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# Review Of "Unsui: A Diary Of Zen Monastic Life" By E. Nishimura

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Review

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is, to write a twentieth century *Cloud of Unknowing* (a Christian document) by using Buddhism.

PAUL WIENPAHL

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**Unsui: A Diary of Zen Monastic Life**, by *Eshin Nishimura*, edited by *Bardwell L. Smith*, drawings by *Giei Sato*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1973.

In *Unsui* Eshin Nishimura and Bardwell Smith have put together a thoroughly delightful volume on Zen Buddhist training and monastic life. The book combines ninety-six comic, cartoonlike color drawings by Giei Satō (1920–1970)—an “ordinary Rinzaï Zen temple priest”—with Nishimura’s running commentary, and a useful introduction by Bardwell Smith which underlines the paradox of tension and harmony characterizing Zen Buddhist monastic life. Taken as a whole, from its appreciative Foreword by Zenkei Shibayama to its Glossary, the book provides a helpful counterpoint to the standard popular work in this area, D. T. Suzuki’s, *The Training of a Zen Buddhist Monk*, and the more recent *The Zen Life* by Koji Sato. All three volumes together provide the student of Zen with valuable information, through pictures and text, of the monastic-institutional dimension of Zen, a subject largely bypassed by popularizers who have been understandably more taken with koanic and satoric enigmatics than the permutations of Zen monastic life. Other relevant works providing historical and descriptive materials on Ch’an and Zen monasticism include Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Jiyu Kennett, *Selling Water by the River*, Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, and Prip Møller’s classic study of Chinese monasteries.

Critics of the Suzuki (and also the Sato) volume who faulted it for an overly romanticized or idealized portrayal of Zen training may criticize *Unsui* for similar reasons. This criticism, while partially valid, calls for two qualifications. The Nishimura-Smith book does not purport to present Zen as a cultural institution. Rather it offers an essentially normative view of Zen institutional life. Furthermore, Nishimura’s straightforward and rather idealized commentary complements but does not take the place of Giei Sato’s drawings depicting the humor, foibles, and very human dimension of the life of the Zen monk. The pictures and text thus serve to exemplify the paradoxical juxtapositions that epitomize Zen Buddhism.

*Unsui*’s lyric moments (for example, “In the early summer swallows come to Japan, nesting for two months in the monastery grounds, becoming good friends of the monks, and bringing to their cloistered life something of the free world outside”), are balanced with a fund of information about monastic life tucked away in Nishimura’s commentary. How many readers of Suzuki and Watts would have expected all of those omnipresent guardian deities enshrined in such seemingly obscure places as the bathhouse and toilet? Or the rituals associated with monastic life? Or the practical as well as the symbolic importance of the master-transmission-authority concept cluster? How delightful to discover that, “A day without work is a day without food,” translates not only into the

spirituality efficacious “meditation in movement” but also the gastronomically pleasing pickling of the *daikon* radish!

*Unsui* is nearly impossible to review for it is a potpourri of the ideal and actual faces of Zen. Such a volume is not without its problems. One wishes for more information on the role differentiation between the head monk (*shika*) and master (*roshi*), or wonders why there is a necessary relationship between the rigid rules of Rinzai Zen and the attainment of right awareness. However, *Unsui* conveys so much to the reader about Zen monastic life both in terms of feeling as well as detail that I—when inclined to be critical—recall the saying inscribed at the entrance of the meditation hall: “Matter of life and death is great. Time runs quickly; nothing remains; it waits for no man. You should not waste your time.” Don’t waste your time reading this review. Read the book! It’s rich dessert!

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