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The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen's Three Hundred Kōans

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A Review of *The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen's Three Hundred Kōans*

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The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen's Three Hundred Kōans. Commentary and Verse by John Daido Loori. Translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi and John Daido Loori. Boston: Shambhala, 2005. 472 pages. ISBN 590302427 (cloth).

The question is posed: "When do the teachers of old get stuck?" One Zen master's reply: "When the thief slips into an empty room." This brief exchange is one of over 1700 classical kōans to have been preserved, but you will not find it in the *Gateless Gate*, the *Blue Cliff Record* or the *Book of Serenity*. The same goes for this one:

> Xuansha one day sent a monastic to deliver a letter to Xuefeng. Xuefeng received the monastic while he was teaching, opened the letter, and found a blank piece of paper. He showed it to the assembly line and said, "Do you understand this?" After a while he said, "Can't you see what he says? Virtuous persons have the same understanding, even though they are one thousand li apart." The monastic went back and reported this to Xuansha. Xuansha said, "The old man on the mountain passed by me without knowing it."

These two kōans are cases 196 and 48 from Eihei Dōgen's Chinese-language *Mana Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye), first published in the eighteenth century and then, after languishing in obscurity, rediscovered in 1934. It has been authenticated, however, only recently. The *Mana Shōbōgenzō* consists of 300 kōans gathered by Dōgen during his time spent in

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China between 1223 and 1227. Throughout his life, Dōgen drew from this compilation when writing his dharma essays. His more well-known, Japanese-language *Kana Shōbōgenzō* makes use of less than a third of these cases.

Kazuaki Tanahashi and John Daido Loori's translation of the Chinese-language *Shōbōgenzō* may be the most significant event for English-language readers of Dōgen since *Moon in a Dewdrop* (1985), Tanahashi's superb selection of Dōgen's writings. While Tanahashi and Loori's scholarship certainly impresses, the primary orientation of their project is practical. Dōgen provided neither commentary nor verse; therefore Loori—Zen priest, photographer and prolific author—has written commentaries and capping verses for all 300 cases. Loori intends this book as "a kōan collection for the twenty-first century" (p. xl).

The book includes an Introduction and Prologue by Loori as well as generous and helpful cross-references to other kōan sources and Dōgen texts, lineage charts, biographical notes and a glossary of Buddhist terms. It would have been better for the Introduction and Prologue to have been combined. In the former, Loori provides textual background on the heels of Tanahashi's translator's note which does the same, creating some confusing redundancy (meanwhile, the jacket sleeve gives the publication date of the *Mana Shōbōgenzō* as 1766, not 1767). It is also unnecessarily confusing to spread out over two sections Dogen's biography and his relationship to kōans. A clearer, more succinct overview can be found in Loori's essay on Dogen in the recent anthology, *Sitting with Kōans: Essential Writings on the Zen Practice of Kōan Study* (2006).

Loori argues that kōans were of great importance to Dōgen even though Dōgen's writings contain several criticisms of kōan study. Loori, however, distinguishes between kōan study (which relies on the intellect) and "formal kōan introspection in the context of a vital teacher-student relationship" (p. xxv). He discusses Dōgen's engagement with kōans in the

Kana Shōbōgenzō and finds therein a "unique commentary style" (p. xxvi), detecting—perhaps provocatively—the influence of the Five Ranks of Master Dongshan. Loori looks at commentaries on common cases from Dōgen, Wansong (the *Book of Serenity*) and Yuanwu (the *Blue Cliff Record*), and he finds the latter two to be comparatively linear in their approaches, whereas Dōgen relies more heavily upon *mitsugo* ("intimate words" designed for intuitive, instant transmission).

For his own commentaries, Loori aims "to embody Dōgen's unique perspective, applying it to situations that modern day practitioners face" (p. xxxv), and if this sounds hopelessly vague, the results are so absorbing that one soon stops worrying about exactly how Dōgen would have gone about it. Consider the way Loori handles Dongshan's "Three Pounds of Flax," case 172 in this text:

> Zen master Shouchu of Dongshan was asked by a monastic, "What is Buddha?"
>
> Dongshan said, "Three pounds of flax."
>
> The monastic had realization and bowed.

