

*Zen Pathways: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Practice of Zen Buddhism.* By Bret W. Davis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 456 pages. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-0-19-757368-6.

ROBERT E. CARTER

This is a remarkable book. Bret Davis has spent the greater part of his life and career balancing the intellectual and experiential aspects of Zen 禪 Buddhism, and in this book he creates a unique account that draws upon both his comprehensive knowledge of the field and his years as a Zen practitioner. He writes, “My Zen training has for the most part been undertaken in Japan, where I resided for thirteen years, and where I continue to spend time during sabbaticals as well as summer and winter breaks” (p. xii).

Davis guides the new Zen student with his straightforward prose and engaging personal experiences, offers support for the teacher by including discussion questions on each chapter for classroom use, and addresses the needs of the scholar with 185 pages of thorough notes. This latter section of the book provides a vast resource for the advanced scholar. All these elements contribute to a book that is both an accessible introduction to Zen Buddhism and an in-depth account of the history and complexity of Zen.

The choice of the title *Zen Pathways* immediately signals to the reader that Davis will be dealing with a multitude of approaches to Zen. He offers a sweeping account both of Chan 禪 / Zen history and of its different schools (Rinzai 臨濟, Sōto 曹洞) and lineages. What can make Zen appear so complex is precisely this institutional variety, as well as its variety of scriptures, the many Zen teachers over the centuries with their differing approaches and texts, and the fact that Zen is not just a spiritual practice but also a profound philosophy. Davis is able to sort through this complexity by explaining difficult concepts that not only have a cultural grounding in Japan but also a unique meaning when looked at through the lens of Zen Buddhism.

As an example, Davis deftly explores the history of meditation and its uses in the various Zen schools and literatures. After addressing the multiplicity of Zen, he notes that all schools come together in the practice of meditation as a pathway to enlightenment. Davis makes the methodology of Zen meditation clear: empty the mind of presuppositions and assumptions and return to the original “beginner’s mind” (p. 4). Davis refers to the teaching anecdote of the Zen master who was serving tea to a professor (p. 3). To the professor’s dismay, the master continued to pour the tea until it was overflowing the cup and spilling onto the table. The message is clear: empty the mind and be open to what Zen has to offer.

Yet even a concept as seemingly simple as “the mind” (Jp. *kokoro* 心) needs to be unpacked and understood in a Zen context. More than once during my sojourns to Japan I would ask a Zen priest or practitioner to point to the mind’s location. Each time they would point to their heart. When asked where a Westerner would point, I would indicate my head, and this would elicit laughter. It is the equivalent of pointing to one’s head to indicate the location of the kidneys. Thus, if the mind is “embodied,” then it is necessary to include the body in any attempt to reach an understanding of the nature of the mind. Little wonder then that Zen Buddhists train the body to develop the mind. Hence meditation and physical training such as the tea ceremony, aikido, or even flower arranging are pathways to enlightenment. As Davis writes, “The point of *zazen*, seated meditation, is to clear or purify the heart-mind. Or rather, the point is to realize . . . the clarity and purity of the original heart-mind that is already there, buried beneath our karmic baggage of egoistic delusions and desires” (p. 33). The result is “an open mind [that also] entails an open heart” (p. 33). Thus, it is that an open mind “and a compassionate heart are, so to speak, two sides of the same *kokoro*” (p. 33).

As our guide on these Zen pathways, Davis concludes his book with an interpretation of the famous “Ten Oxherding” pictures (*Jūgyūzu* 十牛圖) by the twelfth-century Chinese Zen master Kuoan Shiyuan 廓庵師遠 (d.u.) that depict the journey of the self from the earliest stages of awareness to the disappearance of the ego and then to the ultimate stage of enlightenment. Davis remarks that “the biggest breakthrough comes in picture eight, when everything suddenly disappears, leaving only an empty circle” (p. 322). Picture eight displays the realization that “form is emptiness”—that is, that the self as ego has vanished leaving nothing behind.

But now, against this background of absolute nothingness, “things” shine forth with an intense color and brightness, as if being seen for the first time, and this selfless awareness can be filled anew with everything that exists. All these are written on the canvas of nothingness; emptiness is now form, offering “wondrous being” in an undistorted way (p. 334). Nothingness must first be realized for things to appear in their own original suchness. “The empty circle [of picture eight] makes room for everything” (p. 334).

Davis’s book is an important repository of Zen ideas, history, practice, and spirit. Both the beginner and those already acquainted with Zen will benefit from studying this book. Davis has brought practice and understanding together.