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Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher

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A Review of *Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher*

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Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher. By Steven Heine. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2021, 360 pages, ISBN 978-1-61180-980-0 (paperback), \$29.95.

Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher, one of Steven Heine's recent publications, is a contribution to the "Lives of the Masters" series from Shambhala Publications, which brings the life stories and careers of Buddhist masters to the forefront of knowledge and understanding of the general reader interested in the most creative thinkers of Asian spiritual traditions. In line with his rich and profound scholarship, Heine embarks upon the path of storytelling, guiding the reader through the life, works, thoughts, encounters, teachings, and legacy of Zen master Dōgen 道元 (1200-1253), a paramount figure of the early tradition of the meditative school in Japan.

There is no shortage of literature on the life path and teachings of the *Sōtō Zen* master, a number of which, in the last decades, have been authored, coauthored, or edited by Heine himself. There are also several

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older volumes on Dōgen—some which have emerged from the same publishing house as the current one—that one can reach for to learn more about the background, career, and writings of the Japanese master. Among the most notable that come to mind are *Enlightenment Unfolds* and *Moon in a Dewdrop*, both written by Kazuaki Tanahashi, another great student of Dōgen and a prolific writer, whose calligraphy can be found inside Heine's current publication. Nevertheless, for all enthusiasts of the Zen master, or those who consider themselves to be his followers across time and space, this volume is a welcome contribution, given especially its summarizing content, flow, and readability. Or, in Heine's own words, due to its capacity at "demonstrating flexibility, confidence, and versatility" (251).

For those familiar with the exceptionally abundant publication record of Heine, *Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher* will feel intriguingly personal in style from its early pages. Heine combines decades of expertise in Dōgen studies with his role as a writer, providing readers with a thoroughly researched and well written account of the Zen master's life and teaching. Whoever reads the book may be under the impression that Heine is sharing a story of someone he knows intimately, and only recently said goodbye to, or whose travel journal he may even have read. As Dōgen's biography and an account of the Sōtō founder's teachings and writings, it reads as if it was composed by a long-term companion of the master, someone who has for decades been observing his work, quests, and activities from a close distance. Although intended for a general audience, this volume is in no way general in content or depth. The structure of the manuscript and the sequence of its chapters is logical—beginning with the master's life, background, and upbringing—and its flow is natural. After learning about Dōgen's initial path as a Zen student, the years spent on a pilgrimage in China, and his subsequent career as a Zen teacher in his homeland, Heine focuses on his works and thoughts.

As is largely the case with Heine, the chapters are interspersed with lines from Dōgen's various writings using the author's own translations—the philosophical *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, the instructive *Miscellaneous Talks*, the formal Chinese-style *Extensive Record*, or the behavioral *Monastic Rules*—combined with poems written by either Dōgen or other Chan or Zen masters. Interestingly, for instance, when relating to Dōgen's teaching mission and giving the reader a chronological summary of the Sōtō founder's life, Heine also provides a similarly sequential review of the early chapters of the *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, thus portraying the collection as separate essays reflecting on the ongoing issues in Dōgen's path rather than a yet to be unified compilation. Despite the fact that Heine published a separate volume on the thought and content of the *Treasury*, titled *Readings of Dōgen's "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,"* with Columbia University Press only two years ago, here he takes up the collection Dōgen is probably most remembered for together with his other literary works, in order to introduce the audience to a larger doctrinal legacy of the Japanese master.

Besides the historical, institutional, and doctrinal aspects of Dōgen's career fully covered in the volume, the few lines that touch upon the relationships of the Zen master with central figures in his life should be highlighted and appreciated. We glimpse a little—not much, but a little goes a long way—about Dōgen's teachers Myōzen 明全 (1184-1225) and Rujing 如淨 (1163-1228), his samurai benefactor Hatano Yoshishige 波多野義重 (?-1258), the female student Ryōnen 了然 (n.d.), whom Dōgen guided in the early years of his teaching career, his interaction with the fifth shōgun Hōjō Tokiyori 北条時頼 (1227-1263) and his wife, as well as his connection to his disciples Ejō 懷奘 (1198-1280), Gikai 義介 (1219-1309), and others. Even though there is only so much we can learn, it is nevertheless refreshing to see these other personages emerge around the master and add humanity to his great wisdom. The overall historical and literary trajectory of Dōgen's life, and its trials and challenges make him not only a respected Zen teacher and founder of a new school of Zen Buddhism but, more importantly, a person of flesh and bones, a more tangible

and approachable human rather than an unreadable and distant master perched high upon the *Dharma* seat.

The two main chapters, “Life and Thought” and “Literature and Legacy,” are equal in both depth and the value of their message. The unfolding of events on Dōgen’s path while he was in Japan and his later travels in China shaped his career as a Zen master, including the form his thoughts and teachings took. These, representing the latter stage of his life and endeavors, manifested in the great number of written works Dōgen left behind and is famous for among scholars and laity alike. By beginning with the course of the master’s life and later focusing on an in-depth overview of his texts and their significance, the volume steers into Zen history, thought, and teachings that formed the tapestry of Dōgen Zen. Also, with an interim section on the institutional legacy of the *Sōtō* school between Japan and China after Dōgen’s passing that emerged from his own journey to the mainland and was later followed by a number of key disciples from his lineage, it also briefly touches on the *Sōtō* tradition after Dōgen.

The second chapter of the book, “Literature and Legacy,” represents a concise summary of Dōgen’s literary endeavors, including some lesser-known material. These include a number of essays, “a series of short works in different styles and for disparate audiences” (171), as well as the rarely discussed abbreviated versions of Dōgen’s major works, their background, structure, and message. The chronological arrangement of these writings allows the reader to pursue the development of Dōgen’s own thought, concerns, or aims in terms of imparting Zen to his followers or those with an interest in the novel teaching from the mainland.

