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Religion

Master of Zen: Extraordinary Teachings from Hui Neng's Altar Sutra
Demi, illustrator
Tze-si Huang, translator
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From instant enlightenment to conscious departure, the Sixth (and last) Patriarch of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, Hui Neng, is the subject of *Master of Zen*. From the seventh Century AD, these stories, illuminating the Buddhist "middle way," come to life with fresh translations by Tze-si Huang, a native of China and long-time Buddhist; black-and-white line drawings accompany the text on facing pages, illustrated by Huang's wife, noted children's book illustrator, Demi.

The deceptively simple, though not necessarily easy, text and drawings trace the wisdom journey of Hui Neng in the "Altar Sutra." As the story begins, monks appear after his birth and offer a name: "Hui," meaning "to apply the great dharma (universal law) in order to help all beings," and "Neng," meaning "the ability to spread Buddha's teaching to the world."

Although poor and untutored, Hui Neng came into enlightenment in a marketplace when he overheard a monk chanting the Diamond Sutra. He inquired into the text and ended up traveling to a distant monastery. There, uneducated though enlightened, his presence caused problems. Although recognized and acknowledged by the Fifth Patriarch (of the Zen lineage that started with Bodhidharma, who is considered the First Patriarch), it was at night, and in secret, and Hui Neng was then sent away.

The stories of his travels and meetings with those seeking enlightenment are laced with Hui Neng's wisdom, aphorisms, lessons, and gathas, or verses. Readers can stand in the shoes of seekers who don't fully comprehend the teachings. The question is, will clarity eventually dawn for present-day readers, as it seemed to for seekers back in seventh-century China?

Falling into duality seems to be the problem, which Hui Neng addresses: "[I]f they ask you about non-being, answer with being; if they ask you about the ordinary, answer with the holy. These two ways mutually depend upon each other, creating the principle of the middle way. Follow the same way with all questions, then you won't lose the principle." He continues,

“My teaching is non-dual, so is the mind. The way is pure without any forms…Your mind is Buddha.”

This volume offers bare bones context for those not already familiar with the Zen Buddhist tradition, and so will hold greatest appeal to those who have some background. Still, it’s an inviting introduction for all spiritual seekers to drop deeply into the lessons of an enlightened master, considered the “father” of Zen.

Bobbye Middendorf