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Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher

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STEVEN HEINE, *Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2021. XXIII, 333 pp. CAN \$39.95. ISBN 978-1-61180-980-0.

Steven Heine's *Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher* addresses a frequently asked question when composing biographical works on early Zen masters: How to delineate a person's life accurately and fully when written records from the early thirteenth century are scarce? While these concerns with verification and representation exist in all forms of biographical inquiries, Heine's monograph makes it clear that Dogen has left behind a large corpus. This includes both theological works—such as *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, and other lesser-known works that Heine refers to as miscellaneous writings—and literary contributions, such as poetry in both the Chinese and Japanese traditions. Considering this extensive corpus, the question then becomes one of how these written works can be used to account for not only the events of Dogen's life, but also his intimate thoughts on the development of Zen practice. Heine addresses these questions by drawing on Dogen's own connections to and use of literary elements, such as allegories and metaphors, to delineate what it means to practice Zen through Dogen's eyes.

One of the latest additions to Shambhala Press' *Lives of the Masters Series*, Heine's *Dogen* is divided into two parts. The book begins with a section aptly titled "Life and Thought," which contains four chapters that include a biography of Dogen starting with his childhood as an orphan, to his beginning practice at Mount Hiei, then his move to China, and finally, his return to Japan. The second part of the book titled "Literature and Legacy" has three chapters and is less traditionally biographical: rather than allowing the

narrative to progress through life events, the images of Dogen are composed through interpretation, contextualization, and reception of his written works. This section begins by examining sixteen stand-alone compositions that Heine believes illustrate crucial moments in Dogen's journey as a teacher (165). The discussion then moves to examining Dogen's major works, including the *Treasury*, *Monastic Rules*, and *Japanese Poetry Collection*. Heine takes a systematic approach to discussing these prominent writings in that he organizes his analysis of each major work into three categories: structure, message, and abbreviation. In doing so, Heine also remains aware of the different ways these texts have been organized, providing insightful context into the publication decisions made by followers and scholars of Dogen.

While Heine's approach to Dogen's works as living artifacts that change through each dissemination may appeal to non-academic readers wishing to gain a broad picture of Dogen's writings, it also brings a multiplicity that scholars, including specialists of book histories and material cultures, would surely appreciate. This section—particularly Chapter 6, “Distinguishing between a Gem and an Ordinary Stone: Four Major Collections”—almost reads like an encyclopedia, capable of helping academics quickly identify which one of Dogen's works would be suitable for their specialized research topics; however, it does more than catalogue. Beyond sharing details of the number of chapters in each edition of Dogen's work or the technicalities of how it has been abbreviated in later publications, Heine also highlights the human quality to these texts, namely the lived experiences and possible motivations of the practitioners who played a hand in altering them. This humanistic treatment suggests that the story of Dogen's major works is not just one that holds insights into this Zen master's life, but also one that contributes stories of how the Zen community

developed. Biography thus becomes rooted in literary characteristics, such as those of perspectives, framing, and characterization.

A keen eye to literary elements persists throughout Heine's book as an innovative approach to understanding Dogen's life and works. This attention to literature is partly due to Dogen's own gravitation towards poetry, as Heine points out, but it also forms part of Heine's approach to writing a biography. In the "Preface," Heine states his goal as "to decode and explain various prose and poetic works in light of [Dogen's] iconic personal story, which centers on a grave sense of doubt about the possibility of attaining enlightenment" (xi). For Heine, this project is one of contextualization: situating Dogen's works within the context of thirteenth-century Japanese society, a time noted as socially and politically transformative; placing him in the lineage of his Japanese heritage and Zen traditions; finding elements of his intimate thoughts and identity in his written works; locating him within the reception, and as Heine puts it, legacy of his teachings; and lastly, connecting him with other traditions of philosophical thought that have sought to understand the human condition. Through these layers of contextualization, Dogen becomes a fully embodied Zen master—a person with multiple dimensions, some of which are contradictory.

