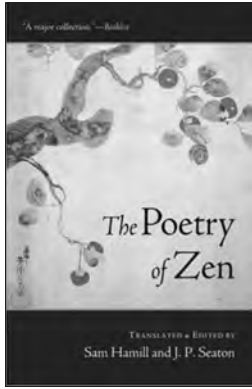


THE POETRY OF ZEN

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY SAM HAMILL AND J. P. SEATON
BOSTON AND LONDON: SHAMBHALA, 2007
208 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1590304259, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Joe Gawrlys



“Nothing’s worth noting that is not seen with fresh eyes,” Bashō says. Sam Hamill and J. P. Seaton’s *The Poetry of Zen* is a surprising, delightful new anthology of Zen.

The first surprise is the poets the book includes. The first, Lao Tzu, is perhaps not too much of a stretch since, as the authors say, “Zen is Taoist Buddhism,” or “Zen is Buddhist Taoism.” But, I never expected the Confucian poet Tu Fu or the Shingon poet Saigyō. The authors cast a wide net, including “poets not often associated formally with Zen institutions, or even Zen practice.” Indeed, they argue persuasively that there are even modern non-Buddhist American poets like Denise Levertov who express a Zen sensibility, though the book itself includes only Chinese and Japanese poets. Hamill and Seaton, in a very Zen way, refuse to be limited to Zen.

Another delight is the freshness of the translations themselves. No doubt the most translated line from all of China is the first line of the *Tao Te Ching*, and yet it comes alive again:

*Tao defined is not the constant Tao.
No name names its eternal name.*

Or consider this refreshing translation of Bashō’s famous haiku:

*At the ancient pond
a frog plunges into
the sound of water.*

The anthology includes three chapters of the *Tao Te Ching* and twenty pages of Bashō’s travelogues and haiku. It also includes thirty additional Chinese poets and twenty-eight additional Japanese poets, and the reader will find wonders everywhere. For instance, there’s Ikkyū Sōjun, who gave up being the head of Daitokuji to take a young lover:

*Monks recite the sutras in honor of the founder,
their many voices cacophonous in my ear.
Afterwards, making love, our intimate whispers
mock the empty formal discipline of others.*

Or there’s Ching An, who is said to have recited poetry before he learned to write:

*Cold cliff, dead tree,
this knobby-pated me . . .
think there’s nothing better than a poem.
I mock myself, writing in the dust, and
damn the man who penned the first word
and steered so many astray.*

The Poetry of Zen has good introductions to both the Chinese and the Japanese traditions, and the Preface thoughtfully discusses the

The Poetry of Zen has good introductions to both the Chinese and the Japanese traditions . . .

nature of Zen itself and the appropriateness of poetry for Zen. Most helpfully, there are also short biographies of each of the poets.

Many will find this book a useful addition to their libraries or even their classes. Meditators will find poems that can enrich their practices. Indeed, as the authors argue, poetry has richer potential for a mindfulness practice than the prose books that have become so popular. World literature teachers will find a superb and varied collection of Chinese and Japanese poems that are very teachable. The authors have purposely avoided highly allusive poems that would be tough for American students, and these short poems that are all similar thematically would be ideal for the classroom. World history teachers will find a good introduction to the Zen tradition that informs so much of high culture in the Far East. ■

JOE GAWRYS teaches World Religions, World History, and World Literature at Baylor School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He received his Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School. In 1991–1992, he was an NEH Teacher-Scholar and studied the history of Buddhism in China and Japan.

Change Your Life,
Change Your World.
Study Abroad in Japan. Experience
the Learning Adventure of a Lifetime.



Youth For Understanding USA
www.yfu-usa.org | 1.800.TEENAGE