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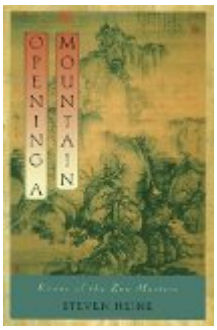
Steven Heine. *Opening a Mountain: Koans of the Zen Masters.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xiv + 200 pp. $35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-517434-2.



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On the beautifully designed cover of Steven Heine's *Opening a Mountain*, we gaze at one of the masterworks in the Chinese painting tradition, Kuo Hsi's "Early Spring," painted in the late-eleventh century at what may have been the pinnacle of the Chinese Zen monastic tradition. Allowing your eyes to wander up, down, and across this truly great painting, we spot the curved roof of a Buddhist monastery nestled gorgeously into a rugged, high valley half way up a towering, mist-covered mountain. No image could more adequately capture the mystique that Chinese Zen monasticism attained in that era and has continued to cultivate up into the modern period. Heine's new book masterfully communicates that aura of Zen by highlighting a segment of koan literature that features the work of Zen masters in "opening a mountain." While it is clear that the mountain in this phrase is really a Zen monastery, and that this phrase became a standard way to refer to the initiation of a new monastery, Heine unravels this act of opening by detailing the enormously interesting historical/cultural tradition behind it.

Long before the emergence of the Zen tradition, or even the Buddhist tradition in China, mountains symbolized numinous, spiritual power. Early Taoists had already used the image of the mountain as a metaphor of mysterious otherworldly reality. Chinese popular traditions pictured the deities residing in these far-off and vaguely known elevations. Buddhists continued to capitalize on that image until literature valorizing the T'ang and Sung dynasty Zen masters brought these images to their current cultural position. Climbing a mountain, and dwelling there, required the utmost mental and spiritual discipline. Residing in that lofty sphere, one attained a vision of the world that in its depth and breadth trumped any understanding that could be attained in the world below. The cultural images of the mountain recluse and the enigmatic Zen master who drew disciples into the remote regions of the mountains for mental/spiritual training is by now one of the most widely known and most powerful images available in the world. That the great Zen masters would "open" their monastic training centers there is perfectly understandable

in the setting of Heine's reconstruction of the idea of the mountain in Chinese history.

What Heine's analysis makes clear, though, is that there is much more to the act of "opening" than we have hitherto assumed. Prior to the movement of Buddhist monasteries into these remote areas there existed a largely oral tradition concerning enigmatic mountain recluses who, like the Taoist legend, Lao-tzu, had withdrawn from the world in the quest for profound spiritual vision. Popular images of these visionaries were widespread throughout China in the medieval period, and no parallel to them existed in the more scholarly, staid world of Buddhist monasticism. The movement of monastic Buddhism into that domain, therefore, necessitated a conflict and melding of images, and the terms in which this ideological battle would take place would not be derived from the rarified philosophical and textual traditions that had made Buddhism so impressive to earlier generations of Chinese converts. Instead, Zen masters would compete for popular recognition in south central China in terms that were familiar to the residents of that area, the terms of magical powers, demons, local deities, and the visions, apparitions, and exorcisms that support that premodern metaphysical world.

The innovation of *Opening a Mountain* is that, while not denying what Heine calls the "conventional understanding" of the koan tradition which has been communicated in largely modern, demythologized, psychological images, the book undertakes the study of koan literature by being particularly attentive to these clear representations of the extent to which Zen was born and cultivated in a premodern world. Opening new territory in Zen koan studies, Heine works his way back into the medieval Chinese mentality that would have set the context for the emergence of the koan tradition in order to offer what he claims is a "fuller" understanding of koan literature.

The book's central thesis could be formulated something like this: Koan literature draws upon cultural resources that have their origins both within and beyond the Buddhist tradition in China. These resources include ancient symbols, elaborate social rituals, mythological stories, and images of supernatural forces drawn from popular religious and shamanistic traditions in East Asia. When we interpret koans in a modern cultural context, we fail to understand them historically, either in the terms of their emergence or in the range of sociological settings in which they were perpetuated. When understood in relation to earlier contexts, koan texts express a much more complex relation between mythological and demythologized concerns, or between supernatural and naturalized forms of experience. Although the demythologized, psychological dimension of koan practice can clearly be seen in the Sung dynasty and post-Sung koan texts, it is also clear that they express more than a passing interest in premodern religious concepts and practices that feature supernatural powers and mythological images. In fact, Heine sees an internal textual "balance between accepting and rejecting supernatural perspectives," which is what generates his claim that a comprehensive reading of these texts requires an equally subtle interpretive effort to see how these two dimensions might coalesce in Zen.

