



Introduction by Taigen Dan Leighton

Marcia Lieberman

CLEAN SLATE

IMAGES FROM DOGEN'S GARDEN

It's hard to imagine a more apt portal to the heart of Dogen's Soto Zen sensibility than Marcia Lieberman's *Clean Slate*. Her brilliant photographs isolate fragments of plants from Dogen's Japanese gardens in various stages of life's impermanence so vividly that the fragrance seeps through the medium. Breathe in: black pine, camelia, wisteria, magnolia. Responses from five lifelong Dogen affectionados and an introductory doorway to Dogen from Soto teacher Taigen Leighton let the extraordinary Zen master and these botanical sentient beings speak to us directly. Just breathe, savoring "mountains and waters"-- no translation required.

Dale Wright, author of *The Six Perfections: Buddhism and the Cultivation of Character* and *Buddhism: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

A letter from Marcia Lieberman

Dear Branching Streams members,

When asked to write an article for the website I decided instead to write a letter—it felt more intimate for me and we already had a history of correspondence arranging summer visits to share the historic temple arts of our practice. Included in these arts are Japanese landscaping and studying the relationship of Zen and nature. Even some of us have pulled weeds together.

So I introduce you to my new book, *Clean Slate: Images from Dogen's Garden*. After years of reading Dogen and asking questions about his practice, my practice, and what we might have seen in common, I decided to make photographs to voice my response. Many of you have visited the gardens I spent time in while in Japan and perhaps even know the history of where Dogen lived. I went to these places looking to photograph what he might have seen out his window in the 13th century. As I mention in my preface,

Looking and observing is a slightly different activity for someone studying Zen. It is more colorful than scientific scrutiny, more evocative than hana kotoba, the emotional words the Japanese use to define flowers. As a Zen practitioner, I deeply consider and see the tentative, fleeting nature of a flower. I don't pick out the prettiest bloom I encounter, but see without judgment a flower browned at the edges, slumped with weather, eaten at the leaf's edge, yet still retaining a timeless beauty. The weathered bloom speaks to me; I listen, then observe, then take a photograph. Just there—that's it.

Throughout this project, one of my main intentions has been to make another way to look and think about Dogen. Not exactly untangling his language, but offering a portrayal that might lead to more understanding. Included in the book are five scholars who wrote commentaries on selected Dogen excerpts. I've tried to make the book accessible to any person curious about nature, Zen, Dogen, Japanese history... In his introduction, Taigen Leighton writes: *Displaying these plants is an original, innovative approach to appreciating the world Dogen inhabited, and how this context informed his teaching.*

How would you like to have a copy? Easy. The book is available in bookstores and Amazon. Just look up Marcia Lieberman. I'm including a link to the publisher's page to order the book with a discount if you like. https://shop.aer.io/ORO_Editions/p/Clean_Slate_Images_from_Dogens_Garden/9781951541088-4768

I had originally hoped to visit in person to share the book and meet with you. Now online, we are arranging a series of interviews and workshops to bring the book forward and to have a chance to exchange ideas around it. I'm also interested in any way I can bring the book to your sangha in the current Covid circumstances. I so appreciate your support.

Please take a look at what's waiting inside... sending you all love and honey, Marcia



MAGNOLIA

HANA KOToba: Natural, sublime, love of nature

JAPANESE: *Haku mokuren*

GROWING CONDITIONS: Slightly acidic moist soil with some sun

This is an ancient plant. While pushing my nose deeply into the bloom, I found a slight delicate fragrance. The tall tree I stood under resembled a giant flower arrangement. This tree is unique in that the bloom arrives first on the bare branches.

The center carpel of the bloom entices me in just like it does the beetle, a frequent visitor that meets it face-to-face.

The Chinese first cultivated the magnolia in 600 CE and used it as a symbol of purity in the gardens of the emperor's palace. Because of the bloom's durability and association with invigorating a person's chi, they are often given on the occasion of birth. The leaves on these trees, which can grow for 120 years, are used in the kitchen and the bark for medicinal healing. The petals I took home to flavor my rice.