Here, in full, is Loori's typically brief, good humored commentary:

> This is an old case that has been echoing in the halls of Zen monasteries for centuries, and yet there have been only a handful who have been able to penetrate Dongshan's meaning. People immediately rush to the words to understand, not realizing that words and speech are just vessels to convey the truth—not yet the truth itself. If you take Dongshan's "Three pounds of flax" to mean that this, in and of itself, is Buddha, then you have missed his intent by a hundred thousand miles. We should understand at the outset that "Three pounds of flax" is not just a reply to the question about Buddha, and it cannot be understood in terms of Buddha. This being the case, then you tell me, what is Buddha?

Loori abstains from engaging with the particular image of flax. Moreover, he concludes with Shouchu's initial question--thereby making an *enso* (Zen circle) out his commentary. Loori makes use of the flax in his capping verse, which begins: "Seeing a gap opening up in the monastic's question / the old master moved quickly to stuff it with flax" (231).

Occasionally, Loori's approach is more synthetic, though his selection and compression make for active, rather than passive, borrowings. Here is a familiar case:

> Once Nanquan saw the monastics of the eastern and western halls arguing over a cat. He held up the cat and said to the monastics, "If you can say a turning word, I will not kill it."
> No one in the assembly could answer. So Nanquan cut the cat in two. Later he told the story to Zhaozhou. Zhaozhou took off his straw sandals, put them on his head, and walked away.

Wansong, in his commentary upon the same kōan in the *Book of Serenity*, notes, "Nanquan didn't offer them forgiveness or encouragement, nor did he give them admonition and punishment." Here is Loori: "Nanquan does not turn to forgiveness, encouragement, reprimand, or chastisement." Wansong continues: "At that moment all sentient and inanimate beings in the whole universe are alike in Nanquan's hands begging for their lives." Loori favors poetic compression: "[Nanquan] holds up the whole community at the edge of his diamond sword." Loori also draws from Yuanwu (the *Blue Cliff Record*). Yuanwu: "This story does not lie in killing or not killing." Loori: "This kōan is not about killing or not killing but, rather, about transformation." One also detects the influence of Hakuin and Tenkei (*Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record*), whose words echo in Loori's closing comments. Hakuin writes, "Nanquan's killing a cat cannot be reached by way of concepts or verbal explanation"; Tenkei concludes, "What is this method? What is this realm? Focus your eyes on it at once and look." Loori: "How do you say a turning word that would save a cat? The turning points

of these two adepts are subtle and profound. Leap free of the words if you really want to see them." Loori's remark regarding the kōan's conclusion (Zhaozhou with his sandals on his head) is both highly original and a useful way of understanding Loori's use of his predecessors: "The active edges of teacher and disciple conform seamlessly" (pp. 243-244).

Loori's efforts to strike a modern tone occasionally distract, as in the use of "awesome" in its contemporary sense or when Linji the monastic "sport[s] a major attitude" (p. 239). Such moments are rare, however, and are more than compensated by Loori's magnificent capping verses, which may be at the top of his many significant achievements in this collection. These range from seeming whimsy:

> The mountain monastic's fault—
> inexhaustible, truly inexhaustible.
> I think of Annie Oakley:
> two silver dollars from the hip,
> with a single bullet. (#206)

to delicate beauty:

> Holding up has a meaning so subtle and profound
> that it has never been communicated.
> Aimlessly, the spring breeze, of itself,
> knows how to enter the scars of the burning. (#371)

Tanahashi and Loori's scholarship and creativity are well suited to this ambitious, deeply important project. English-language readers of Dōgen will find this book an inexhaustible source of pleasure. Above all, *The True Dharma Eye* should speak to contemporary practitioners.