

BOOK REVIEW

THE UNBORN: The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei. Translated with an introduction and annotation by Norman Waddell. North Point Press, San Francisco, 1984. pp. ix+155

QUESTIONS TO A ZEN MASTER. By Taisen Deshimaru. Dutton, New York, 1984. pp. 189.

It was perhaps a coincidence that made these two new books on the subject of Zen reach me in the same mail. Both are slim volumes of less than 150 pages, but this is all they have in common.

Were I a Zen student on pilgrimage, with Bankei and Deshimaru still among the living, I would after perusing these books have little doubt on whose door I would knock, begging to be accepted. At Deshimaru's I might be reminded that according to tradition "a person must be rejected three times before being admitted." In Bankei's case there would be no begging: the door of Ryumon-ji or Hōshin-ji would be wide open. I would join the crowd and listen.

Deshimaru Taisen was a Sōtō Zen monk who settled in Paris in 1967 and died in Tokyo in 1982. He was a layman, married and with children, when he started his study with Sawaki Kōdō Rōshi. In due course he was ordained. After his master's death, he left for Europe as a Zen missionary. He became well known in France and published some books, of which *The Voice of the Valley* and *The Zen Way of Martial Arts* were translated into English. Strange stories about Deshimaru's temperament, his blustering, if not roguish, personality have made the rounds. In the introduction to this latest book the translator warns that the text may be found to be repetitious, that the master had a highly idiosyncratic linguistic bent, so that his inconsistencies and his personal attitude to words might cause readers who are "fussy about language to gnash their teeth." This reader, indeed, gnashed a great deal.

Bankei also had his peculiar habits of speech, was not any less repetitious, but he was nothing if not consistent, crystal clear and unmistakably on target. Norman Waddell's translation is so excellent that one might imagine oneself listening to a seventeenth-century Japanese master who speaks in a civilized, yet informal English idiom of profound simplicity, subtle wit, unadorned in the wabi of its sparse elegance.

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That Mr. Waddell's translation, which appeared in *The Eastern Buddhist* some years ago, has now been published so attractively by North Point Press is an occasion for celebration for it offers one an uninterrupted confrontation with this true master, this extraordinary incarnation of prajna-karuna.

What Bankei has to say is as simple as it is profound, as transculturally valid and important now as it was then. One is struck by the gentle courtesy, the profound respect that Bankei shows his hearers, in each of whom his awakened eye perceives the Unborn. Again and again he says: "Right now you are sitting before me as Buddhas. Each one of you received this Buddha-mind from your mother when you were born." Bankei's "sermons" are not so much preachings as they are friendly person-to-person communications in which he never hides the foibles and misconceptions, the obsession with austerities, which he had to overcome in his own life: "My own struggle was undertaken mistakenly, because I did not happen to meet with a clear-eyed master. I am not different from any of you."

He shows again and again how he has freed himself from all that is superfluous, all that is mere convention, reverent as he remains of authentic tradition. Of the teaching methods of the great Zen masters of the past: "All were different," he says, "each was a response to a particular occasion present at a certain time." His independence from compulsive sectarian rules and etiquette is refreshing. In his incisiveness, his directness, his total commitment to the real existential problems each one of his listeners has to struggle with, the fullness and authenticity of his Wisdom-Compassion is manifest. It is that of the greatest of Zen sages, of Bodhidharma and Hui-neng.

Such directness and simplicity may well make Bankei's Zen particularly suitable for transmission to the Western psyche. His is a universally valid Zen, so unadulterated by the attractions of the exotic that it might have arisen anywhere, so that it comes as a surprise when he suddenly speaks of the duties of servants to their masters, of samurai to their daimyo—as if he intended us to reflect that he is actually speaking of timeless values, of loyalties and human responsibilities, be it in terms of his time and place. "I don't preach on Buddhist teaching, I'll only point out the false notions you bring with you. . . . People studying Zen nowadays spend all their time on Zen words and stories, quoting this fellow and citing that one . . . feeding on their dregs. . . . Here I make people stand absolutely alone and independent, right from the start, with their eyes fully open. . . . I don't let them waste their time with worthless old documents like that. . . . If you don't know yet about your own Unborn Buddha-mind and its illuminative wisdom, let me tell you! It will take care of everything!"

It is delightful to listen to Bankei defending the fellow who fell asleep during zazen: "Don't hit him! Do you think he leaves the Buddha-mind when he

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sleeps? . . . [People] can't be sleeping all the time, so they get up. . . . They can't talk constantly, so they stop and do some zazen. . . . They are not bound by any set rules."

Notwithstanding his gentleness, he never leaves one in doubt about the rigor of his discipline. And since the word doubt has fallen, let me quote him on "the great ball of doubt." He was highly critical of traditional Rinzai Zen, which would bring about the great doubt in students artificially through the use of koans: "People who don't have a doubt," he says, "are now saddled with one. They have turned their Buddha-mind into 'balls of doubt'. . . . It's absolutely wrong!" To pedantic priests of the Precept Sect he points out—one can see the smile— "The precepts were only given by the Buddha because of evil priests," and whining mourners he chides gently: "For all your show of pity, you are acting as if you were reproaching the dead with something or other." "A Zen master," he says, "if he is to be worth anything at all, must have the Dharma eye, each word he speaks must strike to the place of his disciple's affliction like a sharp gimlet, so as to usher him into a realm of wonderful freedom and joy."

