

# Book Review

## *Master Ma's Ordinary Mind: The Sayings of Zen Master Mazu Daoyi*

By Fumio Yamada, translated by John Bellando

Wisdom, 2017, \$14.95

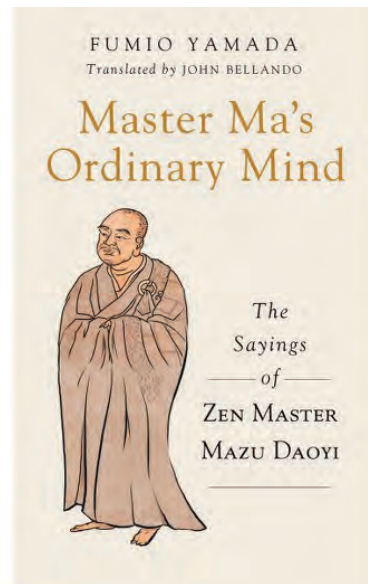
Review by Jess Row

There's a legend passed down in the Chinese Zen tradition that Mazu Daoyi, against Buddhist custom, was allowed to keep his family name—*Ma*馬, a very common surname meaning “horse”—because it suited him so well. (For clarification: “Mazu” is also written as “Ma-tzu,” “Ma Jo” or “Baso.”) In historical terms, Mazu is the essence of a founding father, the figure who bridges the early and mostly legendary era of transmission from Bodhidharma to Huineng with the era of “classical Chan,” that is, the Zen we still practice today, using teaching stories and practices attributed to him, his peers and his many descendants. This is why he's referred to as a “patriarch,” *zu* 祖 “Zen master,” *chanshi*, 禪師 the term used for other teachers of his era. The ideal of the Zen master who uses “strange words and extraordinary actions” begins with him.

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It's always struck me as a little odd that while many other Zen masters have had their recorded sayings—that is, their *yulu*, the traditional designation for an anthology of one master's teachings—published in English several times over, only one relatively hard-to-find (and now out of print) translation has ever appeared of the *Jiangxi Daoyi Chanshi Yulu*, the “Recorded Sayings of Master Daoyi of Jiangxi.” That translation is *Sun-Face Buddha*, by Cheng Chien Bhikshu. It may be that because Mazu is already well represented in the traditional Zen anthologies, none of the major translators or Buddhist publishers felt the need to produce a new version of his teachings; but it's been a major omission from the Zen texts available in English. Wisdom has recognized this by publishing *Master Ma's Ordinary Mind*, which is actually a translation of a translation: Professor Fumio Yamada's selection from Mazu's recorded sayings, with commentary, published originally in Japanese, then translated into English by John “Nick” Bellando, one of his students.

Bellando's translations of Yamada's translations are, in my reading, relatively accurate and a fair representation of the original. (The Chinese text is included in the book as well, which is a great help for those of us who can follow along.) It's impossible to “definitely” translate any text of this kind, because *yulu* stories—that is, kong-an—are so brief, pithy and sometimes ungrammatical, that even the reader in the original language has to engage in verbal as well as mental translation. Actual language-to-language translation has to be understood in the context of practice: this is why Zen Master Seung Sahn's commentary on the “Jōju's Dog” kong-an is crucial for understanding the meaning of Jōju's famous “Mu!” in our tradition. Other traditions—even other Korean Zen tradi-



tions—interpret and practice with the same kong-an very differently.

Since I've never read the entire *Jiangxi Daoyi Chanshi Yulu* in the original, and I never found a copy of Chien Bhikshu's book, some of these kong-an were new to me—and will be new to many English-language readers, as they're not preserved in Zen anthologies such as the *Gateless Gate (the Wumenguan or Mu Mun Kwan)* or the *Blue Cliff Record*. This is what makes Master Ma's Ordinary Mind so important. Here is one of the shorter ones:

One day while with Mazu, Zen Master Magu Baoche said, “What is the Great Nirvana like?”

“Sudden!”

“Just what is ‘sudden?’”

“Look at water!”

This translation requires some explanation. The word “sudden” or *ji* 急 also means “urgent” or “impatient” or “fast, rapid and violent.” Colloquially, at least in modern Chinese, it specifically applies to water, as in a strong current or fast-moving river. When Mazu says 看水, “Look at water!” he could be saying, “Look at the rain!” or “Look at that stream over there!” or even, “Look out, you're about to get wet!” (Although there are definite and indefinite articles in classical Chinese, they're often not used). Each of these possibilities could be worked through in kong-an practice.

