

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 *samgha* 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.

