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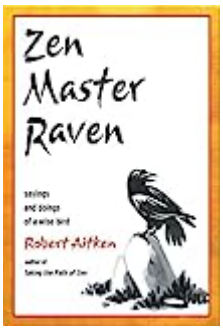

Robert Aitken. *Zen Master Raven: Saying and Doings of a Wise Bird.* Boston, Rutland, and Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2002. 208 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8048-3473-5.

Reviewed by Michael Bathgate (Religious Studies Department, Saint Xavier University)

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A Zen for Today's Forest

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The history of animal imagery in the Buddhist literary tradition is as rich as it is manifold. Appearing figuratively–as symbols and in allegory–animals have served to illuminate the values and foibles of humanity; appearing as animals in their own right, they have illustrated Buddhist orientations to the natural world more generally. Rather than presenting a single image (or ethic), however, the portrayal of animals in Buddhist literature is part and parcel of an ongoing dialogue that constitutes Buddhism as a lived tradition.

It is a dialogue that has left its literary traces from India to Japan, and from Asia to the West. Animal imagery plays a central role in some of the earliest Indian sources, carrying much of the discursive weight in erudite dialogue as well as in popular narrative. The *Khaggavisana Sutta*, for example, advocates world-renunciation by portraying the itinerant lifestyle of the early *bhikku* as the lonely wandering of the rhinoceros, an animal whose thick hide and solitary habits (and, according to one interpretation, its single horn) present an embodiment of impervious detachment. Similarly, in the more popular genre of *jataka* literature, animals often appear in fabulous narratives akin to the tales of Aesop. Like the rabbit whose portrait is said to grace the face of the moon, in recognition of its selfless attempt to offer its own flesh to a hungry traveler, these stories often mingle didacticism with the prosaic cosmogony of just-so stories.

These *jataka* tales, however, are framed, not simply as once-upon-a-time fables, but as episodes in the previous lives of the Buddha himself, a fact that implicates them not only in Buddhist devotionalism, but also in the wider cosmological imagery of *samsara*, the eternal round of birth-and-rebirth, death-and-redeath. In these portrayals, rebirth as an animal is typically characterized among the "three woeful realms," reflecting not only the brutish suffering that is assumed to attend life as an animal, but also the danger of accumulating further bad karma; in such a vision, the "savage ballet" of nature documentaries is fraught with moral as well as mortal peril. At the same time, this imagery of animal rebirth asserts a fundamental continuity between sentient beings–a designation that includes animals, gods, and humans, as well as the demons and victims of hell itself–as suffering, de-

luded moral agents imprisoned in a vicious cycle of greed, ignorance, and hatred. It is an imagery with the potential to radically expand the boundaries of our moral community, to include not only all human beings, but spirits and animals–and in some formulations, even plants–as beings in need of compassion, and ultimately of salvation.

As Buddhism extended its influence beyond northern India and established itself throughout Asia, this literary legacy was translated and adapted to new genres, textual forms that engaged both the Buddhist cosmological imagination and indigenous visions of the nonhuman world, from spirits to the plant and animal kingdoms. In the East Asian genres of *zhiguai* and *setsuwa bungaku*, for example, demons and saviors of Indian origin appear side-by-side with shapeshifting foxes and raccoon-dogs. Portrayed as moral agents, these animals often appear to be influenced as much by the Confucian ethics of reciprocity as by compassion, and their relations with human beings often suggest the transformations of yin-yang cosmology as much as they do the common plight of sentient beings caught up in the cycle of rebirth.

These translations and transformations of Buddhist literature continue today, perhaps nowhere more vigorously than in the encounter between Buddhism and the West. Robert Aitken, the retired founder of the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu, has written extensively on the historical legacy of Zen Buddhism and its application in contemporary Western culture. Rather than a work of apologetics, or the self-help literature that dominates so much of non-academic writing on Zen, his *Zen Master Raven: Sayings and Doings of a Wise Bird* represents a continuation of earlier genres of Buddhist narrative, one that depends on a subtle and sophisticated use of the imagery of nature and the animal kingdom. At the same time, however, *Zen Master Raven* is also a transformation of those genres, incorporating the imagery and concerns of modern Western culture even as it works to find a place for Buddhist practice within it.

In a style that draws on traditional Zen *koan* narratives, *Zen Master Raven* relates a series of brief–and frequently puzzling–conversations between masters and their students. Read in order, these episodes trace the career of Master Raven, his studies under Master Brown Bear, and his foundation of a small but vital Zen community. As leader of this community, he provides guidance to an array of different creatures as they struggle along the Buddhist Path, responding to their questions on doctrine, ritual, ethics, and metaphysics. In the final episodes, Raven retires from his role as teacher, leaving the community in the capable hands of his disciple, Master Porcupine.

