

Whose Zen?

Zen Nationalism Revisited

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IN THE NINTH CHAPTER OF the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra* the householder Vimalakīrti asks the great assembly of bodhisattvas to explain how a bodhisattva enters the dharma-gate of nonduality. After listening to numerous bodhisattvas expound on the issue, Mañjuśrī challenges Vimalakīrti to offer his own response. Vimalakīrti, in what is clearly the climax of the scriptural narrative, remains utterly silent. Mañjuśrī, bodhisattva of wisdom, then offers the highest praise for Vimalakīrti's response, calling it "the true entry into the dharma-gate of nonduality."¹

But this is not the only time we are confronted with silence in this scripture. In chapter seven of the text, in the midst of a *mondō*-like exchange between a goddess and Śāriputra, the goddess asks: "How long has it been since the venerable elder was liberated?" Śāriputra meets the question with silence. When pushed by the goddess, Śāriputra explains that he remained silent because liberation is inexpressible. The goddess then reproaches him: there is no reason to favor silence over speech, she insists, since "words and speech have the nature of liberation."²

Why does silence indicate consummate wisdom in the one instance, and confusion in the other? The short answer is that in one case the respondent was Vimalakīrti, an incarnation of highest wisdom, while in the other case it

The paper entitled "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," which I presented to the symposium on which this volume is based, is to appear in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). An earlier version appeared in *History of Religions* 33/1 (1993): 1–43. I offer below some further reflections on the topic, stimulated by the often intense exchanges at the symposium.

¹ Kumārajīva trans., T.475: 14.551c.

² T.475: 14.548a. *Mondō* (問答) refers to a question-and-answer exchange between master and disciple aimed at testing understanding.

was Śāriputra, a “Hinayāna” disciple who is depicted as somewhat the fool in this polemical Mahāyāna text.³ One might call it a matter of credentials.

This issue, trivial as it might at first seem, is not unrelated to a set of Mahāyāna doctrinal formulations that revolve around the “two truths.” If there is ultimately no distinction between truth and falsehood, or between liberation and ignorance, how is the *saṃgha* to guarantee the viability of the institutions and teachings that are intended to bring liberation to all beings? How can one transmit the truth when the truth is precisely the realization that there is no “truth” to transmit? The stock Mādhyamika solution to this quandary consists of an appeal to two levels of truth—the contingent and the ultimate. The *contingent* distinction between ignorance and liberation is said to be a “means” (*upāya*) to bring ignorant folk to the realization that *ultimately* there is no distinction between bondage and liberation.

The advocates of Zen subitism (i.e., the “Southern orthodoxy” traditionally traced to Hui-neng) were skeptical of this ploy. How could a teaching that was predicated on a set of false distinctions ever bring one to a realization of the emptiness of all such distinctions? The Zen approach took the form of an uncompromising conceptual emphasis on “emptiness” within an institutional structure that gave pride of place to form. Virtually every facet of life in a Zen monastery was governed by strict rules of ritual decorum; the ritualization of daily life extended to even the most mundane of tasks such as cleaning one’s teeth or using the toilet.⁴ While the discursive content of the daily prayers and sūtra recitations, the abbot’s sermons, and the kōan collections reiterated *ad nauseam* the message that all form is empty, monks were subject to immediate and often harsh punishment for any breach of ritual protocol—a cogent reminder that emptiness was to be found precisely *with-in* form.

This dialectic between emptiness and form is readily illustrated in the notion of transmission. Zen was, of course, the school that sought to distin-

³ Some might object that while silence was a sublime response to a question concerning nonduality, it was not an appropriate reply to the question posed by the goddess. This is beside the point. Given the characterization of Śāriputra in the text there is little doubt that if he offered silence in response to the question concerning nonduality, his silence would once again indicate “attachment to emptiness,” if not simple bafflement.

