



Project  
**MUSE**®

*Scholarly journals online*

*Visions of Awakening Space and Time: Dōgen and the Lotus Sūtra.* By Taigen Dan Leighton. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2007. Pp. 208. Hardcover \$55.00.

Reviewed by **Pamela D. Winfield** Meredith College

Taigen Dan Leighton has done it again. Following *Dōgen's Extensive Record* (Wisdom Publications, 2005)—his acclaimed translation, with Shohaku Okumura, of the *Eihei kōroku*—Leighton has produced yet another work of consummate scholarship that expands our understanding not only of the Sōtō Zen founder Dōgen (1200–1253) but also of Zen Buddhism in general. *Visions of Awakening Space and Time: Dōgen and the Lotus Sūtra* convincingly demonstrates the pervasive influence of Tendai's central scripture on Dōgen's thought well after he left the Tendai headquarters at Enryakuji as a young man. It specifically examines the vivid spatial and temporal images in chapters 15 and 16 of the Lotus Sūtra, and highlights Dōgen's appropriation of the form and content of these chapters in his own highly idiomatic writings.

Chapter 15 of the Lotus Sūtra imparts the Tathāgatagarbha lesson that the world itself is the womb for awakening. To illustrate this sentiment, it recounts the extraordinary episode in which myriad enlightened beings magically spring forth from "the empty space under the ground" to preach the Lotus dharma. Chapter 16, by contrast, teaches the monistic Hua Yen lesson of *jijimuge*, the non-obstruction of all dharmas (things/events). To illustrate this sentiment, one learns that Śakyamuni's apparent death does not obstruct the fact of his inconceivable life span, which, one learns, really extends *ad infinitum* from the eternal past to the unimaginable future.<sup>1</sup> By locating enlightenment in the earth itself, and by reconciling impermanence with perpetuity in this way, these two pivotal chapters give full voice and fantastic vision to the Mahāyāna teaching of Buddha's universal and eternal omnipresence throughout all space and time.

Dōgen's appropriation of these spatial and temporal motifs is evident throughout his oeuvre, in terms of both form and content. In terms of form, Dōgen's notion of "practice equals realization" reflects the mediating position of these two chapters between the "cause" and "effect" halves of the Lotus Sūtra, which Sino-Japanese commentaries first identified and which Leighton adeptly summarizes for the reader. The Japanese Tendai founder Saichō (767–822) is curiously absent from his analysis, but Leighton does discuss the commentaries of Daosheng (ca. 360–434), Zhiyi (538–597), Zhanran (711–782), Saigyō (1118–1190), Myōe (1173–1232), Nichiren (1222–1282), and even later Zen figures Hakuin (1686–1768) and Ryōkan (1758–1831). Furthermore, Dōgen's entire approach to teaching reflects the self-legitimizing device of the Lotus Sūtra, which proclaims itself to be the embodiment of Buddhist truth. While the argument is too complex to go into at length here, Leighton creatively invokes Ricoeur's hermeneutics of manifestation and proclamation to indicate how Dōgen's statements both describe and demonstrate Buddhist truth. As a result, one better appreciates how Dōgen's very form of discourse—his wordplay, sentence restructuring, and interchangeable term-swapping—is designed to manifest the nonduality of all dharmas (his own words included).

In terms of content, the spatial and temporal motifs in chapters 15 and 16 also helped to shape Dōgen's worldview and, perhaps more importantly, his timeview. The image of the earth itself giving birth to enlightened beings, in chapter 15, is echoed in such fascicles as Dōgen's Mountains and Rivers Sūtra (*Sansuikyō*), which teaches that nature's insentient forms incessantly preach the Dharma (*mujō seppō*). Furthermore, in chapter 16, the mystifying lesson of the Buddha's infinite lifespan (despite his finite parinirvāṇa) is later echoed in such fascicles as Dōgen's Being-Time (*Uji*), which teaches that all beings are times that can enfold and unfold one another throughout the unobstructed past, present, and future.

