

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Formless Self.* By Joan Stambaugh. Albany, N.Y. : State University of New York Press, 1999. xii, 174 pp. Hardcover: \$54.50; paperback: \$18.95.**

Peter Soares

Graduate Theological Union

Joan Stambaugh has published books on Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dōgen, and comparative philosophy, as well as a translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. In her recent work, *The Formless Self*, she examines the formless self as the ultimate reality, an idea set forth by one medieval and two modern Japanese Zen philosophers. The book's three chapters are correspondingly entitled "Dōgen," "Hisamatsu [Shin'ichi]," and "Nishitani [Keiji]." *The Formless Self* is not an academic work; by her own admission, Stambaugh is not a scholar of Buddhism. Nonetheless, it is a good introduction to Zen thought, guided by the intention "to present Eastern ideas, or at least one Western interpretation of Eastern ideas, to Western readers in a meaningful way." Illustrating the material with examples from everyday experience and Western philosophy, it is insightful, unpretentious, and readable.

Although each of the three chapters purports to present a single philosopher, Stambaugh shifts her attention freely from one to another throughout the book, following the internal logic of her topic rather than, say, its historical filiation. This method gives the impression that all the three philosophers represent in unison a single philosophical position and makes it difficult for Stambaugh to divide her argument cleanly between the chapters. But while there is a certain amount of repetition, Stambaugh achieves a remarkable unity of focus. The three chapters are unified also by the author's admiration for the depth and subtlety of "Eastern thought," underscored by the disappointment with her own tradition. For example, Stambaugh believes that Dōgen's ideas "refreshingly obviate meta-physics, trans-meta-physics, meta-meta-meta-physics and the whole business of 'meta' of which it is to be fervently hoped we have truly had our philosophical fill" (p. 16). Unlike in our Western experience, which is "incredibly limited," in Dōgen we find an "often barely intelligible originality of thought" (p. 42). Although Western "philosophers have to a large

extent exhausted their fascination with substantialist metaphysics" (p. x), they are yet to venture beyond the anthropomorphic way of experiencing (p. 47) in order to develop a Zen-like understanding of nothingness. For example compared to Hisamatsu, Heidegger's treatment of nothingness is "not really sufficient" (p. 126), and (quoting Hisamatsu) "Oriental Nothingness is called [so] solely because it has *not yet* been fully awakened to in the West" (pp. 125–26; italics mine).

For Dōgen, Hisamatsu, and Nishitani the inquiry into reality starts with the search within one's own self. As may be expected of thinkers in the Buddhist tradition, all three take the self to be neither real (substantial) nor merely imagined. This middle view, avoiding both eternalism and nihilism, emerges naturally once the self is examined without self-interest and intellectual preconceptions. Also referred to as the "true" or "formless" self, such self is "one of the many Buddhist names for ultimate reality" (p. xi). Stambaugh uses that name interchangeably with "absolute nothingness," "emptiness," and "Buddha" (p. 86). The key concept involved is that of non-objectification, a state in which the customary, discursive way of thinking has been left behind. Free from objectification and reification, the non-egoistic, or formless, self represents a fusion of the empirical self with the world. We are told that "self is inseparable from world," "the self is the entire universe," and "there is never an entire universe that is not the self" (pp. 5, 19–20; 52–53). For example in the "Genjō-kōan" fascicle of *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen tells us that the precondition for the requisite study of the self is the suppression of a narrow self-interest; the reward consists in the insight into the true reality; and although the true reality does not lie beyond the self or the other, it involves the dissolution of the fixed forms we normally ascribe to both. The new self that emerges will have suppressed all traces of the consciousness of itself, including that of being in a sublime state. The closing page of *The Formless Self* offers a simplified version of these insights:

Selfhood is not to be conceived egoistically as a separate self opposed and hostile to everything other than itself. [...] Overcoming and abandoning its anxious sense of itself as an encapsulated separate "I," the self gains the wondrous freedom and openness to emerge in joyous compassion from the shackles of its self-imposed boundaries (p. 165).

