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*Just This Is It: Dongshan and the Practice of Suchness*

by Taigen Dan Leighton (review)

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of *Linji* (Chin. *Linjilu*, Jpn. *Rinzairoku*). This was first printed in an abbreviated edition in 1975 and was reissued in 2008 with a major overhaul by Thomas Kirchner, who restored the detailed historical, linguistic, and doctrinal annotations that were central to Sasaki's original plan.

The task for the editorial team of *Zen Dust* was much more moderate in scope than for the Suzuki series, yet it was similar in terms of updating transliterations with the use of pinyin. This effort greatly affects the alphabetical listings of the Bibliography (pp. 299–423), which remains one of the most valuable components of the book along with the incredibly detailed notes (pp. 131–295). Some of the materials in the ample Appendixes (pp. 426–454), which were so distinctively esteemed at the time of publication, can now be found in various works on Zen history. But, along with the other sections that continue to offer many helpful nuggets of information and insight, this section helps make the work an important contemporary reference tool.

In short, all scholars of traditional Zen thought will surely want to turn to the pages of the reissued Suzuki and Isshū/Sasaki writings in order to enhance and sustain their studies.

*Just This Is It: Dongshan and the Practice of Suchness.* By Taigen Dan Leighton. Boston: Shambhala, 2015. Pp. viii + 285. Paper \$18.95, ISBN 978-1611802283.



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In *Just This Is It: Dongshan and the Practice of Suchness*, Taigen Dan Leighton has written a rich introduction to the teachings of Dongshan Liangjie (807–869) (Jpn. Tōzan Ryōkai), one of the Chinese founders of the Caodong (Jpn. Sōtō) branch of Chan/Zen Buddhism. Drawing on his expertise as both a scholar and a Zen teacher, Leighton analyzes Dongshan's *Recorded Sayings*, especially its encounter dialogues, the teaching poem "Jewel Mirror Samādhi," and the doctrine of the five degrees, while also taking up anecdotes about Dongshan that appear in koan collections. Given the historical fog surrounding classical Chan figures and their texts, Leighton's focus is "not the literal historical personage of Dongshan, but rather his position as an exemplary, iconic figure in Chan lore" (p. 4).

Leighton's analysis of Dongshan's stance revolves around the doctrine of suchness and approaches to its teaching, to "revealing and imparting awareness of suchness" (p. 42), to helping people "glimpse the underlying reality of all things mutually arising together" (p. 40). In particular, as flagged in the subtitle of the book, Leighton focuses on "the practice of suchness," on how one can "receive and express intimations of suchness" (p. 41). After offering an introduction to Dongshan in his historical context, Leighton organizes his exposition in three sections: "the search for

suchness," "teachings of suchness," and "the fivefold suchness." In the first two, Leighton examines key stories in Dongshan's *Recorded Sayings*, such as "No Grass for Ten Thousand Miles," "The White Rabbit," and "Caring for the One Not Ill."

Early in the book Leighton provides his readers with a helpful introduction to the concept of suchness (Skt. *tathatā*). He writes that "suchness is described in Indian Buddhism as ultimate truth, reality, the source, or the unattainable. Experientially, this suchness might imply the direct apprehension of the immediate present reality, harking back to early Buddhist mindfulness practices of bare attention. So, in varying contexts, suchness may refer to our clear perception of reality, or else to the nature of that reality itself" (p. 9). With regard to the former, epistemological connotation, Leighton describes suchness not as an object of experience but as "a mode of practice of meditative awareness and activity" (p. 10), a "way of seeing reality" (p. 138). And with regard to the latter, metaphysical connotation, Leighton discusses suchness in terms of "just this": "the simplicity and immediacy of reality here now, beyond human conceptualizations" (p. 34). As such, *tathatā* is not a noun (hence the limitations of the nominal rendering "suchness") but instead something adverbial or adjectival, as flagged by certain Chinese translations of this Sanskrit term (p. 139).

Leighton also sketches the contours of the related concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), construing it as "the emptiness or insubstantiality of all persons and entities, understood as empty of inherent substantive existence" (p. 9), empty of "inherent, unchanging identity" (p. 130). Like suchness, it "is not a thing to seek, but rather the way a thing is" (p. 10).

Leighton's astute treatment of core doctrines does not end with suchness and emptiness. One feature of the book that readers will appreciate is his treatment of an array of other Buddhist doctrines in the background (and in some cases the foreground) of Dongshan's standpoint. Leighton discusses buddha nature (pp. 21, 151), *anātman* (p. 36), sudden awakening (pp. 116, 195), *bodhicitta* (pp. 128, 137), the theory of two truths (p. 67), the *tathāgatha garbha* (p. 24), the three bodies of Buddha (pp. 130, 145–146), the five elements (p. 182), non-sentient beings expounding the Dharma (pp. 20–25), the Huayan Buddhist fourfold *dharmadhātu* (pp. 35–36, 213), and the Yogācāra Buddhist eight levels of consciousness (p. 37). Serious readers will appreciate this doctrinal focus, for it illuminates how Chan/Zen thinkers, though ostensibly operating within a "separate transmission apart from doctrinal teachings" (Jpn. *kyōge-betsuden*) are steeped in Buddhist doctrine and philosophy.

They are also steeped in Buddhist literature, and Leighton does his readers the additional service of connecting Dongshan and his writings to other Buddhist texts, whether the *Lotus Sūtra* (pp. 103 ff.), the *Heart Sūtra* (p. 19), the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (p. 81), the *Larger Sūtra on Perfect Wisdom* (p. 115), the *Daśabhūmika* (p. 115), the *Blue Cliff Record* koan collection (p. 83), the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (p. 195), Shitou's poem "The Harmony of Difference and Sameness" (p. 79), and, in various spots, the Sōtō Zen koan collection *The Book of Serenity*. Leighton's extensive treatment of Dōgen's *Shōbō-genzō*, and his references to statements by such contemporary Sōtō figures as Shunryū Suzuki and Reb Anderson, shed light on Dongshan's stance and its legacy in Zen.

