

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/>

*A Review of *The Other Side of Zen: A
Social History of Sōtō Zen Buddhism in
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A Review of *The Other Side of Zen: A Social History of Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan*

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The Other Side of Zen: A Social History of Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan. By Duncan Ryūken Williams. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. xiv + 241 pages. ISBN: 0-691-11928-7

This long-awaited volume by Duncan Williams is based on his outstanding Harvard University doctoral dissertation, “Representations of Zen: A Social and Institutional History of Sōtō Zen Buddhism in Edo Japan” (2000), also recommended to readers since it contains valuable material which did not find its way into the book version. *The Other Side of Zen* makes a great contribution to our understanding of the history of Zen in the early modern or Tokugawa (Edo) era of Japanese history (1600-1868). It goes a long way toward filling a crucial historical gap between William Bodiford’s seminal work on the Kamakura era (1200-1600), *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 1993), and works on the Meiji era (1868-1212) including Richard Jaffe’s *Neither Monk Nor Layman: Clerical Marriage in Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Princeton University Press, 2001). It also complements Helen Baroni’s *Ōbaku Zen: The Emergence of the Third Sect of Zen in Tokugawa Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2000).

Williams has two overarching concerns, one specific and one general. The more specific concern is to explain how Sōtō Zen rose from a relatively small school at the beginning of the Tokugawa era to become the single largest school of Buddhism in Japan by the early eighteenth century. In dealing with this issue, the approach in *The Other Side of Zen* is particularly notable for making the most of recently disclosed sources that reveal the role of Sōtō Zen as a popular religious movement. “Indebted to the many local history and temple history projects that have emerged in the past twenty years,” Williams points out, “the representation of the Sōtō Zen tradition offered here was made possible by newly discovered letters, temple logbooks, miracle tales, villager’s diaries, fund-raising donor lists, talismans, and tombstones” (123).

The second, more general concern is with moving interpretations of Zen away from an emphasis on the image of Zen monks serenely entranced in meditation, which was in fact rarely practiced by Tokugawa era Zen priests, to an emphasis on their performance of diverse kinds of ritual practices. Eschewing a focus on the great literary Sōtō monks of the era, such as Manzan Dōhaku and Menzan Zuihō, who are examples of what he calls “‘ceramic plate priests,’ extraordinary exemplars brought out of the cupboard of the Sōtō Zen tradition in terms of proselytization ... or on special occasions ...” (119), Williams concentrates on the aspects of Zen that negotiated boundaries between this world and the next through funerary ceremonies, between illness and wellness through healing rites, and between the other-world and practical benefits through pilgrimages and talismans.

I will first consider the substance of Williams’s findings regarding popular religiosity in the middle chapters of the book (chapters 2-5) and then comment briefly on the value of his social historical approach for the discourse, or in this case anti-discourse, concerning the nature — and different sides — of Zen as emphasized in the opening and concluding chapters.

Following the discussion in Chapter 1 on the significance of undertaking a social historical analysis (part of Williams’ more general concern), the next chapter shows how several key factors that unfolded at the dawn of the Tokugawa era attracted followers and bolstered the number of parish households. These factors included the participation of Sōtō Zen in the anti-Christian campaign and the implementation of the temple-registration system. By the mid-seventeenth century, the Sōtō school “was able to retain this membership generation after generation through a set of ritual and economic obligations that bound the parish household to each of its nearly 17, 500 parish temples” (22). At the end of the second and throughout the third chapter, Williams explores the role of Zen as part of “funerary Buddhism” (*sōshiki bukkyō*) in bestowing posthumous ordination names (*kaimyō*) and developing other forms of managing the dead, carried out in large part as a means of fund-raising.

The price to be paid for the expanded role of the death cult, Williams shows, is that Sōtō Zen helped legitimate methods of discrimination against social outcasts and women. The result was the fostering of an apparently hypocritical outlook whereby some parishioners (upper-class males) were guaranteed the attainment of a state equal to that of Buddha at the time of death, while the downtrodden were instructed to expect immense suffering without relief in the afterlife. In supporting the role of the *Ketsubonkyō* (Blood Pool Hell Sutra), which damned women to a state of pollution, priests informed the sufferers that only the efficacious cleansing rituals and chants of the Sōtō school could provide salvific powers, performed on demand as initiated by significant family donations.

The fourth and fifth chapters analyze various ways that Zen offered other av-

venues for parishioners and adherents to receive the benefits of its rites. In a detailed case study of the prayer temple at Daiyūzan Saijōji temple in Odawara, Williams gives a fabulous depiction of religious life involving pilgrimage routes to festivals and the acquiring of potent talismans to cure ailments, ward off misfortunes, and gain practical benefits. These practices are centered on the ceremony for displaying a hidden deity (*kaichō*), the statue of the flame-engulfed Dōryō *tengu*-goblin riding on a flying white fox. This section is followed by a careful analysis of the importance of the manufacture and sale of “sacred medicine” in the Sōtō school, in particular, the panacean herbal pill, Gedokuen.

The use of Gedokuen as a cure for everything from fatigue and flu to gonorrhea was originally based on a legend of Dōgen’s recovery from illness during his travels in returning from his trip to China while accompanied by Dōshō through the intercession of the rice fertility deity, Inari. Williams points out that this account appears in the *Teiho Kenzeiki*, the 1753 annotated version of the traditional sectarian biography, the *Kenzeiki*. “What is striking here,” he writes, “is that none of the handcopied versions [from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries included in a critical edition edited by the modern scholar Kawamura Kōdō] includes the story about Dōshō and the medicine” (94). However, this is not so startling because Kawamura has demonstrated that it is just one of over a dozen discrepancies between the original *Kenzeiki* and the more hagiographical entries in the *Teiho Kenzeiki*. The chapter includes two other fascinating case studies of temples in Tokyo, one involving the “splinter-removing” Jizō (Togenuki Jizō) enshrined at Kōganji temple and the other dealing with smallpox prevention talismans associated with “Mawari Jizō” at Senryūji temple.

Regarding the book’s more general concern with focusing attention on the role of popular religiosity in the spread of Sōtō Zen, Williams does an admirable job that contributes to the anti-discourse of deconstructing the stereotypical view of Zen as remote and reclusive. However, the book could perhaps benefit from a more sequential rather than purely thematic structure which makes it difficult for readers to get a sense of the chronological development of the Sōtō school.

I question the title, derived from an influential article on medieval Japanese culture by Barbara Ruch. By using the definite article and singular noun, rather than “Other Sides of Zen,” — or even “Sides of Zen” — Williams implies that there is a “first side,” but what is this? If it is the notion of meditative Zen, then he is far from the first to challenge the apparent simulacra that has been constructed around the tradition. If the first side of Zen is the Rinzai school as the subtitle might suggest, or the elite monks of Sōtō that are not discussed here, then he needs to develop a more nuanced view. This is hinted by the comment regarding the Daiyūzan deity to the effect that beliefs in “this Zen monk-turned-tengu attest to the power and vitality of Sōtō Zen prayer temples that reveal a different side of the Sōtō Zen tra-

dition from both the austere monasticism and funerary Zen.” Indeed, save for the Manzans and Menzans — although it should be pointed out that Menzan himself was the one responsible for inserting unsubstantiated hagiographical elements in the *Teiho Kenzeiki*, including the Gedokuen legend — Williams has exposed the reader to a rich range of materials revolving around multiple perspectives of what it meant to practice Tokugawa era Zen Buddhism. We need not even ask which side is he on.