

***Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher.* By Steven Heine. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2021. xxiii + 333 pages. \$29.95 (paperback). ISBN 9781611809800.**

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Steven Heine, full professor at Florida International University and editor of *Japan Studies Review*, is the author, editor, or co-editor of nearly three dozen books, nearly a dozen of which are about the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen monk and philosopher Dōgen (1200–1253), the founder of the Sōtō Zen school in Japan. Many of Heine's other books are also about Zen, or about Buddhism more generally.

*Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher* should stand at the front of Heine's considerable body of work. Part of the "Lives of the Masters" series put out by Shambhala, Heine's book on Dōgen is, as the series promises, an "engaging introduction" to a seminal Buddhist thinker and spiritual leader. "Each volume [of the Lives of the Masters series]," Shambhala pledges, "tells the story of an innovator who embodied the highest ideals of Buddhism, crafted a dynamic living tradition during his or her lifetime, and transmitted a vibrant legacy of wisdom to future generations" (back cover). I can think of few in the annals of Buddhism who fit this bill better than Dōgen. And I can think of no one writing in English better qualified to take on the daunting task of introducing Dōgen to lay audiences than Steven Heine. This book is a welcome addition to Heine's already rich portfolio, and also, I hope, a very helpful corrective to some misconceptions about Dōgen—some of which I also held until I read *Japan's Original Zen Teacher*.

Probably the biggest misconception about Dōgen that those with a passing familiarity with Buddhism have is that he was primarily a philosopher. In graduate school this is how I learned about Dōgen—as the author of extraordinarily difficult and convoluted texts in Japanese whose meaning on topics such as epistemology and ontology was difficult, if not impossible, to grasp even in English translation. I distinctly

remember opening a translation of *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye) and stopping at the title, rendered in both English and Japanese, for several minutes before daring to probe even the first line of text. I scanned the first four characters again and again, trying to drill through the surface to the deeper meaning hidden within. The same process repeated line after line as I read the main text. Words in any language can often seem almost powerless in the face of big ideas, like tiny lanterns trying to light up the night sky. Dōgen had a suppleness of mind and a facility with language that allowed him to overcome much of the handicap of verbal communication, but following along with him requires intense concentration.

Thus I have long tended to think of Dōgen as an intellectual, someone who could be categorized among philosophers from other places and times. I saw in him a metaphysician far superior to most Enlightenment thinkers and rivaled in depth and richness of thought only perhaps by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Dōgen’s contemporary (see pp. 18–19 for a cameo by Aquinas in Heine’s book). This impression was reinforced when, a few years ago, my wife and I went to an exhibit in Tokyo of calligraphic masterpieces from East Asia. There, behind glass, was a scroll in Dōgen’s own hand. I read the characters one by one and could almost hear the intelligence crackling like electricity under the faded ink and parchment. Here, I thought, was a man whose powers of cognition have been justly lauded for eight hundred years.

In this I was not alone—and was perhaps also under the sway of Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 (1889–1960), who, as Heine reminds us, “argued in his seminal [1926] book *Monk Dōgen* (*Shamon Dōgen* 沙門道元) that Dōgen should be regarded not only as a denominational founder from the past but also as a genuinely universal thinker whose teachings are appropriate for all of humanity, regardless of background, status, or prior belief” (p. 17).

However, reading Heine’s *Dogen: Japan’s Original Zen Teacher* snapped me out of my too-limited view. Dōgen was very much a philosopher, that is undeniably true. But he was not only that. He was, as the title of Heine’s book makes clear, a Zen teacher. Dōgen’s life was spent in pursuit of enlightenment, “casting off body-mind” (*shinshin datsuraku* 心身脱落), and also in teaching others how to do the same, to realize, by “just sitting” (*zazen* 座禪), that one already has the buddha-nature. This Dōgen, the Zen practitioner and teacher, is at the heart of Heine’s

book. It is, I think, the real Dōgen—the man who devoted himself from a young age to enlightenment, and, later, to sharing enlightenment with his home country of Japan. Dōgen's intellectual work must be seen as ancillary to this great twinned goal.

