
Reviewed by James McRae (Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religious Studies, Westminster College)

Published on H-Buddhism (May, 2023)

Commissioned by Ben Van Overmeire (Duke Kunshan University)

McRae on Prebish and Ng - *The Theory and Practice of Zen Buddhism*

The Chinese philosopher Mozi stresses the importance of “exalting worthiness” (*shàngxián*), where people of quality are valued and praised for their contributions to the community. It is in this spirit that Charles S. Prebish and On-Cho Ng have assembled the anthology *The Theory and Practice of Zen Buddhism: A Festschrift in Honor of Steven Heine*. Dubbed “The Godfather of Zen,” Heine has published over three dozen books and more than one hundred journal articles or book chapters on East Asian Buddhist thought. He is the editor of *Japan Studies Review* and was the book review editor for the area of Japan for *Philosophy East and West*. He served as the director of Florida International University’s Asian Studies program for almost a quarter of a century. His scholarship covers a vast array of subjects in the Zen tradition, including Dōgen, kōan studies, Buddhism in the modern world, and even a comparative study of Zen and Bob Dylan. In 2007, Heine earned the Order of the Rising Sun Award from the emperor of Japan for a career dedicated to teaching Japanese thought and culture in the United States.

Prebish and Ng begin their anthology with an introduction that details Heine’s contributions to the field of Buddhist studies (only a few of which I mention above). The remainder of the book is divided into two major sections based on the “root-and-branch” metaphor often used in the Zen tradition. Part 1, “Zen Roots,” explores some of the historical foundations of the Chan/Zen tradition, while part 2, “Zen Branches,” considers more contemporary issues. The book ends with a detailed bibliography of Heine’s monographs, anthologies, journal articles, chapters in edited volumes, and book reviews. No index is included, although because I reviewed the electronic version of the text,
this was not problematic. The e-book was easy to navigate and I was able to read it without problems on my laptop, iPad, and phone (an important consideration for those of us who teach at one-to-one institutions where all faculty and students use tablets in class). Although there are occasional typographical errors, each chapter includes a link to download the most up-to-date version of the text, and there is a postscript that identifies some corrections that were made after the initial publication.

Part 1 begins with John Tucker’s “Searching for the Historical Bodhidharma in Goblet Words,” which analyzes the classic tale of the interaction between Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of the Chan tradition, and Huike, the Second Patriarch, who allegedly severed his own arm to prove his worth as a student. Tucker argues that the details of the story were embellished over time, but the structure of the tale in its final form is meant to echo five encounters between Confucius and Yan Hui that are described in the Inner Chapters of the Zhuangzi. The Confucian master and apprentice are reimagined by Zhuangzi in Daoist terms using “goblet words” (zhīyán) that are meant to harmonize contrary concepts between different traditions. As the story of Bodhidharma and Huike has evolved, their encounter has been reconceptualized through goblet words that are meant to evoke philosophical parallels to Daoism and Confucianism. This chapter offers an excellent literary analysis of both the tale of Huike and Bodhidharma as well as the Inner Chapters of the Zhuangzi, and the concept of goblet words helps to shed light on the literary techniques used in many of the Chinese philosophical classics.

In chapter 2, “Chan and the Routinization of Charisma in Chinese Buddhism,” Mario Poceski explores the early development of Chan Buddhism in China through Max Weber’s concept of the routinization of charisma. Weber argues that religious traditions rise to prominence due to the charisma of their early leaders, who are replaced by later generations who create orthodox, authoritarian structures based on the founders’ teachings. The early figures of the Chan tradition in the Tang era were charismatic leaders who eschewed orthodoxy and embraced a variety of unconventional methods to promote awakening. However, by the Song period, Chan had crystalized into a highly institutionalized, state-sanctioned religion governed by a central authority that regulated spiritual lineage, sacred texts, and monastic practice. Poceski’s chapter is important for understanding the sociopolitical context in which Chan developed.

