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## Eihei Dōgen – Mystical Realist

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# Review of *Eihei Dōgen – Mystical Realist*

M. T. Jarvis (Rev. Ocean-of-Wisdom Sakya)\*

*Eihei Dogen – Mystical Realist*. Revised, 3rd edition. By Hee-jin Kim. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004. 320 pages. Paperback. ISBN 0861713761.

Hee-jin Kim has returned to his book on Dōgen, first published in 1975, and given it new and contemporary life. Thirty years ago the corpus of literature on Dōgen was scant. In the interim there has been a great increase in English expositions on Dōgen. As such, Kim decided to revisit his text and release it anew to an audience with greater sophistication not only about Dōgen, but Zen as well. Kim adds to this edition an analysis of the scholarship on Dōgen that has taken place over the past thirty years, and then recasts his interpretation in relation to these new ideas. This rich summary of Dōgen studies is in and of itself a wonderful introduction to this outstanding book.

*Eihei Dōgen – Mystical Realist* is a journey into the deepest facets of Dōgen's history and philosophical analysis of Buddhadharmā. The previous statement may seem contradictory because of the overwhelming emphasis in the West on Dōgen as a practitioner of *zazen* and rebel against intellectualism. However, Kim clarifies the impact of the Japanese socio-historical context on Dōgen's views and delves into his analysis and interpretation of previous Zen masters, as well as other matters of Buddhist philosophy. Kim shows us Dōgen's personal attempt to recreate a relevant *Dharma* while at the same tackling the various Buddhist ideas of his time. At

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the same time, he enlivens our understanding of Dōgen by showing the interpenetration of Dōgen's intellectual life and practice.

After a discussion of current debates in Dōgen studies, Kim analyzes Dōgen through his socio-historical context. This part of the book is a true gem and could exist alone as a significant contribution to Dōgen studies. Rather than simple hagiography, Kim investigates Dōgen the man as he struggles with the meaning of genuine *Dharma* in the Buddhist environment of his day. Kim includes the controversies within Japanese Buddhism and secular politics of the time, which eventually led Dōgen to feel contempt for the secular, fatalistic, ingenuine devotion and shallow piety common to the Japanese Buddhism of the period.

This led to an internal conflict for Dōgen, in that he had to use the material of his time to deliver a new message. Kim notes, "What was taking place in Dōgen's mind was a radical demythologizing and in turn, remythologizing of the whole Buddhist symbol-complex of original enlightenment, Buddha-nature, emptiness and other related ideas and practices" (37). Kim asserts that Dōgen, rather than being simply a critic of the Buddhism of the period, took hold of contemporary interpretations and set them in a new direction. This new course led to a vision that "...lay in his realistic affirmation and transformation of what was relative, finite, and temporal within a non-dualistic mode of existence..." (37). Kim remarks that this was Dōgen's "final solution," and that "[h]is remaining life consisted of his intellectual, moral and cultic efforts to enact and elucidate this vision in the specific historical and social conditions of his time" (37).

The analysis of Dōgen's soteriological approach in relation to his historical context draws us into the rich philosophical life of Dōgen, and refutes the commonly-held idea of Dōgen as anti-intellectual, anti-conceptual, and anti-language. Kim starts by noting that Dōgen's existential quest led him to review a variety of philosophies and analyze their underlying or implicit assumptions. "His willingness to learn from a variety of sources was indicative of his moral courage and intellectual openness, and revealed his 'intersectarian' approach to Buddhism, which would later revitalize the religion in his time" (24). Ultimately, while Dōgen would reject

syncretism between Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, which he felt diluted and distracted people from pure *Dharma*, he would retain the intersectorian acceptance of Buddhist ideas as he formulated his views on awakening.

Dōgen would eventually come to focus on the "body-mind cast off" philosophy of his Chinese teacher, Ju-ching. With his understanding set in this direction, Dōgen returned to Japan and attacked, deconstructed, or, integrated and reinterpreted contemporary and inherited views of *Dharma*. Kim notes that this did not lead Dōgen to withdraw from the contemporary Buddhist activities that focused on language, sutras, or *kōans*, but rather to reinterpret them for the purposes of his soteriology. On the matter of language, Kim asserts that "Dōgen's view was neither a derogation nor an idealization of language, but simply an acknowledgement of the legitimate place of language in the spiritual scheme of things"; and with regard to sutras, he quotes Dōgen: "Hearing and seeing should not be regarded as more meritorious than reading the sutras" (82).