*Dogen* is divided into two main parts, "Life and Thought" and "Literature and Legacy." There is also a very helpful introduction contextualizing Dōgen's life in history, and the study of his life in the history of Japan since Dōgen's death. We learn in the introduction that "the Mahayana doctrine of original enlightenment" was central to Dōgen's life and spurred him to find the buddha-nature in the here-and-now (p. 20). This, in turn, led Dōgen to rethink monastic life in Japan (pp. 21–22, 28–33).

The stage thus set, we meet Dōgen in chapter 1, "An Aristocratic Orphan: the Development of a Buddhist Prodigy," as he flees from the life laid out for him as a member of the Fujiwara aristocracy and enters into Buddhist studies on Mt. Hiei, just north of the imperial capital city of Kyoto. Our image of Dōgen may be of a serene monk sitting in silent meditation, but he was born in, and lived through, a time of immense social change. The Minamoto clan had defeated the Taira clan in 1185 and established a new political capital in Kamakura in 1192, just eight years before Dōgen had been born. As the political winds whipped around, so, too, did societal entanglements with religion. "Tendai Buddhism," writes Heine, had

been in a hegemonic position for nearly the entirety of the four hundred years of the Heian period (794–1185), as well as the early decades of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). Japanese Tendai began with Saicho (767–822), who founded the sect after he returned from studying in China in the first decade of the 800s. Known for its esoteric ritualism, Japanese Tendai greatly contributed to the establishment of Kyoto as Japan's capital city. Sacred Tendai rites were thought to protect Kyoto from chaos and disturbance, and they became an important part of the city's thriving culture. The Tendai sect often catered to the concerns of the nobility and in turn received substantial support. (p. 45)

The trend of the age was thus to forge close ties between the sangha and the secular rulers, but this kind of political directionality was just what Dōgen wanted to avoid.

And Dōgen was not alone in wishing to escape the societal shadow of Tendai and Kyoto politics. Many monks, Heine writes, left for Kamakura, where they eschewed the Tendai insistence on exclusivity

and esotericism in favor of opening the dharma up to warriors, peasants, and women (p. 46). The Sōtō school that Dōgen would bring back from China, and the Rinzai Zen imported by Myōan Eisai 明菴榮西 (1141–1215), were part of “New Kamakura Buddhism,” which “emphasized the path to individual deliverance for lower classes and marginalized groups” (p. 47). Other monks, too, such as Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263), Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282), and Ippen 一遍 (1239–1289), Heine reminds us, also played a major role in refashioning Buddhism into a more popular, and less Tendai-centric, practice (p. 47).

What seems to have set Dōgen onto a path that would revolutionize Buddhism in Japan was an inner misgiving that clawed at him. For Dōgen, the societal turmoil was matched, if not exceeded, by this inner unease. He was plagued by, as Heine writes, a “great doubt” (p. 48). That great doubt had to do with the very heart of Dōgen’s Zen practice and life-aims, namely, enlightenment. It came down to why one had to do anything special at all if one really did already have the buddha-nature simply by virtue of being sentient. As Dōgen wrote: “If all sentient beings possess the buddha-nature and Tathagata exists without change (as enunciated in the *Nirvana Sutra*), then why must people develop the aspiration for awakening and vigorously engage in austerities in order to realize this truth?” (p. 48).

Dōgen was still young when he first entertained such doubts. He “practiced zazen intensively” at Kenninji 建仁寺 in Kyoto in pursuit of the resolution to his doubt and the awakening to buddha-nature (p. 51). But for many years he sought in vain. It was during his visit to China and his studies under the famed monk Rujing 如淨 (1163–1228) that Dōgen eventually discovered the answer to his longing, the “one great matter” (*ichi daiji* 一大事), or “perpetual realization entail[ing] coming to terms with the ultimate meaning of life and death, or the arising and desistence of all elements of existence” (p. 55). Dōgen also began to understand that his mission in life was to pass on the Zen precepts to others.