In short, rich rewards fall to the share of those who open up to the world. But however simple and unexceptionable this realization may sound, the path leading to it is tortuous, for the formless self is a concept that expresses the conceptually impossible. To start with Dōgen, all things are sharply particular. There is no general thing called water; what each of

us sees when looking upon water is a function of our individual perception (p. 46). This particularity seems to be related to our ability to break the flow of time into discontinuous moments. In Dōgen's interpretation of the Buddhist view of insubstantiality, things are qualified by the moments in which they present themselves. The two are so inseparable that he says that things *are* time (p. 31–32). We capture these “thing-times” in their present, which is also ours—for the self, likewise, is time. The past, present and future are real only in their present-ness. Related to the question of time is another central concern—nondualism. Dōgen equates time with eternity, practice with attainment, and illusion with enlightenment. These identities form a basis for the claim of the universality of Buddha nature, a term referring to the true quality of all existents as revealed in spiritual enlightenment. The concept of universal Buddha nature involves the question of intrinsic versus experiential enlightenment, which constitutes one of the major Buddhist philosophical difficulties. If the whole world—including us—intrinsically has (or as Dōgen puts it, *is*) Buddha nature, why must we exert ourselves to realize it and how is this realization to be understood? A simple answer is formulated in terms of potentiality and actuality: we carry Buddha nature in us like a seed, but need to cultivate it to make it grow. Seen from a slightly different angle, Buddha nature is normally buried under mental delusions and needs to be uncovered in order to come into full actuality. But these interpretations erroneously hypostatize Buddha nature. As a consequence, they fail to establish its universality since both the carriers of the seed and the mental delusions referred to above remain extraneous to it. Another, paradoxical interpretation of Buddha nature as “beyond the opposition of Buddha-nature versus no-Buddha-nature” (p. 24) is not very helpful, either. In contrast, Dōgen's idiosyncratic concept of *keige* can be regarded as one of the most sophisticated attempts at solving the riddle. Normally referring to an obstruction or hindrance, for Dōgen the word means an intensification of our perception of things (*dharmas*). By means of such intensification, a thing or entity comes to be perceived as more than itself, that is, more than it normally appears to be. It is this kind of intensification that is operative in the equalities of time and eternity, illusion and enlightenment. These equalities are based on a particular sense of transcendence, in which the second term of each pair is the quintessence of the first. Dōgen recognizes the universal completely within the particular instead of treating the two as opposites or regarding the universal as a higher category. For example, enlightenment is the *consummation* of delusions (p. 14) rather than their negation or subsumption under permanence and truth. As such consummation, it represents seeing the world in intellectual freshness, without preconceptions, in its suchness (pp. 16–17, 51). The momentariness of things turns into Buddha nature once the moment is allowed to appear in its full weight—or, in Dōgen's words, as self-obstructing or totally self-exerting.

Although Dōgen's view cannot be taken as the final demonstration of the universality of Buddha nature (for why do delusions as such arise at all?), it comes as close to it as the medium of language may ever allow. But this point remains somewhat unclear in Stambaugh's exposition. In fact, she steps back right into the middle of the problem as she qualifies Buddha nature as an "unusual" or discontinuous state. Following Hisamatsu, Stambaugh says that although Buddha nature is nothing holy, transcendent or external to the self, it would be inappropriate to apply the term to "the usual state of human being" (pp. 26–27). Buddha nature is *suddenly* manifested at the very moment of attainment; "it just flashes up at the moment of our seeing" (p. 23). This manifestation or flashing comes about as an abrupt break in our customary mode of experiencing: it is discontinuous with the ordinary (p. 49). But how are we to reconcile this discontinuity with Dōgen's assertion of the nonduality of illusion (our ordinary mode of experiencing) and enlightenment?

In her answer, Stambaugh resorts to what may be termed a doctrine of unconscious enlightenment. Buddha nature, she says, is "realization that we are unable to realize" (p. 50), or realization that we fully possess despite our ignorance of its presence. Everything has or is Buddha nature, "*regardless of whether we know it or not*" (p. 52; italics mine). Underlying this interpretation is a tacit dismissal of what we commonly think, feel, and know, as nugatory. To compound our problem, we are not even aware of its presence. Stambaugh puts it as follows:

The usual state of human being is to be negated, not because humans are sinful or evil, but because they are not awake. They are not even fully and truly alive (p. 26–27).