Dōgen's engagement in the reinterpretation of ideas, rather than a retreat, allowed him to penetrate all aspects of life, including philosophy. For Dōgen, Kim asserts, "The philosophic enterprise was as much a practice of the bodhisattva way as zazen" (98). Philosophic enterprise is rife with language and symbols, something Dōgen well understood. According to Kim, however, Dōgen also realized the reinterpretation of symbols "was possible only when symbol was mediated, liberated, and reinstated by the symbolized" (84). Thus, Dōgen asserted that all parts of life were practice; to ignore philosophy, sutras, *kōans*, or symbolic language would be another error of dualism.

The above gives the general flavor of Kim's approach to Dōgen. His discussion of Dōgen's views continues on a plethora of subjects including creativity, activity, body and mind, Buddha-nature, existence, time, nature, phenomena, morality, Buddhahood, good and evil, and the religious life. Additionally, Kim writes extensively about Dōgen's reconciliation of the above to his view of non-duality. Kim richly supports his arguments with quotes from Dōgen's writings, providing a good overview of Dōgen's

thinking as a whole. Indeed, another gem in this book is Kim's inclusion of Dōgen's reinterpretation and utilization of Buddhist technical nomenclature. The inclusion of quotes from various sources written at different periods in Dōgen's career makes this book not only an academic commentary but also part anthology.

One thing that is particularly engaging about Kim's explanation of Dōgen's religious thought is that it spontaneously generates reflection in the reader. Kim points out that, "Religious thought, like any other intellectual endeavor, employs concepts and symbols bequeathed from particular religious and cultural traditions created by our inner aspirations and cultural socioeconomic conditions of a given age" (10). This remark is useful fertilizer for Western Buddhists currently struggling to define a conceptual framework for their own time and place. Kim's analysis additionally brings forth useful parallels. For example, he describes the decadent, hedonistic period of Kamakura Japan as the backdrop from which Dōgen's emphasis on simplicity arises. It could be said the current hedonism of American life, much like in the time of Dōgen, is responsible for the yearning on the part of many modern Americans for simplicity and calm as a stepping stone to freedom.

There are other good points aside from the textual analysis. Kim brings attention to how Dōgen's early training in classical literature, particularly poetry, influenced his expositions both verbal and written. Historical notes are an added bonus, such as his comment that Dōgen's journey to China may have been as much an escape from the execution of members of his clan, as it was for the more commonly romanticized version of his quest for pure *Dharma*. Further enriching parts of the book, for scholars, is Kim's inclusion of Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese words in parenthesis next to terms translated into English. Also, in the back of the book are extensive notes and several appendices including a chronology of the life of Dōgen.

There are, it must be said, some challenges to the text. Those who are purely interested in a commentary on Dōgen, or who already have a thorough background in Buddhist philosophy and history will have to be patient with Kim's deep and sometimes tedious review of Buddhist

philosophical movements. As well, Kim sometimes comes across as pleading his case. However, it is, as noted in the book, a 'comprehensive introduction,' with all the merits and limits such a categorization includes.

One of the qualities of a good book is it leaves the reader intellectually stimulated, and also encourages them to follow up on ideas presented in the book. *Eihei Dōgen - Mystical Realist* prompts you into reading more Dōgen if you haven't already, or re-reading him from another perspective. It also intrigues the reader into investigating other avenues not fully explored in the book. For example, Kim tangentially mentions some intriguing similarities between Dōgen's thought and Vajrayāna.

Overall the book is a good read both aesthetically and intellectually. Kim awakens in us a sense of Dōgen as a person who was as much an intellectual as he was an ascetic. Moreover, though the author spends a great deal of time discussing intellectual matters, he always brings us back to the pragmatism of Dōgen, stating that it is "crucially important [to our understanding] that Dōgen claimed that authenticity or inauthenticity of practice, that is, of activity – rather than inferiority or superiority of doctrine, or the profundity or shallowness of teaching – was the *sine qua non* of Buddhist truth" (75). The 'activity' of Dōgen's life and thought continues to be an inspiration to practitioners today. This newly revised edition of Hee-jin Kim's book is a wonderful testament to Dōgen not only as the staunch 12th-century man of *zazen*, but also introduces us to a whole side of Dōgen that has been ignored by many Zen practitioners. As such, this work encourages the reader to reflect deeply not only on Dōgen, but on their own practice.