

From Elite Zen to Popular Zen: Readings of Text and Practice in Japan and the West

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Introduction: Cool Zen and Funeral Zen

Zen for Mothers is a Danish book on how to get the best out of motherhood in a way best suited for the modern mother, who aspires to fulfill the needs of both her children and her own individuality. *Zen and Management* is another, written by a Zen practitioner and one of the directors of the company Zen Mind. The book caters to the individual who wants a “considerably improved life quality” (zenmind.dk) and the modern manager who aims at optimizing leadership and business through Zen philosophy and practice. These books are inspired by a long list of predecessors, beginning with *Zen in the Art of Archery* (Herrigel 1953) and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), both of which became cult literature for generations of truth-seeking westerners. The catchy title “Zen and the Art of...” has since then become the epitome of a whole genre of books expressing a general fascination with one specific concept.

Apart from fancy book titles, Zen, as a floating signifier for anything related to truth, spirit and authenticity, has fully entered the market place. Zen has become the name of health products, bars and restaurants. A Danish company, ZenUrt (“Zen Herbs”), sells health products “for anyone who wants to create wellbeing and relaxation for body and mind” (zenurt.dk). An exclusive nightclub in Copenhagen is called Zen, where Zen VIPs, Zen darlings and the whole Zen Family can enjoy the Circus of Zen and a real Zen experience (www.zen.dk). The concept of Zen has in itself become a mental ideal, a psychological tool with which to live, mindfully, an authentic, pure and spiritual life. Zen has also become a concept detached from its religious or cultural origin. “Zen and the art of...” books as well as commercials and self-development stories in lifestyle magazines typically express the Western spiritualization of Zen as a brand of coolness and authenticity, semantically equivalent to “mind,” “quality,” “truth” or spiritual essence.¹ Zen sells, Zen is a good brand. Zen in the West is *cool*.

Such uses of Zen can be seen as indications of a general secularization or “profanization” process, or as “commercialization of the sacred” (Shimazono 1998). They can also be seen as outcomes of a transfiguration of ideas, practices and narratives undergoing change in transcultural meetings between “East” and “West,” transforming elite traditions to popular culture. But Zen

¹ On the general “coolnessification” of Buddhism, see Borup 2009.

is also an obvious case illustrating differences in scholarly perspectives and reception history within the field.

Scholarly analysis of Buddhism in Japan in recent years has challenged and contextualized former images of “Zen.” *Zen* 禪 understood as a specific kind of phenomenon within the domain of religion is a sectarian brand of a particular kind of Buddhism that traditionally has focused on monastic strictness, *zazen* 座禪 and a patriarchal lineage of enlightened masters. Zen can be traced to Chinese Chan, but has through its historical inclusion with other domains of society achieved a certain Japanese flavor. While narrating sudden experiences of *satori* (disguised as “Rhetorics of Immediacy,” Faure 1991), the “Other side of Zen” (Williams 2005) and Buddhism in Japan is mostly associated with ancestor worship, ceremonies, family temples and famous tourist sites. Lived Zen (Borup 2008) and “temple Buddhism” (Covell 2005) is very much about the “Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation” (Covell 2005), a proper designation being “Zen and the art of funerals” (Bodiford 1992). The influential scholars of Japanese “critical Buddhism” (*hiban bukkō* 批判仏教), Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō, have argued that “Zen is not Buddhism” (Hubbard and Swanson 1997), or at least that popular notions of Zen are not Buddhism. Yamada Shōji suggests that identifying stone gardens and martial arts with Zen is a modern construction and that popular Zen is “a self-generated narcotic” (Yamada 2009: 242). In the light of the impact of tremendous social changes since Meiji and post-war eras, such conceptual narcotics are understandable. Modernity, with its rationalization and secularization, and post-modernity, with its extreme individualization and skepticism of traditional authorities, also challenge religious institutions to respond. A decline in the number of engaged adherents (or *danka* 檀家), increasing numbers of deserted temples, and severe challenges to the survival of Buddhist institutions are all closely related to the process of general secularization in the modern world.

In a sense, Zen was also bound to be lured down from its ivory tower. Zen had also become popularized and democratized, and it needed to counterbalance the elitist and hierarchical Zen with a broader “umbrella Zen” (Borup 2008: 278ff). In a broader perspective, the huge discrepancy between Cool Zen and Funeral Zen (*sōshiki Bukkyō* 葬式仏教) is quite understandable.

