

## BOOK REVIEWS

times past, and to taste, if only for a moment, another world that is both similar and dissimilar to our own.

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*THE SWORD OF NO-SWORD: Life of the Master Warrior Tesshu.* By John Stevens. Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1984, pp. *xii*+171. ISBN 0394-72770-3 (paperback)

Yamaoka Tesshū was a dominant political figure during the early Meiji period of Japan. He negotiated the surrender of the Shogunate to the Imperial forces at the end of the brief civil war of 1868, and went on to serve as an advisor to the Emperor. He was a great swordsman, and the principles of *kendō* (swordsmanship) which he taught are followed by *kendō* teachers today. He was a superlative calligrapher, and an ardent student of two prominent Zen Buddhist teachers of his time.

John Stevens has put together an interesting biography of this versatile figure from a variety of sources, most of them rather unreliable, for Tesshū did not write an autobiography or keep records designed to help biographers. Picking through third-hand accounts and some original records that are still available, Stevens gives us an account of Tesshū that rings true, while acknowledging that a few of the details cannot be verified and a few of the stories may be apocryphal.

Though we are given a clear picture of the paradoxical man Tesshū, the swordsman who taught "No Sword," the penniless statesman, the Zen student who died an alcoholic at 52, the warrior who was also an artist—it is nonetheless an uncritical presentation. We need another book to give us cultural, historical, and psychological interpretations of the contradictions in Tesshū's extraordinary life. Such a book might begin with a history of sword-fighting, and could, perhaps, show how elements in this history play themselves out in his story.

The *Mutō* or "No Sword" school of *kendō* did not originate with Tesshū, though he refined it beyond earlier formulations. With the many changes in Japanese culture following the importation of Zen Buddhism in the thirteenth century and its spread through the ruling class, and with the introduction of firearms three hundred years later, *Mutō* developed first as a way of disarming another without using a sword, and later as a way of self-development by us-

ing swordsmanship as a discipline for physical and mental concentration.<sup>1</sup>

The influence of Zen upon sword-fighting began in the Kamakura period, with the Chinese masters Tao-lung and Tsu-yuen (known posthumously as Daikaku and Bukkō) interacting with prominent samurai, including shōgun. In this early phase, as Trevor Leggett has shown, the teachers changed the phraseology of the traditional kōans to fit the ethnocentric needs of their patriotic Japanese disciples, and helped them to find equanimity in the face of danger.<sup>2</sup>

This influence of Zen matured in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the development of what might be called samurai metaphysics. It is outlined in the Zen teacher Takuan's letter to the sword master Yagyū Munenori:

The uplifted sword has no will of its own, it is all emptiness. It is like a flash of lightning. The man who is about to be struck down is also of emptiness, as is the one who wields the sword. . . . Do not get your mind stopped with the sword you raise, forget about what you are doing, and strike the enemy before you. They are all of emptiness, but beware of your mind being caught in emptiness.<sup>3</sup>

Takuan's words are similar to Krishna's advice to Arjuna on the field of battle.<sup>4</sup> Religion has been used to justify fighting, and there have been religions of fighting, since the first *homo sapiens* stood up straight. The Crusades and the various holy wars down through the ages, including the Christian conquest of the heathen in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, and including the communal fighting of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Moslems in modern India and Sri Lanka, all incorporate elements of religious doctrine to encourage combatants and justify killing.

While Zen helped transform sword-fighting to a religion, the gun transformed the swordsman from a warrior to an esthetic and religious athlete. As Hiroaki Sato remarks in *The Sword and the Mind*, "As his military significance was reduced, the professional warrior-swordsman was compelled to seek some spiritual meaning in the mastery of the sword to maintain his

<sup>1</sup> Hiroaki Sato, *The Sword and the Mind* (Woodstock, N. Y.: The Overlook Press, 1986), p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Aitken, reviewer, "Trevor Leggett, *The Warrior Koans: Early Zen in Japan*," *The Eastern Buddhist* N.S., Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 139-141; Leggett, *Zen and the Ways* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1978), pp. 84-88.

<sup>3</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1959), pp. 114-115.

<sup>4</sup> *Bhagavad Gita*, II, 17-19; Lin Yutang, ed., *The Wisdom of China and India* (New York: Random House, 1942), p. 62.

## BOOK REVIEWS

reason for being."<sup>5</sup> The dōjō replaced the battlefield; the general became a kendō master.

A lot more study would be necessary for any definite conclusion, but my hunch is that the "spiritual meaning" of kendō could not meet Tesshū's religious needs. As Trevor Leggett points out, "What are called the Ways are *fractional* expressions of Zen in limited fields such as the fighting arts of sword or spear, literary arts like poetry or calligraphy, and household duties like serving tea, polishing, or flower arrangement."<sup>6</sup> It seems that the Zen teacher Tekisui of Tenryū-ji catered to Tesshū's fractional Way, as Bukkō catered to Tokimune, and Takuan catered to Munenori. After Tesshū's preliminary experience with the teacher Seijō of Ryūtaku-ji, Tekisui assigned him the fourth poem in Tung-shan's "Five Ranks" as a kōan:

Two crossed swords, neither permitting retreat:

Dextrously wielded, like lotus amidst fire.

Similarly, there is a natural determination to ascend the heavens.

