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Not Buying into Words and Letters: Zen, Ideology, and Prophetic Critique

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Christopher Ives *

Abstract

Judging from the active participation of Zen leaders and institutions in modern Japanese imperialism, one might conclude that by its very nature Zen succumbs easily to ideological co-optation. Several facets of Zen epistemology and institutional history support this conclusion. At the same time, a close examination of Zen theory and praxis indicates that the tradition does possess resources for resisting dominant ideologies and engaging in ideology critique.

D. T. Suzuki once proclaimed that Zen is "extremely flexible in adapting itself to almost any philosophy and moral doctrine" and "may be found wedded to anarchism or fascism, communism or democracy, atheism or idealism, or any political or economic dogmatism" (1973:63). Scholars have recently delineated how, in the midst of Japan's expansionist imperialism, Zen exhibited that flexibility in "adapting itself" and becoming "wedded" to the reigning imperial ideology. And for all of its rhetoric about "not relying on words and letters" and functioning compassionately as a politically detached, iconoclastic religion, Zen has generally failed to criticize ideologies—and specific social and political conditions—that stand in tension with core Buddhist values.

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Several facets of Zen may account for its ideological co-optation before and during WWII. Since its full introduction to Japan in the late twelfth century, Zen has been highly embedded in Japanese society and maintained a symbiotic relationship with those in power. This enmeshment has been exacerbated by a religious epistemology centered on "becoming one with things" (*narikiru*),¹ the doctrines of no-soul (*muga*) and indebtedness (*on*), and Zen appropriation of Confucian social ethics, with all the emphasis on hierarchy, loyalty, and obedience. Cognizant of these factors, postwar Zen ethicist Ichikawa Hakugen argues that Zen has generally remained stuck in its contemplative peace of mind (*anjin*), in its "elite intuition that formerly directed actions in the face-to-face relations in medieval villages" (1992:457).

Despite the historical record, Zen and the larger Buddhist tradition of which it is part do offer resources for avoiding co-optation and responding to dominant ideologies, and in recent decades Buddhist ethicists have started drawing from these resources to engage in ideology critique. Arguably, the *criticism* of those ideologies and Zen entanglement in them is the prolegomenon to the *construction* of a rigorous Zen social ethic.

For the sake of this article, "ideology" can be defined as a system of representations that serves the interests of a group.² Ideologies hinder our ability to see reality clearly, for they usually distort or obscure certain things. They may portray certain values, practices, and institutions—and perhaps even the ideology itself—as archaic,³ or as natural, in the sense of being rooted in nature and hence inevitable.⁴ The representations comprising an ideology come to appear self-evident and commonsensical.⁵ Further, ideologies tend to reify certain things. They also function to shape and control people; in particular, they unify people, offering a sense of identity in opposition to other groups or conditions perceived negatively. Finally, though never monolithic or unchanging, ideologies are conveyed by various practices, institutions, and media, all of which are inscribed by power relations.

Buddhist and especially Zen analyses of suffering focus on dimensions of human psychology that parallel these facets of ideology. Much of the

historical Buddha's analysis of human suffering focuses on "views," in Pāli, *ditthi* (Skt. *dṛṣṭi*). Thai scholar-monk Ven. P. A. Payutto highlights the individual and social connotations of *ditthi* (2002:89):

This term covers all kinds of views on many different levels—our personal opinions and beliefs; the ideologies, religious and political views[,] espoused by groups; and the attitudes and worldviews held by whole cultures and societies.

Views . . . are "subjective" mental formations that inevitably condition events in "objective" reality. On a personal level, one's worldview affects the events of life. On a national level, political views and social mores condition society and the quality of day-to-day life.

The Buddha's particular concern was "wrong" views, ways of perceiving reality that run contrary to or obscure recognition of the Three Marks of Existence: suffering, impermanence, and the lack of any soul or unchanging core in things. Early Buddhism argues that wrong views are shaped by mental states that cause suffering, such as the Three Poisons of ignorance, greed, and ill-will.

In the traditional Buddhist scheme of the Eightfold Path, mindfulness and concentration foster awareness of and extrication from wrong views and detrimental mental states, thus cultivating insight into impermanence and the lack of any soul. More broadly, meditation serves to highlight and dissolve attachment to conceptual schemes that give one a sense of "self" and contribute to self-attachment, whether by describing oneself as right and good or by justifying one's self-interested judgments and actions. The Buddhist criticism of attachment to self-serving conceptualization is relevant to critiques of ideology for, as Buddhist ethicist Ken Jones has pointed out, "ideology is about clinging to ideas *for all one's worth*" and "ideologues take themselves *very seriously*" (2003:60, emphasis in original).