This article will address the theme of popular Zen in Japan and the West. It will place the study of Zen, Buddhism and religion in a historical context, suggesting that both fields have undergone parallel and dialectic changes.² It concludes with reflections on the relation between one particular kind of popular culture, “Zen spirituality,” and its apparent lack of parallel in Japan.

² Parts of this article will appear in Borup forthcoming.

Elite Zen

Throughout history Buddhism has had its share of sectarian conflicts of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Institutional fragmentation is not the only sign of the diversity of Buddhisms. Such diversities have been analyzed through two-tiered models dividing great and little traditions, textual and practice religion, elite and folk Buddhism. While such stratified models may not capture the reality of lived religion, they do have analytical relevance. In fact, representations of monolithic narratives are mostly to be seen as ideological statements, something which has also often been the case with “Zen.” Playing with the frames of the Chinese system of hermeneutics, *panjiao*, in which Buddhist schools were placed hierarchically, Chan identified itself as a specific teaching, branding itself as going beyond such systems, pointing *directly* at truth. The patriarchal lineage has been the institutional blueprint of authority, “having been socially defined as Chan masters, what they teach has the performative power of being the truth” (Faure 1991: 22). The image of especially the Rinzai tradition of being aristocratic lives on, not least because of the existence of prestigious temples in Kyoto and Kamakura. Self-manufactured narratives of being true, traditional and “high culture” Buddhism are often reproduced in books and the media, giving (Rinzai) Zen a blueprint of authenticity.

Sectarian boundaries and authenticity claims have also been important in Japanese Zen narratives. These were inspired not least by modernity discourses with Western and Christian ideas of theological correctness. In their endeavor to transform dark images of an antiquarian folk religion that had subsequently been persecuted, “spiritual intellectuals” (*reiseiteki chishikijin* 靈性的知識人) managed to shape a rationalized and spiritualized version of Buddhism that catered to an internationally minded elite in both Japan and the West. The “Protestant Buddhism” of Sri Lanka had its counterpart in “Protestant Zen” (Sharf 1995) in Japan. “Pure Zen” (*junsui Zen* 純粹禪) became the mantra of a textualized universal philosophy, psychology, science and theology. And it became the ideal of the unmediated experience so much valued in nineteenth century psychologization of religion. Not least the writings of D.T. Suzuki and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi helped construct the image of Zen as an expression of Japanese fine culture (e.g., the tea ceremony, martial arts, gardens, calligraphy) and in general the spiritual soul of Japaneseness. While *junsui Zen* was primarily an elitist construct for an elite segment, *Zen bunka* 禪文化 or *taishū Zen* 大衆禪 were invented traditions with a broader appeal, both Japanizing Zen and Zen-izing Japan.

Zen as an elite practice and culture was simultaneously transferred to a universal spirit, available to the serious and cultivated seeker. Through networks of an international elite, Zen came to the West first as inspirational food for thought and later as a practice to be embraced by practitioners. Spiritual seekers, thinkers, artists, avant-garde poets, counter-culture beatniks and ecologically and socially engaged activists from the well-educated middle class have used Zen as an inspiring way to gain insight and improve performance. Among Western scholars, Zen has long been a signifier of elite religion. Zen koans, Zen stories and Zen meditation have been interpreted within the frames of spirituality, mysticism, philosophy and psychology, often

placed at the top of an implicit evolutionary perspective or going beyond any comparison. As a concept that is used, elaborated on and consumed primarily by a cultural elite, “Zen” carries a large amount of symbolic capital.

The “Suzuki effect” (Faure 1993) has not only had a large impact on Western practitioners and scholars of Zen, but also played an important role in Japan. Not least among Buddhist scholars, Suzuki still stands out as a unique personality. As a lived religion, Suzuki Zen is primarily a discourse thought and a tradition practiced by a small number of people. Culturally, Zen has been used to manufacture Zen gardens and martial arts (*kyūdō*) in Japan (Yamada 2009). What is interesting is that “Zen-izing” such fields was largely due to inspiration from thinkers and writers such as D.T. Suzuki, E. Herrigel and others, who had a very specific view of and interest in such spiritualized Zen. The Japanese were in general influenced by such books (Herrigel was something all Japanese should read, Yamada 2009: 239); but Zen as a Western construct was also accepted in Japan (Yamada 2009: 241). The logic of such “shots in the dark” survives in popular literature today in the West, and occasionally in Japan, mostly through English or translated books. A title like *Kyoto: City of Zen* (Clancy and Simmons 2013) is a typical Western book associating a tourist destination with a spiritual brand image.

