

CULTIVATING THE EMPTY FIELD: The Silent Illumination of the Zen Master Hongzhi. Translated by Taigen Daniel Leighton with Yi Wu, with an introduction and preface by T. D. Leighton and a foreword by Tenshin Anderson. Published by North Point Press, San Francisco, CA, 1991. 91 pp. with appendix, notes and selected bibliography. ISBN 0-86547-475-3 (pbk.)

“The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit,” said Jesus Christ to an uncomprehending Nicodemus (St. John 3:8), clearly in order to describe the same unfathomable, boundless, mercurial and pristine freedom of mind that is the subject of this collection of writings of the important Sung Dynasty Chinese Ch’an (Zen) Master, Hongzhi. The knowledge of the possibility of a thorough revolution at the very base of awareness is not unique to Zen or Buddhism in general, but elsewhere, this insight has occurred only in a few exceptional individuals all of whom found difficulty in communicating their understanding to others.

What is unique—and mind-boggling if you grasp its significance—is that in the Buddhist tradition to which these writings belong, along with highly developed—you might even say scientific (in that they are empirical in the most absolute sense)—teaching methods, an extensive and brilliant literary tradition with its own refined artistic traditions of symbolism and imagery, and a rich and often irreverent sense of humor existed. And this was sustained and enriched by generation after generation of those who had attained the same realization and sought through their works only to help show others the way. Though the “Zen culture” of the Sung with its highly aesthetic style was already criticized at the time (by Dōgen, among others) as representing Zen in its decline, all the same, this period has given us one of the most remarkable bodies of literature the world may ever see.

Hongzhi Zhengjue (Japanese, Wanshi Shōgaku, A.D. 1091–1157), master of the Chinese Caodong (Sōtō) school of Zen, was an important contributor to this literary tradition. In addition to a clear understanding of reality and the mind, he seems also to have had a great intelligence and literary ability. Hongzhi’s ideas and style have been a major influence in the course of the Zen tradition, and the translator points out that due to their impact on Dōgen, the founder of the Japanese Sōtō school, the ideas of Hongzhi remain very relevant in modern times. Mr. Leighton has produced an English translation of Volume Six, consisting of “practice instructions,” of the nine-volume collection of Hongzhi’s writings called *The Extensive Record of Chan Master*

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Hongzhi, and a selection of religious poems from Volume Eight.

In addition to necessary biographical information concerning Hongzhi, Mr. Leighton focuses on several other important topics in his lengthy and informative introduction. The first of these is a trend of thought in Chinese Zen which represents the closest Zen ever came to developing a metaphysics. This was an attempt to express the world's ungraspable nature as the interplay or simultaneous merging and differentiation of the Particular and the Universal. This way of describing a reality in flux was perhaps most eloquently dealt with in the poem "Merging of Difference and Unity" of Shitou (recited daily in Sōtō monasteries), but is given a more systematic form in the teaching of the "Five Ranks." Mr. Leighton sees this trend of thought as a kind of central philosophy of the Caodong school necessary to any good understanding of Hongzhi's writings. (Included in the collection of poems in this book is one entitled "The Five Ranks" which is a poetic expression of the meaning of each of the Ranks in order.) However, due the difficulty of understanding these ideas, I think it would take considerable reference to other sources in addition to this introduction to acquire some kind of grasp of what is intended by it.

As indicated by the subtitle of this book, the so-called "Silent Illumination" approach to Zen practice is given particular attention. Together with Dōgen, Hongzhi is considered one of the greatest exponents of the approach to practice which mainly advocates non-dualistic "just sitting" without dealing with a "koan." The Practice Instructions and poems translated here are all presented as examples of Hongzhi's Silent Illumination teaching, though these actual words only appear a few times and there are no direct references to particular practices. More than the exposition of a technique, we see here the expression of the spirit of Zen practice itself with a focus on simply discarding or forgetting all dualistic intellection and allowing the Truth, so to speak, to naturally appear.

After Hongzhi's time, it is said that growing sectarian tendencies amongst the Zen schools gave rise to a demand for clarification of the ideological or methodological distinctions between them. This situation brought apparently undue attention to the "disagreement" between Hongzhi (for which, unfortunately, he became mainly known to later generations) and the Linji (Rinzai) master Dabui Zonggao in which the latter is said to have complained that the "Silent Illumination" approach led to a mistaken quietistic practice. The translator adequately defends "Silent Illumination" against the charge of quietism and takes pains to debunk the idea that there was any actual ideological dispute between the two great masters themselves. Mr. Leighton's treatment of the subject is balanced and illuminating, but I felt a slight contradiction here that might tend a bit to propagate the same sectarian distinction which he is attempting to eliminate.

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On one hand, Mr. Leighton indicates that Dahui was more likely trying to warn of the danger of misapplying this approach rather than to condemn it, and that Dahui was also acutely aware of the dangers inherent in his own "koan Zen" (*kanna Zen*), as evidenced by the fact that he even went so far as to destroy the printing blocks to his master's "Blue Cliff Record." On the other hand, however, throughout *Cultivating the Empty Field* there is the suggestion that these writings are particularly about the "just sitting" way of zazen, while I feel that they really are not so much. Although superficially this style of teaching may seem to be suggesting a somewhat passive approach, actually I can see nothing here which would not apply equally to any form of real Buddhist practice.

