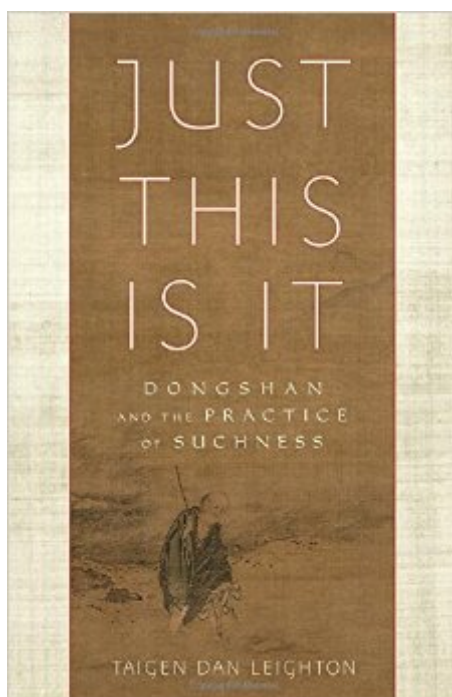


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# Just This Is It: Dongshan And The Practice Of Suchness



## Synopsis

Teachings on the practice of things-as-they-are, through commentaries on a legendary Chinese Zen figure. The joy of "suchness" "the ultimate and true nature inherent in all appearance" shines through the teachings attributed to Dongshan Liangjie (807-869), the legendary founder of the Caodong lineage of Chan Buddhism (the predecessor of Soto Zen). Taigen Dan Leighton looks at the teachings attributed to Dongshan "in his Recorded Sayings and in the numerous koans in which he is featured as a character" to reveal the subtlety and depth of the teaching on the nature of reality that Dongshan expresses. Included are an analysis of the well-known teaching poem "Jewel Mirror Samadhi," and of the understanding of particular and universal expressed in the teaching of the Five Degrees. "The teachings embedded in the stories about Dongshan provide a rich legacy that has been sustained in practice traditions," says Taigen. "Dongshan's subtle teachings about engagement with suchness remain vital today for Zen people and are available for all those who wish to find meaning amid the challenges to modern lives."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The arrival of JUST THIS IS IT, a book by Zen Teacher Taigen Dan Leighton, roshi, is a welcome addition to zen literature by a practicing zen teacher and student. As far as I know, there is but one other decent book on Tungshan and that is his Recorded Sayings of Tungshan by Hawaii Press. There are others about parts of his teaching, but no other book I am aware of that covers the depth and breathe of Tungshan's life and teaching. There IS a wonderful, recently written book that

focuses on Tungshan's teaching of the Five Degrees by Ross Bolletier, also a zen roshi in a koan tradition. As a disclaimer, let me say that I practiced in the Soto School of Zen, of which Tungshan is considered the Chinese founder, for 10 years. For the last 18 years, I have been a koan student with the Pacific Zen School. I mention this here because I have personally spent time with Tungshan's Five Degrees, both cycles, and find it every bit as subtle and evocative as the stories contained in Taigen's book. It is an outstanding volume that promises to deliver a lot: to not only explicate and clarify understanding of SUCHNESS itself, but to show how it's been 'intimately transmitted', in the author's own words. What I love at first about this book is that Taigen immediately tackles the notion of why, if much of Tungshan's writings weren't written down for many years after his passing, that the study of Tungshan and his teaching remains important for an understanding of zen, particularly Soto Zen, but all of zen as well. It's important teaching, regardless of if the historical Tungshan actually wrote and spoke these words or not. Taigen interweaves Tungshan's teaching with his life. After all, where else would one find the Teaching? Suchness. Emptiness. So many strange and foreign words to explain that JUST THIS is it. From his own awakening experience seeing his reflection in a stream soon after departing his master, the subtle, poetic and evocative language and images utilized by Tungshan throughout his life would be a mark of his style. Tungshan was such a powerful conveyor of Zen that the noted Rinzai (Linji) master and innovator, Hakuin Ekaku, the 17-18th Century Zen innovator, took a portion of Tungshan's teaching, the Five Degrees, and made it a vital part of all koan curricula studied in koan schools which stem from Hakuin (which I believe is all of them, currently). Although considered not as central or important a writing by Soto practitioners and teachers, it is an important aspect near the end of koan study. The form of this book follows the intention of Taigen to convey an exploration of the intricate narratives about Tungshan's own training, including his relationship with his teacher, his awakening and becoming authorized to carry on the Teaching; an examination of encounter dialogs between Tungshan and his own students as found in the Recorded Sayings and koan collections used in zen study, but also Taigen's own understanding of how these are reflected and come together in what many consider Tungshan's greatest piece of writing: The Jewel Mirror Samadhi. The Jewel Mirror Samadhi is chanted in Soto temples down to today. Leighton roshi concludes his narrative with a translation of an explication of the Five Degrees. I'll say a bit more about the Five Degrees later in this review. That things, phenomena of our experience, are JUST SO, that beyond our conceptualization and discursive thinking is the true nature of things, ourselves, is what in zen is often spoken of as Emptiness, or Suchness. I view these as two sides of the same hand. Emptiness is not empty, But it IS empty of any validity to be found for our ideas,

