

BOOK REVIEW

Purifying Zen: Watsuji Tetsurō's Shamon Dōgen

Translated and with Commentary
by Steve Bein. Foreword by Thomas P. Kasulis

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More than twenty-five years have passed since William Lafleur introduced Western audiences to Watsuji Tetsurō's (1889–1960) *Shamon Dōgen*, written first as a series of essays between 1920 and 1923.¹ This work is largely credited with rescuing the teachings of Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253) from the narrow preserve of the Sōtō Zen sect, which considers him their founder, and making them known to the wider world of Japanese intellectuals. Steve Bein has now for the first time provided the English-reading world with a sophisticated translation of this landmark in Japanese intellectual history.

Before commenting on Bein's handling of Watsuji's text, a few words about Watsuji's project in *Shamon Dōgen* are necessary. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Watsuji, and many other Japanese intellectuals, were now disillusioned with the Enlightenment ideals of Western philosophy and the assumed superiority of Western civilization. They began to look afresh at their own intellectual traditions for ideas and models upon which to create a distinctively *Japanese* modernity. Watsuji's discovery and valorization of Dōgen were part of such a project, and he made explicit his aim to "arouse interest" in Dōgen among Japanese in the opening paragraph of *Shamon Dōgen*. His goal was to "clarify that *the essence of our own culture* cannot be properly understood without taking such religious figures into consideration" (p. 25; italics mine). Watsuji sought to extricate Dōgen from his position as merely the revered founder of Sōtō Zen, and portray his writings as exemplars of religious *philosophy*. This was one of Watsuji's contributions to the contemporaneous debate over whether the discipline of philosophy even existed in Japan.

In order to focus upon "Dōgen the philosopher," Watsuji denounced the Sōtō institution of his day for its obsession with worldly concerns such as fund raising at the expense of its true mission, namely "the establishment of the kingdom of truth" (p. 26). He condemned Sōtō writings about Dōgen from Meiji and Taishō as "senseless biographies" (p. 28) that served only to create an aura of mystique around him, and that completely ignored the issue of true import, the pursuit of enlightenment. To be sure, there is much to Watsuji's criticism. However, he over-simplistically represents Meiji- and Taishō-period Sōtō as an institution speaking with a singular voice. In fact, Sōtō intellectuals of the day, both priests and lay teachers (*koji* 居士), engaged in numerous and extensive debates concerning

1 Lafleur 1985, pp. 1–20.

doctrinal and soteriological issues, some of which continue to this day. Such intellectuals published innumerable tracts on the role and importance of both *zazen* and enlightenment that were anything but base hagiography. Two leading, but hardly isolated, voices here were Nishiari Bokusan (1821–1910), a fierce defender of the centrality of *zazen* to Sōtō practice, and the influential lay teacher, Ōuchi Seiran (1845–1918). A brief glance at the twenty two volume *Sōtōshū sensho* suggests the extent of such intellectual debates.² Both in his introductory and concluding chapters, Bein uncritically follows Watsuji in this criticism of Sōtō.