Morten Schlütter investigates one of the most essential texts of the Chan/Zen tradition in chapter 3, “The Platform Sūtra and Its Role in Chinese Zen Buddhism.” The Platform Sūtra has appeared in a variety of different versions between its creation in the eighth century and its final iteration in the thirteenth century. Schlütter investigates the development of this text through “encounter dialogues” that illustrate interactions between Chan masters like Huineng and other people who gain spiritual insight from the meeting. These encounter dialogues represent a type of kōan (Chi. gōng’ān) meant to either illustrate core Buddhist doctrines or demonstrate the limitations of conventional language and discursive reasoning. Schlütter argues that encounter dialogues were first developed to promote the Southern School. They became progressively integrated into successive iterations of the Platform Sūtra, which popularized encounter dialogues as a literary form in the Chan/Zen tradition.

Chapter 4 features Dale Wright’s “Eloquence and Silence: How Dōgen’s Dharma Match with Vimalakīrti Turns Out.” Here, Wright explores parallels between Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō and the Vimalakīrti Sūtra concerning the non-dualism of language. While Dōgen often seems to criticize Vimalakirti, Wright argues that the Zen master is actually condemning the latter’s successors in Song-era China, who misinterpreted Vimalakirti’s
“thunderous silence” to mean that language and philosophy were useless for promoting awakening. However, both Dōgen and Vimalakīrti offer a middle-ground position on language, using eloquent words to articulate Buddhist philosophy while simultaneously critiquing the limitations of language compared to diligent practice and mindful awareness. Wright’s chapter offers an interesting revision of both the meaning of the Vimalakīrti Sūtra and Dōgen’s views of Vimalakīrti’s philosophy.

In chapter 5, “The Relationship of Dōgen’s Vision of Nature with His Practice of Devotion and Faith,” Taigen Dan Leighton investigates the meaning the essay Keisei Sanshoku, “The Sound of the Streams, the Shape of the Mountains,” in the Shōbōgenzō. Here, Dōgen explores the interconnection between Zen practitioners and the natural environment. Diligent practice in a natural setting can promote the realization of Buddha-nature not only in one’s body-mind, but in the natural environment, which simultaneously awakens with the practitioner. This parallels another section of the Shōbōgenzō entitled Sansuikyō, “The Mountains and Water Sutra,” which articulates the soteriological power of the natural landscape on Zen practice. Because human beings and nature are fundamentally interrelated, they mutually assist one another in the interdependent process of awakening.

Part 1 concludes with On-Cho Ng’s chapter 6, “Theorizing the Neo-Confucian-Buddhist Encounter: The Chinese Religious Habitus and Doxas.” Here, Ng investigates the ways in which the Chan tradition influenced Confucian philosophy. He uses Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus (a historically constituted system of philosophical dispositions) and doxa (cultural realities that are either consciously or subconsciously accepted). Though Chan Buddhism is typically considered at odds with Neo-Confucianism, many of its ideas were essential to the development of Neo-Confucian thought as the two traditions worked to define themselves as distinct from one another. Though the Neo-Confucian tradition claimed doctrinal purity untainted by Buddhist ideas, the reality is that the Buddhist Chinese doxa heavily influenced the Confucian habitus.

Part 2, “Zen Branches,” opens with Charles S. Prebish’s chapter 7, “The Zen Explosion in America: From before the Pre-boomers to after the Zoomers.” Prebish explores the various historical stages in which Zen spread rapidly throughout the United States during the twentieth century. He covers early pioneers like Sōyen Shaku, Taezan Maezumi, and Shunryu Suzuki before moving to the Beat movement, Square Zen, and academic Zen teachers like Philip Kapleau and Robert Aitken. Prebish then discusses John Daido Loori’s Zen Mountain Monastery as a case study of American Zen. He concludes by examining the future of American Zen and the characteristics that make it unique. Prebish’s chapter is an excellent intellectual history of American Zen that provides a succinct overview of the tradition’s development.