concepts, preconceptions, judgements and such. What remains when you strip all that away? JUST THIS. Tungshan is an able master prodding and showing his students, as is shown in this volume, how to realize suchness without delay. Tungshan also provided pointers to the realization of ourselves and our experience as being JUST THIS IS IT. When a wily student and friend of Tungshan asked about this, Tungshan gave what is typical of his responses throughout this volume: "The master went with Uncle Mi to visit Dragon Mountain. The old monk asked, 'There are no roads into these mountains, so what route did you follow to get here?' 'Indeed there are no roads,' said the master, 'So how did you get here?' 'The Record of Tung Shan, Case 23' There is so much contained of value in the hanging out with the stories of interactions as well as the narrative that Taigen supplies in these pages, that I would recommend reading it for yourself. Over and Over again. Taigen Leighton writes clearly, and from experience, and goes to great lengths to try and convey the true teaching of Tungshan, and in the process, expose us to a taste of real life in this book. Our real life. A real life that is our birthright, our Buddha nature. Each of us must trod this Path, taste this for ourselves, alone and together. We need to taste for ourselves whether the water is hot or cold, knowing it directly. This work shows the tireless efforts of Tungshan to not only realize this for himself, but how he led others to awaken to JUST THIS IS IT, right here right now. Perhaps like the 16 bodhisattvas who got into a bath together and realized the cause of water, hanging out with these stories with our teachers and fellow practitioners of the Way will facilitate us all awakening together. If you want to practice Suchness, practice Suchness without delay. There is no creeping up on it. It is already the case. This book is a wonderful pointer to what has always been, and will always be So. I recommend this book for your enjoyment as well as learning of historical information that infiltrates the personage of Tungshan Liangje.

Taigen Dan Leighton has written an excellent text. His many years of sincere practice, writing and teaching shine through. Although I have practiced on my own for twenty-five years I find that many of his experiences are not dissimilar to my own. Leighton provides many such straightforward experiences which the reader will no doubt appreciate. The text uniquely sources and elucidates the entirety of Donshan's practice and influence upon Zen Buddhism. Leighton's work is scholarly and the inclusion of his personal insights no doubt means the text will be a classic for coming generations. I am grateful to have read it.

Zen people, especially you Soto folks, get a copy of Taigen Dan Leighton's latest book, Just This Is

It. Put it in your backpack, on your night stand or near the toilet -- any place where you can get your hands on it easily. For those with timeline tendencies, start at the beginning and just go forward. For others just pick a chapter or open any page and start enjoying a wonderful read. This treasure has something for each of you -- the scholar, the historian, the teacher, the student, the pilgrim, the seeker and your good neighbor down the street. I now have a better sense of who those Zen ancestors might have been and how they continue to inform the practice of suchness and invite each of us to comment in our own way. Taigen's commentary displays not only classic scholarship, but also a refreshing contemporary context that makes this work a joy to read. I happen to know Taigen, and he is most thoroughgoing -- as reflected in this jewel.

Taigen Dan Leighton's *Just This Is It: Dongshan and the Practice of Suchness* is a delightful romp through the canon of Caodong and Soto Zen teachings. But it is also far more than that. The reader, perhaps without being consciously aware of it, may find herself keeping these strange stories in her mind, coming back to them over and over again, perhaps chewing on them the way a dog chews on a bone. And this may be the way, or one of the ways, to facilitate how one comes to an awareness of Suchness, whereby the layers of delusion are stripped away, and the jewel that was sewn into the coat is discovered. Although centered on the teachings of Dongshan, the book ranges both backward and forward in time. It explores texts and stories by and about Dongshan's own teacher Yunyan (who was described as "a Zen failure"), as well as works by earlier Zen ancestors, such as Shitou's *Song of the Grass Hut*. And it covers much more contemporary Zen teachings by Suzuki Roshi, who brought the Soto Zen lineage to the United States in the 1950s, and Reb Anderson, who was Taigen Leighton's own teacher. In addition, teaching stories are drawn from the works of the Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud, the Victorian fabulist Lewis Carroll, the singer/songwriters Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Donovan, and the theories of string-theory physicists. Taigen Dan Leighton weaves the disparate materials at his command into a seamless net that is both breathtaking and nourishing. And, although it is not a scholarly book, it is amply footnoted, so readers who are inclined to search out the source materials may easily do so.

I haven't finished this book yet; we are reading it in a Zen study group. Taigen, a scholar, looks at the teaching of Dongashan, also a scholar and gives his new perspective. Dongshan is credited with being the founder of Soto Zen in China.

Taigen dives in and swims with Dongshan, his teachers, his students, his ancestors, and his dharma grandchildren. Fish of an endless ocean. Deep, insightful, and playful engagement with Dongshan's koans, verses and stories, all revolving around a central axis of just this ungraspable moment, this very drop of water.

I am not a scholar, but I have practiced Zen faithfully since 2009. I found this book by Taigen Dan Leighton to be a treasure trove of information about the important Chan Master, Dongshan, his times and the forces that shaped him.

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