
Book Review: "The Essential Dogen"

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Reference: "The Essential Dogen - Writings of the Great Master" by Kazuaki Tanahashi and Peter Levitt - Ed. Zen Masters - Shambhala Publications - 2013. Available in hard back, paperback, Kindle edition and audiobook.

In Zen, experience is more valued than intellectual understanding. And it is an unusually direct experience of the teachings of the 13th century Great Master of Japanese Zen that the book "The essential Dogen" offers us. This work offers a great number of Dogen's most famous passages, quotes and poems. The translations and commentary offer deep insights into Dogen's thinking, whilst matching the poetic style of the original as good as possible in the English language.

Dogen is difficult. Even most Japanese find it hard to read the medieval originals. They rely on commentaries and translations, just like any Western reader who does not happen to possess a degree in oriental studies. So we are very lucky to have Kazuaki Tanahashi and Peter Levitt. They combine an understanding of Japanese and Western cultures with an almost lifelong interest in Dogen. Both are Zen teachers in their own rights. They have been actively publishing works on Zen and Buddhism at least since the 1980s. Both have close links to the San Francisco Zen Centre under whose sponsorship "The essential Dogen" has been published. In 2010 Tanahashi and Levitt published collaboratively a complete translation of Dogen's major work "The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye – *Shobogenzo*". The "Essential Dogen" is a highly condensed version of this publication.

The book will be welcomed by those who want to read Dogen, but who are not (yet) ready to tackle the full *Shobogenzo* which is also five times more expensive. It will also be of interest to anybody who is worried about increasing levels of fear and aggression in 21st century Western societies. In the excellent introduction "A Walk with Dogen into Our Time", Peter Levitt points out how Dogen's teaching is centred on the notions of oneness or wholeness, Japanese "*ichinyo*" (pp. xxviii to xxix). These are in contrast to a radical Western dualisms between body and mind, subject and object, self and others and the natural environment. This ideology of separation leads to alienation and insecurity. In extreme cases, it can result in aggression against the self and others on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation to only name a few categories. Dogen shows us that there is an alternative. Intimacy (Japanese "*shinmitsu*") and kindness (Japanese "*shinsetsu*"), cultivated through continuous learning and practice of seated meditation - *zazen* -, have the potential to overcome even the most powerful cultural prejudice. Dogen himself is probably the best example for this. His passionate assertion of the absolute equality of men and women established a standard that even 21st century Japan struggles to meet (pp. 76 to 81.) In the context of medieval Japan this was nothing short of revolutionary.

Everybody who wants to study Dogen is confronted with his very unconventional use of language. His writing is full of poetry, metaphors and riddles. Sometimes it can be deliberately contradictory when he addresses fundamental points of reality and practice. Those trying to

'get into' Dogen need to be prepared to come up against lines of reasoning like the following about Buddha Nature:

"A dog has no Buddha nature; a dog has Buddha nature. No beings have Buddha nature; no Buddha nature has beings. No Buddhas have beings; no Buddhas have Buddhas. No Buddha nature has Buddha nature. No beings have beings". (pp. 61-62)

Being puzzled and knocked out of one's intellectual comfort zone are very much a part of the Dogen experience. When that happens, it is best to follow the advice of other Dogen experts like Brad Warner and Shohaku Okumura, who recommend not to try too hard to make sense of everything Dogen says at the first time. Instead, one should take in the beauty and mystery of the text just as it is, allowing for a deeper understanding to emerge over time. "The Essential Dogen" is a perfect medium to deliver such an experience. This is especially true for the beautiful audio version of the book read by Brian Nishii.

Although confusion cannot be avoided when studying Dogen, there are some parts in the book that appear to be perplexing, but were probably never intended to be like that. For example, in one quote Dogen reminds his followers "not to try to grope for the elephant" or "grasp the true dragon" (p. 14). Rather than trying to be mystical and puzzling, Dogen seems to be referring to two Indian and Chinese stories^[1] that were probably known to his audience at the time. Here, and in a number of other places where Dogen refers to stories from Buddhist sutras, koan collections and other Chinese or Indian literature, the editors could have helped the reader by providing more context information through additional notes.

A related point concerns sections where Tanahashi and Levitt present Dogen passages that are itself more or less direct reproductions from the Zen chronicles and koan collections. These stories introduce some of the most intriguing characters in the history of Zen, like *Bodhidharma*, his disciple and successor *Huike* (Japanese *Eka*) or the sixth Patriarch *Huineng* (Japanese *Eno*). The famous dialogues between Masters and disciples bring the very human side of these ancient 'heroes' of Zen alive and their struggle to attain the way and transmit the Dharma. The stories were chosen very carefully by Dogen and therefore clearly belong into this collection. But in some cases the editors deprive us of Dogen's unique interpretation of these episodes. For example, the famous dialogue between *Nanyue* (Japanese *Nangaku Ejo*) and *Mazu* (Japanese *Baso*) about polishing a tile as a metaphor for zazen is presented in full (pp. 9-10.) But how Dogen overturns the conventional interpretation of this story is not related.^[2] The reader has to turn to the full version of *Shobogenzo* to find out.

All in all, "The Essential Dogen" is an excellent book for anybody who wishes to embark on the Dogen journey. Instead of being heavy on commentary, it provides plenty of original Dogen quotes which are rendered as accessible in English as it is possible with this 13th century Japanese master of language. A reasonable system of references allows the more inquisitive reader to trace the passages back to the originals and compare it to other translations. Once readers have acquired some familiarity with Dogen's teachings and style, they are ready to move to more comprehensive editions of his works.

[1] “The True Dragon” relates to a Chinese story where a collector of dragon toys is scared to death when visited by a real dragon. “To grope for the elephant” seems to refer to an Indian story where a group of blind men are trying and failing to describe the nature of the animal by only touching its various parts.

[2] Traditionally this story is seen as an admonition of *Mazu* by *Nanyue* who, by pretending to turn a tile into a mirror through polishing it is apparently making fun of *Mazu*'s attempt to become a Buddha through his rigorous practice of *zazen* - seated meditation. Dogen however emphasizes the merit of supreme effort in practice that could even turn a tile into a mirror.