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Readings of Dōgen's Treasury of the True Dharma Eye

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A Review of *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*

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Readings of Dōgen's Treasury of the True Dharma Eye. By Steven Heine. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, 312 pp., ISBN 978-0-231-18229-4 (paperback), \$35.00.

For those acquainted with the scholarship of Steven Heine, *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* comes as another of several of his outstanding volumes on the Japanese Zen master Dōgen 道元 (1200-1253) and the Zen tradition of the Sōtō school. As one of the leading figures in Dōgen studies cooperating widely across the field with both Japanese and Western scholars, Heine has in this recent publication aimed for the masterwork of Dōgen, the *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, or *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼蔵 in Japanese. Dōgen's *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* is a compilation of informal sermons-turned-essays, intended for his disciples and the community, that are largely based on citations of Chinese masters and passages from kōan collections. Heine's *Readings of the Treasury* provides a portrayal of Dōgen's unique manner of translation of these original works as well as their novel and unorthodox interpretation, which illustrate Dōgen's innovative writing and teaching style. The present volume, *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (henceforth, *Readings of*

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Dōgen's Treasury), is one of two of Heine's books published in 2020 (setting a high standard for 2021)—the other one being a translation of verse comments on Dōgen's *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* by Giun 義雲 (1253-1333), the fifth abbot of Eihei-ji temple, published by Oxford University Press. I daresay *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* will be studied, quoted, and returned to more often than many other volumes on Dōgen or the Sōtō school, especially because it relates so closely and directly to Dōgen studies and the *Shōbōgenzō* in particular, an area in which, as we learn from the volume itself, “well over fifty volumes . . . have been published in English,” (54) making Dōgen “the most extensively studied East Asian Buddhist leader in the West” (55). As the result of many decades of Heine's research, *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* is concise, concentrated, and comprehensive, covering not only the topic of the *Shōbōgenzō*—a “guidebook” (ix) for Dōgen's own assembly of monks regarding their learning, meditation practice, and monastic life—but it also includes the history and thought of the Sōtō school, the Chan/Zen literary tradition, the several Sōtō versions of the text and some of its commentaries and commentators, as well as Dōgen's life, studies, and erudition. Those interested in kōans or poems will not be disappointed either, as Heine provides a full literary and hermeneutical immersion in the tradition.

For those unfamiliar with Dōgen's original work (or words), *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* gives ample examples of the difficulty and confusion that studying and deciphering the meaning of the *Shōbōgenzō* brings (pp. 16, 21, 31, for a brief illustration). Dōgen's literal reading of Chinese original phrases adapted from continental Chan sources, his deliberate creation of new expressions, and his innovative employment of Japanese syntax amount to a language that has been labelled as “Dōgen-ese” in William LaFleur's ground-breaking collective volume on Dōgen named simply and appropriately *Dōgen Studies* (13). In the same volume, and in the same essay, to be precise, we learn that “even with the best linguistic training and attention to transcultural problems, the ‘translation’ of something like Dōgen's view of things into twentieth-century American ears and minds will, I am afraid, be spotty, fragmentary, and haphazard at best”

(11). Although contemporary scholarship has managed to successfully overcome many difficulties since the 1980s, reading Dōgen nevertheless proves to be a challenge in terms of his use of upside-down logic, startling images, and apparent contradictions. To illustrate just a few, Heine takes Dōgen's lead and explores the nuances of thinking, not thinking, and non-thinking (188), as well as apparent dualities between zazen-only and only zazen (204). Whoever has so far studied Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* will thus quickly learn that *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* is more than helpful and illuminating in many aspects where the *Shōbōgenzō* bids questions without offering explanations, hence serving as the first complete modern-day English commentary of Dōgen's most celebrated literary accomplishment. If the *Shōbōgenzō* caused anyone raised eyebrows in terms of presenting illogical conundrums without apparent solutions, *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* will provide them with answers, albeit presented at the other side of the difficulty spectrum. Although the *Shōbōgenzō* is a Zen text in terms of its teaching methods and often contradictory logic, Heine's work is an example of an academic take on Dōgen's Zen—informative, explanatory, and elucidating, yet both intricate and still profound.