Whereas the Japanese lay Zen and the imported, organized Zen in the West have mainly been democratized elite Zen, Westernized Zen in a broader sense can be termed “popular.” It has been commodified and manufactured beyond religious frames, it has reached a broader segment, and it has to a large extent cut off its ties to the Buddhist origins and elite tradition.³ Elite Buddhist Zen has become popular, new age Zen. Pure Zen has become hybrid Zen.

From Ideal Zen to Real Zen in the Academy

When Sharf described Sanbō Kyōdan as a new religious movement (Sharf 1995), he situated this group in historically particularistic frames, assuming a distinction between traditional Zen and a modern, popularized version of Zen. As such, he also signaled a new research tradition, in particular among American scholars from the early 1990s, which deconstructed former elitist approaches to Japanese Zen and Buddhism. “Cold realism eliminates dismissive misapprehension” is one of John McRae’s “rules of Zen studies” (McRae 2004: xx), which is a relatively long way from the romantic ideas of spiritual experiences. Former paradigms in religious studies focusing almost exclusively on elite classical texts, on theological systems and on great traditions in which folk and popular practices have been looked upon as deviant from the true sources have been supplemented with a broader focus on ritual practice, discourses, folk and little traditions, and hybrid manifestations of lived religion.

³ Even an American scholar of classical “elite Zen” has joined the group of authors using Zen as a philosophy and technique for managers and white collar workers (Heine 2005).

“Popular” in this sense does not only mean that contemporary consumer culture or symbols from one domain (e.g., religion) are used in general popular culture. Popular religion also means the social frame in which official religion becomes accessible and used beyond the constraints of official, theological, elitist systems and discourses. As such, popular religion understood as “lived religion” or “culture religion” in a sense has been the “default religion” of most people in most places throughout history, and elitist doctrinalized, textualized and institutionalized religion the outcome of a long construction process of authenticity and authority by and for the minority.⁴ A scholarly tradition within the study of religion transcending social, economic and power-related aspects in a hermeneutics of understanding is important, but in the study of lived religion it is also reductionist, not least because popular culture and religion “influences what people accept as plausible” (Partridge 2004: 123).

When Bernard Faure, the epitome of Chan/Zen deconstruction, suggested supplementing the hermeneutical and structuralist approach with a performative approach (Faure 1991, 1993), he not only contextualized Chan and Zen in their interrelatedness with the scholarly tradition. He also pointed out that Chan and Zen have always had folk and popular elements. Bodhidharma is also a folk religious object (Faure 2011), meditation is also a ritual (Faure 1991), Zen patriarchs are also thaumaturgs (Faure 1991), and Zen rituals are also magic (Faure 1991). Popular religion was thus not an external influence degrading or obstructing an original, pure Chan/Zen, but “actually emerged from within Chan itself” (Faure 1991: 306). Elite Zen can only be absolutely differentiated from popular Zen by rhetoric and theological reasoning.⁵

And what goes for Zen is characteristic of Japanese religion in general. Had it not been for their derogative connotations, Ian Reader and George Tanabe (1998) could have chosen “folk religion” or “popular religion” rather than “common religion” in analyzing *genze riyaku* as the most common denominator for all Japanese religion. Popular Zen, popular religion and popular culture have always been there. But since research traditions (and popular media culture itself) create the frames of discourse, elite Zen has been the standard narrative of previous Western scholarship. One interesting question to pursue is: to what extent is contemporary Zen in Japan also part of the field which in the West very often includes or is even identified with Zen, namely new spirituality?

⁴ Beyond the field of Zen, Buddhism and Japanese religion, such trends in acknowledging the importance of popular culture in the general study of religion are indicated by an increasing number of books and journals (e.g., *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*).

⁵ On Zen as a living religion, see also Borup 2008, on Zen and folk local folk rituals, see Borup 2008, pp. 234–45.

Japanese Popular Zen and Spiritualized Zen?

In a global world, it could be assumed that Westernized Zen will not remain culturally bound. If it is true that “Japan has become too westernized to de-westernize and Asianize” (Kamiya in Antoni 2002: 26), could we expect a post-modern version of the so-called “pizza effect,” in which religious traditions are transformed and re-imported in the versions constructed abroad?