This assertion does little to advance the matter. One difficulty lies in an unequivocal definition of "the usual state of human being" out of which we are to be forced into full and true aliveness, in the selection of the authority upon which this is to be accomplished, and in the damaging effect of such a definition on those to whom it is applied. A more fundamental issue remains that of dualism. In the end, we still differentiate, if only between those who realize their spiritual blindness and those who do not. By now, Stambaugh's discussion has made a circle around the dilemma of Buddha nature without approaching a solution. Not surprisingly, the conclusion is disappointing:

Even though all things, all forms are not bound to anything specific, they abide in their own dharma-situations. [...] Thus, a certain stasis is achieved in the world of impermanence (p. 47).

The expression “a certain stasis” is tentative and ambiguous. It falls short of providing the basis to support Dōgen’s identification of impermanence and eternity. Perhaps it expresses, in fact, Stambaugh’s implicit recognition of the inconclusiveness of Dōgen’s struggle against dualism.

Like a disturbing undercurrent, the dualistic *aporia* continues to make itself felt through the remaining two chapters of *The Formless Self*. But as in the presentation on Dōgen, only rarely does it come to the surface. Stambaugh’s attention remains focused on the question of self in relation to reality. She starts her presentation of Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, a contemporary Zen philosopher associated with the Kyoto School, with a summary of his public dialogues with Paul Tillich. The latter is depicted unflatteringly as a typical Westerner, fundamentally unreceptive to Zen insights. She then proceeds to examine Hisamatsu’s understanding of “oriental nothingness” (equivalent to the formless self), describes its seven characteristics and the way they are applied in Zen art, and concludes the chapter with reflections on the Zen doctrine of No-Mind. That Hisamatsu’s thought is rooted in his personal experience is intimated in his words, “the nothingness of Zen [...] is my own state of nothingness” (p. 76). It follows that although Hisamatsu’s writings can be approached as religious *philosophy*, subject to strict rules of reasoning and expression and amenable to critical analysis, they may also be viewed—as once suggested by Abe Masao—as free and unhindered self-expression of the experience of awakening. In the latter case, they should probably be read simply in the spirit of aesthetic appreciation. As these two approaches are, to a large degree, mutually exclusive, it would be prudent for any discussion of Hisamatsu to take a clear position on which of the two it adopts. But *The Formless Self* is ambiguous about this point. On the one hand, frequent comparisons throughout the chapter to thinkers such as Kant, Spinoza, Leibniz, Heidegger, Freud, and Jung suggest that Stambaugh reads Hisamatsu critically. On the other, her sense of logical consistency seems to be undisturbed by even the most boldly “free and unhindered” remarks of the Japanese thinker, which suggests that she is treating them, as it were, as poetical metaphors. For example, Stambaugh renders Hisamatsu’s notion of formlessness as the state beyond the dichotomy of seeing and not seeing, being and nonbeing, subject and object, as follows:

What could a seeing that is beyond the dualism of seeing and not seeing be like? An initial, easy answer is that this kind of seeing would not see objects. Then what is seen? A presence. Not a static object, but a dynamic, vibrant presencing. This is perhaps most evident in certain paintings or drawings of landscapes, Western, and Eastern. Chinese landscape drawings hardly depict objects. They largely present emptiness offset by some kind of marginal

figure, perhaps a figure with a large hat crossing a bridge, or a sprig of blossoms, or a bird perched on a branch. For [Hisamatsu], such landscapes [...] present the Formless Self. (p. 57–58).

Although Stambaugh succeeds here in conveying the general feeling of formlessness, the precise character of the formless self remains ambiguous. Do “presence” and “vibrant presencing” refer to emptiness, to the marginal figure in the landscape, or to both? Does a seeing beyond seeing and not seeing imply that the emptiness in the background overshadows the figure to the extent that we no longer see it? Or perhaps, that we see emptiness through the figure that embodies it? Since the paragraph allows multiple interpretations, its message is inconclusive.