Contradiction, and its counterpart of ambiguity, indeed form another key aspect to Heine's perspective as a biographer. Throughout the monograph, Heine highlights how he himself, as well as other scholars, have pointed out Dogen's changing beliefs and practices, which became at best, ambiguous, and at worst, contradictory. An example of this is Heine's account of how Dogen's practice at Kyoto innovatively took a stand against the discrimination of women, but he later reverted to the conventional approach of favoring male clerics at Eihei-ji (25). More prominently, Heine

also highlights the contradiction between Dogen's conviction of simply "just sitting" as Zen's foundation with his interest in developing "diverse doctrines and advocating complex rituals" (23). For Heine, these contradictions in Dogen's beliefs also translate into contradictory ways of interpreting his life and work. Demonstrating wide-ranging knowledge of Dogen's reception in both academic and non-academic circles, Heine notes how many who have studied his life—both through translation and from the Japanese tradition itself—have found his work to be "off-putting or even forbidding" (23). Heine then situates himself within this conversation by embracing Dogen's ambiguities as a path to exploring the multi-dimensional nature of his work. After all, as Heine remarks, a key aspect of Dogen's worldview lies in how he reconciles oppositions (23). In this manner, Heine's methodology curiously reflects his subject matter, creating a rich reading experience that collapses the boundaries between the objectivity expected in a biography and the necessary subjectivity that arises out of narrativizing.

To return to Heine's literary approaches, his focus on the analogies, allegories, and metaphors of Dogen's work play an important role in making sense of Dogen's contradictions. The best example of this is when Heine points out that Dogen himself describes the Buddhist path to enlightenment as an allegory (38). In a Dogen-esque fashion, Heine also directs readers on a literary path by using these literary strategies to interpret Dogen's writings. For example, when illustrating Dogen's worldview, Heine draws on Dogen's metaphor of riding in a boat: the rider, the boat, and even the surrounding waters are simultaneously supporting each other's existence (xiii–xiv). In addition, Heine highlights how Dogen employs metaphors having to do with changing natural scenery, such as "flowers blooming and weeds falling," to express the importance of seeing each moment as an immediate

experience that is “endlessly open to reexamination and reinterpretation” (114). Heine’s book thus offers literary tools as a method for understanding the contradictions that have made Dogen (in)famous.

One of the most memorable parts of Heine’s monograph is his approach to investigating Dogen’s move to Echizen. This examination of the reasons behind Dogen’s decision to relocate is another instance when Heine adopts a Dogen-like quality of collapsing binaries to openly explore Dogen’s ambiguity. Showing a keen awareness of the scholarship surrounding this defining move, Heine notes how critics have approached this period of Dogen’s life through “positive and negative judgements,” believing that either he was free to leave, or he was driven away (131). Contributing to this discussion, Heine offers what he calls a “compromise position” that moves away from examining the binary of the reasons behind this move and towards understanding the opportunities for religious production afforded by it (131–132). Thus, Heine’s research and analysis is informed about the traditional controversies surrounding Dogen’s life, but he brings an open, refreshed perspective that sees these controversies as sites of methodological innovation.

Lastly, in Chapter 7, “Dignified Demeanor in All Activities: The Legacy of Dogen Zen,” there is increasing focus on Dogen’s practice of “just sitting” in its various derivatives—“just doing,” “just resonating,” “just speaking”—which become parts of headings seen in this section of the monograph. This return to focusing on the “simple” after such a robust examination of Dogen’s multifaceted life feels like a return to the familiar, but much like Heine’s methodology of embracing ambiguity in the previous sections, this return also hints at the future. Heine ends *Dogen* by indicating how

Dogen's teachings can be applied to contemporary issues, such as racism and climate change, and in so doing, he also makes connections between Dogen and well-known philosophers from the western tradition, including Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Hence, an interrelated worldview exists till the last pages of Heine's monograph, an apt manner of ending his narrative on a teacher who is renowned for his ability to extend his thinking.

Notes on the Contributor(s)

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