



The Zen Monastic Experience

By Robert E. Buswell

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Robert Buswell, a Buddhist scholar who spent five years as a Zen monk in Korea, draws on personal experience in this insightful account of day-to-day Zen monastic practice. In discussing the activities of the postulants, the meditation monks, the teachers and administrators, and the support monks of the monastery of Songgwang-sa, Buswell reveals a religious tradition that differs radically from the stereotype prevalent in the West. The author's treatment lucidly relates contemporary Zen practice to the historical development of the tradition and to Korean history more generally, and his portrayal of the life of modern Zen monks in Korea provides an innovative and provocative look at Zen from the inside.

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Editorial Review

From Kirkus Reviews

A myth-shattering foray behind the walls of a Korean Zen Buddhist monastery. The common Western image of Zen as a religion that features unpredictable, iconoclastic teachers ``bullying their students into enlightenment" is, says Buswell (East Asian Languages and Cultures/UCLA), grossly inaccurate. And he should know, having spent five years as a monk at Songgwang-sa, one of the largest Zen monasteries in Korea. Here, deftly weaving scholarship and memoir, Buswell depicts what life in a Zen monastery is really like. Early chapters discuss the history and current status (not terribly vital) of Buddhism in Korea; the course (surprisingly flexible) of a typical monk's career and of a typical monastic year; and the layout and bureaucracy of Songgwang-sa, plus a look at its charismatic ``master," Kusan, who ``achieved the great awakening" in 1960, at age 50. Through this survey, which is well-detailed but hardly gripping, Buswell explodes Zen's reputation as bibliophobic, artsy-craftsy, and reliant on physical labor. Ironically, the narrative takes flight with the author's description of the aspect of Korean Zen that matches its reputation--the arduous life of the monastery's ``elite vanguard," the meditators. Although meditators comprise only a small percentage of the monks (with the rest devoted to support activities or ritual), their efforts astonish: sitting in meditation for 14 hours a day; for one week a year, sitting seven days straight without sleep; engaging in such severe practices as extensive fasting, never lying down to sleep, and the frowned-upon but ever-popular practice of burning off their fingers (a ``symbolic commitment"). But for most monks, Buswell notes, it's ``a disciplined life, not the transformative experience of enlightenment," that's crucial. Less the sound of one hand clapping than of hands, mind, and heart working together to lead a sanctified life--and, as such, a sound corrective to Western misunderstandings about Zen. (Sixteen pages of b&w photographs.) --

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Review

"A myth-shattering foray behind the walls of a Korean Zen Buddhist monastery.... Less the sound of one hand clapping than of hands, mind and heart working together to lead a sanctified life--and, as such, a sound corrective to Western misunderstandings about Zen."--**Kirkus Reviews**

"[This book] is ... forged from [Buswell's] own experience and practice.... He enlivens his study with a detailed personal account of his daily life at Songgwang-sa, one of Korea's main monasteries, and with wry humor.... This book should be read by anyone interested in the daily life of Zen training."--**Martine Batchelor, Tricycle: The Buddhist Review**

From the Back Cover

Robert Buswell, a Buddhist scholar who spent five years as a Zen monk in Korea, draws on personal experience in this insightful account of day-to-day Zen monastic practice. Buswell's depiction of Zen reveals a religious tradition that differs radically from the stereotype prevalent in the West. Westerners exposed to Zen through English-language materials have been offered a picture of an iconoclastic religion that is bibliophobic, institutionally subversive, aesthetically sophisticated, devoted to manual labor, and intent solely on sudden enlightenment. Its most revered teachers are depicted as torching their sacred religious icons, bullying their students into enlightenment, rejecting the value of all the scriptures of Buddhism, and even denying the worth of Zen itself. In discussing the activities of the postulants, the meditation monks, the teachers and administrators, and the support monks of Song-gwang-sa, a major Korean Buddhist monastery, Buswell challenges much of this picture. In the "counterparadigm" of Zen offered in the daily lives of the monks, Zen's putative iconoclasts are replaced by resolute members of a community dedicated to a methodical regimen of spiritual training. Zen's apparent bibliophobia pales to reveal contemplatives learned

in classical Chinese and often having extensive experience in Buddhist seminaries. And the brash challenge allegedly made to systematizations of religion, even to Zen itself, fades before monks with strong faith in the arduous way of life they have undertaken. The author's treatment lucidly relates contemporary Zen practice to the historical development of the tradition and to Korean history more generally, and his intimate, sympathetic portrayal of the life of modern Zen monks in Korea provides an innovative and provocative look at Zen from the inside.

Users Review

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