Heine's foremost aim in writing this volume is "to clarify the complexity of Dōgen's writing" (x) and—secondarily perhaps—also to offer a "balanced interpretative approach that opens up an appreciation for the magnitude of the *Treasury*" (10). He accomplishes this by means of approaching the *Shōbōgenzō*, its complexity and intricacy, from several viewpoints, which then serve as the backbone of the book. The first section, titled "Textual Sources and Resources" and consisting of three separate chapters, explores the historical and intellectual background of the *Treasury*, discussing the various editions of the *Shōbōgenzō* manuscripts. It details the rhetoric of the *Treasury*, its pedagogical intent and its traditional as well as modern interpretations. The second section, "Religious Teaching and Practices," with eight individual chapters, examines the fabric of Dōgen's thought and concepts by means of analyzing the theory of learning and practice of meditation. It specifically deals with notions of Buddha nature, true reality, seated meditation,

negotiating living and dying, impermanence, speech and silence, and karmic retribution. In this manner, the first section presents the form of the *Shōbōgenzō* in light of its historical and doctrinal context, both contemporary and modern. The second part of the book explores the content of the *Shōbōgenzō* and indeed of the Zen teaching and practice Dōgen advocated by means of dealing with concepts that Dōgen introduced in the various chapters of the *Treasury*, and brings forth a thorough analysis of Dogen's thought by means of a hermeneutical examination of his scholarship.

My first impression was that the book reads like a lecture or a talk and I felt as if I was following the author's own train of thought across space and time. More than once I would follow an idea on the pages of *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* and only subsequently realize that I was waiting for a "story" to end because in the meantime I have found myself reading about the circumstances of a certain issue or question that Heine was delivering as if on the side of the main topic, as if during an informal conference event or as if he were reading out his own notes. In this aspect, *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* is also an explanation on the background and content of the *Shōbōgenzō*, and many of the historical, literary, doctrinal, and practical aspects of it. Even though Heine has, it seems to me, a way presenting information in a manner well suited for beginners, he does not hesitate to provide the historical and philosophical background of Zen. However, he does not start with the beginnings at the beginning but intertwines these among a more thorough knowledge of Zen, Dōgen, and an interpretation of his language and thought. In this sense, the book is intended for all; readers will find themselves face to face with Dōgen and his stance, which is "more illustrative than argumentative, more concrete than abstract, and more vivid than obscure . . . through all the particularities of everyday life" (147).

Readings of Dōgen's Treasury relies heavily on both quotations from the *Shōbōgenzō* itself and on comprehensive interpretations of the cited passages, interspersed with their poetic, historical, and doctrinal elucidations. The passages quoted directly from the *Shōbōgenzō* are Heine's own

translations based on Kawamura Kōdō's *Dōgen's Collected Works* (*Dōgen zenji zenshū* 道元禪師全集, 1998–1993). For a better illustration and a possibility for a cross-reference with the existing translations of the *Shōbōgenzō*, there are two more sources by each translation labelled as “Nearman” and “Tanahashi.” These stand for two complete translations of the *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* available in English: Hubert Nearman's *Shōbōgenzō: The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching: A Trainee's Translation of Zen Master Dōgen's Spiritual Masterpiece* and Kazuaki Tanahashi's *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*, written in cooperation with more than thirty others. With each excerpt cited from Dōgen's original, there are page numbers for all three of the aforementioned publications, so one can easily check the Japanese source as well as the two other English translations of each quoted passage.

