

TRACING THE RHETORIC OF CONTEMPORARY ZEN

DOGEN SANGHA AND THE MODERNIZATION OF JAPANESE ZEN BUDDHISM

IN THE LIGHT OF A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF A WEBLOG

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1. Introduction

It's not an exaggeration to say that nearly everyone reading this book has more knowledge about Zen than any random person you might meet in Japan.

—Brad Warner, in *Sex, Sin, and Zen* (2010)¹

In the minds of those living in the West, the word “Zen” conjures up an abundance of images. Some view Zen as a form of traditional East Asian spirituality, while others equate it with a universal philosophy accessible to all, and still others are familiar with Zen from brand names and interior decoration magazines. Dogen Sangha,² a recent movement within the sphere of Japanese Zen Buddhism, has added yet another image to this concoction—promoted in the Western hemisphere especially by its American Dharma heir Brad Warner in his popular books. Perhaps in part as an attempt to counter clichés of serenity and Oriental aesthetics, Warner associates Zen with counterculture and liberal thinking.

How is one to make sense of Zen in world popular culture, in which it takes all these varying shapes? A common approach would seem to be taking one of these shapes as “true Zen,” and reflecting on all others through notions associated with it. For a scholar of East Asian Studies, “true Zen” may be the Chan and Zen Buddhism of East Asian religious history, while for someone else it may simply imply a way of doing things—an interpretation promoted by popular books such as the classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.³ In this paper, I operate from a wider perspective. In this model, the contemporary culture of Zen is seen as a socio-historic construction made up of various bits and pieces interrelated to one another in different ways. To understand the significance of a particular element in the construction, one must know all the basic components—and see this element in relation to the construction as a whole.

One method for reconstructing the contemporary culture of Zen is found in the study of rhetoric. Rhetoric arises when differing views exist on an issue, and opposing parties seek to assert themselves by the use of language. By analyzing rhetoric, it is possible to

¹ Warner 2010, 238.

² Dogen Sangha is spelt in English without a macron; however, the romanization of the Japanese name contains a macron (*Dōgen sangha*). In this paper, I will follow the custom of writing Dogen Sangha without a macron when used as an English proper name, while romanizing Japanese script in revised Hepburn. All romanizations are italicized, save personal names. Furthermore, English titles of books, magazines, and weblogs are also italicized.

³ Pirsig, 1974.

trace a web of social interactions. When these interactions are contextualized in a socio-historic framework, members of the web can be identified. In this study, the point of departure is the modernization and internationalization of Japanese Zen Buddhism. After this basic framework has been introduced, a rhetorical analysis will be conducted on Dogen Sangha. The analysis will focus on a weblog, as new media is an arena Dogen Sangha leaders widely employ for proselytizing purposes—and therefore weblog text is representative of the language they use. Based on this analysis, an image of the contemporary culture of Zen can then be created by positioning Dogen Sangha within it. As stated above, having a view of this culture as a whole—as revealed by the rhetoric of its various components—is essential to understanding the many faces and languages Zen assumes in world popular culture.⁴

2. Rhetorical Analysis in Religious Studies

Rhetorical analysis is the study of human activity and its effects on social and symbolic order. It focuses on attempts to arouse in the listeners of a speech or readers of a text certain emotions, make them believe in and accept certain arguments and guide them to act in a certain manner.⁵ If the worldview of social constructionism is adopted—in the case of religious studies, that religious traditions are actively constructed through social interactions—the study of rhetoric becomes a key element in understanding historical developments within social organizations. It answers the question of what kinds of rhetorical devices influential religious figures and texts produced by them have employed to argue in

⁴ I have not come across any previous scholarly articles on Dogen Sangha. In analyzing the movement, I will be continuing a discussion initiated by Robert Sharf in 1995 in his incisive article *Sanbōkyōdan: Zen and the Way of the New Religions*. Sharf argues that *Sanbōkyōdan*, a Japan-based Zen organization which has been widely influential in the West—utilizing both rhetoric that was created during the modernization of Japanese Buddhism in the Meiji period and rhetoric typical to the Zen movement—conceptualized Zen in a radically new way. I will attach Dogen Sangha to this historical process of reconceptualizing Zen. Apart from Sharf, I have not found other articles tracing this process. There are, however, several articles on the modernization of Japanese Buddhism during the Meiji period (see for example Josephson 2006; Klautau 2008; Moriya 2005). When discussing Zen and commercial culture, and in recreating the field of contemporary Zen, I have also worked rather independently—although John McRae, for example, touches on the subject briefly in *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (2003, 101–102).

