

*The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea*, by Robert E. Buswell, Jr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. xvi + 264 pp. \$42.50 cloth, ISBN 0-691-07407-0. \$19.95 paper.

ROBERT BUSWELL, PRESENTLY Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at UCLA, spent the years 1974–1979 as an ordained monk at the Korean Sōn (Zen) monastery Songgwang-sa 松廣寺 studying under the highly regarded master Kusan 九山 (1908–1983). This gives him a background that is quite unusual among scholars of Asian Buddhism, few of whom have spent appreciable amounts of time practicing under actual monastic conditions. In *The Zen Monastic Experience* the author shares this invaluable experience with us, providing a full portrait of actual monastic life and practice, commenting on some common Western misconceptions of what goes on behind the monastery walls, and offering a scholarly interpretation of the question of

“Zen experience.” Such information is all the more welcome since Buddhist monasticism is an area of contemporary Korean religious practice about which very little is known.

The bulk of the book is taken up by a description of Sōn monastic life, in line with Buswell’s main goal of showing “what Zen monks actually do each day and how they live out the religion in practice” (p. 7). This was, for me, the most interesting and valuable section of the work, particularly for the many intriguing similarities and contrasts it revealed with Japanese Zen monastic life as I have seen it in seven years of lay practice at Tokugen-ji, a formal training monastery (*sōdō* 僧堂) in Nagoya, Japan. Buswell mentions his “internal battle between scholarly and contemplative interests” (pp. 93–94), a battle that eventually led to his secession from the order, but one senses in his detailed, anecdote-filled descriptions of Songgwang-sa the basic sympathy he still feels for the monastic life. By the time we have finished this well written and often quite entertaining account we have a much better picture of just what it means to be a Zen monk in Korea.

Buswell describes the layout and construction of monastery buildings, the organization of the monastic community, the daily life of the monks in different divisions of the monastery, and the relations of monks and laity. There is also a brief history of Korean Buddhism (particularly of the modern period) and mention of the practice of nuns. The detail is impressive and never tedious: we learn of the ranks and duties of different members of the community (contemplative, administrative, teaching, lay), and of rituals and ceremonies, rules and manners, clothing, tools, and musical instruments. We read about special work in the fields, about bath customs, and about pickle (*kim’chi*) making. There are intriguing descriptions of health-food fads, of three-year retreats, and of special ascetic practices. One aspect of Korean monastic life that I found particularly interesting was the popularity of pilgrimage, a practice that once formed an important part of Zen practice in Japan too but that has succumbed to the forces of modernization. It was also intriguing to hear about the ease with which Korean monks may shift monasteries during their training, since in Japan such changes, though permitted, are definitely not encouraged: monks are pressured to remain with a single teacher throughout their training, owing, I suspect, to differences in thinking about the master-disciple relationship in Japanese culture. The book concludes with an appendix containing translations of the principal monastic chants. All technical terms are given in English (or in their accepted foreign forms, as, for example, “Zen”) with the Korean in parentheses.

There was much I found to agree with in Buswell’s corrections of Western images of Zen, as when he notes that most monks are quite knowledgeable about doctrine despite portrayals of Zen as “radically bibliophobic” (p. 217). Like the monks of Songgwang-sa, the majority of the monks at Tokugen-ji have studied Buddhist teachings before entering the monastery (most are graduates of Hanazono University, which is associated with the Myōshin-ji branch of Rinzai Zen Buddhism). Advanced kōan work involves a knowledge of doctrine and of Classical Chinese, though earlier work does not.

Similarly, Buswell’s observation that “artistic endeavors have extremely low

priority in the practice of Sōn monks in Korea” can be applied with reservation to the situation in Japan. It may be that, in general, the influence of Zen on the arts has been exaggerated—the importance of large areas of empty space in formal Japanese gardens may, for example, derive from Shinto tradition as much as from Zen (TREIB and HERMAN 1980, pp. 4–5). At Tokugen-ji, as at Songgwang-sa, there is no time formally set aside for the study of calligraphy, ink-painting, tea ceremony, and the like. Still, it must be said that, in Japan at least, Zen and the arts have enjoyed a long and special association. Most major temples have impressive collections of painting and calligraphy, some of it executed by former masters; certain developments in artistic technique are specifically associated with Zen priests (TSUDA 1976, p. 145); not a few masters, such as Ikkyū (1394–1481), Hakuin (1685–1768), and Ryōkan (1758–1831), are famous for their artistic or poetic gifts; and the heads (*iemoto*) of the tea schools frequently undergo Zen training (in some cases, such as the principal Sen 千 schools, the *iemoto* must be ordained).

