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# Review of « The Mountains and Waters Sutra »

**A Practitioner's Guide to Dōgen's « Sansuikyō » - by Shohaku Okumura**

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“These mountains and waters of the present are the expression of the old buddhas”.

This opening sentence of the Sansuikyō chapter of Shobogenzo, the principal work of Eihei Dōgen, the grand Master of Soto Zen, has lost nothing of its mysterious and intriguing beauty over the past 800 years. To this day it captivates followers of the Zen Way and nature lovers alike. It also appears to be more accessible to the general audience than many of Dōgen's other writings.

In Sansuikyō, Dōgen seems to talk about concrete things in the natural world as opposed to abstract topics like “being”, “time”, or “mind” like in other parts of Shobogenzo, as Isho Fujita explains in the foreword. But as soon as we start reading the original, we quickly get a taste of Dōgen's usual concoction of crystal-clear logic and outrageous absurdity, of polemic and poetry. We meet the mountains that walk swifter than the wind and dance over water. Dōgen shows us drops of water full of buddha lands and palaces inhabited by dragons and fish. And as he sees us out at the end of the tour, he tells us that we should stop seeing mountains as mountains, but that we should see them as mountains instead (sic!)

And it is at this point - at the very latest - that we realize that we need some help.

Shohaku Okumura has been studying Shobogenzo for over 45 years. At the age of 24, his teacher Uchiyama Rōshi asked him to learn English to help with the many foreigners who were coming at the time to do zazen in his temple in Kyoto. Okumura didn't like the idea, but agreed anyway. He also agreed reluctantly when his teacher asked him to go to America in 1975 to help setting up a small Zen center in Massachusetts. These two events turned into a lifelong mission of opening up Dōgen's teachings to the fledgling community of American Zen practitioners.

Formally, the “Mountains and Waters Sūtra” is a commentary on Dōgen's Sansuikyō. It is the written version of a week-long seminar taught in 2002 in San Francisco. The book uses a translation of Sansuikyō by Carl Bielefeldt who is working on a full English version of Shobogenzo.

Those who are looking for a scholarly analysis of Dōgen's arguments, verses and multilayered metaphors will not be disappointed. Okumura draws on an impressive command of Dōgen's complete works and other classics of Buddhist and Chinese literature as he patiently unpicks Sansuikyō phrase by phrase. Addressing only the first sentence, Okumura references three Chinese poets and Zen masters, four other chapters of Shobogenzo, Eihei Koroku - Dōgen's

second major work -, two 18th's century Japanese commentators of Shobogenzo, and finally the Heart Sūtra.

Okumura is more than just a Dōgen scholar though. Throughout his book, he warns time and time again against approaching Shobogenzo and Dōgen purely from an intellectual viewpoint. Okumura is a Zen teacher in the first place. And through "The Mountains and Waters Sūtra" he is sharing his very own view of the Dharma - Buddha's teaching.

His view is the result of his training with Uchiyama Roshi and a lifetime of living and teaching Zen in Japan and America. The scholarly parts of his book are broken up with countless sections where Okumura shares his personal memories, insights and intimate feelings. More than once, he even candidly admits that he still finds himself out of depth when trying to make sense of Dōgen. It is through these parts that the book really comes to life. "The Mountains and Waters Sūtra" is not so much a book that explains Dōgen - although it does this as well -, but it is an account of how Okumura tries to answer his own fundamental questions through Dōgen. This makes it an original testimony of Zen in the 21st century.

Okumura's fundamental question is how we can hear the Buddha's voice and see the Buddha's body which can be understood as true and actual reality, unfiltered by our limited senses and mental prejudices. And his initial conclusion is that we cannot do this for as long as we rely on our senses and our intellectual understanding. Referring to an early teaching of the historical Buddha, Okumura explains that there will always be barriers for as long as there is contact between our sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, etc.), their objects (sights, sounds, smell) and a consciousness that processes these impressions. His conclusion is that we need to overcome the separation between subject and object itself. And the key to this is what he calls "the spirit of shikan", like in the expression "shikantaza": "just sitting":

"This word "just" or "simply" is the cornerstone of Dōgen's teaching. Mountains are just mountains and waters are just waters. In the case of zazen, we just sit ..." (loc. 3771.)

And with a view to other activities Okumura adds:

"We not only just sit: when we eat, we just eat; when we work in the kitchen, we just cook; when we clean, we just clean, when we chant, we just chant..." (loc. 3777)

Zazen is the fundamental activity of Zen practice. For Okumura, every chapter of Shobogenzo is ultimately about zazen. Zazen has been described in different ways, but for Dōgen and Okumura it is essentially "shikantaza": "just sitting". Stripping sitting - and in extension all other activities - of all redundant purposes and meanings allows us to overcome the barriers between us, these activities and the world around us. It gives us a chance to see the body and hear the voice of the Buddha and to merge with reality itself.

Despite the many references to the natural environment, Sansuikyō is strictly speaking not a naturalistic text. Dōgen and Okumura use the metaphor of mountains and waters to talk about the Buddha Dharma in the first place. Mountains and waters are used as images to illustrate that all of nature expresses the truth of the Buddha's teaching. They are also used to show our fundamental inability to understand or even experience this ultimate reality, despite us being

an inseparable part of it.

But Okumura nonetheless draws a strong inspiration to care for the natural environment as we understand it today from Sansuikyō. Dōgen could not have foreseen or even imagined the environmental crises of the 21st century. And yet his teaching of absolute interdependence, expressed through the image of mountains and waters, is also at the heart of modern ecology.

Okumura comments on this point:

“To see the true reality of all beings means we live together with all beings; we feel connected with all beings. When we don’t see this, we kill part of this network of interdependent origination; actually, then we are killing ourselves...” (Loc 3129)

Although it is not explicitly stated, it looks like it was his concern for the natural environment that ultimately led Okumura to write “The Mountains and Waters Sūtra”. His book is also a homage to the publicist and environmental activist Gary Snyder, whose 1990 essay ‘Mountains Hidden in Mountains: Dōgen Zenji and the Mind of Ecology’ is re-published in full in the appendix of Okumura’s book.

Okumura’s strongest advice to his audience is that they should not passively accept his or anybody else’s views. He encourages us to engage with the original text directly as well as we can and make up our own minds in the light of our own experiences. Dōgen does not want to teach us some ultimate truth, but he urges us to always keep investigating and not settle on final answers.

When you have read “The Mountains and Waters Sūtra”, Dōgen will have become more accessible to you and you will be ready to tackle the next chapter.