

TAKING THE PATH OF ZEN. By Robert Aitken. Published by North Point Press, San Francisco, 1982; pp. 149 with table of Chinese-Japanese equivalents, notes, glossary, and list of Zen Buddhist titles. ISBN 0-86547-080-4.

Robert Aitken's books on Zen have been relatively few, considering his skill as a writer and his long tenure as head of Hawaii's Diamond Sangha. It is regrettable that he hasn't produced more, as his style is taut, humorous, and to-the-point. It is free, too, of the literary and mystical clichés that so often plague Zen writing; there is no rehashing of D. T. Suzuki, no sidetracking into the occult, no hinting at past lives or mysterious spiritual experiences which will somehow resolve all of one's problems. The emphasis is always on the concrete matter of Zen practice and its relation to everyday life.

Taking the Path of Zen, as the author says in his preface, is intended as a manual for beginning students and as a reference for the more advanced. Much of what appears in this book was first mentioned in the author's previous book, *A Zen Wave*, a collection of essays on the Zen implications of Basho's haiku. The poetry-centered format of that work precluded a systematized presentation of his thoughts on Zen practice, however, and this Robert Aitken provides in *Taking the Path of Zen*. Starting with advice on such fundamentals as attitude and motivation, he moves on to the physical side of Zen—posture, breathing, and exercises for loosening the body—then takes up a consideration of emotional/mental difficulties in practice, types of religious outlook, and points of Buddhist doctrine likely to be of concern to the student of zazen. At the very end he gives an account, which manages to be both inspiring and unself-serving at the same time, of his own years of training under Nyogen Senzaki, Nakagawa Soen Roshi, Yasutani Hakuun Roshi, and Yamada Koun Roshi.

All of this is presented with remarkable clarity and lack of excess verbiage. Especially well done are his sections on doctrinal issues. He makes more sense of the problem of karma, for example, in a few paragraphs than some authors do in as many chapters, and his consideration of the ten grave precepts is a model of lucidity, revealing their basis in compassion and their common-sense necessity in a program of religious training. The author never loses sight of the fact that Buddhism is fundamentally a practical religion, one whose doctrines are based on an understanding of the workings of everyday existence. The more simply stated the better. Too much talk of realms of existence or karmic reverberations in future lives is misleading, and burdens a straightforward

teaching with useless baggage.

So too with sectarian statements, which always carry the implication, "We have the truth and you don't." There is an unfailing fair-mindedness throughout this book, even when it entails casting out some of the teachings traditional to the author's line. Harada Roshi's "Five Types of Zen," for example, with its rather ethnocentric outlook on other spiritual traditions, is replaced by a more balanced and rational section on "Attitudes in Religious Practice." Nor does the author flinch at debunking a few of Zen's sacred cows. Zen, for instance, shares with the rest of Mahayana Buddhism a rather deprecatory view of the Theravada tradition of Southern Asia, and countless books contrast Mahayana's Bodhisattva ideal, dedicated to the salvation of others, with the "self-centered" Arhat of Theravada. Robert Aitken, however, points out a fact that anyone who has lived in Asia has seen but which is seldom mentioned in print: that it is not in the Mahayana but rather in the Theravada countries that Buddhism is most active in the lives of the people, educationally and socially as well as in religion.

The teaching line to which Robert Aitken belongs is primarily a lay tradition, and one which combines strong elements of both the Rinzai and Soto schools. With some teachers in this line the Rinzai side, stressing koan practice and *kensho*, takes precedence, but with Robert Aitken the Soto elements of steady, integrated, and long-continued practice seem foremost. He does place value on the koan system, of course, and emphasizes the primary importance of self-realization; still, he is against the hyper-tense, clenched fist direction that Zen training sometimes takes, and his attitude toward spiritual experience seems best summed up in the old Zen phrase, "Spring comes, the grass grows of itself."

His approach, though, is not one that condones quietism or laziness. In his *teisho* on the koan *Mu* he advises: "Don't overdramatize your practice or set up unreasonable targets. Nonetheless, it is imperative that you pass through the barrier. Use all your energy in this task. This does not mean that you should strain. Just don't use energy on anything except *Mu*." This mood of reason and balance prevails throughout *Taking the Path of Zen*. The author's advice is to keep things in their proper perspective, yet to remain always at the forward edge of one's capabilities.

The criticism is sometimes voiced of Robert Aitken that his approach to Zen is if anything too reasonable, that self-realization is a difficult task requiring methods of much greater rigor than those he suggests. This is an important point to consider, as traditional Zen training in Japan is usually quite severe, particularly in the monasteries of Hakuin-line Rinzai Zen. With such methods Hakuin himself produced a number of exceptional successors, men who revitalized the Zen of their time and started a teaching school that comprises all of the present day Rinzai sect.

The attempt to force spiritual experience is a perilous one, though, even under the most ideal of conditions. In a monastic community, with its strictly regulated life-style and constant supervision by a master, extreme methods can be justified at times as a means of aiding breakthrough in borderline cases. Even then, however, the risks are great: Hakuin, again, produced numerous successors, but he also lost scores of disciples to illness, insanity, and suicide. Considering the spiritual desperation of his students and the enormous attainments of those who succeeded, this sacrifice was undoubtedly worth it. Rinzai Zen has always placed primary importance on the *ikko hanko*, the "one man or half a man" of great doubt and great enlightenment, and the others are more or less left to fall by the wayside.

This, obviously, is not an approach suitable for laypeople with spouse, children, and job, and whose reasons for practicing Zen are varied and seldom on a level with those of the world-renouncing monk. For them a balanced approach between training and everyday life is needed, one which lets the practitioner find his own depth and integrate this with his daily activities. In outlining a way of practice which answers these needs Robert Aitken is by no means offering a watered-down version of Zen for the layperson. One gets the impression that, based on his own long experience in practice and teaching, he has found the methods set forth in this book to be the most reliable for progress in the conditions of modern American society. One gets the impression, too, that if someone of *ikko hanko* potential should happen along he could hardly do better than begin with a good grounding in Robert Aitken's steady, good-sense approach to training in Zen.

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