Unfortunately, Fumio Yamada interprets this kong-an not as a challenge to Zen Master Magu, or the student, but as an interpretive, pedagogical gesture: “The moment that flows into nirvana—the moment's *suddenness*—is most certainly what Mazu wants to teach,” he writes:

Water is constantly flowing. However, if you look at a fixed point, in a moment the water flows up to you, and in a moment it flows away. This flow is the same at any given moment, regardless of how fast the water is flowing. That moment is

(Continued from p. 23)

often in the Pali canon when human beings are referred to. One particularly convincing example she cites is a passage recommending that a man transcend his masculinity, which is paralleled by a passage recommending that a woman transcend her femininity. Gross also adopts a comparative view of Buddhist attitudes toward gender: she contrasts the unequal Western view of parenthood (for millennia, it was assumed that the woman who gave birth was a passive recipient of the male life force with no generative contribution) to the many Buddhist passages in which mothers and fathers are equally venerated and to whom the child owes equal debt. Western monotheistic religions, she argues, consider women to be literally the second sex, while the Buddhist description of humanity from the beginning consists of two sexes.

Gross was a pioneer at the intersection of women's studies and religious studies, with a deep knowledge of Buddhism both as scholarship and as practice: originally a student of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, she was ordained as a senior teacher in the Karma Kagyu tradition in 2005. The tense of the previous sentence is crucial here. She died of a massive stroke in 2015, leaving *Buddhism beyond Gender* far from finished. It was missing chapters that she had spoken about writing, in particular a chapter on gender fluidity and transsexuals. Her friend and colleague Judith Simmer-Brown did the final organizing and editing of the manuscripts that Gross left behind. Not knowing what Simmer-Brown faced, I can't comment on whether she could have done better. But many sections of this book are not worthy of the subtle and

important points that are embedded in it. When she moves into contemporary material, Gross loses focus, oversimplifies, and becomes a somewhat testy cultural critic. I wish this book had been edited with a heavier hand, although I can easily understand why Simmer-Brown was hesitant to do so.

And the organization seems strange. Smack in the middle come the most powerful lines, which should have been its conclusion.

What does all this “gender talk” have to do with “real dharma”? Everything! “Gender talk” is not fundamentally a project of social liberation, although it also facilitates social liberation. It is an extremely close and deep way of studying the self, which, we are told, is the only way to forget the self and thus attain “the way of enlightenment.” Therefore, I conclude that all the Buddhists who claimed they believed in egolessness but were better Buddhists than me because they had no issues with conventional gender arrangements simply had never taken seriously the Buddha's instruction about every conditioned phenomenon, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.” “When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness.”

To make this point, to extend this point past the individual and to the communal, and to base it in classical Buddhist texts, is a major contribution to contemporary Buddhist discourse. I hope we all heed it. ♦

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eternity, nirvana. It defies any attempt at human control. This is the moment to which Mazu is calling our attention.

Anyone who has much experience swimming or boating in moving water knows that, on a practical level, it's simply not true that “flow is the same . . . regardless of how fast the water is flowing.” Sometimes “flow” is a river at flood stage; sometimes it's a barely perceptible trickle in a tiny rivulet in the desert. Even if it were a helpful observation, however, Professor Yamada's commentary misses the point of kong-an practice, which is about realization, not explication. What does Magu see right now? How can you show it to me?

Here's another wonderful Mazu kong-an that was new to me:

Someone asked, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?”

Mazu responded, “What does this mean, here and now?”

This is another instance where no single translation will suffice. Mazu's response is probably best translated literally as, “What is the meaning of this present moment?” or “What is the meaning of what's happening right now?”

Mazu's response is pure Zen teaching that really shouldn't require any commentary at all; and Yamada says, correctly but superfluously, “The meaning [of Bodhidharma's coming from the West] is not that of an event in the distant past; it's the meaning of your present state of being.”

*Master Ma's Ordinary Mind* is a much-needed book, in that it makes all of Mazu's kong-ans available in one place and in print; it also includes a brief biographical sketch by Andy Ferguson, author of the indispensable *Zen's Chinese Heritage* (Wisdom, 2011). (It doesn't contain Mazu's longer dharma discourses, which are translated in *Sun-Face Buddha*.) But it would be a more useful book for Zen students—obviously, the primary audience—if it had commentary from a contemporary Zen master, or more detailed material on the relationship between Mazu, his teachers, and his many dharma heirs. My advice to my fellow students is to stick with the kong-ans themselves—and bring them into the interview room, where Master Ma's mind is always at work. ♦

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