

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 17, 2022

Zen Conversations

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RICHARD BRYAN MCDANIEL, *Zen Conversations*. Manotick, Ontario: The Sumeru Press Inc., 2021. 185 pp. CAN \$27.95 (pb). ISBN 9781896559742.

Richard McDaniel has emerged as the premier chronicler of Zen Buddhism in North America. In the course of writing seven books published between 2012 and 2021 on the topic, he has gradually developed his own distinctive approach and voice. Like all of McDaniel's books, *Zen Conversations* is not primarily directed towards an academic readership, but rather towards Zen practitioners or anyone with an interest in the decentralized and varied milieu of Zen lineages, teachers, and institutions in contemporary North America. Being his most recent book, *Zen Conversations* is inextricably (more than usually is the case) linked to his previous work; thus, I will begin this review with a brief discussion of the book's background and context.

Books on the history and state of Zen Buddhism in North America have constituted a minor genre for at least forty years, spilling over into the larger Zen memoir and biography category. One of the genre's first products was Rick Field's *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (1981), which focused on the general history and state of Buddhism in America, rather than on Zen Buddhism in particular.¹

Lenore Friedman's *Meetings with Remarkable Woman* followed in 1987, consisting of chapters on thirteen Buddhist women teachers, of whom five were Zen teachers (Toni Packer, Maurine Stuart, Joko Beck, Jiyu Kennett, and Gesshin Prabhava Dharma).² Friedman took a biograph-

¹ Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boulder, Shambhala, 1981).

² Lenore Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America* (Boston/London: 1987, Shambhala).

ical approach to each teacher, and included selections from her transcribed interviews with them. Helen Tworok's *Zen in America: Profiles of Five Teachers* came out in 1989. Tworok took a similar approach to Friedman, but discussed fewer teachers in greater depth—Robert Aitken, Jakusho Kwong, Bernard Glassman, Maurine Stuart, and Richard Baker. These five were all first-generation American successors of Japanese teachers, and included some very influential figures. Another important teacher, Philip Kapleau, was invited but declined to participate.

The next book in the genre, and by far the most comprehensive, appeared in 2006: James Ford's *Zen Master Who? A Guide to the People and Stories of Zen*.³ After a brief introductory summary of Zen practices, concepts, and history in China and Japan, Ford recounts the history of the transplantation of the main Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese lineages that have taken root in North America. *Zen Master Who* remains an invaluable resource, but it has not been revised since its publication and is unavoidably dated.

After Ford's 2006 survey, the mantle gradually shifted to Richard McDaniel. McDaniel began writing about Zen Buddhism around 2011-12 when he was convalescing from a broken (and rebroken) leg. His first three books—*Zen Masters of China: The First Step East* (2012), *Zen Masters of Japan: The Second Step East* (2013), and *The Third Step East: Zen Masters of America* (2015)—were mostly retellings of stories and events about famous Zen figures, taken from the secondary English-language literature.⁴ As McDaniel wrote in the introduction to *Zen Masters of Japan*, "As with

³ James Ishmael Ford, *Zen Master Who? A Guide to the People and Stories of Zen* (Somerville, MA: 2006).

⁴ Richard McDaniel, *Zen Masters of China: The First Step East* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2012); *Zen Masters of Japan: The Second Step East* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2013); and *The Third Step East: Zen Masters of America* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Sumeru, 2015).

that first volume, there is no new material in this collection. All the stories gathered here have been told in English elsewhere. And once more I have retained the story-teller's prerogative of making minor embellishments."⁵

This approach changed with his fourth book, *Cypress Trees in the Garden: The Second Generation of Zen Teaching in America* (2015).⁶ McDaniel altered his focus to contemporary North American Zen teachers, and adapted an approach based mainly based on extensive series of interviews. As McDaniel said in his address at the 2021 meeting of the American Zen Teachers' Association (AZTA),

I assumed that contemporary North American Zen teachers – you – had things to say that were at least as worth preserving as Tang-dynasty comments about mounds of flax, turtle-nosed snakes, or excrement sticks.⁷ So in March of 2013, starting in San Francisco, I began a tour of Zen centers throughout North America. In total, I interviewed 124 American, Canadian, and Mexican teachers before the COVID outbreak put an end to travel. They represented the Soto, Rinzai, Sanbô, and Kapleau schools, as well as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean lineages. . . . I treated that tour much like a pilgrimage. I undertook it without expectations. I had no agenda in mind. I wasn't seeking to defend a particular theory or to argue to a particular end. I tried not to take sides in any of the several differences of opinion I encountered. My goal

⁵ McDaniel, *Zen Masters of Japan*, 11.