Chapter 8, by Richard Jaffe, is entitled “The Role of Zazen in D. T. Suzuki’s Zen.” Jaffe offers an extensive analysis of Suzuki’s views on seated meditation (zazen). Though Suzuki wrote extensively on Zen in both English and Japanese, he did not often discuss the topic of zazen. Suzuki’s attitudes about the minimal importance of zazen training were heavily influenced by his study of early Chan texts, including the Platform Sūtra. Nonetheless, he supported the idea that zazen training could be conducive to the promotion of religious understanding and the development of moral virtue. Few scholars have been more important than Suzuki in the early spread of Zen outside Japan, and his interpretation of Zen has come under criticism in recent years. Jaffe’s chapter is important for reinterpreting Suzuki’s views on seated meditation.

The revisionist study of D. T. Suzuki’s interpretation of Zen continues in chapter 9, “Zen and Japanese Culture: Nativist Influence of Suzuki Daisetsu’s Interpretation of Zen.” Here, Albert
Welter notes the influence that the Kokugaku (nativist) views of the Edo period had on Suzuki's understanding of Zen. While many scholars since the 1990s have contended that Suzuki's views were influenced by William James or the Nihonjinron agenda of the Kyoto School, Welter argues that many of these ideas had their roots in pre-Meiji Japanese ideals. Motoori Norinaga's Kokugaku sought to define Japan's identity in the face of foreign influence by emphasizing Shintō as a uniquely Japanese intellectual tradition that was superior to Neo-Confucianism. Suzuki embraces many of the characteristics that Norinaga ascribes to Shintō: his iteration of Zen is beyond reason and language, in harmony with nature, and represented in the Japanese arts.

The tenth chapter, James Mark Shields's “Zen and the Art of Resistance,” discusses the ways in which Zen has been used in political activism. Zen, like many schools of Buddhism, is often portrayed as a monastic tradition that is radically disengaged from the world. However, not only is it the case that Zen practitioners have long participated in economics and politics, but the philosophy of Zen has also been a valuable conceptual resource for resisting unjust economic and political structures. Shields argues that the “New Buddhism” that developed during the early twentieth century consisted not only of Shin and Nichiren Buddhists but also Zen thinkers, and that the theory of Zen resistance they developed fits neatly with the recent Critical Buddhism movement. Ultimately, Zen can contribute to a better understanding of social power that emphasizes mobilizing people to cooperate on collective actions that can ameliorate political and economic problems.

Chapter 11 features Michaela Mross's essay, “‘Can You Hear the Great Sound of Holy Footsteps?’ The 650th Grand Death Anniversary of Gasan Jōseki (1276–1366),” who was second abbot of the temple Sōjijii, which he made into one of the most powerful and respected temples in Japan. Though these celebrations were formally held only within the monastic community, in 2015, members of the public were included to promote both Sōjiji and the Sōtō tradition. Mross offers a detailed account of the event that contextualizes Sōtō Zen both within its socio-historical roots as well as with contemporary Japanese religious practice. Numerous full-color photos of the event are provided to illustrate this event.

Paula K. R. Arai's “Sōtō Zen Women's Wisdom in Practice” is the twelfth chapter of the anthology. Arai investigates the important role that the wisdom of women plays in both the monastic and domestic realms of Zen Buddhist practice. Regrettably, due to the patriarchal structure of Buddhism throughout much of its history, the contributions of women were often not catalogued in libraries or included in academic collections, so Arai has drawn extensively from contemporary ethnographic research. She begins with a discussion of Dōgen's teachings about women's equality and the important work that was done by twentieth-century Sōtō nuns to promote equal opportunity in rank and leadership positions. Arai then explores how Buddhist laywomen embody Sōtō principles in domestic contexts, particularly through healing practices that promote wisdom in the home. Arai's chapter not only sheds light on the importance of women in the history and practice of the Sōtō tradition, but it also serves as a reminder of the important role that activities in the everyday life-world can play in spiritual cultivation.

