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Comments on Zen

by M. Kiyota

This short paper is a review of Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (tr. into English by Sumiko Kudō). New York and Scarborough, Ontario: A Mentor Book, New American Library, 1974. 366 pp. Glossary and Index. Paperback.

This book consists of Shibayama's *teishō* on the popular *Mumonkan* (*Wu-men küan*), composed by Wu-men in China in early 13th century. *Teishō* are instructions on the *goroku*, a collection of essential sayings of past Zen masters. *Mumonkan* consists of 48 such sayings, each commented upon by Wu-men. *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* consists of Shibayama's *teishō* on the *Mumonkan*. Shibayama was the *rōshi* of Nanzenji Monastery (representing the Rinzai tradition of Zen), Kyoto, from 1948 to 1967. He is a qualified *teishō* master. In this work, the *Mumonkan* is translated in its entirety with Shibayama's own *teishō* added. Both are rendered into English by Sumiko Kudō, a long-time personal (and faithful) secretary to the *rōshi*, and edited by John Moffit. Kudō, I feel, deserves the highest praises for interpreting ideas conceived and composed in a language (frequently expressed in terse classical Zen vernacular) rooted in a tradition other than the language into which she translates them. For this type of work requires not only familiarity with the languages (classical Zen vernacular, modern Zen Japanese, and English) but also considerable insights into the culture that those languages represent. This work was occasioned by an invitation to the *rōshi* by Colgate University to deliver a series of lectures on Zen, an enterprise apparently realized through the good offices of Professor Kenneth Morgan.

This work provides many of us—absorbed in the painstaking work of textual exegesis, thematic contextualization, and philo-

sophical interpretation of Buddhist texts and systems of thought—a “refreshing breeze,” for it communicates the Dharma through direct discourse and simple metaphors without the contrivance of logical structure and intellectual manipulation of ideas. This is important, for Zen ultimately consists of an experiential process, not a noetic philosophy to be apprehended simply by the intellect, as Shibayama rightly points out. To this end, Professor Morgan deserves credit. For, after the death of Charles Moore, a platform to enable native Asian philosophers and religious practitioners to speak their minds freely—from the perspectives of their own philosophical tradition and religious training and without the imposition of Western concepts and bias—has not been adequately provided. In passing, it might be pointed out that Professor Morgan has been involved in this type of what we might call a reverse “out-reach” program, without the strain of ‘cultural imperialism,’ since the fifties. *The Path of Buddha*, which he compiled and edited in the late fifties, represents the culmination of such efforts. Such a breed of man is in short supply nowadays.

In reviewing a book of this type—a translation of *teishō* plus a *teishō* on *teishō* by a *teishō* master—it is meaningless to cite one’s own preference of terms, or, for that matter, to criticize the contents of the *teishō per se*, because *teishō* consists of an intuitive insight (*prajñā*) which is beyond the realm of conceptual thought. We should, as Professor Morgan has seemingly done, encourage the practitioner to speak his own mind in a manner he desires. Nevertheless, we must make clear that there is a distinction between religious instructions designed to ‘enlighten’ people (*keimō*, as the Japanese would gently put it) and scholarship. It is this difference which I wish to point out. Furthermore, the fact that this work represents a product of a reverse “out-reach” program does not, by any means, mean that it cannot be criticized (no matter how useful it may be in terms of *keimō*). But my criticism is not directed to the specific contents of the *teishō*, the manner in which they are presented and translated, nor the intent with which Professor Morgan encouraged the publication of this work. It is directed to issues to which, I feel, this work has not addressed itself squarely: the content of the experiential, the specific meaning of the term “no reliance on letters,” and the very nature of *teishō* itself. This book is reviewed from the perspective of modern Buddhology.

Throughout the work, the *rōshi* insists on the priority of Zen experience—echoing one of D.T. Suzuki’s major themes—and he plays down the role of “letters/scripture” (the terms “letters” and “scripture” are used interchangeably in this work). The fact remains that there is no school of Mahāyāna developed in East Asia which does not emphasize the experiential (my work, *Shin-gon Buddhism: Theory and Practice*, 1978, for example, emphasizes the same), and there is no school of Buddhism which conceives the “letters” as truth *per se*. In other words, emphasis on the experiential and “no reliance on letters”—odd though it may seem to a Zen practitioner—are not features unique to Zen (or the Rinzai tradition of Zen which the *rōshi* represents). They are common Mahāyāna properties. But what is lacking in this work—like many other works authored by Zen practitioners—is a structured approach to describe the contents of the experiential.

