

Zen Chants: Thirty-Five Essential Texts With Commentary



Synopsis

An introduction to Zen chanting practice, with new accurate and chantable translations of the texts used in Zen centers and monasteries throughout the English-speaking world—by the renowned translator of Dogen and Ryokan. A Zen chant is like a compass that sets us in the direction of the awakened life; it is the dynamic, audible counterpart to the silent practice of zazen, or sitting meditation; and it is a powerful expression of the fact that practice happens in community. Here is a concise guide to Zen chants for practitioners, as well as for anyone who appreciates the beauty and profundity of the poetry in dharma. An introduction to the practice is followed by fresh and carefully considered translations and adaptations of thirty-five chants—some common and others less well known—along with illuminating commentary.

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Customer Reviews

KAZUAKI TANAHASHI has edited several collections of the writings of Eihei Dogen, including the definitive translation of the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo. His other books include Brush Mind; Sky Above, Great Wind: The Life and Poetry of Zen Master Ryokan; and The Heart Sutra: A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism. He is also a renowned calligraphic artist whose work has been exhibited throughout the world.

Kaz Tanahashi's Zen Chants provides the meanings and some history of the Japanese and

Sanskrit words in the more common Zen chants that have been translated over the years. He also offers his own and other modern translations and even suggests finding one's own translations for meal chants, etc. Just rethinking them with different words is helpful, for example, exchanging the phrase, "May all beings realize the Buddha Way," with "May all beings realize the Awakened Way," broadens the outlook. One of my "keep handy" books.

This is a great and useful collection. The chants are now posted online. I would have rather had a CD with the chants because I suspect that link will one day not work. Particularly helpful are reworked versions of some of the chants that bring a nice new depth to them. This is a book I'll keep around as long as I'm around. After that, who knows?

Every book of Kaz is a gift to us all. DāfÂ©sirÂfÂ©e

A beautiful addition to anyone's Buddhist practice. Recommended!

Thank you for this work, it is always good to have translations from skilled and thoughtful people, also a good selection without being too weighty

The scholarship that went into preparing this book is clear. It is invaluable.

I had great expectations of this book, and it easily surpasses them. This isn't so much a book as a treasure trove.

This is a lovely and ambitious attempt to re-form the "traditional" Zen liturgy here in America. Kaz Tanahashi worked with Joan Halifax and Mel Weitsman on his translation of the fundamental chants used in Soto (and Rinzai, apparently) practice, with poetic flair and a certain refined elegance that flows naturally. The book is divided into 5 sections:-Daily Chants-Chants for Events-Enlightenment Poems-Prose Chants for Study, and-The Texts IlluminatedThe first two sections deal with chants that are used regularly in the Zendo, either during daily service, or during sesshin. In many chants, the changes Kaz proposes are subtle, and scarcely noticeable, while in others, they are striking, and to one used to the generally current liturgical language, a bit jarring at first. Originally, most Zen chants in America were performed in Japanese; over the years they have been translated, and then retranslated, with a gradual divergence from one community to another. For example, the opening

verse to the meal chant when I first began sitting with the Berkeley Zendo in 1970, was "First, 72 labors brought us this rice; let us know how it comes to us." Currently it is, "Innumerable labors brought us this food; may we know how it comes to us." Kaz proposes "We reflect on the effort that brought us this food and consider how it comes to us." In the final section, Kaz sets out the Kanji for this verse, and it is clear that the opening word is "One" or "First," which is omitted in both the current version and his proposed version. He then provides a "literal translation" (I put this in quotation marks because Japanese can be translated in many different ways), which reads, "One: we measure the amount of work and consider where it comes from." Assuming this is a literal translation, then it seems clear that Kaz' proposed translation is the most accurate of the three, as well as sounding more natural and less grandiose than the current version. Personally, I miss the poetry of "72 labors brought us this rice," but it is clear from the Kanji that this is simply not what the verse says. This is merely a small taste of the subtle difference Kaz Tanahashi introduces in his translation. Much more significant is his translation of the most fundamental sutra chanted daily throughout Zen centers in America, the Heart Sutra. Here is a key portion of the current translation used in Berkeley Zen Center: "Form does not differ from emptiness; Emptiness does not differ from form. That which is form is emptiness; That which is emptiness, form." Kaz' version reads: "Form is not separate from boundlessness; boundlessness is not separate from form. Form is boundlessness; boundlessness is form." This may not seem major, but in my training, I found the expression "Form does not differ from emptiness" very confusing and hard to own. Obviously, form DOES differ from emptiness, I kept saying to myself. Okay, so maybe this is just part of the paradoxical nature of Zen itself, and my difficulty simply indicated my lack of understanding of Zen. I don't have the same reaction to "Form is not separate from boundlessness." Somehow, while it is still vague and wavers like a mirage, the term "boundlessness" is something I can wrap my head around. It doesn't push me away. It doesn't bark at me "You don't understand!" Secondly, there is a subtle but vital difference between "does not differ from" and "is not separate from." The latter is softer, not quite so abrasive, so confrontational. All too often, once a student has passed through the initial infatuation with Zazen and entered the stage of, "Well, what does all this really mean?" there is a sense of confrontation, of almost an attack on one's sense of self and of one's being in the world. Kaz' translation lessens this feeling, which in my opinion, is beneficial to further pursuit of the tremendous depths of Zen. Continuing in the same sutra, the current version reads, "No eye, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind." This is almost impossible to understand. It is counter to our own experience. It is spooky and nonsensical. It contributes to the feeling that Zen is oxymoronic nonsense. Kaz translates this passage as, "It is free of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind."

This too is difficult to grasp, but it is not such a punch in the no-nose. It gives the student some room to breathe with it, to explore it. This is probably not a book for a person with a casual interest in Zen, but rather a book for serious students, and even more, for sanghas, as the work is intended to be a replacement for the current liturgical translations, and would thus require community acceptance and action to adopt it. It is a book that has been long in the making, and well worth reading and contemplating by American Zen students, as our national community gradually moves away from the Japanese ritual formalism. Whether Kaz' endeavor succeeds, it is certainly a worthy attempt.

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