As for the translations themselves, it must be said first of all that anyone who attempts to render Chinese Zen records into English, is confronted with perhaps the most difficult job a translator can take on. Actually the original texts are not so difficult to read or, (in a certain sense) "understand." But Buddhist texts, which often attempt to express the condition of reality from the enlightened viewpoint are discussing something which few people can see. Though obvious enough to those who can, their assertions usually run contrary to the conventional logic upon which language usually depends for meaning. (As Mr. Leighton quotes Zen master Dongshan as saying, "The meaning is not in the words.") But that isn't all. Most translators may hope at best to simply report as precisely as they can what is being said in another language without imposing their own judgements concerning the meaning, but in the case of Chinese and English this is not nearly as possible as it might be in other cases. The Chinese written language differs fundamentally from alphabetical languages in that it is composed of a very sophisticated system of symbols for idea "bites" rather than phonetic symbols for the reproduction of inflected language patterns. This system is relatively free from the necessity of more-or-less logical, linear or architectonic development of meaning and hence has a different set of strong and weak points than most other languages.

By looking, for example, at the poem "The Acupuncture Needle of Zazen," the first in this collection (which poem, Mr. Leighton tells us, was much praised by Dōgen), we can see the type of problems encountered by the translator. This poem is composed of extremely terse and almost non-grammatical groups (sentences?) of mostly four or five ideograms apiece. The first, 仏仏要機 is translated "The essential function of all buddhas." The first ideogram means "Buddha," and is repeated to express plurality. The third means the essential point of something, and the fourth could mean the mechanism which operates something—hence Mr. Leighton's translation—but it could also mean the central reason, truth or pivotal point of something, which would make the third and fourth ideograms about the same in meaning.

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but enriching the language with different sets of overtones. In the second phrase we see 祖祖機要 which is translated "the functional essence of all ancestors" (i.e. the Buddhist Patriarch). Here, since the order of the third and fourth ideograms have been reversed, the translator gets "functional essence." If the third and fourth ideograms are taken to have roughly the same meaning however, their order would have been reversed only for the lively poetic effect achieved.

Mr. Leighton has grammatically linked as subject and predicate, the first two phrases to the third and fourth (不触事而知。不对緣而照。) to arrive at "is to know without touching things (or perhaps "without defiling matters," or even "without committing acts") and to illuminate (here in the sense of "to know," to "perceive," or to "reflect" as in a mirror) without encountering objects" (emphasis and parenthetical insertions mine). My personal feeling is that each of the phrases in this poem thus far refers to an understood subject, namely the mind, truth or meaning of zazen which is enlightenment itself. Though the end result could perhaps be understood in somewhat the same way, I think that linking these phrases into a grammatical English sentence restricts the meaning too much.

In the fourth phrase, the second and third ideograms (对緣) which are translated as "encountering objects" actually seem to mean to become involved with things with a kind of cause-and-effect or dualistic relationship or attitude etc.—in other words what is usually known in Buddhism simply as "attachment." Perhaps it is possible to imagine "encountering objects" as having this meaning as well, however.

The use of the word "function" in the first two phrases may in one meaning seem like a fairly direct translation of the Chinese, but the dualistic implications of "purpose" etc. are impossible to escape and so the use of "function" might better have been avoided. Also, the use of such words here and elsewhere as "innately" or "inherently" (for 自 as in 自敵 or 自妙) may be pretty close to the Chinese meaning, but these words are overused in English, often with little or no purpose other than to dress up the language. I wonder if some words which tend more to turn the mind on rather than off might have been found.

The fact that all of the above difficulties can be found in only the first few ideograms of the first (albeit perhaps the most difficult) poem might give the reader some idea of the problems involved in trying to translate such texts as these. But even if these translations are just read for their own unique meaning without belaboring them with comparisons to the original texts, I find that there remains much that can stir the blood (in spite of a sprinkling of "holes" from which it is difficult to extract much significant meaning). Fortunately, as Mr. Leighton himself correctly points out in his preface, Hongzhi's (and

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nearly all Zen teachers') style is rather holistic in that each part tries to express the same meaning as the whole teaching. Therefore, whatever avoidable or unavoidable problems there might be in the translation, one needn't be concerned about their distorting the overall meaning. (There is plenty here to enjoy. One example which mirrors to some degree the quotation in the beginning of this review, is "The people of the Way journey through the world responding to conditions, carefree and without restraint. Like clouds finally raining, like moonlight following the current, like orchids growing in shade, like spring arising in everything, they act without mind, they respond with certainty.")

I believe—and I think Mr. Leighton would agree—that in the end anyone who really wants to know what this literature is about must (in addition to doing a lot of Zazen) consider learning to read the original texts at least a little, rather than depending on anyone's translations. If he or she does, then the pioneering work done by such translators as Mr. Leighton will be invaluable. As for myself, I must confess that if it weren't for this book, I most likely would never have gotten around to reading anything by Hongzhi, so for this at least I must express my gratitude.

JAMES K. MORTON