⁵ Sakaranaho 2001, 13–14. This definition is in line with Kenneth Burke, a prominent theorist—along with Chaim Perelman and Stephen Toulmin—of so-called “revived rhetoric,” referring to the study of rhetoric in the humanities and social studies since the mid-20th century. Burke focuses on the influential use of rhetoric, while Perelman and Toulmin look at what makes rhetoric convincing. The term “rhetoric” itself is derived from the Greek word *rhētorikê*, denoting the verbal skills of a public speaker. “Classical rhetoric” refers both to persuasive language and the rhetorical techniques used in speech (Sakaranaho 2001, 9–10).

favor of the viewpoints they have promoted. In other words, the study of rhetoric reveals how language has been used to shape the history of religions. It also sheds light on power-politics: whose arguments won and for what reasons.

Tuula Sakaranaho, professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Helsinki, has developed a heuristic model for rhetorical analysis based on theories on rhetoric by Kenneth Burke, Michael Billig, and Jonathan Potter. The model is founded on the principle of an “analytical double focus,” in which the use of language is analyzed as both explicit and implicit argumentation—an example of the latter being the counter-arguments always implied by explicit arguments. Implicit meaning-giving also occurs in the taking of certain notions for granted without attempting to clarify or explain them. They have become naturalized common agreements, which aim at to maintaining social order.⁶

The main concept in Sakaranaho’s model is “identification,” a key rhetorical process for persuading others. Dogen Sangha, for instance, identifies with a conception of Zen that sees *shikantaza* 只管打坐, or “just sitting,” meditation as the core practice of the Sōtō school of Zen. This identification can be detected from the way leading figures of Dogen Sangha argue in favor of committed, regular, and formal *shikantaza* practice. Rhetoric takes place when identification occurs together with its counterpart, “division”—a characteristic feature of conflict situations. Division, in this instance, takes the form of explicit criticism against all formal features of Zen practice other than *shikantaza*, such as monastic rituals. Division from conceptions of Zen that include such traditional aspects of monastic culture is also made implicitly apparent by a single-pointed focus on *shikantaza* as the only representative of formal Zen practice.⁷

Since nothing can be expressed verbally without the use of terms—and because people tend to utilize a specific vocabulary so as to reduce complexity into clarity—“terministic screens” are created by people through the selection of the terms they use. Terministic screens dictate where attention is directed. According to Kenneth Burke, terministic screens are made up of “God-terms,” used in individual reasoning as ultimate sources of explanation, and ideals aspired towards. In the model, religions are seen as terministic screens made up of God-terms. These screens provide a model for what reality is like, on

⁶ Sakaranaho 2001, 14, 21.

⁷ See section four of this paper for this and further analysis.

the one hand, and a model for what reality should be like, on the other.⁸ The analytical process is divided into the following three phases:

1) Framing the analysis. The framework depends on the research interest.⁹ The study at hand is cross-disciplinary, applying a method developed in religious studies to increase the understanding of phenomena traditionally researched in the field of Japanese studies—the modernization process of Japanese Zen Buddhism. Rhetorical analysis will therefore mainly be used as a means to articulate identifications and divisions made by Dogen Sangha in relation to other elements in the field of Zen. This information will prove useful when contextualizing Dogen Sangha within a larger socio-historic process.

2) Analysis of explicit argumentation—justification and criticism—present in the text. Special attention is paid to concepts central to the argumentation. By analyzing meaning-giving processes related to these God-terms it is possible to detect direct and indirect identifications and divisions.¹⁰ In this study, this stage will be performed by grouping identifications and divisions under three separate themes, specified in accompanying tables, together with explanations.

3) In the final stage, God-terms are used to reconstruct terministic screens, innate ways in which social reality is perceived.¹¹ Dogen Sangha's terministic screen will be briefly discussed at the end of the rhetorical analysis. The results of this analysis will then be used as the foundation for the religio-sociological discussion in the latter part of the paper.

3. Modernization of Japanese Zen Buddhism

3.1 The Meiji New Buddhist Movement

During the first half of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), the ruling military government, or bakufu, tried to insert itself into the decision-making processes of Buddhist institutions. However, new regulations were not always obeyed, prompting accusations of misconduct.¹² As the period approached its end, the notion was formed in Japanese Buddhist cir-

⁸ Sakaranaho 1998, 46–47.

⁹ Sakaranaho 2001, 15.

¹⁰ Sakaranaho 2001, 16.

¹¹ Sakaranaho 1998, 49; 2001, 16.

