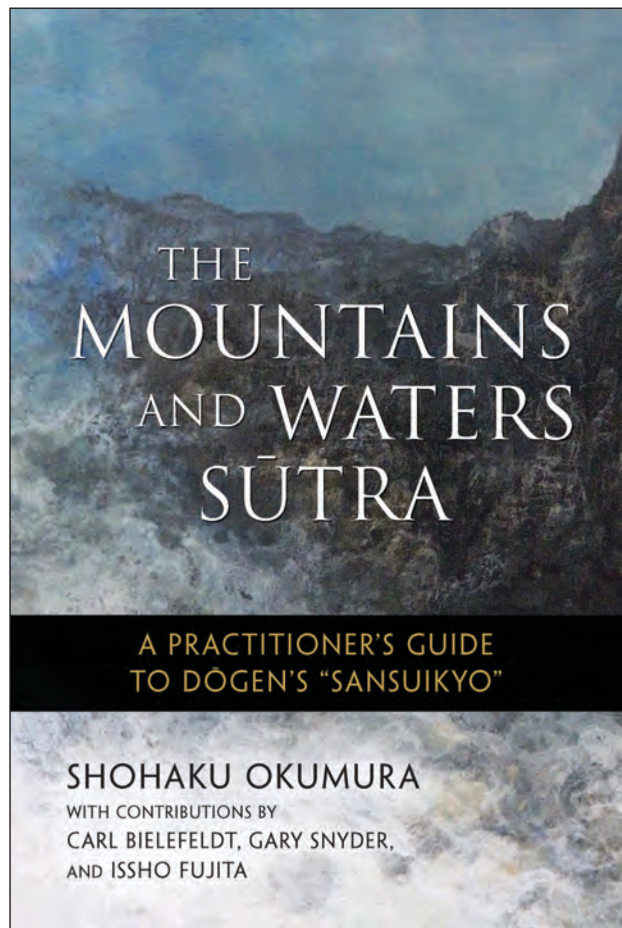
Book Review

The Mountains and Waters Sutra: A Practitioner's Guide to Dogen's "Sansuikyo"
By Shohaku Okumura
Wisdom, 2018, $17.95
Review by Jess Row

"Just as grammarians begin with reading the alphabet, the Buddha teaches doctrines that students can bear," the Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna once wrote. "To some he teaches doctrines for the reversal of sin; to some, in order to win merit; to some, doctrines based on duality. . . . To some, he teaches the profound, frightening to the fearful, having an essence of emptiness and compassion, means of achieving highest enlightenment." Whenever I think of that last category—"the profound, frightening to the fearful"—I think of Dogen's *Sansuikyo*, the "Mountains and Waters Sutra," perhaps the most challenging chapter in his massive anthology of writings, the *Shobogenzo*, or "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye."

If "Mountains and Waters Sutra" followed the traditional form of a sutra, it would begin with "Thus have I heard," and go on to describe a Buddha, bodhisattva, or other holy being delivering teachings on a certain subject (presumably, in this case, mountains and waters). In the *Sansuikyo*, it's the mountains and waters doing the teaching. Using Zen Master Seung Sahn's terms, we might say that Dogen is interested in a very precise, painstaking investigation of what it means to follow the progression that goes "like this," "just like this," "subject just-like-this," "object just-like-this." In other words, how can we directly connect to reality, outside of our own limited perceptions? Take the word *mountains*, Dogen says. We think we know what the word means, but then a Zen teacher says, "The blue mountains are constantly walking," and we no longer know what it means. What happens then?

> Even when we have the eyes to see mountains as the appearance of grass and trees, earth and stone, fences and walls, this is nothing to doubt, nothing to be moved by; it is not the complete appearance of the mountains. Even when there appears an occasion in which the mountains are seen as the splendor of the seven treasures, this is still not the real refuge. Even when they appear to us as the realm of the practice of the way of the buddhas, this is not necessarily something to be desired. . . . Each of these appearances is the particular objective and subjective result of past karma; they are not the karma of the way of the buddhas and ancestors but narrow, one-sided views. . . . There are words that are free from such realms: they are "the blue mountains constantly walking" and "the East Mountain moving over the water."



Most Zen students are very familiar with the importance of tautological statements: "the wall is white, the floor is brown" means "the wall is white, the floor is brown." For Dogen, this is a little too easy; it allows us to assume that we know what *wall* and *white*, *floor*, and *brown* mean by simply describing them on the level of conventional appearance. "East Mountain moving over the water is just 'East Mountain moving over the water'" is something else again. It's not a metaphor for enlightenment, and it's not a reaffirmation of conventional language. It's something like enlightenment *in* language.

The text of the *Sansuikyo* is short (about 11 pages in English translation) but it distills all of Dogen's studies and his many hard years of practice, in Japan and China, where he traveled as an eager young monk looking for the essence of Zen, only to be passed from teacher to teacher in the Linji school, finding a lot of shouting and riddles and sectarian backbiting, none of which seemed to represent the dharma. After two years of searching, he found Tiantong Rujing, an austere and withdrawn master in the Caodong lineage, who refused all of the honors and official positions common to Zen masters of Song-Dynasty China, and who taught a single-minded, minimalist approach to Zen called *zhiguan dazuo*: "Only stopping and sitting." Translated as *shikantaza*, this became the foundation for Dogen's Soto school, which became the great rival

of Rinzai (Linji) Zen in medieval Japan.

Dogen's teacher, Rujing, refused to accept the common description of Zen as "not depending on words," which was the central teaching of the Linji school, and Dogen, in *Sansuikyo*, doesn't mince words in his criticism of Linji teachers who used barks or shouts or short riddles as their only teaching. "Their idea is that any saying that is involved with thought is not a Zen saying of the buddhas and ancestors," he writes. "They are to be pitied. They do not know that thought is words; they do not know that words are liberated from thought."

"Dogen tells us here that eliminating thought is not our practice and is not enlightenment," Shohaku Okumura writes in his commentary. "Instead, we need to understand how to use this ability as a tool to perceive reality more deeply and intimately." He uses the analogy of a map, which is always distorted because it's a two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional space. "Zazen," he writes, "is not a method to correct the distortions . . . or throw the map away. Rather, our zazen places our entire body on the earth, on the ground of reality, not on the map. . . . When we see that this map is not perfect but distorted, we are liberated from our own system of opinions."

Okumura is a fascinating teacher—a Soto Zen monk who has primarily worked in overseas Japanese organizations but has a longstanding relationship with the San Francisco Zen Center. In the Soto school in Japan, Dogen is studied formally and at great length, but because his writings are considered so challenging even in Japanese, very few Japanese Zen teachers are willing to present their own commentaries in English. This is why, over the last fifty years, most of the Dogen translations and commentaries in English have come from American Zen teachers. Okumura's approach is much more detailed, drawing on the full range of Buddhist teachings Dogen was intimately familiar with: the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Abhidharmakosa* (Vasubandhu's encyclopedic teachings on Buddhist psychology), the *Kalahavivada Sutta*, and so on. Okumura also takes the time to explain Dogen's creative use of Japanese and Chinese words and expressions—which in this case is essential because almost nothing in the *Sunsuikyo* should be taken at face value.

It's especially helpful to see this book labeled a "practitioner's guide," because it's meant to be read and reread over time. *Sansuikyo* for me is one of a small number of texts—others include the *Sandokai*, the *Xin xin ming*, Uisang's *Ocean Seal Inscription*, and poems by Han Shan and Su Dongpo—that I return to over and over because of the sense of wonder they evoke. Wonder as the essence of the Buddhadharma, so to speak. Shohaku Okumura's book is a great way to open that door. ◆

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