

BOOK REVIEW

Winfield, P. D. & Hein, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Zen and Material Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 352pp. ISBN: 9780190469306

© 2018 University of Malaya. This journal is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC-ND) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

This substantial volume, containing nine essays by well-known authors from various fields, presents a new, interdisciplinary, even unorthodox way of looking at Zen Buddhism. Traditionally seen as a monastic and meditational form of Japanese Mahayana Buddhism, it developed from Chinese Chan-na first introduced into Japan during the Kamakura period (1185-1333), with Eisai (1141-1215) bringing in the Rinzai sect in 1191 and his disciple Dogen (1200-1253) establishing the Soto sect in 1236. Rinzai and Soto are the two most influential forms of Japanese Buddhism today.

The authors of this volume examine Zen in terms of Japanese material rather than spiritual culture, including the use of certain objects outside of the ritual context. They explore the vital role that material and visual objects play in creating and sustaining a distinct tradition of Zen within Japan as well as, in a final chapter, in the United States of America.

Playing upon the term “Zen matters”, the title of the volume, the editors ingeniously exploit the multiple meanings attributed to the word “matters”, to emphasise the four senses in which the approach to Zen is conducted. These refer to material and visual objects, essential matters, ideas and ideals that matter to lay as well as monastic practitioners. With that the fourth meaning arises through the practical (financial and economic) concerns that have fuelled the production and promotion of objects and artworks for Zen practice. These four senses incorporate the material touched upon in the articles in the volume. By exploiting such polyvalent meanings, the authors of the individual chapters breakdown any lingering stereotypes that construct Zen as a purely “meditative, minimalistic, or iconoclastic tradition”. This enables the volume to explore the ways in which traditional Zen “images, objects, structures, scrolls or other cultural artifacts materialize abstract idea(s)” find fresh relevance in new contexts.

The editors claim, no doubt with eminent justification, that this is the first publication since Robert and Elizabeth Horton Sharf’s *Living Images* (2001) to bring together scholars of religious studies, and art history into conversation about the material and visual culture of Japanese Buddhism.

The Introduction to the volume provides remarkable insight into the manner in which Zen has been examined or reexamined in terms of material culture rather than in the usual esoteric and mystical style familiar to most observers. This provides a refreshing approach to an ancient and well-worn theme, through physical objects of ritual

protocol and *dharma* instruction, but also as symbols of authority, keeping in mind the material objects related to the two principal Zen sects, Rinzai and Soto.

A theoretical and material approach is taken up by Pamela D Winfield in chapter 2 with the underscoring of language and form in the construction of a new Zen monastery, taking into consideration the Dogen's words of regarding Chan temple architecture and the leveraging of his knowledge of Chinese material theory and cosmology in the construction of Japan's first Soto Zen monastery.

The question as to what extent Zen principles can be found in material objects is raised by Morgan Pitelka through Rinzai Zen's reputed connection to tea-wares. His historical approach compels us to reconsider the evidence and concludes that there are indeed some occasional--but inconsistent connections between Rinzai Zen and material culture of tea.

Emblematic but Zen ritual objects such as the staff and the string (*mala*) of prayer beads, often overlooked, draw the attention of Michaela Mross, who breaks new ground by writing about them for the first time in English. Her fascinating and detailed chapter examines the integration of the Buddhist pantheon into the Soto imagery, while also featuring Chinese zodiacal mansions, constellations, the stages of classical Indian *dhyana*, *yin/yang* and womb/diamond world symbolisms as well as cosmological features. As the volume editor comments "this eclectic selection of deities map their immaterial identities into the material string of 108 beads, and through its highly coded iconography, which, as Mross says "mandalizes" the cosmos into one's very hands.

The related issue of importing and integrating Chan-na Buddhist material and visual culture into Japan is discussed by Patricia J Graham who touches upon the exotic luxury goods and Chinese-styles temple decoration at Manpukuji Temple, Obaku sect headquarters established in 1663 by Ingen--Chinese (Yinyuan 1592-1673).

Patricia Fisher explores the extraordinarily prolific material and visual creations of two Rinzai Zen abbesses, Daitso Bunchi (1619-1697), and Tokugon Riho (1672-1745), into their respective Zen institutions. Bunchi spent more than thirty years producing embroidered, painted or sculpted images of Kannon, Sakyamuni, Bodhidharma, and later her own lineage teachers. In contradistinction to her austere and self-discipline, the eighteen year old Tokugon Riho restored Kyoto's imperial Hokyoji Rinzai convent.

This same study in creative contrasts is at the heart of Diane E. Rigg's chapter on Zen robes (*kesa*); this concerns a subject of significance as there is continuing debate on the inherent contradictions between Buddhist ideals of renunciation and non-attachment on the one hand and the display of exquisite brocades on the other hand.

Paula Arai addresses the matter of Zen cloths and rags in a different light. Following an ontological reflection on the non-dual nature of rags, seen as neither pure nor impure, neither high nor low, she then supplies her own contemporary ethnographic research at a training convent (named, p. xxv) to elucidate various Zen practices in which rags "wipe, wring, clean protect and heal."

Rags are seen as instruments that teach mindfulness, patience, perseverance, care, Zen-like items by multinational corporations for maximum profit, the question of non-

duality becomes an issue: How does the use of modern merchandising methods by non-profit monasteries to support an adherent's practice gel with Buddhist ideals such as right livelihood and right consumption?

Gregory P.A. Levine, in the volume's final chapter raises important questions on Japanese Zen material culture in the context of contemporary American monasticism, using the example of Zen Mountain Monastery established in 1980 to sell through a mail order catalogue. With Zen and business connected, and the move away from the original religious contexts, questions on use and misuse of artefacts inevitably arise. The analysis here contributes greatly to the understanding of Buddhist economics, practice and ethics. It highlights Zen's ever-evolving imperative for material sustainability in new cultural contexts.

To one unfamiliar with the interior meanings and practices of Zen some of the information in these chapters must come as a shock, as something away from the "standard" practices universally known. However the new approaches and perspectives provided in the individual, well researched and remarkably well thought-out chapters are both informative and transforming.

The volume assumes, of course, that the reader has a reasonably strong background into the subject of Zen as a spiritual discipline. Yet several of the chapters approach the non-specialist in a friendly and readable manner. This is especially the case in chapters that deal directly with recent developments in Zen, providing it with a new and exciting dimension, apart from historical, spiritual or aesthetic concerns with Rinzai or Soto. Such fresh approaches and perspectives will certainly be welcomed even by those already familiar with Zen.

Meticulously researched and documented as well as extremely well written, this remarkable collection of chapters is refreshing in its approach to an ancient, esoteric tradition that continues unabated in modern setting.

Ghulam Sarwar Yousof

Cultural Centre, University of Malaya

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: gsyousof@um.edu.my