In chapter 2, “Casting Off Body-Mind: Resolving the Great Doubt,” Heine paints a richly human portrait of the maturing monk Dōgen, first as he trains under Eisai, and then as he achieves enlightenment at Mt. Tiantong in China under Rujing in 1225 (pp. 61–62). In many ways, Dōgen was charmed, or perhaps just lucky. As Heine points out, the political window for visiting China was, fortunately for Dōgen, open in

the first half of the thirteenth century. “Song-dynasty rulers in China,” Heine writes, “feeling the threat of Mongol incursions to the north, were [...] eager to develop cultural and commercial exchanges with the new Japanese military government [in Kamakura]” (p. 67). Dōgen was able to take advantage of this time of heightened Sino-Japanese awareness and exchange to spend four years in China, from 1223 to 1227 (p. 68).

Dōgen’s life in retrospective does seem to indicate a destiny working its way out through him. For example, perhaps because Dōgen had not been properly initiated in “the Hinayana precepts, which were required of all Buddhist monks traveling in or to China,” Dōgen was forced to stay on board the ship that had carried him and a fellow monk named Myōzen 明全 (1184–1225) to the mainland from Hakata (pp. 69–70). But Myōzen died in China, perhaps from not having had time to acclimate to his new surroundings, while Dōgen, forced to cool his heels on the ship, spent productive hours in port discoursing with a Buddhist monk who worked in a monastery in China as a cook (pp. 71–73). (This is relayed in the delightful Dōgen work *Instructions for the Cook*.) Dōgen eventually made it off the ship and to the Five Mountains central to Zen (Chan) in China. On the brink of desperation at not achieving enlightenment, Dōgen met with Rujing, and, over the course of two years’ study under him, was able finally to “cast off body-mind” and even achieve “casting off casting off” (pp. 82–89). The “great doubt” had been resolved. The way ahead was clear.

In chapter 3, “Coming Back Empty-Handed: Dogen’s Teaching Mission,” we find Dōgen in what Heine calls his “reformative period,” a sixteen-year time span during which Dōgen went back to Kyoto before eventually leaving the capital behind to found his own monastery in Echizen, far from either the political intrigue of Kyoto or the military power center of Kamakura (p. 95). Dōgen could see that the practice of Buddhism in Japan often lacked the intensity and seriousness of what he had witnessed in China. While sojourning at Kenninji, for instance, Dōgen was saddened to find that the monks “chatt[ed] idly while seeking associations with wealthy patrons in Kyoto, instead of resolutely pursuing monastic discipline and meditative practice” (p. 100). Dōgen sought to focus on Zen, not on the trappings of worldly ease and influence, and he resolved to found his own monastery to do so. Later in life, “in autobiographical reflections about the need to define his teaching mission,” as Heine writes, Dōgen penned these words:

I returned to my native land at the beginning of 1228 with the intention of spreading the Dharma and rescuing sentient beings. It seemed as if I were shouldering a heavy load, so I decided to bide my time until I could vigorously promote methods designed to release the discriminatory mind. As a result, I drifted like a cloud and floated like a reed, ready to learn from the customs and habits of clear-minded Zen teachers of the past.

Although I was still a weak practitioner of the Way, I was determined to lead a transient life and wondered, on what mountain or by what stream could seekers find me? Because of my feelings of compassion for potential aspirants, I hereby write down everything I observed and learned from the behavior and practices in Chinese monasteries in order to preserve the transmission of what Rujing understood to be the most profound goal, which is to propagate the true meaning of the Buddhist Dharma. (pp. 105–106)

Dōgen remained in Kyoto until 1243, when the politics of Buddhism and statecraft, and the intrigues that accompany both, became too stifling for him (p. 124). He went far away, into the mountains of modern-day Fukui, to found Eiheiji 永平寺. There, “except for two short trips away, [Dōgen] remained [...] until his death” (p. 125).