⁶ McDaniel, Richard, *Cypress Trees in the Garden: The Second Generation of Zen Teaching in America* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Sumeru, 2015).

⁷ These refer to koans in the standard collections used in Rinzai and Harada-Yasutani Zen training.

was simply to record a phenomenon I found interesting and personally meaningful.⁸

Cypress Trees took up where Ford's *Zen Master Who?* left off. *Zen Master Who* was a history and survey that focused on the transplantation of the Zen lineages to North America, concentrating on the Asian teachers and their first-generation American successors. *Cypress Trees* focused on the second generation of North American teachers, presented in extensive and detailed interview-based portraits. At 499 pages, it is the longest of McDaniel's books.

McDaniel's fifth book was *Catholicism and Zen* (2016),⁹ a study of the substream of Zen as practiced and taught by some Catholic clergy, almost entirely in the Sanbô-Kyōdan and Harada-Yasutani lineages.¹⁰ *Catholicism* follows a similar format as *Cypress Trees*—that is, it is mostly based on extensive interviews.

Cypress Trees was followed in 2019 by *The Story of Zen*, a historical survey of Zen Buddhism on an ambitiously vast scale, from Shakyamuni Buddha through the contemporary North American scene.¹¹ In some ways it represents a return to McDaniel's earlier approach, but is much

⁸ McDaniel, Richard, "AZTA Conference, July 8, 2021," Richard Bryan McDaniel-Zen Profiles, July 14, 2021. accessed April 27, 2022, <https://rbmcdaniel.ca/2021/07/14/azta-conference-july-8-2021/>.

⁹ McDaniel, Richard, *Catholicism and Zen* (Richmond Hill, Ontario, Sumeru, 2016).

¹⁰ The Sanbô-Kyōdan is a syncretic lay line (founded in 1954 by Yasutani Hakuun, an heir of Harada Sogaku, and Yasutani's successor Yamada Koun), that combines aspects of Soto and Rinzai practice, and which, although marginal in Japan, has a very strong presence and history in North America and Europe. The broader term "Harada-Yasutani" includes both the Sanbô-Kyōdan proper and the lines that are derived from it but which are no longer a formal part of the organization. The name Sanbô-Kyōdan was changed to Sanbô-Zen in 2013. In this review I will refer to it by both names.

¹¹ McDaniel, Richard, *The Story of Zen* (Richmond Hill, Ontario, Sumeru, 2019).

more dense and detailed, although it does contain some interviews with newer third-generation teachers.

That brings us, at long last, to McDaniel's most recent book, *Zen Conversations* (2021). *Zen Conversations* is strongly connected to *Cypress Trees* and *Catholicism*—in a way, it is another take on the same body of interviews (augmented by more recent ones), but it is approached from an oblique angle. That is, *Cypress Trees* and *Catholicism* are organized by teacher and lineage; *Zen Conversations* is organized by topic (within each topic, the material is organized by teacher). In *Cypress Trees*, for example, readers can learn about the Sanbô Zen lineage through sections on three of its North American teachers—Sister Elaine MacInnes, Patrick Gallagher, and Henry Shukman—and similarly with other lineages. But in *Zen Conversations*, they can become familiar with and compare many different teachers' experiences with and views on a series of broad topic headings: "Discovering Zen," "The Function of Zen," "Zen Practice," "Adapting Zen to the West," "Compassionate Action," and "Ecodharma." Although *Zen Conversations* is strongly linked to *Cypress Trees* (and *Catholicism*), it is a smaller book (185 as opposed to 499 pages). While *Cypress Trees* is a massive tome, *Zen Conversations* is light and compact, almost like a chapbook. It is perfect for browsing; it appears to be intended more for dipping in and out of than for reading straight through.