Drawing from earlier Buddhist critiques, Zen offers its own analysis of mental states and modes of experience that cause suffering. Historically, however, Zen has not extrapolated from its epistemological critique to

ideology critique, from its particular psychological analysis of the human ego to a socio-political analysis of the collective ego, or as Zen thinker David Loy has termed it, the "wego" (2003:48). In part because of this, Zen institutions historically have remained fully embedded in East Asian societies, receiving patronage from ruling elites and accepting dominant social and political ideologies, especially Confucianism. Despite this institutional history, however, we do encounter Zen masters like Linji, who in the ninth century warned his students, "Don't be taken in by the deluded views of others" (Sasaki 1975:25).⁶ More broadly, Zen theory and praxis do provide resources for ideology critique.

First, Zen calls into question the binary thinking and dualistic mode of experience that is characteristic of most ideologies. The Third Patriarch Seng-can wrote, "To set up what you like against what you dislike, this is the disease of the mind" (Suzuki 1960:77), and "Abide not with dualism; carefully avoid pursuing it; as soon as you have right and wrong, confusion ensues and Mind is lost" (ibid:78). As Dōgen put it, "If the slightest dualistic thinking arises, you will lose your Buddha-mind" (Yokoi and Victoria 1976:45), and "Zazen is a practice beyond the subjective and objective worlds, beyond discriminating thinking" (ibid:46). This criticism and the accompanying meditative praxis undermine attachment to dualistic categories and subvert the sense of oneself as standing apart from the world, of self versus other or "us" versus "them." It was along these lines that modern Zen thinker Hisamatsu Shin'ichi criticized modern nation-states as egos writ large, setting themselves up in opposition to other nation-states, with all the dualistic characterization and judgment of the other that is seen in relations between self-interested egos.

In terms of ideology, the Zen critique of dualism points to a social ethic that keeps a vigilant eye out for strict binaries, for representations of the world as, for example, a confrontation if not battle between good people and evil-doers, between righteous believers and the Great Satan, between those who are "with us" and those who are "against us." Rejecting such essentialist, polarizing representations, a rigorous Zen ethic would

advocate, in their stead, sophisticated analysis of the complex causes of events like 9/11.

Zen psychological analysis and meditative discipline can also serve to unmask and uproot fear, ignorance, greed ("like"), and ill-will ("dislike"), to clarify how such detrimental mental states color our experience and give concrete shape to our idiosyncratic expressions of fundamental self-attachment. Zen loosens the grip of these "poisons" and the accompanying constructs seen, for example, when the mind conceptualizes the object of its ill-will as an "infidel" or "terrorist," fully deserving of one's aversion and hatred. Zen thinkers and activists have begun to direct their gaze on ideologies that exacerbate ill-will or deepen our greed, such as consumerism with its claims about how the indulgence of desires and the acquisition of wealth and possessions lead to happiness. The Zen religious critique can also help unmask the greed that permeates politics and attune us to signs of fear at the collective level and the impulse to act on that fear, evident after 9/11 when U.S. military actions seemed at least partly aimed at overcoming feelings of fear and vulnerability by reestablishing a *sense* of American invulnerability and power (while also smacking of vengeance).⁷

With an eye toward prodding its practitioners to, as Dōgen put it, "drop off body-mind," Zen also criticizes attachment to the anxious, fixated "self" that is epistemologically cut off from its objects of experience. This criticism extends to our attachment to mental constructs and conceptual schemes that prop up our sense of self and promote our interests. At the political level, this attachment manifests itself as tenacious adherence to ideologies. Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and others in the Tiep Hien Order respond to this type of attachment in their set of fourteen precepts, the first and second of which in part read (Thich Nhat Hanh 1998:17-18):

Aware of the suffering caused by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones . . .

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice non-

attachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth . . .

Grounded in the doctrines of interrelational arising (Skt. *pratītya-samutpāda*) and emptiness (Skt. *sūnyatā*), Zen further criticizes fixed, substantialist constructs, especially concerning the self and objects of attachment. Of course, this criticism is not unique to Zen, for the crux of the ignorance (Skt. *avidyā*) that works in concert with clinging to cause suffering is our tendency to perceive the world as constituted by separate, substantial, enduring things. (Ken Jones notes how even ideas can be reified: "ideology solidifies the objectivity of mere ideas into subjectively freighted articles of faith shaped to serve the believer's aspiration" (2003:59).) The anti-substantialist orientation of Zen and other forms of Buddhism can prove useful in ideology critique insofar as it sensitizes us to the kind of reification that characterizes ideological representation, whether of "evil" as a substantial force operating in the world, or "our" inherently good, innocent, and peaceful nature as opposed to "their" inherently evil, fanatical, and violent nature. I have written elsewhere about how this reification of an "us" and a "them" as inherently "good" and "evil" exacerbates the dehumanization and demonization of enemies (Ives 2003). Representing them as ontologically evil, and perhaps insane if not bestial ("Mad Dog" Khaddafi), leaves us one step away from succumbing to exterminationist impulses.