Scholars, graduate students, and undergraduates will benefit from this placement of Dongshan's stance in the doctrinal and textual history of Zen and the broader Buddhist tradition of which it is part. I might add that Leighton enhances this contextualization with a Caodong/Sōtō lineage chart at the beginning of the book and an excellent index.

Leighton also couples his expertise as a respected scholar of Zen with his insights as a Zen teacher (Leighton is the Zen master at the Ancient Dragon Zen Gate in Chicago) to offer comments that will interest not only scholars but Zen practitioners. Key topics in this regard are the practice of suchness in relation to emotional heat and coolness (pp. 91–93), the middle way (p. 98), kindness (p. 110), objectless meditation (p. 129), leaving no trace (pp. 237–238), and the “great matter” of life and death (pp. 160–161).

The book will also appeal to “engaged Buddhists,” for Leighton presents Dongshan's view of engagement with suchness as engagement with the world, and in several spots Leighton connects his analytical points to contemporary issues like the climate crisis, self-immolation as a form of protest, and the need for sustainable economic systems and cooperative communities.

One sign of a good book is the curiosity it piques in its readers. As I reflected on Leighton's representation of suchness as both the mode of reality and a way of experiencing reality, I found myself wondering how he, a scholar and practitioner of Sōtō Zen, might weave into his discussion some additional treatment of Dōgen's notion of *genjō-kōan*, which Leighton renders as “actualizing the fundamental point” (p. 39). Leighton points out that suchness “is simply this immediate present reality” (p. 127); he refers to the “open self” through which one catches a “glimpse of the underlying reality of all things mutually arising together” (p. 40), and he quotes the famous lines in the *Genjō-kōan* fascicle of the *Shōbō-genzō*: “To carry the self forward and experience the myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and experience [or, confirm] the self is awakening” (p. 39).

Along these lines, one other way of rendering *genjō* is “presencing,” and it appears that what Dōgen might be getting at is a kind of fusing of the metaphysical and epistemological dimensions of suchness in the moment when a dualistically experiencing, judging, reacting, and grasping self—which carries itself forward to the myriad things—drops off and there emerges an emptied, open “self” that is filled by the myriad things as they “come forth,” as they manifest themselves just as they are, as they presence themselves in their suchness. In this moment there is no distinction between the things presencing/presenting themselves in their suchness (the metaphysical facet of suchness) and the non-dual experience of—or, better yet, *as*—this presencing (the epistemological facet of suchness). This experiencing in the mode of suchness in which the metaphysical and epistemological facets of suchness are not separate, the “self” and the presencing “things” are not separate, and, as Dōgen repeatedly emphasized, practice and confirmation/realization are not separate, seems to have been seen by Dōgen as a dynamic way of confirming and manifesting our buddha nature, our original awakening. I suggest this possibility cautiously, for, unlike Leighton, I am not an expert on Dōgen or a Sōtō Zen teacher in Dōgen's lineage,

but I wonder whether Leighton would accept this way of tying together several of the facets of suchness that Dongshan lifts up and Leighton so skillfully discusses.

Leighton's success at stimulating my own questions and reflections generates the one quibble I might add to this review to ensure that it does not simply sing the praises of this important volume. Leighton devotes the last section of the book to exploring Dongshan's complex doctrine of the five degrees or, as other translators would have it, the five ranks. He unpacks Dongshan's verses on the five degrees and summarizes how later Chan/Zen teachers, including Dōgen, have expounded on the five degrees. Then, in the final two pages of the book, titled "The Five Degrees and the Practice of Suchness," Leighton offers some closing comments on how one might practice and live out each of the five degrees and on how we can "meet" suchness vertically through engagement with traditions of teaching and culture and horizontally through open-hearted engagement with other people to "support mutual benefit and creative, sustainable livelihoods and communities" (p. 238). As I read the last section of the book and savored Leighton's masterful treatment of Dongshan's five degrees, I found myself wanting Leighton to comment more on the five degrees in relation to suchness. In earlier sections of the book Leighton skillfully treats suchness in detail and in the last section he skillfully treats the five degrees, but I would have been curious to hear more from him about how suchness appears in the five degrees (as the "fivefold suchness"), or how the five degrees might even give Dongshan's notion of suchness a systematic treatment (or not). Of course, Leighton could make the case that what Dongshan is setting forth in his doctrine of the five degrees does not pertain directly to the doctrine of suchness; hence, this last section of the book treats suchness less than do other sections of the book. In short, the lack of sustained discussion of the connection between the five degrees and suchness may have more to do with Dongshan's treatment of the five degrees than with Leighton's treatment of Dongshan.

As the first in-depth analysis of the standpoint of Dongshan, a key figure in the history of Chan/Zen, *Just This Is It* deserves to be read by all serious students and practitioners of Chan/Zen. Leighton has done a masterful job of illuminating the range of Dongshan's thought and the ways in which Dongshan's thought has been and can be put into practice.

*The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. Editor-in-Chief Seyyed Hossein Nasr; General Editors Caner Dagli, Maria Masse Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard; Assistant Editor Mohammed Rustom. New York: HarperOne, 2015. Pp. lix + 1995. \$59.99, ISBN 978-0-06-112586-7.

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*The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, almost two thousand pages of translation, commentary, and discussion of the Qur'an, is a very impressive product. It is very unusual also, since it is clearly meant to be a religious work, not a work