Readings of Dōgen's Treasury also introduces Heine's own translations of the *Shōbōgenzō* fascicles, with some of them named slightly different from the translations of both Nearman and Tanahashi. “Genjō kōan” 現成公案 (“On the Spiritual Question as It Manifests Before Your Very Eyes” in Nearman's translation and “Actualizing the Fundamental Point” in Tanahashi's rendering), for instance, is translated as “Realization Here and Now”; “Gyōji” 行持 (“On Ceaseless Practice” in Nearman's version and “Continuous Practice” in Tanahashi's translation) is “Sustained Exertion”; and “Dōtoku” 道得 (“On Expressing What One Has Realized” in Nearman's rendering and “Expression” in Tanahashi's) becomes “Expressing the Way.” Already this—the multiple variations in translations of even the names of the fascicles—is an important point and illustration of the numerous options for rendition of not only Zen terms, but of Dōgen's Zen terms in particular. The possibilities for diverse translations attest to Heine's own words describing the complicacy in the process of translation of Dōgen when he mentions “the incredible degree of intricacy and ambiguity embedded in Dōgen's composition” (x). This complicacy, notable throughout *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury*, and the process of its untangling, comprises the gist of Heine's book itself.

Not in a chronological or alphabetical manner, but by elaborating on a specific thought, Heine repeatedly touches upon some of Dōgen's most renowned essays (for the sake of clarity presented here under their Japanese titles), such as “Busshō 佛性,” “Uji 有時,” “Keisei sanshoku 谿聲山色,” “Hosshō 法性,” “Sansuikyō 山水經,” “Zazenshin 坐禪箴,” “Genjō kōan 現成公案,” “Gyōji 行持,” “Dōtoku 道得,” “Kattō 葛藤,” “Kūge 空華,” “Daigo 大悟,” “Senmen 洗面” and many more, analyzing and interpreting their core ideas and concepts. Even if commenting on these texts would already satisfy many, *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* also features examples and offers interpretations from lesser known fascicles of the *Shōbōgenzō* (I am opting for their English titles as Heine lists them, as their Japanese names may not be as widely known as the essays mentioned previously), as for instance “Cleaning,” “Great Cultivation,” “The Bowl,” “A King Asks for Saindhava,” “Deep Belief in Causality,” “Four Horses,” “Summer Retreat,” etc.

Like Dōgen, who “applies his speculative skill accompanied by rhetorical savvy to provide inventive elucidations of traditional Zen views of theory and practice” (98), Heine notes some of Dōgen's key expressions and leads the reader through a journey of hermeneutical analysis and interpretation of the images and phrases that Dōgen uses to highlight his views on the two pillars of Zen learning and practice. Throughout the different chapters of especially the second section of the *Readings of the Treasury*, Heine introduces some of Dōgen's essential terms and concepts, such as “being-time” (*uji* 有時), “full exertion” (*gūjin* 究盡), “manifesting” (*genjō* 現成), “right now” (*nikon* 而今), “temporal conditions” (*jisetsu* 時節), “coming and going” (*korai* 去來), “holistic passage” (*kyōryaku* 經歷), “sustained exertion” (*gyōji* 行持), “nonthinking” (*hishiryō* 非思量), “total activity” (*zenki* 全機), “dignified demeanor” (*iigi* 威儀), “dharma position” (*hōi* 法位), or “dwelling place” (*jū-hōi* 住法位), to name a few. In *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury*, these are inserted in chapters under various headings. It therefore becomes clear that just as Dōgen refers to these concepts repeatedly in a number of treatises of the *Shōbōgenzō*, Heine treats them accordingly. Hence, one cannot but notice that they are all interconnected

in both Dōgen's masterwork as well as in Heine's analysis of it, not as an idea propounded in a single fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō* unrelated to the other texts but as carriers of the teaching they convey. Where Dōgen intersperses his core concepts through the individual volumes of the *Shōbōgenzō*, Heine unites the separate fascicles through their common ideas, admonitions, or recommendations, which join the *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* conceptually. By means of such analysis and interpretation, it becomes clear how pregnant with meaning, symbols, and images Dōgen's writings are, regardless of any one volume. The reader is being reminded by Heine that "Dōgen's various ideas may seem disorganized without an interpreter's integrative analysis of their underlying texture" (139), and Heine accomplishes just that; translating Dōgen's most poetic, allusive, and kōan-like essays into the language of the twenty-first century, with careful regard for the contemporary emphasis placed on critical thinking and intellectual curiosity. As such, Heine takes on the role of translator of ancient expressions and wisdom into language and images of our time.