Within institutionalized Japanese Buddhism, changes have begun. In coping with the crises, it has been acknowledged that better branding is necessary, whether this includes Zen cafes, fashion shows, bars, mangas, karaoke or rock concerts. One recent event that underlines the necessity and significance of a socially engaged Buddhism has been the relief work by religious (and Buddhist) organizations related to the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, the impact of which has sometimes been referred to in the media as a contemporary “religion boom” and “Buddhism boom.” While Zen and other Buddhist schools approach social engagement to varying degrees, the relation between Zen and spirituality is somewhat less clear. “Spiritual Zen” in the West is almost an a priori proposition (“how can Zen *not* be spiritual?”), and a true representation of an elitist tradition that has been democratized and popularized. If (for reasons of analytical simplification) spirituality is understood as ideas and practices aiming at individual and inner purification and transformation, there are many examples of spirituality initiatives related to or based on Zen. Within the Rinzai and Sōtō Zen institutions there are many *zazen-kai* 座禅会 (meditation sessions) aimed at lay people, and lay groups such as Sanbō Kyōdan or Ningen Zen have made *zazen* for lay people their main activity. Beyond the Zen organizations, *zazen* has become part of spirituality practices and courses, such as those focusing on meditation and yoga.

One symptomatic example of an attempt to “spiritualize Zen” within such frames of contemporary and popular spirituality can be observed in one of the sub-temples of Myōshinji in Kyoto. Some years ago the residing priest opened his temple to outsiders, offering meditation, yoga classes and discussions of spirituality. In this way, he hoped to challenge and reverse the dark image of funeral Zen with a view to creating a more lively and spiritual Zen. Typically for such an approach, the priest drew his inspiration from his stay at an American university, and most people who come to the temple are not Japanese from his own congregation but spiritually interested foreigners. Such endeavors might seem Sisyphean. He is challenged not only by a long tradition of Japanese funeral Zen and *danka Zen*, but also by an organization that has an interest in maintaining the distinction between an elitist and a popular Zen, thus protecting the authority of clerical Zen (Borup 2008).

The question is whether such barriers themselves are challenged by other developments. While secularization has also been a major threat to organized religion in a Japanese context, the new and new new religions (*shin shin shūkyō* 新々宗教) have for decades been the alternatives both to traditional religion and to no religion. In recent years, spirituality beyond the frames of organized religion has also taken hold of many Japanese. The phrases “from salvation to spiritu-

ality” (Shimazono 2012) and “from secularism to spirituality” (Shimazono 2012: 6) designate a general tendency for the spiritual world (*seishin seikai* 精神世界) and spiritual movements (*shin reisei undō* 新靈性運動) to appeal especially to the youth culture.

It would be obvious to look for parallels in Japan to the Western correlation between Zen and an individualized, spiritual environment. It could be assumed that post-Aum dissatisfaction with organized religion and the increasing individualization also in Japan include Zen as spirituality in both institutionalized religion and new age spirituality—just as esoteric Buddhism has already been included and rediscovered in this world (Prohl 2002: 78, 89). The field of spirituality (*supirichuaru* スピリチュアル and *supirichuaritī* スピリチュアリテイ) is in many ways closely related to and inspired by American new age and contemporary Western spirituality. This is true of yoga, *feng shui* and other “Asian” concepts and practices—but interestingly it is not true of “Zen” and it is only partially true of Buddhism (Borup forthcoming). Zen and spirituality in Japan seem to be part of two narratives that are simply too dissimilar: the traditional religion of Japan and the spiritual tradition of (mainly) the West. Both the Zen institutions and the spirituality world have interests in not overlapping and being identified with each other (Borup forthcoming). Zen has always been both elitist and popular, with both hierarchical Zen and “umbrella Zen” being part of Japanese Zen Buddhism. But Zen in Japan as a practice, institution and concept is only popular and “spiritual” to a very limited extent in the sense typically applied to a general Western narrative. So this spiritualized and psychologized new age version of Zen mostly seems to be a Western invention. As such, this kind of new age Zen is particular, rather than universal.

This does not mean that elite Zen and “cultural Zen” in a longer perspective cannot also become mainstream and part of a spiritual market or of popular media culture. It might also be a possible future scenario that Zen will be part of more hybrid and global networks, becoming more mainstream and popular also in Japan, and that we will see a “secularization” of Zen, using cool Zen in brands, commercials and secular practices, just as yoga and mindfulness have been de-sacralized in the West. Such issues are naturally important for future research, not least in a new research field in which institutionalized, traditional religion (*kinsei shūkyō* 近世宗教) also needs to be approached in its contemporary and social contexts in Japan as well as globally.

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