As Heine offers, “Since there is so much interest in interpreting the meaning of Dōgen’s works, yet a lingering deep uncertainty about their authentic content, Japanese scholars continually produce annotations, commentaries, concordances, dictionaries, and other reference or interpretative materials” (166). Yet with even the centuries-long Japanese scholarship on Dōgen, and the comparably recent Western endeavors, it

is nonetheless necessary to continue with a meticulous study of the master, precisely to “interpret the meaning of Dogen’s works”—and words, I would add. Heine manages to include his understanding of the master’s thought within the lines, as well as the explanations of other scholars on Dōgen, supplemented by the original expressions of Dōgen’s teacher Ru-jing, earlier Chan masters such as Yaoshan 藥山 (745-828), Baizhang 百丈 (720-814), or Xuedou 雪窦 (1105-1192), or poets of the likes of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), Hongzhi 宏智 (1091-1157), or Ryōkan 良寛 (1758-1831).

It becomes clear, as the book notes on several occasions, that an ongoing textual and historical inquiry into Dōgen is meaningful as ever and still bearing fruit. There are, for instance, references to various manuscripts of the *Treasury*, and different versions of Dōgen’s other texts that have come to light gradually over the centuries, including the last one hundred years, with the *Twelve-Chapter Treasury* only discovered in 1930 at Yōkōji temple in Noto peninsula. More importantly, however, Heine touches upon some of the stereotypes that have influenced those that have viewed the final part of the master’s life after his return from Kamakura as unproductive. The reader is reminded that this has been “seriously challenged in recent decades by new textual findings that helped spin revisionist theories” (193), thus being rightfully corrected with the support of written evidence. These conclusions are especially welcome given that Dōgen did continue to write further chapters of the *Treasury* and a number of *Extensive Record* entries, albeit formulating these in a different tone and message from his earlier essays.

Those rather familiar with Heine’s other works and his more academic style of writing may find some aspects of *Dogen: Japan’s Original Zen Teacher* unusual. For instance, I wished all the Japanese and Zen terms were italicized, not merely the first occurrence of an expression in the text. Also, I would expect the specific terms to be accompanied with their transcription in kanji, in consistency with Heine’s more academic style of writing. Although I am aware that this is probably based on the publisher’s

editing, one would hope, alongside the exhaustive account of Dōgen's life, for a thorough formal presentation of such exemplary scholarship.

In the same breath, however, it must be mentioned that there is also a positive aspect to the popular rendering of the volume: the similarly general list of reference works and publications. Whatever topic captures the attention of the reader throughout the almost 300 pages of Heine's text is referenced in articles and books that are readily available, often online, and not too scholarly. In this, I am imagining a motivation on the part of the author to assure the reader that they can probe further into their chosen area of interest without the danger of being overwhelmed by exceedingly intellectual literature. To use the words of the volume, therefore, this seems to be another example of "how human awareness should be keenly attuned to the fragility of impermanence" (135), notwithstanding what kind of literature one is used to reading.

In the last section, "Dignified Demeanor in All Activities: The Legacy of Dogen Zen," Heine draws attention to contemporary issues of how to actualize Dōgen's Zen and his instructions for practice, despite the centuries between his time and conditions, and the present. We read,

Although Dogen oriented most of his teaching toward monastic life, for many enthusiasts today his approach seems applicable not only for clerical but also lay practitioners. Dogen has come to be seen as a religious figure able to help both monastics and laypeople find peace of mind through harmonious existence within the complex and deeply unsettled circumstances of modern society. (243-244).

Indeed, Heine does distill Dōgen's essential injunctions into five categories that he calls "bodhisattva task" or "bodhisattva undertaking." These are: (1) having no anticipation and no assumptions concerning all existence and its manifestations by an awareness onto the here and now; (2) regarding every instant (and instance) as an opportunity for understand-

ing; (3) acknowledging the key role of language in the quest for enlightenment; (4) engaging with spontaneity in all pivotal experience (thereby simultaneously turning all experience into a pivotal occasion); and (5) maintaining dignified demeanor and proper etiquette in all activities.

More intriguing, however, is the next summarization—enhanced by Heine’s own wordplay that he may have observed in the master himself—of Dōgen’s teaching in its practicality. Dōgen’s well-known emphasis on “just sitting” rather than seated meditation (*zazen*) is a familiar one among Zen students. In a similar vein, Heine transposes the practice of reciting sūtras into “just speaking,” adherence to monastic precepts to “just doing,” spiritual communion with all beings including buddhas, bodhisattvas, *arhats*, patriarchs, and spirits as “just resonating,” and transmission of a lineage into “just circulating” in sustained exertion within continuous practice of the way. As for the initial question of relevance of Dōgen’s thought for the contemporary practitioner, one is reminded that “understanding must be cultivated by continuing to question one’s own views through exploring all available options” (250), and of the importance to “relinquish and release ordinary thoughts, whether of reality or illusion, truth or falsity” (270). Like Dōgen himself, Heine does not forget to accentuate the practice of *zazen*, as “seated meditation was always, without exception, the one true training technique that was used by all Buddhists. It therefore must remain central” (255).

Yet another example where Heine follows in the footsteps of the Zen master is found in the balance between duality and nonduality. “Dōgen maintained that the essence of Zen is sometimes to release or let go and sometimes to hold on or gather up—like a double-edged sword that can either kill or give life” (121). So too, in this volume, Heine released his hold on the form of complex and intellectual academic writing and gathered up and summarized his extensive scholarship and intimate knowledge of master Dōgen, Japan’s original Zen teacher.

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