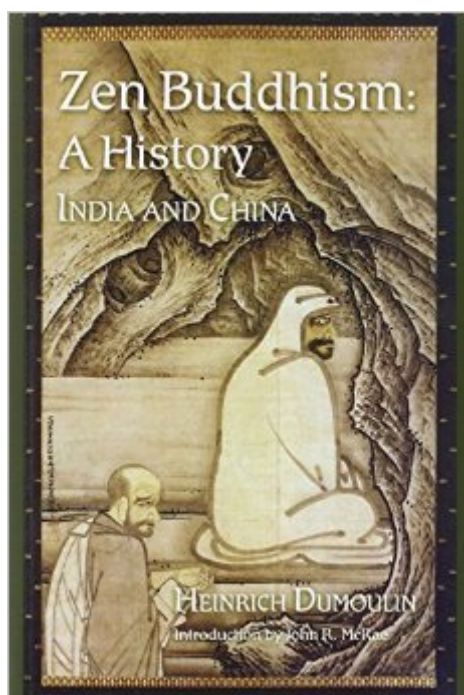


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Zen Buddhism: A History, India & China (Volume 1)



Synopsis

Unparalleled in scope and detail, this classic history of Zen covers all important ideas and developments in the tradition from its beginnings in India through the Sung period in China.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Basically the book is just what it claims to be: a history of Zen Buddhism in China (it says "India" because it discusses the precursors to Zen in the Mahayana tradition and yoga). It is perfect for students interested in the topic. I've heard from a few people (and the preface of the book admits it as well) that this book is somewhat dated because scholarship in this field has ballooned in the past decade or two. However, there is no equivalent introduction to all of Zen history. Thus, if you plan to study Zen history in depth, this is still the best place to start and you can move on to more recent books covering more specific movements and time periods. On the other hand, if you're not going to study in depth, then the new developments are not so radical as to render this unhelpful. Within ten years a better, up to date history of Zen is bound to come out. If you can wait... On the other hand, I believe that a background in Chinese religion would be helpful, since Dumoulin really doesn't provide the background that a student needs in that area. But he does refer to them--Taoism and other strands of Chinese Buddhism--enough that perhaps he ought to have given a bit of introduction to them. He does give an interesting coverage of Neo-Confucianism, although not in much depth and only discussing their relationship to Zen. I was glad I had some familiarity with Taoism, but I found myself wishing I'd had more familiarity with Chinese Buddhism. For that reason,

if you are a beginning student, I'd strongly recommend some other books first. If you're new to Zen, start with "An Introduction to Zen Buddhism" by D. T. Suzuki. If you don't know much about Taoism, I recommend Livia Kohn's "Daoism and Chinese Culture." If you don't know much about Chinese Buddhism, I recommend "Buddhism in China" by Kenneth Ch'en. I think, at that point, if you want to get into the history of Zen Buddhism in greater depth, then you'll be ready to get a lot out of Dumoulin's fine book. Of course, if the history of Zen really is the ONLY thing you're interested in, not how it interacted with Taoism or other kinds of Chinese Buddhism, then go ahead and just jump straight into this one.

A detailed survey that begins in India with the historic Buddha, Sakyamuni, and finishes with the decline of Zen in China. The amount of detail would be overwhelming if Dumoulin hadn't digested it so well and hadn't written so well. Packed not only with historical events and persons, there are many observations and insights that reveal not only how Zen developed but the extent of diversity and challenges within it. There were some highlights for me: the roots of Zen in yoga (hence the emphasis on the lotus pose for zazen), the importance of the Mahayana sutras with all the work to translate them into Chinese, the interplay of Buddhism with Taoism in China that led to Zen, the persecution of Buddhism in China that only Zen and Pure Land survived, and the settling down into the methods of regular zazen and koan practice. The differing views on enlightenment and other key Buddhist concepts as well as on meditation practice reveals that Zen was ever exploratory and many things to many of its masters and those who followed them. Remarkably NeoConfucianism eventually gathered strength so as to be able to successfully challenge Zen for the Chinese heart. This volume closes with Chinese Zen in a decline from which it never recovered. Dumoulin explains how NeoConfucianist scholars were able to weaken the hold of Zen upon the Chinese such that Zen only was able to progress outside of China. That Zen later prospered in Japan did not lead to its rehabilitation within China so one is left wondering if Japanese Zen largely succeeded due to not facing a NeoConfucian challenge within Japan: all the more reason to read carefully Dumoulin's history of why Zen declined in China. I find it impossible to wonder if Japanese Zen, however much it flourished there, did so to some extent by avoiding the challenges that Zen faced in China. Any such questions may be answered by a careful reading of both this Volume 1 and the companion but consensus seem less to be found than a struggle by many that shaped the tradition without bringing it closure. Zen Buddhism, Volume 2: A History (Japan) (Treasures of the World's Religions)

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