

Nothing if Not Thorough About Nothing

Brad Warner, *The Other Side of Nothing*, New World Library, Novato CA, 2022, xii + 387pp., £16 pb

reviewed by Stephen Lumb

In my previous reviews of books by Brad Warner I appeared to have a need to either explain, defend or excuse, either him, or his style of Dharma writing.¹ This time I have taken a precept to abjure any such lengthy expository prologue, because this is neither necessary nor helpful. Some wear socks with sandals, some do not. Some think they're just practical, others laughable. It is all just preferences.

The Other Side of Nothing is an ambitious book, if its byline is anything to go by – *The Zen Ethics of Time, Space, and Being*. It primarily explores non-duality. This convinced me I might be able to squeeze a third review out of myself on the boy Warner's oeuvre. Though he is a boy no longer. Over the last three books there has been a discernible maturing, broadening and deepening in his writing. The quirky modern cultural metaphors are more judiciously applied, and limited to where they really make a point well. As an example, here he explains the difference between the Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Dōgen's approach to Buddhism. This he puts wittily, but also it is a quite apt analogy:

So Hinayana Buddhism is like a crusty old hipster who thinks only his favourite band's early records are worth listening to, while Mahayana is like a young fan who is into the stuff the band's put out more recently and doesn't really like the old records that much. Dogen is like a young fan who prefers the new stuff, but has dug back into the discography to get into the older records and thinks some of those early albums are pretty good.

Whether he succeeds in adequately explaining 'the Zen Ethics of Time, Space, and Being' – well, that is debatable. His inadequacy in the face of the Dharma is a recurring statement. Like us all he is well aware of his shortcomings. Yet, at just shy of four hundred pages, this book is neither brief, nor lightweight. He is being nothing if not thorough about nothing.

He spends the first two-thirds of the book exploring ethics in general and the Zen approach. There are chapters on sections of the Noble Eightfold Path, Zen Precepts, The Heart Sutra, before he gets down to the metaphysical underpinnings of it all. Ethics, it could be said, is a more secure ground to write accessibly about. It's also clearly easier to outline how ethics might be applied to daily life. However, once we reach Dōgen's philosophical views about the

nature of reality, how ethical practice relates to the nature of reality tends to get obscured, become a tad vague. Though considering the often convoluted and contradictory complexity of Dōgen, I quite understand. Every now and then he'll directly quote Dōgen:

You should understand that even though there was a moon last night, the moon you see tonight is not last night's moon. Tonight's moon, whatever the phase it appears in, is nothing but the moon of tonight. Although they say there is the moon, it is neither new nor old, because the moon inherits the moon.

Which Warner will then comment upon saying:

Dogen says, 'the moon inherits the moon'. We inherit the things we did in the past. As my teacher said, everything you do is carved into the universe forever. We have to be careful here and now, because what we do here and now can never be undone. That's where ethics becomes important.

This can come across as a bit tacked-on-the-end, just to remind you that he has his overall theme, and here he is leveraging it in. However, he then goes on to ensure that you understand how our practice of the Bodhisattva Ideal, like any practice, can only take place in this moment, it's not retro-activated in the past or for reaping in the future as merit. If there is simply Being-Time in the present moment, then you can only act now and regret at your leisure what you did or didn't do.

A superficial reading of Sōtō Zen might lead you to think that it downplays the role of ethics, particularly when someone says that even good and bad is a duality that must be transcended. However, the latter would only be the case once you achieve an extraordinary level of Insight. After which you'd tend to be ethical in your behaviour, without any need to label it good or bad. Dichotomies would have dropped away. Before this, ethics requires conscious application, as a vital element of spiritual practice.

In the final third of the book Warner explores three chapters from Dōgen's *Shobōgenzo*: 'Being-Time', 'One Bright Pearl', and 'Buddhas Alone Together With Buddhas'. I have to express my admiration for anyone who even shakes a theoretical fist at 'Uji', the chapter on 'Being-Time'. Warner very wisely lets his own teachers Nishijima and Uchiyama, and more importantly Katagiri, do most of the heavy lifting for him.