As another example related to Hisamatsu, Stambaugh introduces the Eckhartian concept of freedom in poverty which she interprets as “not simply removing the subject-object dualism, but being free of everything including God” (p. 60). The reader may be surprised at the assessment of the removal of the subject-object dualism as “simple,” as well as at the interpretation of freedom from God as going *beyond* such removal. The passage from Eckhart that Stambaugh quotes implies neither such differentiation nor ranking.

The seven characteristics of the absolute nothingness (or the formless self) postulated by Hisamatsu is another problematic area. First, we may be reluctant to accept wholeheartedly his claim that “other art works of Buddhism or the West may possess one or two of them, but only Zen art invariably embodies them all” (pp. 83–84)—the claim that Stambaugh reports without a comment. Secondly, some of the individual characteristics raise questions of their own. For example one of the seven, Stambaugh reports, is freedom from attachment, which means unattachment rather than detachment. Unlike in detachment, where “I simply don’t care about a thing and want nothing to do with it, in unattachment I can very well care about the thing—or person—and take care of it—or him or her—, but I am not bound by it. I can let go of it if that is what is called for.” There is something misleading about this definition. Is caring about a thing and indifference to it (which, effectively, “not being bound by it” amounts to) not a contradiction in terms, at least in the usual understanding of these terms? Or should we see unattachment simply as the strength of character that allows us to do violence to our nature? In the absence of further clarification, Stambaugh’s idea of unattachment is interesting but unconvincing.

The chapter ends with a comparison of the Zen No-Mind with the Western conceptions of the unconscious. Stambaugh suggests that, compared to Hisamatsu, Freud and “even” Jung did not go far enough. The ensuing discussion is replete with technical terms such as “focal attention,” “holding on of ego,” and “a holistic ground which is not a solid ground but

very much in flux." We also encounter a rather unusual definition of meditation as "an activity of intense receptivity to openness" (p. 95). But if the details may be confusing, Stambaugh's central idea is clear enough: our conscious, rational mind is unconscious of what it really is (p. 94), and any system of psychology that does not take the No-Mind as its model should be dismissed as a product of Western backwardness. The wholesale condemnation of Western thought at the beginning and the closing of the chapter contrasts strongly with the exposition within, where remarkable tolerance is exhibited toward the problematic aspects of the "Eastern" philosophy of Hisamatsu.

Stambaugh's presentation of Nishitani in the last chapter of the book is straightforward despite the interpolation of multi-page discussions or rediscussions of Hisamatsu and Dōgen. I will limit my comments to a few controversial points regarding the nature of awakening and its relation to history. Stambaugh believes with Nishitani that to awaken to our true (formless) self or ultimate reality is to see "things as they really are." These are things undistorted by the interference on the part of the subject (p. 111), i.e. things experienced from the standpoint of selflessness (the formless or empty self). Stambaugh clarifies:

Basically, Nishitani wants to get beyond consciousness and self-consciousness that are bound up with the structure of subject-object. That this does not constitute a descent into the psychological unconscious should be clear. He is not talking about any kind of mental state, but about reality. As long as we are dealing with consciousness or self-consciousness we can only represent, objectify and substantialize reality, that is, distort it (p. 103).

Thus, by getting beyond the subject-object structure we arrive at reality, that is at things as they really are. But, one could object, if by looking at the world through consciousness we "objectify and substantialize reality," then do we not, when claiming to look at it "directly," fall into the opposite error of objectifying and substantializing consciousness? Stambaugh seems to be doing exactly this when she reports without objection that "originally a term reserved for a kind of mental concentration, *samādhi* as Nishitani uses it is an *ontological* term designating the ultimate reality of things" (p. 154). The denial that *samādhi* occurs to or within a subject may be motivated by the desire to underscore the experience, in that state, of one's awareness "merging with the world" (pp. 108, 111). But in the absence of elaboration of this anti-subjectivist claim, some readers may find it difficult to accept.