Occasionally, however, Buswell’s efforts to rectify a misconception lead him to a rather hasty substitution of one half-truth for another. His description of the place of work in monastic life is a case in point. Buswell writes:

Another of the putative root paradigms of Zen, which Western scholarship often reiterates, is that Zen values manual labor. The locus classicus for this view is the famous phrase of Pai-chang Huai-hai (720–713), the putative creator of the Zen monastic codes, who is claimed to have said, “A day without work is a day without food”.... One wonders to what extent this impression of Buddhist monasticism in Western literature has been subtly influenced by Christian models, where a life of labor was especially emblematic of the Cistercians. In fact, meditation monks in Korea do little, if indeed any, work; the monastery instead seeks to keep their time free for contemplation. (p. 220)

Buswell’s description of the limited work schedule of the meditation monk comprises a valuable corrective to the popular image of Zen. It is hardly plausible, however, to suggest that Christian monastic models are behind the value assigned to work in most Western portrayals of Zen. The more likely source is Japanese Zen monasticism, where work is indeed a quite central part of monastic training. (It is true, as Buswell says [pp. 6, 21], that portraits of Zen monasticism based solely on the Japanese model are misleading, but one hopes that future efforts in “corrective scholarship” [p. 5] will not ignore Japanese monasticism completely.) A monk at a Japanese monastery normally spends from three to five hours a day in manual labor (*samu* 作務), some of it quite heavy, and it is not uncommon to work eight hours or more. Except during the week-long meditation retreats (*sesshin* 攝心), monks at Tokugen-ji spend more time on cleaning, gardening, cooking, and related activities than on anything else; certain monasteries, like Bairin-ji in Kyūshū, actually emphasize *samu* over meditation, and consequently reduce the number of yearly *sesshin* to a minimum. In Japanese monasteries all monks participate in *samu*, just as all monks engage in meditation. It is a basic tenet of monastic

life, repeated during numerous readings of the monastic rules throughout the year, that concentration in the midst of activity (*dōchū no kufū* 動中の工夫) is “a hundred, a thousand, or a hundred million” times superior to concentration in stillness (*jōchū no kufū* 静中の工夫). Seen from this perspective, work is not an unsatisfactory substitute for meditation but is, once one has learned the practice of *dōchū no kufū*, an important form of meditation in itself. This is clearly linked to the fact that senior monks fill the demanding support positions that allow less time for seated meditation, while the junior monks spend more time sitting and are in every way more cloistered.

It is this understanding—that meditation is more than its outer form—that underpins the tradition in Japanese Zen that it *is* possible for a layperson to successfully engage in kōan practice, a notion that Buswell suggests is not taken seriously in Korea. At Tokugen-ji—as at Rinzai-ji in Shizuoka, Shōkoku-ji in Kyoto, Kaisei-ji in Nishinomiya, and many other formal training monasteries throughout Japan—kōans are used by lay practitioners, a number of whom have completed the entire system. Iida Tōin (1863–1937), for example, who did his training as a layman, is regarded in Zen monastic circles as one of the greatest masters of this century. This is significant, for although the Korean approach to kōan practice differs somewhat from the Japanese, the psychological processes involved are, as indicated by Kusan’s description (pp. 153–60), remarkably similar in both traditions (compare descriptions of kōan work in the Japanese tradition in, for example, FURUTA 1979, pp. 61–73; TŌREI 1992, pp. 47–48; HORI 1994).

In his discussions of kōan work Buswell tries perhaps too hard for a very contemporary kind of scholarly objectivity. Here Buswell the scholar appears to have taken over from Buswell the contemplative. This is the one aspect of the book that I personally found disappointing. Buswell’s experience of Sōn monasticism puts him in a unique position in comparison with other Zen scholars, and I would have liked to have seen more of this expressed in his analysis. Despite the fact that he himself struggled for years with the Korean equivalent of the kōan Mu, there are, in a twelve-page discussion of kanhwa Zen (pp. 149–160), only three brief references to his own experiences; for interpretive models he turns to the ideas of Victor Turner, Sherry Ortner, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his conclusions he seems oddly reluctant to accept the testimony of those most familiar with the practice of kōan Zen:

*The protestations of past masters to the contrary* [italics mine], Sōn monastic life suggests that the technique of kanhwa Zen was never seriously intended for the laity, but instead targeted those few monks with the fortitude to endure many years of ascetic training in the meditation hall. (p. 9)

Undoubtedly, kōan training is much harder for those subject to the multiple distractions of lay life and will always be practiced primarily by those in the more focused environment of the monastery. But surely what the “past masters” are saying is that, provided the necessary effort is made, kōan practice is viable for the lay practitioner just as it is for the monk. The example of Japanese Zen monasticism shows that, given the opportunity, there are lay-

people willing and able to make genuine progress in kōan Zen; if Korean monasticism does not see lay kōan practice as a realistic possibility it may well be because the present system provides no place for the serious lay trainee.

It must be remembered, however, that these reservations concern only a small portion of the book, and that in any event they represent but the shadow of far larger problems of epistemology. When, for example, the domain of investigation is that of spiritual practice, might there not be limits to the knowledge available to objective scholarship (see e.g., KIRCHNER 1993)? Overall Buswell succeeds admirably in his primary purpose of conveying a concrete sense of what life in a Korean monastery is like. Anyone who wishes to know more about the people, activities, and customs associated with this fascinating aspect of Korean spirituality could hardly find a better resource than *The Zen Monastic Experience*.

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