⁴ The rules governing such tasks can be found in Sung dynasty monastic codes such as the 禪苑清規 *Ch’an-yüan ch’ing-kuei*, the 校定清規 *Chiao-ting ch’ing-kuei*, and the 勅修百丈清規 *Ch’ih-hsiu pai-chang ch’ing-kuei*. These early texts served as models for all later Zen codes of conduct; see the discussion in T. Griffith Foulk, “Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice in Sung Ch’an Buddhism,” in *Religion and Society in T’ang and Sung China*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), 147–208. The earliest extant code, the 入衆日用 *Ju-chung jib-yung* (大日本續藏經 2.16.5) includes detailed instructions on dental hygiene and the use of the toilet.

guish itself from its rivals by its claim to represent an unbroken “mind-to-mind” transmission of the dharma from one authorized master to another. At the same time Zen texts insist that ultimately there is nothing to transmit, rendering transmission the quintessential “empty form.” The complex cluster of rites and practices that surrounded the notion of transmission emerged as one of the defining characteristics of the Zen school. Only those who were formally received into the lineage of patriarchs through a ceremony known as “transmission of the dharma” (傳法 *denbō*) or receipt of the “seal of transmission” (印可 *inka*) were accorded the authority to pass on the dharma to others. Once a monk was drafted into the legion of patriarchs his sermons would be dutifully recorded for later study, his portraits produced in numbers to serve as objects of worship, and his bodily remains preserved as sacred relics imbued with miraculous powers.⁵ While the patriarch was expected to preside over a number of ceremonial events in which he ritually made manifest his “enlightenment,” he had at his disposal a host of conventional rhetorical gestures that served to denote his freedom from social, ritual, and institutional conventions. These gestures were not mere ploys; they were acquired through years of intense monastic study and discipline. Only when a monk had come to embody the full range of Zen ceremonial and rhetorical forms would he be deemed qualified to assume the role of patriarch, effectively rendering him, ex-officio, a living buddha.

The latter point is often misunderstood. According to certain popular conceptions, certification was granted to a disciple only after he could demonstrate that he had attained an authentic experience of awakening or *satori*. While we do find stories in the “recorded sayings collections” (語錄 *yü-lu*) that would seem to lend credence to this view, in point of fact certification had little if anything to do with the verification of any specific “religious experience.” Rather, it was typically given to those who had spent the requisite years mastering the elaborate scriptural corpus and ritual procedures necessary to perform the duties of abbot. Only after prolonged study under the strict guidance of seasoned monks could one be entrusted to wield the rhetorical sword of emptiness in a manner that upheld, rather than threatened, the long-term viability of the monastic institution. The difference between an authorized master speaking of the “emptiness of form” and a mere student was not so much a difference in their “spiritual experience,” or even in their manner of expression, but a difference in the official roles they played within the larger institutional context.

⁵ See Robert H. Sharf, “The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch’an Masters in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* 32/1 (1992): 1–31; and T. Griffith Foulk and Robert H. Sharf, “On the Ritual Use of Ch’an Portraiture in Medieval China,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 7 (1993/94): 149–219.

Modern lay students of Zen might find this concern with credentials and institutional stability a touch troubling; does it not contravene the very spirit of Zen “liberation”? In the popular imagination a master typically manifests his liberation in spontaneous and often antinomian behavior, accompanied by sudden shouts or inscrutable utterances. But we must be careful not to confuse pious mythology with institutional reality. After all, when it comes to “manifesting” or “transmitting” what is supposedly an ineffable dharma, in principle silence is no better than speech, a shout no better than a sūtra, antinomian antics no better than stately ceremony.⁶ In fact, traditional Zen monastic training did not countenance spontaneous outbursts, but rather taught forms of speech and action that ritually *denoted* spontaneity and freedom. As in the case of Vimalakīrti and Śāriputra, the denotative force of Zen activity depends largely on how the activity is “framed,” i.e., the social role of the protagonist and the ritual context in which his performance takes place. Understandably, the Zen institution exercised considerable caution when it came to authorizing a monk to assume the role of “living buddha.”