This is William F. Powell's translation of the poem in his recent work, *The Record of Tung-shan*, and it seems accurate.<sup>7</sup> The "Five Ranks" deal with five conditions of the universal and the particular, the eternal and the temporal, the pure and the worldly, the empty and the realm of form. In the fourth rank we are shown the two sides as completely equal, in marvelous tension. Two tropes for this tension are offered—the two swords crossed and held by equally dextrous partners, neither giving way; and the lotus amidst fire, which, as Powell indicates, is a simile from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* expressing the Bodhisattva's vow to practice meditation in the midst of desires.<sup>8</sup> In tension between the universal and the particular, neither mastering the other, neither retreating from the other, one naturally gathers oneself for the highest possible realization.

It is clear that Tung-shan fully intends the two swords and the lotus amidst fire to be figures of speech. The term Powell translates as "similarly" is *wan-jan* 宛然 (J. *enzen to shite*), for which another translation in this context might be, "like this." In poems setting forth the other ranks, Tung-shan uses metaphors and similes to make his points: "A familiar face from the past" for the first, "Finding the ancient mirror" for the second, "Avoiding the name of the emperor" for the third, and "Returning to the charcoal fire" for the fifth.

<sup>5</sup> Sato, *The Sword and the Mind*, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Leggett, *Zen and the Ways*, p. 117; emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> William F. Powell, trans., *The Record of Tung-shan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Powell, p. 87.

## THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

However, Stevens, and it seems Tesshū as well, and perhaps Tekisui for the sake of Tesshū's fractional Way, take the swords literally:

When two flashing swords meet there is no place to escape;  
Move on coolly, like a lotus blooming in the midst of a roaring fire,  
And forcefully pierce the Heavens!<sup>9</sup>

In place of a poem setting forth in figurative terms the tension between the particular and the universal naturally giving rise to an aspiration for the highest understanding, we have the presentation of an actual swordsman persevering coolly from one side in the utmost difficulties of an equal contest, and forcefully attaining his goal. This seems quite removed from Tung-shan's meaning.

Zen teaches through metaphorical expressions almost entirely, and many stories are told of naive students taking them literally. The most absurd of these is the account of a young monk at Engaku-ji who was told by his teacher Imakita Kōsen to "stop the train running by the triple gate." The monk stood before the train until he was pulled away at the last moment. John Stevens tells a similar story of Tesshū:

Every minute for the next three years, Tesshu butted his head against his koan. During breaks in conversation, Tesshu would cross two [long tobacco] pipes, trying to figure out the problem; while eating he put his chopsticks together like two swords. Tesshu always kept a pair of wooden swords near his bed. If a possible solution presented itself at night, Tesshu would jump out of bed and ask his wife to grab a sword and confront him.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, Stevens tells us, the meaning of Tekisui's kōan revealed itself to him, and he experienced "great enlightenment," composing the following poem:

For years, I forged my spirit through the study of swordsmanship,  
Confronting every challenge steadfastly.  
The walls surrounding me suddenly crumbled;  
Like pure dew reflecting the world in crystal clarity, total awakening  
has come.<sup>11</sup>

In response to this, I recall Dōgen Kigen's words in the *Genjō kōan*: "When the Dharma does not fill your whole body and mind, you think it is already

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<sup>9</sup> Stevens, *The Sword of No-Sword*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Stevens, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Stevens, p. 18.

## BOOK REVIEWS

sufficient. When the Dharma fills your body and mind, you understand that something is missing."<sup>12</sup>

Of course I must allow for the possibility that the words "total awakening has come" is a translator's interpolation. (I don't have the original for a comparison.) Yet even granting this possibility, the poem does not seem right. Doubtless something happened to Teshshū—some kind of awakening. His swordsmanship matured, and he set about establishing his own dōjō. But the task of the Zen teacher is to keep the student on track until the various somethings mature. Teshshū's poem does not set forth *what* he realized. Was it something more than just an emotional release? Did Tekisui check Teshshū after his experience? Did he approve him? Stevens doesn't say.

Kendō-Zen flourishes today, and its followers revere Teshshū, Munenori, and Takuan as Dharma ancestors. In this tradition, it seems, the mind is limited to *ki*, *zenjōriki*, samadhi-strength. The mind of "the mountains, the rivers, and the great earth" is missing, except as it is cultivated in the human body. Zazen becomes a device for developing personal power—for example, Teshshū said that mice would fall dead from the ceiling when he glanced up from his meditation.<sup>13</sup> In my view, this is not even a fraction of true practice. Too much "self-power" of this sort is taught in the name of Zen by kendō enthusiasts.<sup>14</sup> Where is the power of the Morning Star?—of distant peach flowers?

I do not presume to disparage Teshshū's accomplishments, and I enjoyed reading about him as a unique human being—even his drunken exploits and his braggadocio are amusing. As a Zen teacher, however, I must object to the lofty status Stevens and others assign him in the pantheon. For example, in his preface, Stevens calls him "one of the greatest of all enlightened Buddhist laymen." I can think of one or two modern lay people for whom this might be an appropriate characterization, but I don't believe it fits the statesman, artist, Zen student, and kendō master Teshshū. It is important to be clear about this.

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<sup>12</sup> Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Stevens, *The Sword of No-Sword*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Mike Sayama, *Samadhi: Self Development in Zen, Swordsmanship, and Psychotherapy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986).