Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics
Volume 20, 2013

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Purifying Zen: Watsuji Tetsurō's Shamon Dōgen

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Purifying Zen: Watsuji Tetsurō's Shamon Dōgen. Watsuji Tetsurō, translated by Steve Bein. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011, 174 pages; ISBN 978-0824835569 (Paperback), $24.00.

In *Purifying Zen*, Steve Bein brings together two giants in Japanese thought with a translation of a groundbreaking work. The subject of this book is Zen Master Dōgen (道元禅師, 1200-1253), founder of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism and arguably one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Japan. The writer of the original Japanese work is Watsuji Tetsurō (和辻哲郎, 1889-1960), one of the most widely known modern Japanese philosophers and ethicist of the highest rank. The book Bein translates is Watsuji's *Shamon Dōgen* (沙門道元, 1926), the book that rescued Dōgen from obscurity and thrust him into the spotlight of world philosophy. Now, more than eighty-five years after the publication of Watsuji's landmark work, it is finally available to English readers.

I think this book will particularly interest two kinds of readers: those interested in Buddhism and Dōgen, and those interested in modern Japanese philosophy and Watsuji's thought. I shall briefly explain the contents of this translation, then move on to the key points that might

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be of interest to these two groups. I shall end with some technical comments on the translation.

A Brief Overview

Bein begins by introducing this translation, describing the two thinkers, Watsuji and Dōgen, and their encounter. This is one of the highlights of the book. The descriptions are detailed and vibrant, giving the reader a real sense of what Watsuji and Dōgen were like *as human beings*—Watsuji's conflicted relationship with nationalism and his unconventional choices in scholarship, Dōgen's struggles and breakthroughs, and the personal resonances between the two. The introductions also help situate this text amidst the voluminous writings of both Dōgen and Watsuji.

The actual translation covers chapters one to nine. The first chapter is Watsuji's apologia, where he shares his basic approach to religion, culture, and philosophy. Chapters two to eight focus largely on *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* (正法眼蔵随聞記), a collection of sayings by Dōgen that Watsuji himself edited and arranged. Here Watsuji tries to bring out the character of this Zen master as seen in his views on topics like spiritual practice, compassion, and society. Chapter nine is on Dōgen's masterpiece of philosophical erudition, the *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼蔵). Watsuji focuses on four fascicles—*Raihai tokuzui*, *Busshō*, *Dōtoku*, and *Kattō*—the choice of which is rather unusual, and tells us about Watsuji as much as it tells us about Dōgen.

Bein closes this book with another contribution, "Reading *Shamon Dōgen*: A Tourist's Guide," in which he analyzes Watsuji's contributions, contrasting Watsuji's reading of Dōgen with other approaches more common to the English-language literature. He also tries to situate the points in *Shamon Dōgen* within the rest of Watsuji's works, focusing on its connections to Watsuji's masterpiece, *Ethics* (*rinrigaku* 倫理学, 1937-

1949). This book is also well-equipped with extensive notes and bibliographic listings.

Dōgen in Japan

Allow me to proceed to some key points in this work. As Bein stresses in his "Tourist Guide," Watsuji presents an approach to Dōgen's Buddhism that is quite different from the works on Dōgen in English. Thus it is interesting in light of the phenomenon of *modern* Buddhism, because Watsuji is a modern Japanese philosopher, but writing for a Japanese audience. Watsuji wrestled with (western) modernity as much as any other thinker did, as is evidenced from his early works on existentialism to his mature works on *Ethics as a Study of Ningen*. But as Bein points out, Watsuji's emphasis seems quite different from the view of Dōgen in Buddhist modernity. (For my usage of the term "modern Buddhism," see David McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 2008.)

I wish to highlight two key points where this can be seen. First is Watsuji repeatedly emphasizes that Dōgen's Buddhism is a rejection of the secular orders of the world. In recounting various episodes from Dōgen's biography, Watsuji highlights Dōgen's outright refusal of the secular fixation on wealth and renown. Poverty is taken to be essential to practice (45). Poverty as a *social* problem is taken as unessential, as justice is not Dōgen's concern (49). Furthermore, the growth of Buddhism is seen as independent of its spread in culture—what matters is not the number of believers or practitioners but the wholeheartedness of whomever practices (50). In his stories on Master Myōzen (1184-1225) and the monk who needed to leave his mother (74-76), we see that for Dōgen even secular virtues like loyalty and filial piety do not have any authority over a monk, who must put the *Dharma* above all things.