If the importance of credentials, of institutional sanction, or of traditional authority in Zen comes as a surprise, it may be due in part to the fact that so many of those responsible for popularizing Zen in the twentieth century lacked formal institutional sanction themselves. D. T. Suzuki, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao, to name but a few, all lacked formal transmission in a Zen lineage, and their intellectualized Zen is often held in suspicion by Zen traditionalists. We should be cautious before uncritically accepting their claim that Zen is some sort of nonsectarian spiritual gnosis, for such a claim is clearly self-serving: by insisting that Zen is a way of experiencing the world, rather than a complex form of Buddhist monastic practice, these Japanese intellectuals effectively circumvent the question of their own authority to speak on behalf of Zen. But there is something more pernicious at work here than the attempt of a few “outsiders” to appropriate the authority of the tradition, for in insisting that Zen could be, and indeed should be, distinguished from its monastic “trappings” these writers effectively severed Zen’s links to traditional Buddhist soteriological, cosmological, and ethical concerns. Once wrenched from its institutional and ethical context, this free-floating Zen could be used to lend spiritual legitimacy to a host of contemporary social,

⁶ This dilemma is explored in a number of Zen kōan, such as case 5 of the 無門關 *Wu-men kuan*, Hsiang-yen’s “Man up a tree” (T.2005: 48.293c2–4). A man holding onto a branch of a tree by his teeth is asked by a passerby: “Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?” We know, of course, that Bodhidharma went to China to transmit the dharma. But should the man up the tree say so he runs the risk of reifying a “dharma” that could be transmitted. Indeed, to say anything at all will send him plunging to his death. If he remains silent, however, he forsakes the bodhisattva path, abrogating his responsibility to transmit the dharma to all beings.

philosophical, and political movements, from dadaism to Kyoto philosophy, from new-age hedonism to fascism. Thus before reflecting on the question of “Zen and nationalism” we must look carefully at just what sort of Zen we are talking about.

ZEN AS A TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONSTRUCT

The popular “lay” image of Zen, notably the notion that Zen refers not to a specific school of Buddhism but rather to a mystical or spiritual gnosis that transcends sectarian boundaries, is largely a twentieth-century construct. Beginning with the persecution of Buddhism in the early Meiji (廃仏毀釈 *haibutsu kishaku*) Zen apologists have been forced to respond to secular and empiricist critiques of religion in general, and to Japanese nativist critiques of Buddhism as a “foreign funerary cult” in particular. In response, partisans of Zen drew upon Western philosophical and theological strategies in their attempt to adapt their faith to the modern age. As I have discussed this phenomenon in detail elsewhere, I will limit myself here to a brief overview, concentrating not so much on the historical evolution of contemporary Zen rhetoric, but rather on its underlying logical structure.⁷ For heuristic purposes I have analyzed this structure in terms of four conceptual stages.

The first stage involves positing a distinction between the “essence” of a religious tradition and its “cultural manifestations.” According to this view, while the cultural manifestations of a religion are invariably shaped by social, institutional, and economic contingencies, the essence is an ahistorical truth logically prior to, and thus unsullied by, the cultural forms through which it is made known. Modern scholarship has effectively naturalized this somewhat Platonic distinction between timeless essence and localized manifestation—we tend to forget that the modern version of this distinction is part of a theological enterprise with roots firmly in reformation Europe. This apologetic discourse effectively exonerates religion from crimes committed in its name; the “spiritual essence” of a tradition remains forever untainted by the shortcomings of church or clergy. Thus Japanese Buddhist intellectuals in the Meiji were able to argue that the corruption and degeneracy of the Tokugawa Buddhist establishment in no way impugned the spiritual heart of Buddhism.

Closely associated with the distinction between “pure essence” and “contingent manifestation” is the notion of “pure origins”—the supposition that the original expression of a religious teaching most perfectly reflects its unvarying essence.⁸ The founding truth of a religion is, according to this

⁷ For a historically oriented analysis, see my “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism.”