We must remind ourselves that *satori*—the Zen equivalent for enlightenment—as such is not the goal of Zen, as the *rōshi* rightly points out on many occasions. In fact, the very notion of enlightenment should be abandoned in Zen (*datsuraku shin-shin*, as Dōgen puts it) because the goal of Mahāyāna, of which Zen constitutes an integral entity, is practice. Practice means the external demonstration of *prajñā* (*śūnyatāyām prayojanam*), that is, the creation of a new socio-religious human configuration through the practice of emptiness. It is within the context of *śūnyatāyām prayojanam*, for example, that we can speak rationally of Buddhism as an experiential philosophy. The *rōshi*’s statement, “Zen is Zen experience,” actually refers to this kind of practice and experience. Furthermore, what is important to note here is that this kind of experience is communicated through “skill-in-means,” as it always has been throughout the history of Buddhism. In Mahāyāna, “skill-in-means” refers to the ultimate (*paryavasāna*) of wisdom.

“Letters” and language, sounds and *mantra*, metaphors and similes, *maṇḍala* and *mudrā*, etc. are symbolic representation of truth. They constitute the Buddhist “skill-in-means” through which truth is communicated, and have always been the accepted, effective, and only available instrument to communicate truth. If this were not so, it would be strange that a great number of Buddhist literary expositions—such as the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Vajracchedikā*, *Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa*, *Laṅkāvatāra*, *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, etc.—have been made available through many Zen

writers, such as, for example, D.T. Suzuki, Shōsan Yanagida, etc. Both Yōsai of Rinzai and Dōgen of Sōtō relied on “letters” to compose the *Kōzengokoku-ron* and *Shōbōgenzō*, respectively. And *Zen Comments on Mumonkan*, itself, employs “letters” to convey its *teishō* messages, though, in all fairness to the *rōshi*, he does point out the limitations of his own *teishō* writings. But this is precisely the reason why a work of this sort should, I repeat, take a structured approach to describe the experiential and provide a clear definition of what the term “no reliance on letters” actually means within the context of the Zen tradition (which does in fact employ “letters”).

Now then, Zen apologists would stoutly maintain that Bodhidharma came to China to spread the True Dharma from “mind-to-mind” and did not rely upon the words of scripture. First, whether Bodhidharma was a historical figure is highly questionable, but we shall not get involved in a subject of this sort now, for it has already been thoroughly discussed, by, for example, Shindai Sekiguchi (*Daruma daishi no kenkyū*, Tokyo: Taisei insatsu, 1957). Second, a statement of this sort—“no reliance on letters”—can be found in Tsung-mi’s *Ch’an-yüan-chu-ch’üan chi* (9th century), Tao-yüan’s *Ching-te fu-teng lu* (11th century), Yōsai’s *Kōzengokoku-ron* (12th century), etc. But interestingly, this type of a statement, though found in even earlier Zen texts, was most strongly articulated in late T’ang, when Buddhist scholarship began to wane, and particularly in Sung, when Zen began to be absorbed by Confucianism (prompting Wing-Tsit Chan, for example, to remark that neo-Confucianism is Zen plus Confucianism. In his *Shina bukkyō no kenkyū* (Vol. III, Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1943), Daijō Tokowa claims that “no reliance on letters,” advocated strongly by Sung Zen practitioners, contributed to the decline of Zen in China, for, in their insistence on “no reliance on letters,” they ignored the classics. Within the context of the history of Chinese Buddhism, a school of thought which failed to honor the classics failed to renew itself, for textual studies not only involves an exegetical exercise but the constant re-interpretation of systems of thought from new perspectives in order to respond effectively to actual historical situations.

More interesting to note is that, historically, the notion of “no reliance on letters” was not at all times observed without criticism, even within the Zen tradition. For example, the *Tsu-*

ting shih-yüan (Section 5), a catalogue of Zen works (compiled ca. 1098-1100), says,

The patriarchs who transmitted the Dharma observed the teachings of the *Tripitaka* together with practice. But after Bodhidharma, mental marks (*hsin-yin*) were emphasized to 'see' one's own Buddha-nature. As a result, many practitioners lost sight of what we actually mean by "no reliance on letters" and they conceived Zen as just sitting in silence. These people are like a deaf-mute lamb!