Of all McDaniel's books, *Zen Conversations* is probably the most approachable. The topical organization strongly conveys a sense of the richness and variety of approaches and styles within the tradition, and of the differences and commonalities between the teachers' approaches and personalities, presented side by side in relation to a common topic. The chapters have the quality of a series of conversations. Partly because McDaniel uses material from forty-two teachers, the subsections for each individual teacher tend to be short.

The book begins with an introduction containing a capsule history of Zen Buddhism and a description of McDaniel's project. It ends with an epilogue in which McDaniel talks briefly about his own early spontaneous *kensho* experience and later involvement with Zen practice; an index of the forty-two teachers, with page numbers and recording dates; and a glossary of names and terms.

Since the chapters draw on the views of many teachers from different lineages, approaches towards the same topic vary, sometimes widely. For instance, Chapter 4, "Adapting Zen to the West," centers around two questions. The first is "is Zen necessarily Buddhist?" The second is "how Japanese should American Zen be?" To give a taste of McDaniel's approach, I'll give a capsule summary of teachers' responses to the second question.

Zen teachers tend to occupy various positions on a continuum between two poles: a conservative desire to keep practices as Japanese as possible versus the urge to "Americanize," that is, to individualize and innovate to fit changing contemporary North American contexts and norms. Of course, the matter isn't as simple as that because there is no single uniform Japanese model. This is especially so with Sanbô Zen (and, in general, the Harada-Yasutani lines that derive from it) which is itself a departure from many Japanese Zen norms as follows: 1) it is a relatively recent syncretic sect with little influence in Japan but a great deal in North America; 2) it is a lay, not an ordained, lineage; and 3) although its origin is nominally Soto, it contains a strong infusion of Rinzaï elements. However, no matter where they are on the continuum, virtually all of the teachers in *Zen Conversations* who teach in Japanese-derived lines have retained the essential forms of Japanese Zen practice such as *zazen*; the ceremonies and attendant ritual chanting, whether in English, Japanese, Sino-Japanese or other languages; and *sesshin* (intensive practice periods, usually lasting a week).

Among the teachers discussed in Chapter 4, the Rinzai teachers Shinge Chayat and Genjo Marinello tend to retain the most overtly Japanese elements. Shinge Chayat is the abbot of Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji, a Japanese-style Rinzai monastery in the Catskills (modeled after the Kyoto Rinzai monastery Tofukuji) which makes no concessions to Western architectural styles or taste. The style of practice there tends to be strongly Japanese. As Shinge says, "the transition to a more Western form of practice has been slow" (101). Genjo Marinello, the abbot of the Rinzai training center Chobo-ji in Seattle, comments that "relative to most Zen Centers in the country Chobo-ji would feel more Japanese than most. I would say we're in the 90th percentile or something like that" (102). He emphasizes the importance of a strong form in Zen practice, and he feels that since they inherited one from Japan, they should continue to use it until "it slowly morphs into an American form that is as strong" (102).

A similar view is expressed by the Soto teacher Koun Franz, who teaches at Zen Nova Scotia, in Halifax. Franz feels that the Japanese forms aren't essential for Western practitioners, but that "what is critical is that we don't design it ourselves. Right? A spiritual practice of our own making is designed to make us comfortable. There's no way around that. This is a spiritual practice that makes us uncomfortable" (103). And since the Japanese form in which he was trained satisfies those conditions, it would be good to maintain it so long as it doesn't become become something esoteric and exotic. But at the same time the practice has to be local. "If you build a temple in Nova Scotia it has to be Nova Scotian. It has to be local. It doesn't work otherwise. And I think I'm fortunate in that regard because I lived in Japan for so long that, for me, there's no magic to it" (104).

