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The Review of No-Review: A Response to Robert Aitken

Upon reading Robert Aitken's review of my book *The Sword of No-Sword: Life of the Master Warrior Tesshu*¹ I initially dismissed it as a classical example of what is known in Catholic theology as "invincible ignorance," i.e., the person in question can never be converted because the teaching being presented lies far beyond his or her field of experience. On second thought, however, I decided to let the editors and readers of *The Eastern Buddhist* know how poorly Tesshū and myself were served by the reviewer.

I was under the assumption that reviewers were actually supposed to read the book that they were reviewing. That does not seem to be the case here. In reference to Tesshū's enlightenment Aitken states: "Did Tekisui check Tesshū after his experience? Did he approve him? Stevens doesn't say." But I do say. Turn to page 49 and, lo and behold, we find:

When Tekisui first met Tesshu after his disciple's breakthrough, he immediately sensed the tremendous change in Tesshu's bearing. No further testing was necessary—Tesshu had obviously arrived. . . . Later, Tekisui presented Tesshu with an *inka*, a formal certificate of Dharma transmission.

Another gross misrepresentation is the reviewer's disparaging reference to mice falling dead when the immature Tesshū did zazen. Aitken fails to mention that Tesshū himself joked that such zazen was only good as "rat poison" (p. 44) and also omits—because he didn't read it?—the essential passage on page 97:

Mice, once deathly afraid of Tesshu's demon zazen, now sported on his lap and shoulders as he created a new Buddha with each character during his *shakyo*.

Nor was Tesshū an alcoholic as Aitken declares. Tesshū did enjoy the "hot

¹ See *Eastern Buddhist* 19, 2 (Autumn 1986), pp. 133-37.

water of transcendental wisdom” but he did not drink nearly as much as one of Aitken’s own teachers, Yamamoto Gempō, who once said with a smile, “Although I’m a penniless monk I’ve contributed a huge amount of money to the national treasury in the form of liquor tax.” I make it clear in the book that, following his enlightenment, sake was not an intoxicant for Tesshū: after his nightcap he did stone-cold sober *zazen* or *shakyō* for the rest of the night. Rice wine was in fact a medicinal pain-killer for this valiant man who suffered from stomach cancer from his mid-forties.

Aitken is similarly off the mark regarding the “sword of no-sword.” Except for one extreme, exceptional case (p. 38) Tesshū never encouraged killing and he himself, most remarkably, never took the life of another being even in the heat of battle when his opponents were trying to cut him in half, blow him to bits, or break his neck. He subdued his enemies through the power of “no-mind,” the true test of a Zen master.

Rather than a hopelessly muddled discussion of Tōzan’s “Fourth Rank” the readers of the *Eastern Buddhist* deserved at least some information on the book’s important calligraphy section.² Not knowing anything about *budō* is excusable but a total lack of familiarity with calligraphy and painting is a serious handicap for someone who considers himself a teacher of Zen. Art was, and is, a primary teaching vehicle and comprehensive knowledge of *Zen-sho* is necessary for a thorough understanding of Zen Buddhism. Zen masters live in their brushwork and even today we can still encounter such great teachers as Hakuin, Sengai, and Tesshū as they challenge us face-to-face with their “visual koans.” Zen art is not a dilution of practice as Aitken has maintained elsewhere but a distillation of the essence of Buddhism.

Aitken quoting Dōgen on the nature of enlightenment is highly problematic since the quality of Dōgen’s own realization has been questioned by various commentators, past (e.g., Suzuki Shōsan) and present (e.g., D. T. Suzuki). In my opinion, Tesshū’s enlightenment was deeper and broader than that of Dōgen; Tesshū’s dynamic presence of mind under fire, his unstinting charity, his openness to life in all its manifestations, his pacificism, his incredible legacy of Zen art, and his ability to combine Zen enlightenment, family life, and public service make him an infinitely better exemplar for flesh and blood human beings engaged as spiritual warriors in the modern world than the aloof, morose, and uptight Dōgen. Whenever I look at one of Tesshū’s scrolls I receive a burst of energy that carries me through the day. Can any reader of the *Shōbōgenzō* say the same?

Despite Aitken’s feeble objections, Tesshū was indeed one of the greatest of

² Incidentally, due to an editorial oversight, illustrations (d) and (e) on page 90 and on pp. 92-93 of my book are reversed.

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all enlightened Buddhist laymen. He is widely recognized as the savior of Buddhism in general and Zen in particular during the Meiji era. Tesshū restored and founded scores of temples, supported dozens of priests (as well as an army of beggars, down-and-out samurai, invalids, and stray dogs and cats), protected Buddhist art treasures from vandals, and waged a single-handed battle against anti-Buddhist Shintoists and Christian missionaries. When Tesshū died, virtually every Buddhist abbot in the country attended his funeral and he was declared by one and all to be a reincarnation of Vimalakīrti. (Although I didn't mention it in the book, Tesshū was also indirectly responsible for the introduction of Zen to the United States. Tesshū was an early patron of Shaku Sōen, who presented Zen Buddhism at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, and the First Zen Society of America was a branch of the Ryōbō-kai, founded by Tesshū and several other laymen.)

I must also protest Aitken's attempt to speak *ex cathedra* as a "Zen teacher." His lack of experience with two of the three disciplines involved in the book and his personal prejudice against a practice that does not fit in with his preconceived notion of what Zen is renders his review invalid. Furthermore, to imply, as Aitken does in the last paragraph, that his own brand of one-dimensional, plodding, fussy Zen is somehow superior to that of Tesshū's "live completely, die completely" Zen is an insult to the good judgment of all of his predecessors. Aitken's run-of-the-mill approach may be suitable for timid souls but, compared to that of Tesshū, it is certainly less inspiring, much duller, and surely less rewarding.

JOHN STEVENS

Robert Aitken replies:

I found errors in my review of John Stevens' *The Sword of No Sword* and sought to revise it, but was advised by the editors that the piece was already set up in type, and that I could submit a correction for the next issue. I did so, but now this letter will run in its place.

The main error was my misinterpretation of Tung-shan's fourth gāthā in his Five Ranks. The verse, as translated by William F. Powell, runs as follows:

Two crossed swords, neither permitting retreat:
Dextrously wielded, like lotus amidst fire.