⁸ See the discussion in chapter 1 of Bernard Faure’s *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

view, profoundly compromised and obscured as it becomes institutionalized under the control of a self-serving priesthood. The gradual but virtually inevitable decline of the teachings may, however, be punctuated by periodic revivals in which inspired leaders attempt to reform the institution through a renewed emphasis on the “original teachings.”

This notion of spiritual decline is not, of course, new; structurally analogous versions include the biblical genesis narrative, the Buddhist notion of the “decline of the dharma,” psychological theories of ego development that view emergence into adulthood as a “descent from grace,” and so on. The prevalence and seductiveness of this myth may account in part for the preoccupation among scholars of religion with “origins,” despite the fact that the identification of an “origin” is always somewhat arbitrary and therefore suspect. Scholars must be cautious lest the ideological and apologetic dimensions of the “fall narrative” come to compromise their work; historical efforts to reconstruct the life of “the founder,” his disciples, and his teachings, for example, often contribute to an academic discourse that tacitly deprecates or disenfranchises later doctrinal or institutional developments.⁹ This in turn lends historical credibility to the apologetic distinction drawn between the “essence” of a tradition—the source from which a tradition springs—and the cultural forms through which it is made known.

The second stage in the construction of modern Zen rhetoric consists in identifying the essence as a type of “experience.” The heart of Zen thus lies not in its ethical principles, its communal and ritual practices, or its doctrinal teachings, but rather in a private, veridical, often momentary “state of consciousness.” I have demonstrated elsewhere that the emphasis on experience in modern Japanese renderings of Zen can be traced directly back to Western writings on religion and psychology, notably the works of William James.¹⁰ In privileging experience the Japanese, like their Western mentors, sought to naturalize the category “religion”—if religious traditions were predicated upon an ineffable, noetic, mystical state of consciousness, then they could not be rejected as mere superstition, infantile wish-fulfillment, or collective hysteria. At the same time, by construing the core of religion in general, and Zen in particular, as a subjective experience, religion was rendered immune to rationalist, positivist, or empiricist critiques. Apologists could then argue that modern scientific rationality was not a viable alternative to religious modes of

⁹ It is not uncommon, for example, to find the growth of a tradition analyzed under the rubric of “institutionalization,” “popularization,” “syncretic accommodation,” and so on.

¹⁰ See “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism” and “Buddhism and the Rhetoric of Experience,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, November 22, 1992).

understanding; rather, the unchecked rise of “scientism” made the need to plumb the spiritual depths of the “great religions” all the more imperative.

The third stage consists in universalizing the “Zen experience” by denying that Zen is a school or sect of Buddhism *per se*, or even a “religion.” Rather, partisans would insist that the term “Zen” properly understood denotes the universal experiential core of all authentic religious traditions, both Eastern and Western. In short, Zen is truth itself, allowing those with Zen insight to claim a privileged perspective on all the great religious faiths.¹¹

The final stage comprises the claim that the universal religious experience of Zen is the ground of Japanese aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. Virtually all of the major Japanese artistic traditions are reinterpreted as expressions of the “Zen experience,” rendering Zen the metaphysical ground of Japanese culture itself. Given this exalted spiritual heritage, the Japanese are said to be culturally, if not racially, predisposed toward Zen insight; they have a deeper appreciation of the unity of man and nature, the oneness of life and death, and so on. This is in contradistinction to Western cultures, which are supposedly founded upon philosophical and aesthetic principles—dualism, individualism, materialism, utilitarianism, etc.—that are fundamentally at odds with Zen.

The claim that Zen is the foundation of Japanese culture has the felicitous result of rendering the Japanese spiritual experience both unique and universal at the same time. And it was no coincidence that the notion of Zen as the foundation for Japanese moral, aesthetic, and spiritual superiority emerged full force in the 1930s, just as the Japanese were preparing for imperial expansion in East and Southeast Asia. This use of Zen to provide a rationale for Japanese claims of uniqueness and cultural supremacy is, in brief, what I have called “Zen nationalism.”

