Sawaki Kōdō


The Commentary on the Song of Awakening is an English translation of the transcribed lectures of the Japanese Zen monk Sawaki Kōdō (1880–1965) on the important Chinese Chan poem the “Song of Realizing the Way” (Ch. Zheng dao ge; Jp. Shōdōka). Sawaki Kōdō, an influential figure in Shōwa-era (1926–1989) Sōtō Zen, is known for his simple and direct teachings—“Wear the robe and sit zazen, that is all.” His strict, stripped-down approach to Zen training is on full display in this volume, but Sawaki also seasoned his lectures with anecdotes from his past, offering, in bits and pieces, a kind of autobiography. He holds up his own struggles as emblematic of the necessarily difficult, character-building trials of Zen training. “Born in poverty, orphaned very young, mistreated by an adoptive mother, I was raised by blows of punishment that rendered me fearful” (p. 223). He recalls a childhood spent “weeping and sucking [his] fingers” (p. 127) until he resolved to become a monk at the age of sixteen. After working for a year as layman at Eiheiji, Sawaki was finally ordained by the Sōtō priest Sawada Kōhō on the island of Kyushu. Just three years later, in 1900, he was drafted into the Japanese army and eventually joined the infantry on the front-lines of the Russo-Japanese War in Manchuria. He was sent back to Japan to convalesce after taking a near-fatal bullet in the neck, but returned to the front in 1905 to serve during the final months of the war. These experiences, Sawaki explains, toughened him both mentally and physically, and he revisits them in his lectures to illustrate the tenacity required not just for Zen practice, but for life itself. “Life is not a tranquil river,” he warns, “its waters are turbulent and rush headlong. One laughs, one cries, they knock you head over heels and carry you away, but one feels immense happiness when one succeeds in traversing it” (p. 244).

Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War marked the end of Sawaki the soldier and the beginning of Sawaki the Sōtō Zen master. For the next sixty years, first in the capacity of priest and later also as a professor at Komazawa University in Tokyo, Sawaki lectured on Zen to lay people and trained countless monks in monasteries throughout Japan. (Sawaki famously never had a fixed abode, earning him the nickname “Homeless Kōdō”). Although he had no Western disciples himself, Sawaki has become a much revered figure in some Western Zen circles. After his death, Sawaki’s teachings were brought to France
by his disciple Taisen Deshimaru (1917–1982), who went on to found the Association Zen Internationale. In the United States, another of Sawaki’s disciples, Gudō Wafu Nishijima (1919–2014), ordained a number of Americans, including Brad Warner, author of *Hardcore Zen: Punk Rock, Monster Movies & the Truth about Reality* (2015), and Jundo Cohen, founder of a virtual, online Zen “community.” In Japan, Antaiji, the temple where Sawaki served as abbot in the final years of his life, has become a training center for Western Zen practitioners under the guidance of Sawaki’s successors. Given Sawaki’s stature among some Western students of Sōtō Zen, this new translation of his talks will no doubt be enthusiastically received. The only other book of Sawaki’s teachings available in English—*The Zen Teaching of “Homeless” Kōdō* (Uchiyama 1990)—consists of brief excerpts of Sawaki’s teachings followed by commentary from his disciple and immediate successor at Antaiji, Uchiyama Kōshō.

*Commentary on the Song of Awakening* not only expands Sawaki’s oeuvre in English, it also offers a new translation of the “Song of Realizing the Way” itself. This long, beautiful poem is conventionally, though probably mistakenly, attributed to Yongjia Xuanjue (665–713), the Chinese monk who was famously “awakened in one night” by the Sixth Ancestor of the Chan lineage, Huineng. The “Song of Realizing the Way” has been translated into English at least a half dozen times, and some of these translations have been published along with the commentaries of modern Chinese Chan masters. *Commentary on the Song of Awakening*, the first Japanese commentary on the poem to be translated into English, highlights the importance of the poem in modern Japanese Zen. Sawaki calls it the “Mahayana sutra that resolves all problems” (p. xxix) and reads it as an encapsulation of the stages of Zen practice. His commentary unfolds in sections, each expanding on a line or two of verse. These passages provide context and analysis for some lines, but on the whole Sawaki uses the poem’s verses as jumping-off points for his own teachings. The “Song of Realizing the Way” provides the frame or pretext for Sawaki’s dharma talks. While not terribly helpful for unlocking the mysteries of this sometimes elusive poem, Sawaki’s digressions are the most delightful aspect of the book. He is a consummate story teller, interspersing his teachings with tales gleaned from Indian and Chinese Buddhist lore, and Japanese history, literature, and poetry. By turns poignant, funny, and cantankerous, Sawaki’s lectures brim with insights into the challenges of ordinary life and the trials of Zen practice. The result is as entertaining as it is edifying. No wonder Sawaki was in such high demand as a speaker.

Sawaki published his lectures on the “Song of Realizing the Way” in 1940, with the title *Shōdōka o kataru* (Talks on the “Song of Realizing the Way”). Some sixty years later, Janine Coursin translated that text into French, changing