motivating questions ("How can you foolishly hold on to your ignorance . . .?"), or warnings ("You're but a fraud scratching the surface . . ."), or encouragement ("I (Boshan) want to be a dharma friend to him!").

Boshan is deeply immersed in Chinese Buddhist literary culture. This can make his writing seem at times surreal:

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Simply and easily turn and be transformed from a single blade of grass into a ten-foot-tall golden buddha. Otherwise, it will be like trying to row a boat by hammering down the oars, or trying to catch fish up a tree.

But it isn't surreal. Boshan is referencing stories and texts that his reader would easily have recognized—like when we talk about leaping tall buildings in a single bound, or of someone or something turning into a pumpkin. Being a 21st-century American who isn't a scholar of Chinese Buddhism, I have no idea what Boshan's references are. There is a gap here that I'm not sure any translation can truly bridge.

Jeff Shore's commentary, about the same length as Boshan's short text, provides some context. Aside from more fully discussing the experience or concept of great doubt, Shore discusses influences on Boshan, later teachings similar to Boshan's, experiences of modern practitioners and teachers in the light of Boshan and so on. I would have liked a little more. For example, I learned from Jess Row that the image of a blade of grass transforming into various things is an idiom that would have been known at the time; Shore simply mentions a Chan master named Tiantong as a source. But someone with different tastes than mine might be grateful that Shore does not go into detail on Boshan's sources.

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I don't know if Boshan is speaking in Shore's voice (after all, Shore is the translator), or if Shore's commentary is staying close to Boshan's voice, but the commentary somehow does not quite seem contemporary. To give one

example: "Illumine that and the essential work is done. Then the single saucer lamp is quite enough . . . Don't just follow my words; confirm it in your bones." Shore's language is as tightly strung as Boshan's and at times seems to come from the same era.

Rather strangely, Boshan doesn't really talk about doubt past its formulaic mention at the beginning of each chapter. (Shore does say more about it.) Instead, Boshan is demolishing many more than 20 mistaken notions about Zen practice—each section may seem to hinge on one, but in fact brings up many others. Whatever you think Zen practice is: it isn't. Whatever method you think will get you there: it won't. Whatever fruit you think you will attain: forget about it. Boshan's text ends with the warning words, "In Zen there is no sickness worse than that." On the other hand, Shore's commentary ends with the welcoming words "But that, too, will be the Dharma in its fullness."

Shore has performed a valuable service to the English-speaking Zen community by translating this book. But I can't recommend it unreservedly. Because of its terseness and its many arcane references, it will seem opaque to many contemporary readers. Don't expect to read it quickly—while the combined text and commentary only take up 80 pages, those 80 pages are incredibly dense. But for those folks who get dharma energy from reading old texts (I know I do) and have the time to put into it, reading one small section at a time, allowing each chapter and its commentary to sink in before moving on to the next, it can be quite rewarding. ♦



Photo: Francis Lau