

**Robert E. Buswell.** *Numinous Awareness Is Never Dark: The Korean Buddhist Master Chinul's Excerpts on Zen Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. xiv + 326 pp. \$68.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-6739-3.

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First impressions last, and having read Robert Buswell's *Numinous Awareness Is Never Dark: The Korean Buddhist Master Chinul's Excerpts on Zen Practice* (hereafter *Numinous Awareness*) I am left with the impression that for Buswell this study was a labor of love. Buswell's translation and introduction to it are well presented, well researched, and very informative, but underlying these is the sense that Buswell has spent many years mulling over not simply the academic implications of Chinul's (1158-1210) life and writings, but also their religious implications. Although Chinul lived over eight hundred years ago and completed the subject of this study, *Excerpts*, in 1209, Buswell manages to add breath and color to what could so easily have been a suffocating and gloomy experience, especially for those without a background in Korean Buddhist thought.

This review will begin with some general observations and personal opinions, and then move to the structure and make-up of the book. But for those who do not feel inclined to persevere to the end, I will pin my colors to the mast and save you the trouble of skimming through this review searching for the bottom line. If you have even a passing interest in Korean Buddhism and Zen, I wholeheartedly recommend this book as a fine addition to your library.

The truth is, although the "Korean Wave" has brought Korea and certain aspects of its culture to the attention of a wider audience, the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) Buddhism and Zen masters of the period have not been beneficiaries of this popularization. In fact, it is difficult to discern any positives when it comes to the Korean Wave's impact on Korea Buddhism in the contemporary world, whether on the cultural, academic, or religious fronts. A moot question, but one wonders what Chinul would make of the present commodification of Korean Buddhism as a novelty in the business of heritage tourism.

In the context of the present drive to promote things Korean on the international stage, where might *Numinous Awareness* fit in? In the preface, Buswell briefly outlines the sponsorship through which his work came to publication: it was supported by the English Translation of 100 Korean Classics program, the Ministry of Education of Korea, and the Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies. This raises two concrete questions regarding the place and purpose of Buswell's study: first, at whom is this work aimed? And second, who might benefit from reading it?

It goes without saying that the academic community is the major target audience of *Numinous*

*Awareness*. But within that diverse collection of scholars, I think, those involved in Buddhist studies and religious studies will gain most from Buswell's work. Having a background in the world of Korean Buddhism would be advantageous for the reader, but is by no means essential. In the section outlining the translation conventions employed in his study, Buswell points readers towards the Buswell and Lopez edited *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (2014) as a useful companion in the journey through *Numinous Awareness*. Apart from helping to clarify terms, use of the above-mentioned, or similar, dictionary or encyclopedia would facilitate a better understanding of both Buswell's "Translator's Introduction" and the "Translation" itself. The number and breadth of topics and concepts dealt with in this study make a degree of secondary reading vital if one is to fully engage with and get full benefit from the text. In short, this is not an easy read. However, the degree of difficulty does not, I think, preclude a wider readership than only those well versed in Korean Buddhism. Indeed, a surprising conclusion I arrived at on reading *Numinous Awareness* was just how important and useful this book might be for those just beginning the study of Korean Buddhism and Zen Buddhism itself.

If general or nonspecialist readers were to quickly flick through the index and body of Buswell's study, they could be forgiven for thinking that this is a book to be read down the line, after gleaning a better understanding of Korean Buddhism. And yes, a certain grasp of the ebbs and flows of Korean Buddhism will prove helpful, but is not essential. Anyone who would like to cultivate their understanding of Korean Buddhism, the Korean Zen tradition, and the Zen tradition in general, and, importantly, is prepared to cross-reference and consult secondary literature could do much worse than use *Numinous Awareness* as a textbook. Indeed, as a text for seminars or group

study projects, Buswell's translation and introduction may well be a perfect fit.

