

Iron Eyes: The Life and Teachings of Ōbaku Zen Master Tetsugen Doko, Helen J. Baroni
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Compared to Rinzai and Sōtō, the Ōbaku sect of Japanese Zen Buddhism is relatively less known and has fewer parishioners. It is famous for preserving certain unique features of Chinese Buddhist practice of the Ming period such as the ‘chanting zen’ (*nenbutsu-zen*) and the strict adherence to a vegetarian diet. *Iron Eyes* focuses on the well-known Ōbaku Zen monk Tetsugen Doko (1630-1682). He was initially a Jōdo-shin priest who became famous in Japan because he published the first complete wood block edition of the Chinese Buddhist scriptures.

Baroni’s previous publications in this area of Japanese Buddhism include *Ōbaku Zen: The Emergence of the Third Sect of Zen in Tokugawa Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), and *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Zen Buddhism* (New York, Rosen Publishing Group, 2002). Her detailed and fascinating work on Ōbaku Zen continues in *Iron Eyes*. While *Ōbaku Zen* explored the development of the Ōbaku sect in the Edo period, *Iron Eyes* explores in detail the personal life and teachings of Tetsugen.

The first four chapters offer a detailed and contextualized narrative on his life. Chapter 1 is devoted to personal information about Tetsugen’s life. It discusses Tetsugen’s relationship to his first religious teacher, Saigin, a Jōdo-shin priest who had practised Zen. Baroni suggests that the source of Tetsugen’s openness to non-Pure Land Buddhist schools such as Zen can be found in Saigin; Saigin seems to have left a long lasting, formidable influence on him. Baroni also explains the reasons that led Tetsugen to leave the Jōdo-shin sect.

Chapter 2 examines the remarkable feat of producing a complete woodblock edition of the Buddhist scriptures in Japan. The increasing demand of Japanese Buddhists for publishing Buddhist *sūtras* began in the early seventh century; but it was Tetsugen who enthusiastically pursued this ambitious project. Baroni has gathered anecdotes about Tetsugen’s fund raising travels and challenges. Some of the narratives illustrated in this chapter are: Tetsugen’s confrontation with difficulties, his boundless determination to succeed, details of his supporters within the Ōbaku sect, the affairs of the Tokugawa government, and an anecdote of a Jōdo-shin priest who once received Tetsugen’s reprimand.

The third chapter presents major themes found in Tetsugen’s teachings as well as a discussion of the techniques and pedagogical styles that he employed. This chapter discusses Tetsugen’s largest piece of work, the *Dharma Lesson in Japanese* (Jp. *Tetsugenzenjikanahōgō*). It provides an alternative way of viewing the distinction between ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hīnayāna’ Buddhists. Baroni maintains that Tetsugen followed a slightly different threefold classification of Buddhist practice that combines discipline, teachings, and meditation. Her analysis demonstrates the way he developed his teaching with considerable attention to specific stages in the process of attaining the enlightenment.

The tradition maintains that Tetsugen’s *Dharma Lesson in Japanese* had been expounded for the benefit of a single, devoted Buddhist woman. Since there is not sufficient evidence to support this claim, Baroni concludes that it is more likely that Tetsugen wrote it for a general lay audience.

Mainly on the basis of *Deeds of Tetsugen*, written by his disciple Hōshū in 1714, and *Biographies of Unusual People of the Early Modern Period* (*Kinssei kijin den*, by Ban Kōku, 1733-1806), the fourth chapter explores the hagiography related to Tetsugen and the way his biography has been used by other writers in the early modern and modern period. Baroni analyzes the narrative using only internal or insider descriptions of Tetsugen found within

the Zen school. This is a drawback since it prevents the reader from understanding the real religious and social climate that led Tetsugen to leave Jōdo-shin practice.

The second part of *Iron Eyes* presents a number of original translations of texts that have been attributed to Tetsugen. The largest section in it is *The Dharma Lesson in Japanese*. It also includes a collection of personal letters that Tetsugen sent to his supporters in the community.

As a reader, it would have been useful if the conventions used for the translation of proper names had been improved. On the whole, *Iron Eyes* is a significant contribution to the study of Ōbaku Zen, and Baroni has collected many relevant texts from different sources to expand our understanding of this past Zen master. This work makes a valuable contribution to the study of Tetsugen and helps in understanding the influence of his thought within the Ōbaku sect.

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