ZEN AND NATIONALISM

By nationalism I mean an ideology or rhetoric that posits a nation, a state, or an ethnic or racial group, the members of which all participate equally in the glory of their “collective past.” The context of modern nationalism is the globalization of forms of knowledge and culture, since national self-consciousness presumes a plurality of “nation states” interacting with one another. Put simply, globalization allows an individual to imagine him or

¹¹ This is clearly the attitude of D. T. Suzuki, Nishitani Keiji, and Abe Masao, for example, each of whom tends to approach interfaith dialogue as an opportunity to expound not only on the meaning of Buddhism and Zen, but on the meaning of Christianity as well.

herself as a member of one geographically, historically, culturally, and/or ethnically distinct “nation” among many.

Globalization is largely coextensive with “Westernization.” The spread of modern Western “thought,” science, technology, and political and economic systems, coupled with the attendant scourge of industrialization and urbanization, tends to undermine indigenous resources for constructing personal and corporate identity. As traditional allegiances collapse, nationalist alternatives arise, promising to preserve or restore native political, social, and moral norms in the face of the threat of foreign cultural hegemony. Ironically, nationalist discourse cannot escape the ground from which it grew: nationalism is very much the product of modernity and the modernist episteme. That is to say, as nationalist representations of self are inevitably constructed in dialectical tension with the foreign “other,” the nationalist promise to restore cultural “purity” is always necessarily empty. Even in the case of so-called ethnic nationalisms, only by coming to see oneself through the eyes of the imagined other does one’s own “ethnicity” become self-conscious.

It should now be evident that the issue is not whether Zen is “inherently nationalistic,” since the particular notions of “Zen” and “nationalism” invoked here are both very much contemporary constructs.¹² Zen, like any other school of Buddhism, has had a long history of allying itself with state interests, resisting the state only when its own material interests were at stake. Moreover, Zen has had to reinvent itself repeatedly in the face of shifting political, social, and economic circumstances. What is new in the contemporary situation is the global or pluralist context, which presents a tremendous challenge to the survival of *any* religious system.

The Zen of Suzuki and his intellectual cohorts represents one of the more compelling attempts to have one’s cake and eat it, too. Despite his romantic streak, Suzuki was very much a modern, insisting that his Zen was fully compatible with rational thought and scientific progress. But at the same time Suzuki, who spent many years in the West, recognized the dangers of Western cultural imperialism (or “Orientalism”) entailed in the modernist project. Thus while Suzuki’s Zen claimed a privileged perspective that transcended cultural difference, it was at the same time contrived as the antithesis of everything Suzuki found most deplorable about the West.

The *nihonjinron* (日本人論) polemic in Suzuki’s work—the grotesque caricatures of “East” versus “West”—is no doubt the most egregiously inane manifestation of his nationalist leanings. We read repeatedly that the “West” is materialistic, the “East” spiritual, that the West is aggressive and imperial-

¹² Besides, religion is as good a rubric for the construction of national identity as is race, language, culture, or what have you, none of which are “inherently” nationalistic.

istic, while the East extols nonviolence and harmony, that the West values rationality, the East intuitive wisdom, that the West is dualistic, the East monistic, and that while the West is individualistic, setting man apart from nature, the East is communalistic, viewing man as one with nature.¹³ In short, his image of the East in general, and Japan in particular, is little more than a romantic inversion of Japanese negative stereotypes of the West.