The scope of this work is not limited to Buddhism of the Goryeo dynasty, nor to Chinul alone. Buswell provides pointers to the historical foundations of *Excerpts* by examining links with Chinese Buddhism and its major figures. However, connections with more recent events are also made by way of his brief references to Söngch'öl (1912-93) (pp.76, 90), who reignited the sudden awakening/gradual cultivation debate in the 1970s, and the subsequent relationship between Haeinsa Temple and the Chinul founded Songgwangsa Temple. Although *Numinous Awareness* is aimed at the specialist reader, it is also a good addition to the library of works which, with some creativity, could be used with great effect in teaching introductory courses in Korean Buddhism, Korean Zen, and the wider Zen tradition.

Another group of readers who would benefit from Buswell's translation are those who are interested in the wider topics of meditation and spirituality. It is all too easy to forget that Chinul's *Excerpts* was written as a religious text for serious religious practitioners and not as a text for later investigation by scholars: "Chinul's goal is to offer a guide to practice, not history" (p. 20). From the very first pages, Buswell states, "Chinul's *Excerpts* is the single-most influential text ever written by a Korean Buddhist author" (p. 7). Whether you agree with Buswell's high appraisal of *Excerpts* is irrelevant; the fact is Chinul's work was and remains a sophisticated and insightful tract on Zen and meditation, and as such deserves to be regarded as a "spiritual" classic in the same manner as works such as *The Cloud of Unknowing* (author unknown: dated in the latter half of the fourteenth century) and Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle* (1577) are thought of in the Christian sphere. Outside the worlds of Korean Buddhist and religious studies, many Korean Buddhist texts remain unknown to the wider community; this is a shame and needs redress. How such a project

might be undertaken is a question for another day, but it should be noted that thus far this important task has been neglected by organizations that ought to have done better.

The text itself totals 326 pages, with the body of the book, consisting of the “Translator’s Introduction” and the “Translation,” occupying pages 3 to 194. Even without searching for a calculator, it is evident that annotations of various types play a major role in *Numinous Awareness*. Conveniently, the notes are divided into two sections: those relating to Buswell’s introduction and notes for the actual translation. Although not a major addition, such a division facilitates easier access to the informative footnotes, which play such an important role in this study. Another useful addition to the text is the section entitled “Appendix: Complete Table of Contents of Chinul’s Excerpts.” In this, Buswell clearly lays out the section headings used in the translation and cross-references them with the Sinographic text, *Han’guk Pulgyo chŏnsŏ* (*Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*, 1979 onwards). This is also the case for Buswell’s inclusion of embedded page numbers in his translation referring to the *Han’guk Pulgyo chŏnsŏ*. While not essential for the casual reader, such inclusions are convenient for those who would like to delve more deeply into the original and make comparisons.

As mentioned above, the core of *Numinous Awareness* is made up of two parts: the introduction and the translation. Following the natural order of the text, I will briefly look at the introduction and then the translation. However, before examining them in detail, it is good to note that Buswell’s introduction is in fact more than a mere summary of his following translation. The introduction stands on its own merits as a substantial piece of research which might be employed as a standalone study.

Buswell concludes his introduction with the thought that “*Excerpts*, more than any other text, deserves to be considered Korean Buddhism’s au-

thoritative guide to liberation” (p. 92). This thought underlies Buswell’s introduction and helps to put his approach in context. Any discussion of Chinul’s thought and writings can all too easily focus on the novelty of the sudden/gradual debate to the detriment of other important features. However, by remaining faithful to Chinul’s original intentions and placing *Excerpts* in the broader context of liberation, Buswell avoids this trap, while not ignoring the sudden/gradual debate either.

An area of interest for me is the historical/social context in which religious writings and movements developed. With this in mind, if I had to highlight a disappointment with Buswell’s introduction it would be its lack of broader historical context with regard to the world in which Chinul lived and wrote. I mention this lack not as a criticism of *Numinous Awareness*, but as a warning for prospective readers who might be expecting a gentle or even an in-depth introduction to the times and trends of Chinul’s world. As it states on the label, or in this case the front cover, *Numinous Awareness* is a translation and introduction to a specific text; it is not a general introduction to Chinul and his writings. If a general study of Chinul and his life is your want, there are other, more suitable studies available.