Chapter 4 of *Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher* is titled, fittingly, “I Am the First in Japan: The Eiheiji Years.” In Echizen, Dōgen continued to cultivate the patronage of Hatano Yoshishige 波多野義重 (?–1258), whose connections to Echizen provided Dōgen with a much-needed stepping-off point for founding his new monastery complex. It was in Echizen that Dōgen came into full flower—an assessment that Heine makes in contradistinction to “many of the skeptics” who “claim that Dōgen’s creativity declined significantly while he dwelled in Echizen” (p. 131). But, Heine counters, Dōgen was “tremendously productive” during his first year in the provinces as he worked on the *Treasury*, his major literary effort, and was thereafter fully engaged in his teaching work as well (p. 131). I share this view, and feel that Dōgen did indeed take “excellent advantage of the shifting circumstances by succeeding at Eiheiji perhaps to an even greater extent than he had in Kyoto” (p. 132). Throughout, Dōgen continued to take Rujing as his “model teacher” (pp. 134–142), and today his spirit continues to guide Eiheiji, where his earthly remains are said to rest (p. 155).

The second half of Heine’s book begins with chapter 5, “Nothing Concealed in the Entire Universe: Dōgen’s Miscellaneous Writings,” and continues through chapter 6, “Distinguishing between a Gem and

an Ordinary Stone: Four Major Collections” and chapter 7, “Defined Demeanor in All Activities: The Legacy of Dogen Zen.” In my view, the decision to divide the book into halves, the first more of a traditional biography of Dōgen and the second a literary recapitulation of that biographical tour, is an inspired one. In the second half of the book, Heine presents a feast of Dōgen writings in deft translation and also walks his readers through many of the finer exegetical points of Dōgen literary research. I suspect many readers will linger on pages here, savoring the manifold meanings of Dōgen’s words (and clever neologisms). This would have interrupted the flow of the more conventional biographical sections, however, so I commend Heine and his editors for keeping the reader in mind. (I am also grateful for the very helpful timeline in the appendix showing the highlights of Dōgen’s life at a three-page glance—another very thoughtful touch.) After the first half of the book, wherein one learns of Dōgen the man, in the second half of the book one learns what that man brought forth out of his mind, thereby enhancing the portrait of Dōgen and showing readers this remarkable figure in the round.

It is difficult to find anything with which to quibble in *Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher*. Heine writes with authority, but in an accessible, warm, and measured way. Specialists and novices alike will benefit from reading this book, something that can rarely be said about other volumes. It is a mark of great learning that Heine can speak to, and hold, multiple audiences at once. One slight critique would be that I would like to have had Japanese and Chinese in parentheses in the text, as it would have helped track the literary flourishes and cross-references in and between Dōgen’s work, the work of other Japanese Zen thinkers, and the Chinese Chan and other Buddhist teachers whose works were staples in monasteries on the archipelago. Also, while there is a serviceable map on page 34 showing the geographical scope of Dōgen’s travels, the insert map of China is postage stamp-size, and neither map is a great display of cartographical skill. I found myself wanting to cross-reference Dōgen’s, and Myōzen’s, journey on the mainland in as much detail as the Zen goes-on in Japan, so I found the map a bit frustrating.

But these trifles are easily fixed in the next edition, and should definitely not keep anyone from buying and enjoying this one. Of Heine’s many books, I hope that *Dogen: Japan's Original Zen Teacher* will be among the most widely read. There is something in here for everyone.

It showed me—for which I am grateful to Heine, and to Dōgen—that Dōgen was much more than “just” a Zen philosopher. He was, through and through, a singularly dedicated monk. Without doubt—and by overcoming a “great doubt” of his own—he “embodied the highest ideals of Buddhism, crafted a dynamic living tradition during his [...] lifetime, and transmitted a vibrant legacy of wisdom to future generations” (back cover).