These practical examples of overcoming worldly values are theoretically grounded via Watsuji's reading of Dōgen's *Raihai-tokuzui.* In

this fascicle, Watsuji highlights Dōgen's refusal of all forms of social stratification—in terms of gender, power, economics, even species—toward a spiritual egalitarianism. But furthermore, Dōgen goes beyond equality and argues for a *spiritual* aristocracy, where a person's true value is measured by how seriously one upholds the *Dharma*. This near hostility toward worldly values seems quite different from the secularized "lay Buddhism" in the west. Also, a lot of this is clearly in response to problems particular to Japanese Buddhism in Dōgen's and Watsuji's time—issues that might provide an interesting contrast to Western Buddhism or a point of comparison with the problems of Christian institutions.

This leads us to the second point: Watsuji stresses that at the core of Zen practice through which one upholds the *Dharma* lie *faith* and *obedience*. It is the personality of the patriarchs that drives the Buddhist forward: "'Practice' is the abandonment of all old views, all our current analyses, and all of our desires, in order to follow the words and deeds of the patriarchs" (53). How we practice (even *zazen*) is shaped not by what "makes sense" or what is "scientifically proven," but by what the patriarchs themselves did. This stress is very different from the rational, scientific trends in Buddhism today, instead emphasizing a "blind obedience in the patriarchs" (54) that may conflict with the anti-dogmatic and protestant sentiments that drive much of modern Buddhism.

This faith becomes more extreme in the presence of a master to whom one must have absolute obedience. When one has given oneself to a master, there is no autonomy that the practitioner keeps for him/herself. And the idea of criticizing one's master is unthinkable:

> If the *teacher's own words* don't suit you, why did you choose that person as a teacher in the first place? Further, if you are using your own opinions to criticize your teacher, then you are caught up in endless distraction. Once you have a teacher, you must throw away all your

> own views and defer to him regardless of whether or not he suits you. (57)

While this again clashes with the modern spirit of autonomy (which was in turn shaped by centuries of clerical domination), perhaps it points out something of contemporary importance: If reason isn't enough to guide us to enlightenment, why use reason to criticize the very people who help us go beyond what reason can achieve? While there are perhaps occasions when rational criticism is necessary, an overreliance on it may be a mistake, as Watsuji points out. As he stresses, "The innermost meaning of the practice of the patriarchs is not transmitted by fixed general concepts: it is transmitted as the strength of a living personality" (56). And it is faith in that living personality that will guide us, not reason.

The outright rejection of worldly values and the focus on faith differ greatly from common trends in modern western Buddhism, and as such while they may be difficult for the western reader to appreciate, they also lend the opportunity to rethink the presuppositions that western modernity bestows. However, I must warn that noting these differences in Watsuji's reading from western ones is important, one must be very careful when trying to account for these differences. Some differences might be cultural or historical (like Watsuji's criticism of Japanese monks) but others might simply be personal and tied with Watsuji's own ideas. Let us move on and examine things as they pertain directly to Watsuji.

Another Side of Watsuji

For the readers who are interested in Japanese philosophy in general or Watsuji in particular, this new translation also has much to offer. I focus on two main and one minor points.

First, in the previous point on faith and obedience there is critique of individuality: "Clearly there is no concern at all for individuality here. Whether or not one imitates, whether or not one follows, grasping the eternal truth is the only important thing. This does not mean the disposal of individuality but rather the exultation of it" (57). It seems as if individuality is only meaningful if one throws out one's differences (in opinion and sentiment) and submerges oneself into the totality of Buddhist patriarchs via one's master. Bein reads this quite positively as leaving behind egocentric individuality and lifting up authentic individuality (140). But I think this point is more controversial than it seems. Watsuji has been heavily criticized for reducing the individual to a functionary of the whole, such that individuation contributes nothing individual to the totality it returns to (see Sakai Naoki's *Translation and Subjectivity: On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, 1997)—an empty "authenticity." Watsuji also clearly rejects any form of irreducible particularity in the individual in the second volume of his *Ethics*. Is this reading of Dōgen not a precursor of that?