¹² Williams 2009, 41. Government control was especially heightened after the Purple Robe Incident (*shie chokkyo jiken* 紫衣勅許事件) of 1627, in which the bakufu stripped the imperially awarded ranks, titles, and

cles that early modern Buddhism was something degraded and decadent. Orion Klautau argues that the heterogeneity of Tokugawa Buddhism contributed to the development of criticism both within and between Buddhist schools. A common target of criticism was the clergy's disregard of precept-keeping, and there was a "movement for precept revival" (*kairitsu fukkō undō* 戒律復興運動).¹³

Along with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Buddhism—witnessing the rise of Shintō as state ideology, and being forced to face Christianity—had to reconsider its position in the new *status quo*. The Bureau of Kami Worship set up by the government sought to sever the state ties and privileges of Buddhist institutions, and to transfer their social functions to Shintō institutions. Local administrators frequently used force while implementing separation edicts.¹⁴ Some of these acts were part of the *haibutsu kishaku* 廃仏毀教, a nationwide anti-Buddhist campaign in the 1870s, which depicted the clergy as corrupt and hypocritical.¹⁵

Some clergy members did nothing, while others saw the situation as an opportunity to promote reforms. One reaction was to emphasize the contribution Buddhism—once its "evil customs" were purged—could make to the Japanese nation side-by-side with Shintō. Under this principle, leading figures of several Buddhist schools founded in 1868 the first supra-sectarian Buddhist association of modern Japan, the League of United Buddhist Schools (*Shoshū dōtoku kaimei* 諸宗同徳会盟). Eventually, it became normative to think that before the Restoration traditional Buddhists schools had been permeated by evil customs. Klautau claims this tendency to perceive the "current" form of Buddhism in need of reformation became part of the very fabric of the modernist concept of Buddhism. Another notion central to the discourse was the ideal of a "correct" form of Buddhism as the com-

purple robes of over one hundred and fifty clerics, overriding the authority of the imperial household in Kyoto. The incident marked a shift in power from the Kyoto court to the Edo bakufu (Williams 2009, 34). Criticism of "corrupt" priests is a constant in Japanese Buddhism, and can be dated at least to the Kamakura period (Klautau 2008, 268–269).

¹³ Klautau 2008, 269–270. It is commonly thought among scholars that a supra-sectarian and modernist concept of Buddhism was based on Buddhists responses to criticism that came from the outside (called *gohō-ron* 護法論, or "discourses in the defense of the Dharma"). Klautau, however, points out that the discourse on Buddhist degeneration continued through modernity as a rhetoric device utilized by Buddhists reformists themselves (Klautau 2008, 270).

¹⁴ Klautau 2008, 274–275.

¹⁵ See for example, Moriya 2005, 285; Sharf 1995, 434.

mon base of different schools, which Klautau believes laid the foundation for modern ideas of the “essence” of Buddhism.¹⁶

The Meiji New Buddhist Movement was made up of prominent figures in the Buddhist world who advocated radical reforms. Along with Shaku Unshō 釈雲照 (1827–1901) and Fukuda Gyōkai 福田行誠 (1809–1888)—whose reformation programs focused on removing what were perceived as evil customs—Hara Tanzan 原坦山 (1819–1892) is considered a central figure in the movement. Tanzan was one of the first Japanese Buddhists to emphasize empirism and experimentalism, and he proposed that Buddhism should be restructured through the adoption of Western and scientific ideas. Soon increasing amounts of Buddhists began to represent their ideas in Western philosophical terms. Inoue Enryō 井上円子 (1858–1919), who was introduced to Tanzan as a philosophy major, came into contact with a range of Western philosophers such as Descartes and Hegel. Like Tanzan, he emphasized that Buddhism should reassess itself through the categories of Western philosophy.¹⁷

During this period, the idealized image of Zen as “pure experience” was created, with scholars distinguishing between *kenshū-zen* 兼修禪 (Zen practice mixed with the teachings of *kenmitsu* Buddhism, the medieval Buddhist orthodoxy) and *junsui-zen* 純粹禪 (“Pure Zen,” introduced from China in the Song dynasty and “unmixed” with other teachings).¹⁸ One such scholar, Wada Ukiko, believed that while Pure Land Buddhism was responsible for the “objective development” of the Japanese people’s religious thought, Zen was responsible for its “subjective development.”

The above idea by Wada Ukiko was crucial to the development of Suzuki Daisetsu’s 鈴木大拙 (a.k.a. D. T. Suzuki, 1870–1966) reflections on Zen as an integral part of the Japanese cultural identity as a form of transcendent, individual spirituality.¹⁹ Suzuki is renowned in the West for his numerous books and articles written in English. He belonged to

¹⁶ Klautau 2008, 271, 274, 277, 279–280.

¹⁷ Klautau 2008, 280–281. In 1879, Tanzan became the first Lecturer on Buddhist Texts at the University of Tokyo (Klautau 2008, 280).