Being-Time is a central conception of Dōgen's approach. It's the idea that says our experience of reality in each moment is actually one singular indivisible instance of being and of time. It can be challenging to grasp even the basic fundamentals of this, let alone the ramifications of it. Without a rudimentary understanding of Being-Time, much of Dōgen's writing could easily be

misinterpreted or just remain weirdly baffling. The chapter Uji is never going to be easy bedtime reading. Warner nonetheless puts in a superb effort at making it comprehensible. And does so admirably, without dumbing it down or escaping off into heavily theoretical specialist language. He has set himself the herculean task of bridging the gap between the easier comprehension of ethics with this more esoteric level of Dōgen's Zen. They do require a different sort of headspace though. I don't think he achieves this bridging consistently, but throws himself into the task with great gusto nonetheless.

One of the best chapters in this book is 'Who Walked My Dog?', where Warner utilises, with great coherence, what he's been discussing – about the nature of the moment, Being-Time, etc. – and sees how it might relate to one's sense of self. Well, more how it undermines the sense of self completely, by putting our petty worries and concerns in a much vaster perspective, beyond our interactions with others and into relation to the universe. In this chapter he is being at his most personal, frank and revealing:

When I get worked up about me, what am I getting worked up about? As I said, I might start worrying about things that might happen to me in the future. But I'm not sure if future me will experience any of the things I worry about. I'm not sure if, even if future me did experience those things, it would be anything like what the me of right now imagines. Lots of things in the past that I anticipated would be horrible turned out just fine. While lots of things that I looked forward to ended up being crappy.

Whatever can be thought is just a thought. My most terrifying fears are just secretions of my brain. My most joyful anticipations are nothing more than energy popping in my head. My deepest regrets are just brain farts.

The Other Side of Nothing leaves an impression that it's really two distinct books: a basic introduction to Ethics in Buddhism, with an emphasis on the Zen perspective; and a more philosophical although accessible primer of Dōgen's more abstruse metaphysics. Like a peanut butter sandwich forcefully glued together with metaphysical jam.

Dogen himself tends to delight in blurring the boundaries between what is ultimate and absolute and what is relative and down to earth. It's that old samsara is nirvana thing. As he says in the 'Instructions for the Tenzo' (the monastery cook):

It is vital that we clarify and harmonise our lives with our work, and not lose sight of either the absolute or the practical.

Yet Zen, in my experience, can too quickly abandon the practical and barricade itself behind the absolute perspective. Dōgen's writing, however, is

frequently at pains to demonstrate that relative and absolute are concepts, not discrete entities, interwoven with each other in one moment of Being-Time.

For myself, as an experienced practitioner, the exploration of the Zen ethical perspective was covering a lot of very familiar ground. Warner makes a sterling job of what follows this. Though I am not sure many newcomers to Buddhism would make it through the final third of the book. Maybe a book that moved from the theoretical to drawing out the practical ethics and consequences, rather than the other way round as here, might have provided a sharper link between the two.

By the last few chapters of the book there was a sense of Warner willingly floundering in speculation to try and forge a satisfying conclusion. But, to be fair, once you attempt to go to *The Other Side of Nothing*, what exactly is there be to talk about? Having raised the conjectured idea of the Universal Mind using our consciousness as a way of problem solving, as if the universe itself, like ourselves, has somehow lost its way, ethics then can be seen as one way to get everything back on track:

When you get to the other side of nothing, you discover that your duty is to be exactly what you are. But having experienced the complete negation of yourself, you notice that you've wasted a lot of effort trying to be something you're not. You've been trying all sorts of ways to alter yourself, but all of them just interfered with your ability to integrate with the rest of the universe. Once you find that perfect fit, nothing you've ever experienced before feels better, and when you start to slip back into old habits and alter yourself again, you notice something is wrong... you have to give up everything that you believe yourself to be in order to discover what you really are.

As the painter George Grosz put it: 'Even as we flounder we are forging ahead'.

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¹ WBR 6 (2016) review by Vidyavajra of Brad Warner, *Don't Be a Jerk* (<https://thebuddhistcentre.com/westernbuddhistreview/advice-zen-master--dont-be-jerk>), and WBR 6 (2017) review by Vidyavajra of Brad Warner, *It Came From Beyond!* (<https://thebuddhistcentre.com/westernbuddhistreview/more-advice-zen-master--read-dogen>).