Should the reader feel lost in such abstractions or claims of "young fathers and old sons," Leighton's clear, articulate prose renders Dōgen's writings alive, accessible, and relevant to life in the twenty-first century. Leighton uses an array of hermeneutical devices such as original translations, pedagogical anecdotes, secondary sources, and even Bob Dylan lyrics to unpack Dōgen's idiosyncratic turns of phrase. In addition, the Afterword reflects upon some of the important ecological, ethical, and scientific implications of Dōgen's spatial and temporal writings. Beyond these contributions, Leighton's study is significant for several reasons:

1. It situates Dōgen's writings within their wider doctrinal context and demonstrates Zen's debt to scriptural inspiration. This deconstructs the claim that Zen is only about meditation and a special mind-to-mind transmission outside the sūtras.

2. It reinforces the recent scholarly trend to recast medieval Japanese reformers not as radical founders of breakaway Buddhist sects but rather as heirs to the long Tendai tradition of studying and revering the Lotus Sūtra. By highlighting continuity and change instead of rupture and revolution, this study helps redefine the contours of Kamakura New Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

3. It demonstrates that Dōgen borrows much of the Lotus Sūtra's fantasmagorical imagery and melodramatic narratives in his own writings. This mercifully fleshes out the idealized stereotype of Dōgen's minimalistic "pure" Zen, as if it were only Keizan (1264–1325) who used the colorful esoteric *imaginaire* to popularize Sōtō Zen in the medieval period.<sup>3</sup>

4. To this writer's knowledge, this is the first full-length study of the subject in a Western language, although other translators have footnoted Lotus-inspired passages in Dōgen before.<sup>4</sup> As such it will be especially helpful to undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate readers, as well as Zen practitioners wishing to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of the tradition.

Above all, Leighton's study compels the reader to acknowledge the role of space and the earth itself in Sōtō Zen, although Leighton sometimes neglects to carry his argument out to its logical end. One wishes, for example, that he had gone beyond David McMahan's "spatialization of temporality" (pp. 101–103, 113) to consider Dōgen's temporalization of space, for Dōgen tends to put a temporal spin on everything. Leighton argues that the presence of many material objects in Dōgen's texts (e.g., tiles and pebbles, fences and walls) demonstrates Dōgen's spatial sensibility. In Dōgen's temporalized worldview, however, these items are not so much objects as occurrences, not so much things as events in the Total Dynamic Functioning (*Zenki*)

of the world. They are all part of Dōgen's idiosyncratic code-speak for the monastery itself, the place of awakening, and these stock images are essentially a shorthand reference to specific experiences of illumination.<sup>5</sup> As a result, they are evidence not so much of Dōgen's spatial sense as of his temporal attunement to life and enlightenment in the very flux and flow of impermanence. This sentiment is of course at the heart of all Mahāyāna teachings, which insist that the universal, eternal potential of nirvāṇa can and should be realized right here and now in the fleeting forms of saṃsāra. Leighton's study reminds students and scholars of this core Buddhist doctrine, and, most refreshingly, reflects on its application to life today.

#### Notes

- 1 – One learns that his apparent death and entrance into nirvāṇa was but an expedient means to encourage others to embark upon the Buddhist path.
- 2 – See for example, Richard Payne, ed., *Re-Visioning "Kamakura" Buddhism*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), and Robert E. Morrell, ed., *Early Kamakura Buddhism: A Minority Report*, Nanzan Series in Religion and Culture (Asian Humanities Press, 1987).
- 3 – See Bernard Faure, *Visions of Power: Imagining Kamakura Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 4 – See Abe-Waddell, Heine, Cleary, Nishijima-Cross, and Tanahashi. Japanese scholars have also noted this influence before, and Kawaguchi Eryū 川口惠隆 most recently presented a paper, *Dōgen Zenshi no Hokkekyō* (Master Dōgen's Lotus Sūtra) at the Nihon Indogaku Bukkyō Gakkai, Shikoku University, September 4–5, 2007.
- 5 – For example, Hsiang-yen Chih-hsien achieved enlightenment by hearing a roof tile strike bamboo, and Ling-yun Chih-ch'in awakened when viewing plum blossoms.