It certainly is a joy to hear this clear-eyed master tell a group of women—and that in seventeenth-century Japan— "Men are Buddha-beings, women are too! Don't doubt it for a moment! Grasp the principle of the Unborn and you *are* Unborn, whether man or woman! Women are, unlike men, quite straightforward about things. . . . In their directness *they* are the ones who become Buddhas, rather than the men with their shrewd intellectuality."

He is the astute psychologist who diagnoses our worst foibles as the result of sheer conditioning: "You fell into your deluded ways by watching and listening to others in their delusions. You picked them up gradually; from the time you were a baby you've watched and listened to people losing their temper. . . . You've been schooled in this until you too have become habituated to anger." His treatment of thinking versus non-thinking is of utmost clarity. His single article of faith is: the Unborn.¹ "Firmly believing in it, this is the believing mind. . . . It is this Buddha-mind that is in continuous zazen." It is this mind of faith which he was able to transmit to his contemporaries and is still able to awaken in us.

One is tempted to quote the entire book verbatim, for it is a compendium of Zen as supreme Sanity, an excellent medicine for the overwrought, over-ac-

¹ And "faith" here is the unconditioned trust in the presence in each one born human—therefore in oneself—in this Unborn, this Buddha-mind that is in constant timeless contemplation, and if I may add my own interpretation, in the Original Face, in That Specifically Human which in the West has been spoken of as the Sleeping Christ within.

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tivated, over-isolated intellect.

Waddell's preface gives generous and reverential credit to D. T. Suzuki for having resurrected Bankei. His comprehensive biographical introduction to Bankei's texts I find as exemplary as the many well-researched notes that follow each chapter and which add significantly to the value of this "Course in the Primal Miracle," which I would recommend highly as one of the dozen or so source books on Zen, indispensable to introduce the subject responsibly to newcomers, and not less precious to Zen veterans as a reminder of what is essential and central.

I would hardly recommend Deshimaru's book for either purpose, not so much because of its insistence on compliance with his house-brand rules of zazen, but because it rambles on so confusedly, and is all too replete with statements which I can only see as nonsensical, or at any rate totally incomprehensible as expressed. It is moreover marred by the random use of terminology, and littered by abstruse but far from erudite chatter about the anatomy and physiology of the brain. Deshimaru's infatuation with words like noumenon and phenomenon is almost comical and although it is painful to quote some examples, it must be done to show what odd books on Zen are deemed publishable by a distinguished house like Dutton: "To find eternity is not egotism, it is truth, true noumenon, that is the true religion we must create"; "but even if we die we can exist eternally, because we have no noumenon"; "*mu* exists but without noumenon"; "every phenomenon is part of Zen, even toilet paper is Zen." "True wisdom arises from the thalamus and hypothalamus," he tells us and as if to offer a few samples of this true wisdom, he generalizes—I counted a dozen very similar generalizations— "Westerners always make a distinction between illusion and satori"; "Orientals are calmer, that comes from the influence of the monsoons, the rains that lay everything to waste, so that people have no choice but to be patient. Buddha did not like fighting. He wanted peace. So Buddhism grew and influenced the whole of Asia."

Another example of thalamic activity: "It is not wise to say 'You must not eat meat.' Meat is necessary, especially for Westerners. (*sic*) But if you eat too much of it, you may have many and intense sexual yearnings." On a related subject he reports his answer to the question of a student who asked: "I have got a fiancée and I am very attached to her. How can I sever that attachment?" He told him: "Have two, three, a dozen fiancées, by that means your attachment will change. . . . In the end you'll be worn out and not at all attached anymore." Even more enigmatic is this statement about Christianity: "Afterward the apostles spread and organized his teaching and cultivated a spirit of compassion in regard to his cruel death."

Finally I can't resist quoting: "The crisis in our civilization is caused by the

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fact that most people's minds are not normal. If the mind changes the civilization changes. Changing minds could solve the problem of oil shortages. People would attend sesshins instead of watching television." Will this go down in history as the OPEC koan, one wonders . . .

Reading between the lines of this diffused text or hidden in the web of loquacity one seems to hear familiar echoes: "One's profound ego, which is that of every other existence"; "satori is not some special state but simply a return to the original condition"; "zazen is not a means to something"; "the only problems are the real problems of everyday life . . . everyday life is a koan."

There are also some relevant words on the roles of both training and *mushin* in art, and on the value of ritual; and even the poetical: "The body and the mind are like the two wings of a bird."

Deshimaru may well have been a valuable teacher. He was certainly lacking the self-criticism to refrain from doing what he was obviously not gifted for. Or did he want to prove that it is impossible to write about Zen, however poorly, without arousing reflection?

I was saddened by this book and will place it on the shelf, put Bankei in my pocket and look for a quiet spot.

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