In the course of these conversations, masters frequently respond to the philosophical questions of their students with terse and poetic images of nature, often evocative of *haiku* (a subject on which Aitken has also written). Responding to the question "What does it mean to cross to the other shore?" for example, Raven says, "Flowers crowd the cliffs" (p. 127). These poetic responses are only part of a larger repertoire of the masters' conversational incongruities, including growling, croaking, and a variety of gestures, for which the Zen *koan* tradition is often known. Like these other strategies, Aitken's evocations of nature represent not simply a poetic conceit but a practical corrective to the dangers inherent in language as a means to liberation. Philosophy, after all, is not enlightenment, and even the subtle use of categories can be as much a source of delusion as the other fantasies that trap us in suffering. In this context, the masters' poetic reflections on the natural world may represent an attempt to use language to point away from itself, away from their students' mental representations of the world towards experience of the world-as-it-is.

It is, however, in Aitken's use of animal imagery that some of his most interesting insights are conveyed. At first glance, the depiction of his characters as animals seems to lend their conversations a gratuitously fabulous quality–throughout the work, animals behave in dubiously human fashion, speaking together, sitting in meditation, and chanting sutras. Stag sensei teaches karate, Reverend Crane preaches Christianity, and Owl complains of the difficulties of balancing the pursuit of enlightenment with the demands of a career. Yet this incongruity appears to be central to the author's message, a reflection of the equally profound incongruities at the heart of Zen practice in the modern West. Like the reader of these episodes, the animals of *Zen Master Raven* are themselves struck by the differences between themselves and the humans in whose footsteps they try to follow. In one episode, for example, Owl appears to doubt the usefulness of Zen practice itself–for the ancient masters, it seems, "the very atmosphere was charged with realization. That's certainly not true for us today" (p. 62). Similarly, Grey Wolf reflects on the glaring differences between the masters of the past–"folks who wore clothes"–and the animals attempting to follow their example (p. 177). But this is precisely the challenge faced by adherents of virtually every living tradition, attempting to apply the precedents of the founders to their own lives, de-

spite the profound distances that separate them. The social, cultural, and linguistic chasm that divides contemporary American Zen practitioners from the masters of medieval China and Japan–let alone the community of the Buddha himself–is so vast as to be virtually incommensurable. The struggle with this incommensurability is one appositely symbolized by the efforts (by turns compelling and absurd) of the animals of Aitken's narrative.

Even as the differences between humans and animals provide the basis for the text's ongoing reflections on the historical dynamics of tradition, the author's imagery of human and animal also suggests the basis for their commonality, as well. Alongside the animals of Raven's Zen community, the very wise and very human figure of Grandma also appears from time to time, conversing not only with her granddaughter but also with the animals. In a fashion that evokes earlier Buddhist ideas, the presence of Grandma among the animals of the text implies a basic common nature, the shared Path of sentient beings in pursuit of enlightenment. Instead of the traditional imagery of rebirth (an idea that is virtually absent from Aitken's narrative), however, the basis for this commonality seems to reflect a more contemporary ecological orientation, one in which humanity appears not as a separate realm of rebirth, but as one species among many.

In this regard, the central place of animals among the characters of the text provides a framework for reflecting on humanity's own animal nature. Even as the animals of Raven's community come together to practice and support one another, they remain animals, with the instincts of predator and prey intact. The compassionate ideal of the bodhisattva is at the center of Zen's Mahayana ethic, yet as animals, our biology is seldom compatible with our commitments–in Raven's own words, we "have this urge to prey on newborn lambs" (pp. 59, 63). Indeed, in an ethic that extends compassion towards blades of grass, even vegetarianism is revealed to be part and parcel of a brutish food chain. From this perspective, bushes and grasses, grains and fruits are also a kind of prey, which Raven suggests are distinguished from meat only by their inability to get away (p. 194). It is this fundamental incompatibility, between a radical ethic of compassion and an equally radical bestiality, that provides the experiential backdrop for Zen practice as a troubling pursuit of virtue as well as truth.

Early in *Zen Master Raven*, Raven asks Master Brown Bear why they rely on the traditional *koans* of China and Japan, instead of developing a new record of themes that might be more "relevant for the forest today" (p. 18). In many respects, the dialogues of this book represent the beginnings of just such a record. It is a record, however, that is shaped by the continual struggle with the precedents and practices of the past. In the religious and cultural landscapes of the West, Buddhism remains an exotic transplant. Like the monks of China more than 1,600 years ago, the leaders and thinkers of American Buddhism stand at a historic crossroads, a period of cultural and religious contact where old and new traditions are in a formative (and transformative) state of flux. For roughly half a century, Robert Aitken has been a prominent voice in this unfolding dialogue. Only time can tell the ultimate impact of his animal imagery on future generations of American Buddhists, but *Zen Master Raven* presents a rare and fascinating glimpse of this tradition in translation.

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