

Cunningham, Eric. *Zen Past and Present. Key Issues in Asian Studies, no. 8. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2011.*

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In this essay booklet titled *Zen Past and Present*, Eric Cunningham attempts to put into plain academic text the complicated and, in some cases, indescribable history, teachings, and practices of Zen Buddhism from its ancient beginnings until the modern day. In many ways, he succeeds in transferring complex ideas into conversational topics that are easily understandable, even if one does not have a background in Buddhist history and teachings. However, the helpful manner in which he presents many of the legends and teachings in his essay booklet must be taken with a grain of salt and a lack of assumption in the professionalism of this work. With both the good and the bad, it can be seen that this essay is, at best, an all right source as an introduction to Zen Buddhism, albeit one that would not be useful in any form of academic work.

With many topics and teachings of Zen Buddhism, an emphasis is placed on indescribable qualities of the world, and the ability to understand without words. This can make it very difficult for beginners to jump into a study or history of Zen, but Cunningham handles his description of Zen teachings very well, putting them into conversational terms that the beginning student can understand. Furthermore, he offers his reader a concise look at the history of Buddhism itself, and some unique closer looks at some key Buddhist sutras such as the Prajnaparamita Sutras, and the koan questions specific to Zen. The structure of this essay is also very easy to follow in that it flows from the history of Buddhism, from its roots in India, across Asia, into Japan, where Zen has become most prominent, and into its modern-day influences such as in the translation works of D.T. Suzuki—a prominent figure in the introduction of Zen to American society—and Punk Zen.

In the chapters where he describes the integration of Buddhism into Chinese culture, Cunningham does an excellent job of comparing and

contrasting the teachings of Buddhism with native Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism and Taoism. This allows the reader to see, in a more detailed way, how Buddhism was able to adapt to philosophical ideas that were already present in Chinese society, and thus become an integral part of the culture. He presents a similar view of when Zen reaches Japan, but it is not nearly as detailed as the integration of Buddhism into Chinese culture. Finally, in his description of topics related to Zen teachings, such as Zen gardens and many Japanese art forms that were based off of Zen ideas, he takes a very conversational standpoint. This dialogue form of presenting these facts again helps beginning students of Zen history and teachings to understand what is usually intended to be understood without words.

Unfortunately, apart from the helpful way in which Cunningham presents the history, teachings, and related topics of Zen Buddhism, he has many errors in his presentation of Buddhist history, and some very unhelpful breaks in his train of chronological and academic thought. Firstly, when describing the birth and early life-story of Siddhartha Gautama, there are many errors in comparison to the traditional canon of Buddhist history. For starters, Cunningham compares the birth of Siddhartha Gautama to the birth of Jesus Christ, and while he explains it as a perhaps imprecise analogy, there is a difference between “imprecise” and “erroneous.” Siddhartha Gautama, while his mother had a vision of a divine white elephant during her pregnancy, was not present at his own conception and birth the way that Cunningham tries to explain it. Furthermore, Siddhartha Gautama was not born the Buddha, but rather became the Buddha through his choice to pursue transcendence from suffering. Cunningham also claims that Siddhartha Gautama was kept isolated by his father because he was attempting to change his son’s fate to become a holy man, while in fact, it was prophesized that Siddhartha Gautama would become either a holy man or a great king, and his father was simply trying to promote one possible destiny over another. Later, long after he has attained enlightenment and is approaching death, Cunningham claims that the Buddha appointed Mahakasyapa to follow him as the patriarch of Buddhism, when in fact, the Buddha did not appoint an heir, which resulted in the many different schools of Buddhism. Also, as someone who has also learned about Buddhist artwork, I feel I must point out that the figure of a statue on page eight of the essay booklet is incorrectly described by Eric Cunningham. He describes this statue as the Buddha sitting in meditation, when in fact the hand positions of the main figure and the smaller figures underneath it indicate that it is a depiction of the Buddha’s first sermon at Sarnath.

Some other difficulties in reading this essay booklet arise after about Chapter Five, in Cunningham’s organization and representation of some

ideas. After the fifth chapter, Cunningham switches his narrative randomly and without prelude between China, Japan, and their respective time periods. I myself was able to understand when and where he was referring to, but only because I already have a basic knowledge of Chinese and Japanese history, while anyone without that knowledge would have been completely lost. An example of this is seen in Chapter Seven, where Cunningham jumps from China and the invasion of Manchuria to World War One and the impact of that conflict on Zen as a budding international school of Buddhism. Also, when the booklet reaches Chapter Seven, which covers Zen in Japan, it becomes more of a lesson on pre-modern Japan with a few miscellaneous points about Zen's influence rather than a full description of how Zen became such a prominent school of Buddhism in Japan. Another issue with writing style that might impact beginning readers of works about Zen Buddhist is in the occasional breaks that Cunningham takes from academic form with a statement or question that is really very unprofessional in academia. Some examples of this are on page 31, where he asks, after introducing the Prajnaparamita, an important Buddhist text, if the Prajnaparamita is 'true,' with the implication that he wants the reader to decide then and there if that Buddhist text is 'true' or false,' or on page 68 when he asks if Punk Zen is really Zen. Both of these questions, while irrelevant and useless in actual Zen teachings, are also completely unprofessional in the type of academic work that he is presenting.

So all in all, this essay booklet by Eric Cunningham about Zen Buddhism is a decent source for someone who is a complete beginner to Zen Buddhism, but it should not be used for anything other than a piece of basic, and flawed, introductory work. Cunningham offers a list of additional sources and further reading at the end of his essay, but I am of the opinion that any one of those sources, even though they are sources that focus on particular areas, or sections of history. Thus, depending on what it is that the reader is attempting to learn, this essay is either a great way to start learning about Zen Buddhism, or a bad academic source for further learning.