In chapter 13, “To Tame an Ox or to Catch a Fish: A Zen Reading of The Old Man and the Sea,” Pamela Winfield offers a thorough exegesis of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, which she uses to interpret Ernest Hemingway's classic novella. She provides a thorough analysis of the development of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures from their original
arrangement to their ultimate form, in which a boy tames a wild bull that represents the mind, realizes its emptiness, and then returns to help others do the same. She argues that the images represent not only the awakening that comes from insight meditation, but also a three-stage process of affirming, negating, and reaffirming the self in the world. Arai then applies these concepts to Hemingway’s novella to show how the main character Santiago goes through the same process as he catches his fish, loses it to sharks, and then returns home. This chapter not only offers a concise and insightful exposition of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures, but it also provides a novel interpretation of one of Hemingway’s greatest works.

Chapter 14 is Steve Odin’s “Steven Heine on the Religio-Aesthetic Dimension of Zen Buddhism.” Unlike most of the other chapters, which deal with Zen but do not directly engage Heine’s work, Odin discusses some of the key aspects of Heine’s research that have influenced comparative philosophy and Buddhist studies. First, Odin analyzes Heine’s distinction between two different scholarly approaches: the Traditional Zen Narrative (TZN) articulated by D. T. Suzuki and the Historical and Cultural Criticism (HCC) view that criticizes Suzuki. Then, Odin examines Heine’s groundbreaking research on the religio-aesthetic dimension of Zen, including Dōgen’s concept of being-time (uji) in relation to Martin Heidegger’s notion of dasein, the Mu Kōan, and Dōgen’s works on poetry and aesthetics (including key concepts like yugen and mono no aware). Since this anthology is a festschrift in honor of Steven Heine, it is fitting that Odin offers such a thorough exposition of the importance—and continuing legacy—of Heine’s work.

The fifteenth and final chapter of the volume also directly deals with Heine’s contribution to scholarship. In “Authentic Time and the Political: Steven Heine on Dōgen, Heidegger, and Bob Dylan,” Jin Y. Park explores parallel themes in Heine’s studies of Japanese Zen, German existentialism, and American music. Heine’s interdisciplinary interpretations of three key figures—Dōgen, Heidegger, and Dylan—allow him to articulate a philosophy of time, existence, and social engagement that offers a unique contribution to comparative philosophy and Buddhist studies. In the first section, Park provides a succinct analysis of Heine’s comparative study of Dōgen and Heidegger’s notions of time, while in the second, she explores the kōan-like language and socially engaged themes of Dylan’s work that resonate with Zen. As with the preceding chapter, Park’s work highlights the importance of Heine’s scholarly work for Zen studies and its creative interplay with the arts.

Overall, The Theory and Practice of Zen Buddhism: A Festschrift in Honor of Steven Heine is an excellent collection of academic articles dealing with the philosophy and practice of Zen. Specialists in comparative philosophy, Buddhist studies, and Asian studies will find this a valuable resource for their own research. The contributors are some of the top scholars in their fields, and their chapters cover a variety of different topics related to Zen. The first part, “Zen Roots,” offers valuable insights on the intellectual history of Chan/Zen along with rigorous analysis of some of the key texts of the tradition. The second part, “Zen Branches,” helps to contextualize critical Buddhist theory, Zen practice, and Zen aesthetics in the modern world. All of the articles are academically rigorous, yet accessible enough that they could be assigned to graduate students or even advanced undergraduates. I would consider using this anthology for my own upper-level undergraduate course on Buddhism, since we devote a significant portion of the semester to Zen.

The extent to which the anthology is a festschrift for Steven Heine varies a bit depending on the chapter. The final two chapters deal extensively with Heine’s work, as does the introduction (as one would expect). Two other chapters in the volume make explicit reference to Heine’s scholarship, and five more cite his work. However, there
are six chapters in the book that do not mention or cite Heine at all. These articles that do not reference Heine's work are still excellent pieces of scholarship that deal specifically with Zen, but I would have preferred that all of the articles in the volume dealt more explicitly with Heine's extensive publications on Buddhist thought. This is a minor quibble, though. All of the articles are insightful and well worth reading. I strongly recommend this volume for scholars who are interested in the theory and practice of Zen. It is a fitting tribute to the monumental work of Steven Heine.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58915

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.