Much more serious is Bein's acceptance of the "decadent Buddhism" paradigm for interpreting both the Buddhism of Dōgen's day and that of the early twentieth century. It is precisely this interpretation that informs Bein's choice of "Purifying Zen" as the title of this volume, since such "purifying" was the goal shared both by Dōgen and, some seven hundred years later, by Watsuji. The literature on the problematic nature of such an explanatory model is fairly extensive, and any prospective reader of *Purifying Zen* would do well to consult this as a corrective to Bein's comments in the introduction and conclusion of this work.³ Succinctly put, the rhetoric of decadence claims that established Buddhist sects in certain historical periods became spiritually bankrupt by pursuing material gain over spiritual goals, and morally bankrupt by abandoning adherence to the precepts. Such charges are of course as old as Buddhism itself, and highlight a natural tension in religious traditions between normative ideals and lived reality. Moreover, numerous studies over the past thirty years have shown that this caricature, especially of the established Kamakura period sects, overlooks the metaphysical and soteriological consistency of the teachings of the older Buddhisms of the period (most importantly the Tendai, Shingon and Kegon sects) with "this-worldly" behavior, as well as the internal innovations of such priests as Jien, Kakuban and Myōe. The rhetoric of decadence also assumes a normative and pristine original Buddhism from which that of the period in question has fallen. Historical studies of Buddhist institutions and teachings in India, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan and Tibet that record the thoroughly heterogeneous and plural nature of "Buddhism" are far too numerous to cite. It is unfortunate then that Bein informs his readers that Dōgen "arguably achieved what he'd set out to do: he brought home a pure, unspoiled Zen and saw it take root" (p. 1). A further problem with Bein's accompanying commentary is that it ignores Lafleur's warning that the naïve confidence with which Watsuji felt able "to peel off all encrustations and locate the structure of truth beneath" Dōgen's extensive corpus in the 1920s is no longer possible in an age of multiple and sophisticated hermeneutical strategies.⁴ Bein, like Watsuji, seems confident that he can explain what the "real" Dōgen "means." In this regard, I would urge the interested reader to supplement *Purifying Zen* with studies of Lafleur's 1985 essay and Carl Bielefeldt's sobering piece on the significant textual difficulties entailed in understanding and translating Dōgen.⁵

Bein's translation, as mentioned above, is sophisticated and, for the most part, reads smoothly. One decision, though, that struck me as particularly odd was his translation of "*dōtoku*" 道德 as "excellence." This results in rather equivocal sentences such as, "In this sense Dōgen clearly separates the excellences of the clergy from the excellences of lay

2 *Sōtōshū sensho* 1981–1984. See especially volumes 1–8.

3 See for example, Foard 1980, pp. 274–81; Morell 1987; Payne 1998; and Klautau 2008, pp. 263–303.

4 Lafleur 1985, p. 2.

5 Bielefeldt 2004.

people” (p. 73). I prefer to stick with the usual translation of “morality” for this term. Only by substituting this for “excellence,” was I able to make sense of the relevant chapters.

The notes to the text, placed at the end of the book, more often than not consist solely of the Japanese reading of a particular term, and are in some cases repetitious. Having to turn the pages repeatedly to discover so little information left this reader frustrated. One factual error in the notes needs correcting: *The Tale of Genji* does not relate the story of the Taira and Genji clans (p. 152, note 3).

Ultimately, one must ask about the relevance of translating a text such as this into English. Is its bona fide historical significance of having introduced Dōgen to the modern world reason enough to warrant its translation and publication? Watsuji himself was not a trained Buddhologist, and many of his observations concerning Dōgen’s life and teachings have been refuted by subsequent scholarship. Why then introduce an arguably outdated work to the English-reading world? Bein argues that above and beyond its status as a “classic,” Watsuji’s reading of Dōgen discusses issues—such as the importance of faith, intuition and the responsibility of the individual Zen student in Dōgen’s teachings—that have escaped the notice of Western scholarship. Such concerns, Bein explains, have not appealed to Western thinkers, whose greater interest has been with Western philosophical problems such as mind-body dualism and the relationship between time and space. This is indeed the case, and Watsuji’s discussion of these issues, and perhaps even more so, Bein’s concluding chapter, would be of interest both to Zen practitioners and to those working in comparative philosophy.

Notwithstanding the shortage of historical awareness here, Bein’s concluding exegesis is an intelligent exercise in comparative philosophy that deals with issues of Zen teaching and practice found in Dōgen, many of which are not explicitly discussed by Watsuji. Bein is clearly adept both in the Western philosophical tradition and in issues of Zen thought and practice, and his discussion of central notions in Dōgen’s teachings such as *shinjin* 心身, often translated as “body-mind,” non-ego, impermanence and “the oneness of practice and enlightenment” (*shushō ichinyō* 修証一如) is an elegant and engaging introduction to the philosophical issues surrounding such terms, and their possible implications for Zen practice today. For those interested in such comparative philosophy, Japanese philosophy and/or Zen practice, this conclusion, as well as Watsuji’s text, will prove stimulating. Those who are more concerned with Watsuji’s critique of Taishō period Sōtō Zen need only read Watsuji’s nine-page “Preface.”

Reviewed by John S. LoBreglio

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