As this statement clearly indicates, the ultimate purpose of Zen is neither "no reliance on letters" nor just "sitting in silence." It consists, most fundamentally of all, in arousing one's own *bodhi-citta-chien-hsing* as the Chinese would call it, or *kenshō* as the Japanese call it, with the vigor of a *kōan*. *Kenshō* literally means "seeing one's own nature." It corresponds to what the existentialists refer to as the "authentic self." Like the existentialists, a Zen practitioner may be able to realize *kenshō* through the means of "letters."

Teishō, like "letters," is a means to "see" the "authentic self," which Mahāyāna maintains is based upon an insight into non-duality. *Teishō* is designed to penetrate the realm of non-duality, the realm beyond conceptual thought. It may or may not enable one to realize *kenshō*. Granting that "letters" in themselves offer no assurance of realizing *kenshō* either, they nevertheless have an equal—if not a better—chance to develop a rational understanding of what *kenshō* is. But what is important to note here is, as historians of religions constantly remind us, that any type of religion is subject to the historical cycle of fossilization and renewal. To accept *teishō* without criticism is to fossilize Zen; to critically examine *teishō* is to revitalize the 'spirit' of Zen. Critical examination means to understand the doctrinal basis of Zen thought through the means of "letters" and to interpret those "letters" with *prajñā* insights. *Teishō*, observed in a didactic manner as does this work, deprives one of the freedom to think critically and to digest ideas through the process of reasoning. Notwithstanding the *rōshi's* claim that *teishō* is free of dogma, the manner of its presentation smells of dogma, because the *rōshi* simply offers flashes of insight without interpreting the doctrinal basis of those insights and without contextualizing those insights. *Teishō* in general tends to become sterile, ritualized and dogmatic,

as many—who have frequently participated in a private *teishō* session (with a cool head) or have read an extensive range of *teishō* literature in the original—can attest. Fully aware of this kind of danger inherent in *teishō*, Seizan Yanagida approaches Zen historically and doctrinally (*Mu no tankyū*, Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1969), Shigeo Kamata investigates Kegon as the basis of Zen thought (*Chūgoku kegon shisō no kenkyū*, Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1975), Shun'ei Hirai examines the Chinese development of *prajñā* as the basis for the development of Chinese Buddhist experiential philosophy (*Chūgoku hannya shisō-shi no kenkyū*, Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1976), etc. These are all faithful Zen practitioners and eminent Buddhologists. Zen studies in Japan among Zen scholars take a philological, philosophical and historical approach to investigate the contents of the experiential. They avoid offering flashing insights but present their views rationally, based upon textual, doctrinal and historical investigation.

As a matter of summary, let me repeat that to understand the contents of *teishō* rationally requires the contextualization of those contents within the framework of basic Mahāyāna principles—such as *prajñā*, *madhyama pratipād*, *citta-mātra*, etc. This is quite important because, as I see it, Zen has come a long way since it was introduced to the West by D.T. Suzuki (also in a *keimō* manner, though his studies on the *Lankāvatāra* and his translation of the *Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, accomplished during his younger years, still warrant respectability), and, subsequently, in the more flamboyant manner of Alan Watts and others. It is this manner of spreading Zen in the West that prompted Edward Conze, the eminent British Buddhologist, to caustically remark, “Zen is nothing but *prajñāpāramitā* with jokes.” If Zen is to be taken seriously, as it should be, more serious work—which not only moves the ‘spirit’ of man but which stimulates the reasoning power of man—is certainly in need. This review, it must be made clear, is not intended to criticize Zen nor the *rōshi* simply for the sake of criticism. It is intended to encourage Zen practitioners to examine Zen as an integral entity of the Mahāyāna tradition, doctrinally and historically, so that they would be able to present the experiential in a structured and rational manner.

The *rōshi* and Miss Kudō—respectable practitioners and faithful missionaries of Rinzaï Zen—died in 1974, leaving behind them this excellent piece of *keimō* literary work. *Gasshō*.