However, Watsuji's reading of Dōgen's *Kattō* tells a different story. Here he highlights that grasping the truth, even in face-to-face transmission, is particular to the individual. These "entanglements" are not a hindrance to the *Dharma* but the very means by which we learn and practice the *Dharma*. "When we understand entanglement in this way, I think the reason the Buddha-Dharma exists in the form of unending entanglements becomes clear, for though each of the patriarchs attains enlightenment, each attains his own enlightenment" (115). This sort of a reading would actually acknowledge the fundamental individuality that remains even after one has surrendered to the totality of the Buddhas and the patriarchs—an individuality that makes conflict and entanglement irreducible to a *wa* 和 (harmonious whole).

A second point that illuminates much of Watsuji's later work is in Watsuji's preface in the first chapter. Here Watsuji tries to defend his attempt, as a layman, to understand Dōgen, and to use his understanding

of Dōgen to further understand Japanese culture. What we see here is a peek into his view of religion and culture: He acknowledges that religious truth transcends society and history, a religious core that we touch only through direct experience (29). But at the same time, religion only concretely exists as "particularized expressions of religious truth, not an existing religious truth itself" (30). This means that Buddhism and Christianity are both socio-historically particular (and corollary to that, imposing it as universal would be a violence to other particular cultural forms). This view presages his view of religion and culture in the second volume of *Ethics*.

But he also suggests something with a radicality that is lost in his later writings:

> We must accept several true religions. Because their foundations are equal—in other words, because each of them expresses the absolute being—they are all made eternal and divine. But since we accept all of them, we cannot belong to any of them. Thus, we look for a new god. We see both Christ's God and Shinran's Buddha as symbolic expressions, then seek out a god that is revealed in each of these, but that will never be completely revealed.

If one fully realizes the particularity of one's religion, one has already gone beyond this religion—one can no longer remain within that religious totality with an uncritical sense of absoluteness. But does this not hold true for any relative totality and its values? Does this not hold true even for the state? For Watsuji himself saw clearly the relativity of climates, histories, and nations—but struggled with articulating a notion of a trans-national mode of being. Perhaps this is a hint that Watsuji was definitely thinking about it, at least in its logical form.

As an additional, third, but minor point, *Shamon Dōgen* also shows Watsuji's penchant for using Hegelian terms to appropriate Buddhist

ideas. In his reading of *Shōbōgenzō*, he sees expression of truth as the self-expression and self-development of *logos* (109), casting-off body-mind as *Aufhebung* (110), and the development of *Dharma* through contradiction as a dialectical movement (115). This definitely foreshadows the Buddhist-inspired but heavily Hegelian logic that he will employ in his systematic ethics.

Technical Notes on the Translation

Bein's rendering of Watsuji is smooth and eloquent (as Watsuji's Japanese is) and free from any stiffness that some translations suffer from. But there are just a few words and phrases that I have reservations about. First, in the case of very technical words that Watsuji employs in his system, I would have kept other translations of Watsuji in mind. For instance, I would have used negation (*hitei* 否定) rather than denial, and self-return (*jikokanki* 自己還帰) rather than recurrence in order to show the connection with the logic Watsuji uses in his later work and its Hegelianisms (see 115). Double-negation and self-return are the very key words on which his systematic ethics was built, and I fear "double-denial" and the "recurrence of emptiness" do not work quite as well. Also, I would have translated *mubusshō* 無仏性 as no-Buddha-nature rather than emptiness-Buddha-nature (97), or at least maintained the distinction of *mu* and *kū* 空 in light of the academic politics surrounding the use of the term in the Kyoto School (Nishida's focus on *mu* and Watsuji's and Nishitani's focus on *kū*). But all in all this book is excellently translated and I have no real complaints.

I am truly grateful to Bein for this wonderful translation of a work that I think is very important—not just historically but for the contemporary employment of Buddhism and philosophy. Given the insights on Dōgen and Zen Buddhism as well as on Watsuji's early thought contained in this new publication, I recommend it very highly.