Zen theory and practice, at least in principle, help dissolve not only attachment to oneself and reified constructs and objects, but the fearful desire to be certain about things and to be right, a variety of clinging usually accompanied by a fair measure of self-righteousness or arrogance. The epistemological openness of Zen, the admonition to cultivate "no mind" (*mushin*) or what some have termed "I don't know mind," promotes the ability to sit with ambiguity, to resist the desire to be certain and right. This can prove useful in avoiding a tendency Ken Jones has mapped: "Dogmatism solidifies into ideology. Ideology generates a telltale predictability in the literature of 'the movement.' Righteousness leads to the antithetical

bonding of 'our movement,' providing its members with a reassuring belongingness identity, relieved of the ambivalence, uncertainty, and other disturbing challenges encountered on more exposed spiritual paths" (Jones 2003:229). In a sense, Zen practice can foster epistemological humility. At the socio-political level Zen might advocate cultivating the virtue of humility⁸ and engaging in criticism of the arrogance often exhibited by elites, zealous fundamentalists, and dominant superpowers.

Zen practice centers on the act of "just sitting," remaining motionless with no distractions, observing what arises in one's mind and, by extension, the surrounding world, seeing and feeling more vividly. This practice ostensibly generates clearer perception of actuality, increasingly free from self-interest and bias, as conveyed by Zen textual references to seeing things in their "suchness" or "just as they are" (*sono-mama*). In this way Zen challenges the denial, distraction, and numbing seen in complacent acceptance of reigning ideologies, whether consumerism, representations of the United States as innocent and backed by God, or representations of the United States as a satanic force out to destroy Islam. This points to a Zen "prophetic" critique that would, for example, prod Americans to recognize unpleasant truths, such as how we have deployed rhetoric of protecting or spreading freedom and democracy to obscure and rationalize our pursuit of economic gain and in this and other ways have denied the uglier dimensions of our foreign policy and international business dealings. This type of critique would also prod us to discern how corporate control of mainstream media fosters "ignor-ance" of certain conditions and issues. In short, a rigorous Zen social ethic would call for the sustained praxis of criticizing representations, practices, and institutions that hinder our ability to see the world clearly, or at least as clearly as possible.

In this article I have sketched how Zen theory and practice, especially concerning mental states, conceptualization, and modes of experience, provide resources for critiquing ideologies and overcoming entanglement in ideology. I am not claiming, however, that one can easily extrapolate from psycho-religious analysis and practice to political analysis and praxis. Nor, of course, am I arguing that Zen can provide an omniscient standpoint from

which its adherents can perceive socio-political reality free from all perspectival interpretation and value judgment. Recognizing that no critiques are free of ideologies of their own, Zen critics must acknowledge their own political and economic positioning.

More importantly, although much of what I have sketched here concerns the significant ways in which Zen criticizes "wrong" views and can help unmask ideology and extricate us from it, a social ethic must also engage in the constructive work of articulating what might be "right" views or the "right" society. At the level of religious analysis, traditional Buddhism construes right views as insight into impermanence, interrelatedness, and no-soul, and Zen might emphasize insight into non-duality and suchness, but a Zen social ethic must take a step further and articulate what Zen might regard as right views—and right practices and institutions—in the social, political, and economic arenas. According to Ichikawa, the tradition needs to appropriate "the activity of the experimental intellect and the power of analysis and synthesis as a way to grasp, clarify, and solve problems" (1992:457). That is to say, it needs to find a proper place for critical analysis, judgment, and advocacy. On this basis Zen thinkers can begin to formulate a social ethic that is more faithful to core Buddhist values than the traditional *de facto* systems of Zen social ethics with all of the Confucian overlay and symbiosis with the state.

Most Japanese Zen leaders, however, feel little impetus to take this step, for their focus, as in the past, is on training in monasteries, performing rituals, administering temples, and, insofar as they engage in any kind of analysis, studying Zen texts. While they were alive, Ichikawa Hakugen and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi were exceptions to this rule, and at present Thich Nhat Hanh and several other "engaged" Zen Buddhists have started advancing arguments about what might constitute an optimal society and constructing, at least in broad strokes, formulations of Zen social ethics that may lead Zen in directions other than ideological co-optation and acceptance of the status quo.

Notes

¹ Or at least rhetoric about such a mode of experience.

² Ken Jones defines ideology as "a collectively held body of ideas that affirms the identity of the group that believes them at least as much as it provides a comprehensive explanation of society or some other phenomenon" (2003:59).

³ This often obscures the fact that the ideology or the specific values, practices, and institutions represented as archaic are actually a recent invention by a subgroup of society.

⁴ In some cases ideology represents things as rooted in a supernatural level of reality, as deriving from a divine source, and in this way ideology often plays a central role in legitimation. Whether claimed to be rooted in nature or the supernatural, ideology obscures the degree to which dominant values, practices, and institutions are human constructions.

⁵ When raising an alternative view, one may be branded as dumb, crazy, or "brain-washed" (as if a "clear headed" person would easily discern such "self-evident" facts as x, y, or z).

⁶ Translation adapted here. Granted, Linji was not necessarily talking about political views, but his admonition implies an overall stance of skepticism.

⁷ Zen thinker David Loy in particular has explored the social dimensions of detrimental mental states. See Loy (2003).

⁸ Zen ethics can benefit from an exploration of Iris Murdoch's approach to ethics, especially her reflections on humility.

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