It was also interesting to witness how the author remains true to Dōgen himself in terms of wordplay and the highly original use of phrases and expressions. The chapters' and subchapters' titles are but one example of this, combining an innovative dual naming of the matter presented ("Sources and Resources," "Creativity and Originality," "Multiplicity and Variability," "Temporality and Ephemerality"), as well as, for instance, Heine's choice of terms describing the specific periods of Dōgen's life and career (Formative, Informative, Transformative, Reformatory, and Performative; p. 68). The reader is thus, possibly without noticing, drawn into the world of innovative treatment of words, which can be seen as an invitation into the world of Dōgen's own language, and where phrases and expressions serve as a suggestion at a profound understanding of the realms beyond the literal meanings they carry. Similarly, as Dōgen can unexpectedly turn a phrase around and produce a novel meaning to a well-known kōan, poem, or statement, Heine can suddenly come to an originally phrased conclusion that the reader afterward feels as if it had

been there all along. Also, just as Dōgen highlights an idea with only a few well-employed characters or words, Heine has the capacity to use a handful of expressions to conclude an argument that seemed illogical and counterintuitive only a page before. The sentences in *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury*, I have found, can be taken out of context and still remain whole, profound, and meaningful in conveying the wisdom of the *Shōbōgenzō* or Zen, as well as a feeling of this wisdom.

Many chapters are enriched with illustrations from kōan cases, as well as with interpretations of these. Most of the kōans presented are from the *Shōbōgenzō* itself but a few others from the *Blue Cliff Record*, the *Gateless Gate*, and the *Book of Serenity* too are cited. By combining Dōgen's words with instances from kōan cases, the message of *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* becomes wholesome. Namely, there are kōans with their allegorical message as well as Dōgen's own words full of paradoxical symbols and twisted imagery. In addition, there is Heine's intellectual and analytical language, dissecting and explaining, and at the same time synthesizing and systematizing all of the above. Dōgen's practice of integrating a kōan within his writing is described as "providing a creative interpretation of the kōan case" (159) and again true to Dōgen's example, Heine provides an elucidation of Dōgen's writings with original explanations of a number of kōan cases within the text itself, supporting the distinct topsy-turvy logic of Dōgen and his teaching.

The richness of all the topics covered in the *Readings of Dōgen's Treasury* is awe-inspiring, yet the volume also features a number of appendices which are no less helpful or illustrative than the main text. Appendix one lists the already mentioned titles of the *Shōbōgenzō* fascicles in the present author's rendition. Appendix two offers an index of the various versions of the *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* with Japanese names of fascicles included in the individual versions, as well as the date they were composed and place of their origin. Undoubtedly, these two appendices are a useful overview of other of Heine's past researches. A comprehensive timeline of Dōgen's life and events relating to the *Shōbōgenzō* is shown

in appendix three, while appendix four summarizes complete translations of the *Shōbōgenzō* in English, French, Spanish, German, and Chinese, with a list of existing partial translations included in the final bibliography.

Readings of Dōgen's Treasury of the True Dharma Eye is a wise book. Heine has—in fulfilling his aim to open a path of appreciation for the magnitude of the *Shōbōgenzō*—covered so many distinct threads of the *Shōbōgenzō* tapestry that, at times, it was hard to follow the main theme of an individual subchapter as it connected to many other topics related to various texts of the Chan/Zen tradition, history of the Sōtō school, or to Dōgen himself. At other times, I found that the language of not only the *Shōbōgenzō*, but of *Readings of the Treasury* itself proved an intellectual challenge, yet for some reason I noticed that the less I paid attention to the individual words and more to the flow of the language, the better I was at understanding the message of Heine's interpretations of Dōgen and his teaching. Just as the language of Dōgen is both a challenge and a reward, so was *Readings of the Treasury* both thought-provoking and elucidating. *Readings of the Treasury* is also an astonishing achievement as—35 years after the confession on *Shōbōgenzō*'s untranslatability in LaFleur's *Dōgen Studies*—it explains, translates, and interprets Dōgen into the language of our modern time and age, as well as offers comprehensive and stimulating renderings of Dōgen's original thought and concepts.

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