

Three Zen Books

By Joe Gawrys

An Essay Review of Andrew Ferguson's Book

Zen's Chinese Heritage

The Masters and Their Teachings

SOMERVILLE, MASS.
WISDOM PUBLICATIONS, 2000
518 PAGES



Burton Watson's Book

The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi

A Translation of the Lin-chi lu

NEW YORK
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2000
140 PAGES



and Hal W. French's Book

Zen and the Art of Anything

COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA
SUMMERHOUSE PRESS, 1999
175 PAGES



Zen is popping out all over. A recent search on Amazon.com turned up 1,686 book hits for “Zen,” and the local bookstore has as many books on Zen as it has on all the rest of Buddhism. Which of these books, though, can the educator use? *Zen's Chinese Heritage*, *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi*, and *Zen and the Art of Anything* are three that have some potential for the classroom.

Zen's Chinese Heritage is in many ways the most valuable of the three; indeed, it's a great reference book that I've already used several times in my eleventh grade Eastern Religions class. In this book Andy Ferguson, a member of the San Francisco Zen Center, has gathered together the biographies and teachings of twenty-five generations of Zen masters from Bodhidharma through the late Song Dynasty. The biographies are brief, sometimes even just two or three sentences, and there is little or no commentary; Ferguson chooses instead to let the Masters speak for themselves.

Zen's Chinese Heritage should not be assigned as a text for students to read cover to cover: one Zen master soon blends into the next, and the stories all start to sound the same. As a reference tool, though, there is much to love about this book. First, it comes with a wonderful foldout Lineage Chart of the Zen ancestors. This color-coded chart graphically shows 179 of the most famous Zen Masters, and students can clearly see the vast range of Chinese Zen, including the Five Traditional Houses and the lineages that become the Japanese Rinzai School, the Japanese Sōtō School, and the Korean Chogyo Order. Studying this chart alone teaches much about Zen.

Second, in addition to an excellent bibliography (including Internet resources) and index, Ferguson also includes three tables of all the major Zen ancestors. Each table has the names in Pinyin, Wade-Giles, and Japanese Romaji, but the first table is alphabetized by the Pinyin spelling, the second by the Wade-Giles spelling, and the third by the Romaji spelling. Each name is also keyed to the foldout chart. Simply looking at these tables, again, teaches students much about transliteration issues with Far Eastern names, and my students have been fascinated and mystified to see that Rinzai Gigen, Linji Yixuan, and Lin-chi I-hsuan are all the same man. When students then learn about the death names that many of these Masters have, they are finally ready to go out and do Far Eastern research with a high tolerance for alternative spellings!

Finally, as for the Zen Masters' chapters themselves, which are organized chronologically by generation, I believe the best approach for most teachers is to have the students take tastes from here and there. After hitting the most famous ones, like Bodhidharma and Hui Neng (and Ferguson's summaries of these two, about five pages apiece, are excellent), I use the book as a gold mine of primary source material—too rich and overwhelming to read straight through, but wonderful for browsing and picking and choosing. If time allowed, though it doesn't in my one-semester class, I would even have different students become experts in different Masters and then share and compare with their classmates.

The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi, translated by the eminent scholar Burton Watson, is another excellent resource for primary material. Watson writes a good introduction in which he explains basic Mahayana concepts like *sunyata* and gives a good overview of Lin-chi's seminal contribution to Zen, and he includes a good glossary of terms and excellent notes that help explain the text. The *Lin-chi lu* itself has four sections grouped by

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subject. The first, "Ascending the Hall," has very brief stories of Lin-chi's addresses to monks or lay believers. Like the Buddha's Flower Sermon, these are usually supra-rational displays where Lin-chi ends up shouting or dragging one of the monks out of his seat or some such tomfoolery. Students can have great fun with these and may even (as four of my students did when I asked them a question) end up climbing out your window, climbing up a tree, and barking like dogs!

The second section, "Instructing the Group," is easily the best for more rational classroom discussion and understanding of Zen. These are sermons where Lin-chi clearly talks about the truly enlightened life and what it requires. For instance, chapter 13 says,

Followers of the way, the Dharma of the buddhas calls for no special understanding. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything in particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, lie down. Fools laugh at me, but wise men will know what I mean.

Watson says that later masters "do little more than reiterate or embroider on Lin-chi's words or doctrines," and these sermons in section two are the best primary material on Zen I've ever used in class.

Section 3, "Testing and Rating" (where students come to Lin-chi to test their religious understanding), and Section 4, "Record of Activities" (anecdotes of Lin-chi's life, including the famous one in chapter 48 on his own enlightenment), are like Section 1—fun

and instructive to a point. They invariably end with Lin-chi hitting someone, or shouting, or ruffling his sleeve; and it is important that students read some of these as a corrective to what would be an overly intellectual understanding gained merely from Section 2.

Zen and the Art of Anything is a totally different kind of book. If you are looking for a scholarly introduction to the Far Eastern Zen tradition, look elsewhere. Hal French's goal in this book is not to accurately portray the Chinese or Japanese Zen tradition, but to *appropriate* useful elements of Zen for American lives. This book is not interested in the institution of Zen, but in zen, that way of life whereby "a wide variety of pursuits, when combined with a meditative and mindful discipline, may be elevated to the level of art forms." It's a book about doing zen, not studying Zen.

Nevertheless, I've found *Zen and the Art of Anything* useful in my classroom in two ways. First, French is an American professor of Asian religions, and his book is full of useful tidbits for teachers. Indeed, I made a handout for my students from facts I picked up from French, such as "The place where kendō was practiced in ancient times was called 'the place of enlightenment,'" or good quotations such as this one by Ryokan:

*Spring come again, after moody wintering indoors,
I left the hermitage with begging bowl.
The village children played in the long-awaited sun.
I bounced the ball with them, chanting—one-two-three—
four-five-six-seven.
They bounced while I sang,
They sang while I bounced.
So I've wasted, joyfully,
a whole spring day.*

That handout has occasioned some of the best discussions my classes have had on Zen.

Secondly, French's directions for how to practice zen are often beautifully written and crystal clear for American students. His section "Breathing" (pp. 31–43) in particular is a wonderful introduction for a class period on zazen. This year instead of giving my normal instructions on sitting before a class meditation period, I simply read French's "Breathing" to the class. Afterwards, several students expressed interest in buying French's book.

There's too much good stuff on Zen, and too little time in most of our classes, to bring in everything. These three books, though, have each found a niche in my own classroom. ■

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