The relationship of Japan to the rest of Asia in the writings of the Zen apologists is considerably more complex than the simple antinomy of East and West. Even the staunchest of the Japanese Zen nativists could not ignore the fact that Buddhism was a product of India, and Zen a product of China. Suzuki, himself a capable scholar of Indian and Chinese Buddhism, struggled with this issue, but never relinquished his cultural chauvinism. Thus Suzuki would argue that Japanese “spirituality” is a more developed or refined form of a pan-Asian spiritual ethos, and while this ethos is linked with Buddhism, it was not until Chinese Ch’an met the samurai culture of the Kamakura period that it would attain its consummate form in Japanese Zen. This theory allowed Suzuki to claim that only in Japan was Asian spirituality fully realized.¹⁴

More to the point was Suzuki’s claim (and the claim of many of those who followed) that the Chinese manifestation of this spirituality, i.e., Ch’an Buddhism, died an early death on the continent, and that pure Zen survives today only in Japan. Specifically, we read that Chinese Buddhism ceased to develop after the Sung dynasty—i.e., immediately after Japan assumed the mantle of Zen—and that post-Sung Ch’an is irredeemably tainted by its “syncretism.” The Ōbaku (黄檗) school of Zen, a form of Ming Ch’an transplanted to Japan in the seventeenth century, is considered representative of

¹³ A single example should suffice here. After an extended comparison of a single poem by Tennyson, which Suzuki takes as representative of the “West,” and one by Bashō, representative of the “East,” Suzuki summarizes his findings as follows: “The Western mind is: analytical, discriminative, differential, inductive, individualistic, intellectual, objective, scientific, generalizing, conceptual, schematic, impersonal, legalistic, organizing, power-wielding, self-assertive, disposed to impose its will upon others, etc. Against these Western traits those of the East can be characterized as follows: synthetic, totalizing, integrative, nondiscriminative, deductive, nonsystematic, nondogmatic, intuitive (rather, affective), nondiscursive, subjective, spiritually individualistic and socially groupminded, etc.” (D. T. Suzuki, “Lectures on Zen Buddhism,” in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* by D. T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm, and Richard De Martino [New York: Grove Press, 1963], 5).

¹⁴ See, for example, the extended treatment in Suzuki’s 日本的靈性 (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1944; English trans. by Norman Waddell as *Japanese Spirituality* [Tokyo: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and Japanese Ministry of Education, 1972]); see also my discussion in “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism.”

late Chinese Buddhism—it is commonly regarded as a sort of second-rate Zen compromised by its incorporation of Pure Land elements.

In fact, Chinese Buddhism continued to play a dynamic role in China up until the modern period. The oft-repeated allegation that post-Sung Ch’an had become sterile and corrupt is little more than an uncritical rehearsal of the anti-Ōbaku polemics of the Tokugawa period. The sudden appearance of eminent Chinese Ch’an masters in seventeenth-century Japan provoked a defensive and sometimes hostile reaction from Rinzai quarters. The Rinzai monks responded by touting the “purity” of Japanese Rinzai, in contradistinction to the admixture of Zen and Pure Land being propagated by the Chinese émigrés. This was, of course, mere sectarian polemics: Rinzai Zen in Japan had been thoroughly “Japanized” by the Tokugawa period, growing steadily more distant from its Chinese origins. In particular, Japanese religious sectarianism encouraged Rinzai to suppress the “Pure Land” aspects of its practice in order to distance itself from its Jōdoshū and Shinshū rivals. There was, however, no Pure Land “school” in China; Pure Land was a ubiquitous feature of Chinese Buddhism, and Chinese Ch’an included nominally “Pure Land” elements since the “golden age” of the T’ang. In most respects the Ōbaku school more accurately reflected T’ang and Sung Ch’an practice than either the Rinzai or Sōtō sects, and in the end Ōbaku proved to be a pivotal force in stimulating the Tokugawa revival of Zen.¹⁵

The polemical intent behind the modern Zen nativists’ rendering of East Asian Buddhist history, indebted as it was to Tokugawa anti-Chinese polemics, is plain: while the strength of the West might lie in its superior science and technology, the strength of Asia lay in its spirituality. Asians must return to their indigenous spiritual roots in order to recover the resources that would allow them to throw off the yoke of Western imperialism. Since the foundation of Asian spirituality was Zen, and since Zen survived in its “pure” form only in Japan, Japan had the right, and indeed the obligation, to assume the leadership of Asia and guide its disadvantaged brethren into the modern age.