Related to the question of the ontological status of *samādhi* is the position occupied by enlightenment vis-à-vis history, the latter understood as the realm governed by the subject-object structure of conscious-

ness. What does Stambaugh mean by “getting beyond” this structure? We get close to the pith of the matter, I believe, with Hisamatsu’s observation (related by Stambaugh) that “the realization of the ultimate antinomy that is reason” is a moment enabling a breakthrough to awakening. But Hisamatsu and Stambaugh are at pains to explain why and how the breakthrough occurs. The argument breaks off with Hisamatsu’s disappointing admission that, “concerning the relation between the saved-self and the not-yet-saved-self, it is too delicate a matter to speak of either continuity or discontinuity” (p. 134). In light of this statement we are forced to conclude that the relation between the ordinary self and the enlightened one remains a mystery. This bodes ill for the ensuing discussion of the relation between the historical and the suprahistorical. Again, Stambaugh quotes Hisamatsu:

The great activity of the Formless Self ought to work three-dimensionally so that it will not only lead the individual to the Formless Self but truly form the world and create history. Only then will its wondrous activity become full and its great Zen activity become world-forming and history-creating. That is to say, its Zen activity will have the three dimensions, Self, World, and History, which constitute the basic structure of man, closely united within itself (p. 137).

Instead of claiming an essential identity of the suprahistorical (the formless self) and the historical, which the overall argument of Stambaugh’s book would lead us to expect, Hisamatsu charges the suprahistorical with the task of *creating* self, world, and history. The two—the creator and the created—remain independent and distinct. Thus, Hisamatsu falls squarely back on the basic dualism that his concept of formless self set out to repudiate. Nishitani does not do much better on this score. He differentiates between, on the one side, relative affirmation and its negation, and on the other, absolute affirmation coming out directly from absolute nothingness. The first pair can be regarded as the dimension of logic or history, the second—that of the suprahistorical. The transition from one to the other, i.e. the relation between the two, is a central theme in his philosophy. Yet, in a relevant passage of his *Religion and Nothingness*—a passage that Stambaugh does not discuss—Nishitani concedes his inability to explain that transition: it occurs on a level, he simply says, that no longer allows analysis in terms of “why” and “how.” In other words, the basic duality remains unresolved.

In summary, as *The Formless Self* unwittingly demonstrates, a personal experience of enlightenment does not guarantee a smooth superimposition of the reality opening in that experience—the reality of the formless self—over the world rationally observed, the historical world. To

be successful, such superimposition should be explicable and communicable, at least to some extent. For that, it requires the vehicle of language. The Zen writers examined by Stambaugh do try to interpret experience in words and concepts. But, confronted with the intractable problem of dualism, they (at least Hisamatsu and Nishitani) are quick to repudiate the very principle of conceptualization, interpreting their difficulties away as paradoxes to be “broken through” without the use of reason. To be effective, analytical tools must be sharpened rather than used self-destructively and then discarded, and the hesitation of much Zen literature on this point opens an opportunity for philosophers like Stambaugh to make a valuable contribution. I feel that *The Formless Self* does not take sufficient advantage of this opportunity. But while arguing for the extended use of philosophical analysis, I am far from expecting it to unveil the deepest mysteries of Zen experience. When properly recognized and precisely defined, a paradox remains a legitimate paradox. As Stambaugh rightly observes (p. 15), when it comes to ultimate questions none of us ordinary mortals knows anything.

***Indestructible Truth: The Living Spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism.* By Reginald A. Ray. Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2000. 494pp. Hardcover: \$29.95**

***Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric World of Tibet.* By Reginald A. Ray. Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2001. 524pp. Hardcover: \$29.95**

Taline Goorjian

University of California, Santa Barbara

Reginald A. Ray and Shambhala Publications' recent two volume introduction to the spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism is, frankly, a literary genre-defining classic. Outlining the synthetic middle ground between popular and academic Tibetan Buddhist literature, *Indestructible Truth* (hereafter, *IT*) and *Secret of the Vajra World* (hereafter, *SVW*) have finally set a circumscribed standard of excellence for that field of Tibetan Buddhist studies in which practice and scholarship overlap. These two volumes are valuable to both introductory and expert audiences, as they present to date the first comprehensive, explicitly “non-technical” set of textbooks on Tibetan Buddhism published in North America. This systematic overview is engagingly articulated by a scholar whose own accomplishments and range of expertise these texts aptly demonstrate. Author of the 1994 Oxford University Press *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and*