One dimension of the relation between the natural and supernatural interests in early Zen had to do with the fact that Zen masters were forced to compete with local cults in their emphasis on magic and folklore. Rather than seeking simply to eliminate these older religious perspectives, the Zen masters featured in koan stories tended to acknowledge and utilize them for distinctive Zen purposes by refashioning them in new ways. This is where the theme of the mountain comes into play. Since mountains tended to be conceived as far off and mysterious, and since their most notable inhabitants were recluses and other shamanistic visionaries, the Zen tradition could simply envelop these images and incorporate them into the mystique of Zen. Like the illu-

sive hermits who lived in the mountains prior to Zen, the Zen masters cultivated a reputation for profound vision and the unconventional behavior that tended to accompany it. When Zen masters "opened a mountain," a significant part of their task was to tame the malevolent mountain ghosts and spirits reported in local folklore, as well as to demonstrate spiritual and shamanistic superiority over the local hermits and sages who would have inhabited the mountains in that area. Heine's book does a superb job in "recapturing" this basic dimension of koan literature and in the process adding significant sophistication and depth to our reading of the classic koan texts.

The organizational principle of *Opening a Mountain* is both interesting and helpful to the task of reading. Heine translates sixty koans from classic Chinese and Japanese collections that communicate his central theme of opening a Zen mountain monastery in view of the indigenous spiritual forces. These koans are then systematically ordered in accordance with the types of religious and supernatural themes featured in them. The five categories make this a unique collection of koans in its own right. The first theme collects koans that address the mountain landscape itself, along with the demons and spirits that were typically thought to reside there. Here the book's overall theme is both carefully articulated and exemplified in a series of well-known koans. The second chapter isolates koans that feature a Zen master in some kind of competitive encounter or contest with unusual religious adepts. Here we find Zen masters matching spiritual powers with shamans, wizards, and hermits who practice exorcism, trance, and other supernatural arts. We also encounter in this group "dangerous" female practitioners whose unconventional powers allow them to trick or outsmart the Zen masters.

The third category for displaying koans is the encounter with supernatural forces beyond the human. Although some Zen literature shows disdain for these popular religious beliefs, many of the koans in this group demonstrate ways in which they were also taken very seriously. Here we find ghosts, supernatural animals, gods in various forms, as well as altered states of consciousness such as trance, visions, and dreams. The fourth koan category highlights Zen symbols of authority, instruments that were widely thought to carry supranormal power within them. Zen staffs, sticks, fly-whisks, robes, and fans are ritual items that have incorporated elements of aura from earlier Taoist and shamanistic contexts. Each koan translated demonstrates the power clearly thought to reside in one of these ritual symbols. The fifth and final theme takes up a common element in religious contexts throughout the world--confession. In the setting of the Zen monastery, confession was one practice that was thought capable of evoking the experience of awakening. These include the Zen ordination ritual and the fortnightly confessional rite in which the precepts governing appropriate Zen comportment were recited, as well as rituals surrounding the experience of death and funerals. Although there is indeed a strong anti-ritualistic theme throughout Zen literature, through these particular koans we are shown the limits of that critique in classical Zen.

Throughout the book, the author's commentary is invaluable. In the introduction, a section entitled "On Reading Koans" gives advice on the structure of koan literature and on how to proceed in the effort of reading them. Thereafter, each koan is accompanied by "discussion" that the author intersperses in order to provide background information vital to making sense of the stories. For this reason the book is useful in classroom contexts for college students who have already had some level of introduction to Buddhism and/or Zen literature. Although readers might want to have had access to a concluding chapter integrating these themes in an overall understanding of Zen cultural history, the coherence of the book and its themes does stand very well on its own. Indeed, for a literary and historical study

of koan literature, this is the finest available, joining Heine's own ***Dogen and the Koan Tradition: A Tale of Two Shobogenzo Texts*** (1993) in a fascinating and quickly growing scholarly field.

Although my own work as co-author and co-editor with Steven Heine led me to question the initial invitation to review this book, my interest in it and sense that this book constitutes a very important contribution to the study of Buddhist literature convinced me to accept a second request. A thorough study of the book more than bore that sense out. This is an innovative reading and presentation of Zen literature. It breaks new ground in the study of Zen and in the interpretation of koan literature, setting a standard for these in terms of scholarly rigor and broad accessibility that is truly impressive. ***Opening a Mountain*** will encourage us to read koans in a much more articulate literary, sociological, and historical setting than we have previously managed. This is an excellent book.