Why, we might ask, would anyone in the West take this view of Zen seriously? To put it simply, the Japanese nativists’ discomfort with the seeming triumph of scientific reason, and their yearnings for a spiritual solution to the problems of modernity, mirrored our own. The notion of “pure Zen”—a

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of the anti-Ōbaku polemics in Tokugawa Japan see esp. Helen Baroni, “Buddhism in Early Tokugawa Japan: The Case of Ōbaku Zen and the Monk Tetsugen Dōkō” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1993). For a critique of the notion “Ch’an-Pure Land syncretism” see Robert H. Sharf, “The *Treasure Store Treatise (Pao-tsang lun)* and the Sinification of Buddhism in Eighth-Century China” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1991), chapter 2.

pan-cultural religious experience unsullied by institutional, social, and historical contingencies—would be attractive precisely because it held out the possibility of an alternative to the godless and indifferent anomic universe bequeathed by the Western Enlightenment, yet demanded neither blind faith nor institutional allegiance. This reconstructed Zen offered an intellectually reputable escape from the epistemological anxiety of historicism and pluralism.

But impatience with plurality and uncertainty in the intellectual realm can lead all too readily to impatience with plurality and uncertainty in the realm of politics. It may not be mere coincidence that a surprising number of those who saw Zen as a solution to spiritual anxiety were drawn to authoritarian or totalitarian solutions to social and political unrest. In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt has commented on the “exasperation” we sometimes feel when confronted with the fact that Plato and Heidegger were drawn to “tyrants and Führers.” Arendt suggests that this may be more than happenstance; it might in fact attest to a *déformation professionnelle*: “For the attraction to the tyrannical can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers (Kant is the great exception). And if this tendency is not demonstrable in what they did, that is only because very few of them were prepared to go beyond ‘the faculty of wondering at the simple’ and to ‘accept this wondering as their abode.’”¹⁶ It may well be that the apostles of “pure Zen,” accepting wondering as their abode, fell prey to this *déformation professionnelle*: they yearned to realize in the world of human affairs the “perfection” they found in their Zen.

The purveyors of Zen insight would like to expurgate this gap between the world of human affairs and the world of Zen through rhetorical fiat. They blithely cite Jōshū’s injunction to “wash your bowls,”¹⁷ and insist that true Zen is to be found in the midst of daily activity—in “chopping wood and carrying water.” But this seemingly benign exaltation of everyday life is achieved through the leveling gaze of “enlightenment”—the totalizing (non)perspective of “absolute nothingness.” (Note that the examples of “daily activities” invariably recall the tranquil existence of a medieval forest monastery, rather than the unrelenting technologized chaos of modern urban life.)

While this intellectualized Zen avers to leave things just as they are, in fact it utterly emasculates the “other,” eliminating the possibility for real dialogue or external critique. In the end, Zen’s response to plurality is a strategic retreat to “the still point of the turning world,” which effaces alterity in

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” in Michael Murray, ed., *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), 293–303.

¹⁷ See case 7 of the *Wu-men kuan* (T.2005: 48.293c26–29).

the name of an experientially vibrant but politically ominous “nonduality.” I fully concur with Jan Van Bragt’s invocation of Emmanuel Lévinas in this regard: “this alleged integration [of self and Other] is cruelty and injustice.”¹⁸

In conclusion I would remind the reader that this Zen is not Zen at all, at least not the Zen practiced by the “masters of old.” Those with a monastery to run, disciples to train, gods and emperors to appease, could not, when confronted with difficult moral and political questions, afford to shroud themselves in the cloak of “absolute nothingness.” They knew that in order to keep the monastery economically viable the monks had to maintain, at least in public, certain standards of moral conduct and ritual propriety elaborately prescribed in the monastic codes. This does not mean that a medieval Zen abbot would have taken what *we* believe to be the moral high ground on the issue of Japanese imperialist aggression during the first half of the twentieth century. The real question, as I see it, is why we would expect him to.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 52; see also the reference at the conclusion of Jan Van Bragt’s essay in this volume, page 254.