A phrase which comes to mind as an appropriate description of Buswell’s introductory section is “mature scholarship”: it is considered, insightful, and challenging. However, the introduction does demonstrate one tendency which, to some degree, lacks objectivity, but is nevertheless interesting. Buswell, as someone with close links to Songgwangsa Temple, founded by Chinul, and trained in line with its traditions, on occasion demonstrates what might be called a degree of bias when referring to Sŏngch’ŏl and his rejection of Chinul’s sudden/gradual teaching. As he, I guess tongue-in-cheek, writes: “It is only a slight exaggeration then, to say that without Chinul, there could be no Sŏngch’ŏl” (p. 76). Throughout,

Buswell consistently demonstrates a deep respect for Chinul and his teachings, and subsequently positions them close to, if not at, the pinnacle of the Korean hierarchy of important religious texts. In line with this thinking, he makes the interesting claim, based on a doctoral thesis he examined, that Chinul's *Excerpts* influenced Sot'aesan (1891-1943), the founder of Won Buddhism (p. 82). Not having access to the said thesis, it is impossible for me to verify this, but it is a proposal which I have never encountered before and, if true, would be interesting, to say the least.

Turning to the translation, Chinul's *Excerpts* is structured around Guifeng Zongmi's (780-841) *Dharma Collection and Special Practice Record*, and it contains many quotations from Zongmi and other Zen masters, along with notes, explanations, and teachings by Chinul. It is not an easy read and demands a degree of concentration if the reader is to draw most benefit from it. As with any work of translation, the translator had to decide how best to approach the task. And his decisions, I think, were good ones. I get the impression that Buswell tried to remain as faithful as possible to the original text, which, in truth, does not make it a relaxing read, but does do Chinul's *Excerpts* justice.

In the section of the translation entitled "Chinul's Critique of Radical Subitism," we are treated to a discussion on the merits of different approaches to enlightenment and are pointed towards "sudden awakening/gradual cultivation, which has been posited specifically for ordinary people" (p. 142). Chinul continues by excluding the alternative approaches that are available: "Gradual cultivation/sudden awakening, sudden cultivation/ gradual awakening, gradual cultivation/ gradual awakening, and so forth, all are practices directed at those whose faculties can only bear a gradual approach; they are not worth promoting" (p. 142). It is an oversimplification to claim that this is the core of *Excerpts*, but for the purposes of a book review we will have to be con-

tent with such a cursory conclusion. Throughout, Chinul clarifies the benefits of sudden awakening/gradual cultivation and promotes it as the most appropriate approach to enlightenment: "If one contemplates the efficacy and benefit of this method [of sudden awakening/gradual cultivation], it is vast and brilliant, readily understandable, sensible, and permitting of easy comprehension. It is the best mirror on the mind for people today who, by relying on these verbal instructions, will have the capacity to access the path through faith" (p. 183).

In the fashion of the *via negative*, what I did not want to do in this review was highlight terms and phrases, and then argue the merits and demerits of the translation style. That delight I will leave to those more qualified than me. In *Numinous Awareness* we have a fine translation and study of a rich Korean Zen text produced by one of the most important Zen masters to have lived his life in Korea. Early in his introduction, Buswell states that "*Excerpts* is in an important sense, then, the articulation of Chinul's own religious autobiography" (p. 12). Not wanting to overstate the case, but I was struck by the thought that, to some degree, Buswell's translation and study of *Excerpts* is also representative of a section of his own life's journey, with roots back to the 1970s. And perhaps that explains why I am left with my first impression, as mentioned at the beginning, that *Numinous Awareness* was indeed a labor of love.

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