In contrast, Shugen Arnold, the abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery values ZMM's Japanese heritage, but places less emphasis on main-

taining overt Japanese style, usages, or connections (101). Shugen is an heir of John Daido Looi (himself an heir of Taizen Maezumi), and his lineage is both Soto and Harada-Yasutani.

Bodhin Kjolhede, abbot of the Rochester Zen Center, has built on the changes made by his teacher Philip Kapleau, such as English translations of the chants, eating at table in chairs (instead of on the floor from oriyoki bowls), non-Japanese Buddhist names, and a more Western-style dress for ordained practitioners.

Bodhin Kjolhede . . . is dressed in a navy blue short-sleeve shirt with a banded collar and matching slacks. "As part of the process of adapting Zen to the West, my teacher—Roshi Kapleau—and I didn't feel inclined to maintain the Japanese *samugi*," he explains.¹² "We chose something more Western, but we also wanted a way to distinguish those who were ordained. So we came up with this." Unlike a *samugi*, it is something one could wear on the street without appearing too foreign or exotic (117).

This small adjustment in clerical clothing is typical of the mostly unobtrusive changes made by the Rochester Zen Center to render Zen Buddhist practice less exotic and more ordinary within the North American milieu.

Bernard Glassman, Taizen Maezumi's main heir, set about very purposely over time to de-Japanize his style of Zen teaching. "I was . . . encouraged by my teacher to create my own ways" (107). In the course of his teaching career, Glassman moved from a traditional teaching style towards an incorporation of social action, ultimately creating such events as street sesshins, in which participants live homeless on the streets for a week without access to their own money or resources. One

¹² *Samugi*, also called *samue*, are traditional Zen work wear.

of his heirs, the Catholic Zen teacher Robert Kennedy, also set about to Americanize his style of Zen:

Maezumi Roshi made it very clear that we should make Zen American. We should not imitate the Japanese. And it is not necessary to do so. I think the Japanese can't really be imitated anyway. They're a completely unique civilization. A wonderful civilization. But it's not our job to imitate them. Our job is to find a Zen that is open to American culture, American life. It is not necessary to wear Japanese robes in order to see your own nature. . . . Now some Zen people will disagree with this. But I would just say that Maezumi was clear that we were to do what he could not do, which was to make Zen American (107).

In addition, Kennedy (and his colleagues), simply by virtue of teaching Zen Buddhism as a Catholic priest within a recognized Zen lineage, has already altered the traditional Buddhist orientation of traditional Japanese Zen practice and teaching. This consideration touches on the other question explored in Chapter 4: "is Zen necessarily Buddhist?"¹³

A similar viewpoint on the question "how Japanese should American Zen be?" is expressed by Joan Sutherland, a dharma heir of John Tarrant (heir to Robert Aitken) in the Harada-Yasutani lineage. After saying that she feels more connected to the Chinese Ch'an than the Japanese Zen tradition, she continues:

I want to claim a deep connection to that tradition [Chan]. That thing that makes that difficult is that the way that we've inherited Zen in particular from Japan, I am not a part of. I've trained in it. I know it. And I choose—quite deliberately—not to be part of

¹³ As mentioned, this topic is explored at length in McDaniel's *Zen and Catholicism*.

that mainstream. So does that mean I'm Zen or not Zen? I don't know (111).

The above summary gives a taste of the teachers' give-and-take on the various issues discussed in *Zen Conversations*.

In conclusion, Richard McDaniel's *Zen Conversations* is a unique, informative, and quite enjoyable book, an interesting and even entertaining series of conversations between contemporary Zen teachers about a series of very pertinent issues in North American Zen teaching and practice. Of all the books in its genre, it is the only one that is interview-based, concentrates squarely on current North American teachers and practice, and is organized, not by teacher or lineage, but topically by key issues and concerns common to the North American Zen practice community. It is not a specialist or academic book, but will be of interest to specialists and academics, and to anyone involved in or interested in contemporary Zen practice in the West. No one knows this territory better than Richard McDaniel, and no one could do a better job with it.

Notes on the Contributor(s)

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