¹⁸ John McRae makes the interesting point that it was not until the Song dynasty (960–1279) that Chinese Chan Buddhism really took shape, reaching a “climax paradigm.” Due to this, previous events in Chan must be interpreted through the lens of its Song dynasty configuration (McRae 2003, 119–121). In other words, the “Pure Zen” that was introduced to Japan in the Song dynasty was as a matter of fact the end product of a long popularization and adaptation process that the Chan institution had gone through in China during the Tang (618–907) and early Song dynasties.

¹⁹ Klautau 2008, 285. Moriya Tomoe divides Suzuki’s presentation of religion into gradual phases of rationalism, social criticism, and non-political, individualistic spirituality (Moriya 2005, 292).

the generation of Buddhists born after the Restoration. Moriya Tomoe argues that a generational gap allowed those who had grown under the new paradigm of enlightenment and social progress to approach the “Other” of the West in a new fashion—presenting the role of religion as rational and scientific.²⁰

In 1899, a group of University-educated youngsters founded a lay-oriented Buddhist group called the Buddhist Puritan Society, which was later named the New Buddhist Society (*Shin Bukkyōto Dōshikai* 新仏教徒同志会). The society published the monthly journal *Shin Bukkyō* 新仏教 (“New Buddhism,” 1900–1915), which offered an opportunity, primarily for laity, to exchange ideas with other reform-minded people. Their mission statements included “sound Buddhist faith,” “radical reform of society,” “free discussion on Buddhism and other religions,” “extermination of all superstitions,” “not [recognizing] the necessity of preserving traditional religious systems and ceremonies,” and “rejection of all sorts of political protection.” The reformists also emphasized the distinction in religious practice between “inner mind” (*naisō* 内想) and “outward practice” (*gaiken* 外顕), the former of which was held in higher regard than the latter.²¹

Jason Ā. Josephson believes that the importation of the English term “religion” and its translation into Japanese as *shūkyō* 宗教 in the late 19th century also contributed to transforming the conventional definitions of Buddhism. Buddhist schools became “religious” institutions by emulating Christian structures, and as Buddhism began to be seen as a set of personal beliefs, an anti-superstition ideology was born. The form of Buddhism that resulted from these transformations attained legal and intellectual credibility but distanced itself from the actual practices of followers of Buddhism—resulting in an increasing dissonance between Buddhism as a “philosophical religion” and Buddhism as a lived practice.²²

The Meiji period saw the creation of Buddhist schools as Western-style religious institutions, attempts on behalf of the laity and scholars to mold Buddhism to philosophically suit a rationalistic and scientific worldview, and a division between practice and philosophy. The notions that there was something wrong with the “current” state of Buddhism and that there was a “correct” common base for different schools of Buddhism became constant features of the modernist conception of Buddhism. In the case of Zen, a fundamental

²⁰ Moriya 2005, 286.

²¹ Moriya 2005, 286–287.

²² Josephson 2006, 163–164.

distinction was made between “cultural accretions” and Zen as “pure experience.” An interpretation of Zen as essentially transcendent, transcultural, and individualistic spirituality became especially widespread in the West by the mid-20th century due to publications and other activities by charismatic English-speaking apologetics such as D. T. Suzuki.

3.2 *Sanbōkyōdan* and Modern Zen Refashioned

In the early 1990s, Robert Sharf—currently professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of California—conducted a research on the “image of Zen most familiar to students in the West,” in other words the so-called “Harada-Yasutani method.” While he had already come to the conclusion that the philosophical emphasis on spiritual experience by Zen teachers was in part influenced by Western sources—as explained in detail above—he now turned to the question of Zen practice.²³

Zen priest Yasutani Hakuun 安谷白雲 (1885–1973) severed his formal ties to the Sōtō institution—or *Sōtōshū* 曹洞宗—establishing in 1954 the independent lay organization *Sanbōkyōdan* 三宝教団, “Three Treasures Association.” Despite its relatively small size, *Sanbōkyōdan* has had a huge impact on Zen in the US, Europe, Australia and Southeast Asia.²⁴ In the US, numerous prominent figures in the Zen scene are tied to *Sanbōkyōdan*, including Maezumi Taizan, Philip Kapleau, Robert Aitken, and Eido Tai Shimano. Though these people eventually lost institutional affiliations with *Sanbōkyōdan*, they had all studied *kōan* 公案 (Zen riddles used in meditative practice) under Yasutani or his teacher, Harada Daiun 原田大雲 (1871–1961), and had been strongly influenced by their style of lay practice. In 1965, Philip Kapleau’s *The Three Pillars of Zen*—a practical guide to Zen meditation, or *zazen* 坐禪—was published, featuring Yasutani’s teachings.²⁵ According to the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, this book “ushered in the first wave of American *zazen* practitioners.”²⁶

²³ Sharf 1995, 418.

²⁴ Due to the marginal status of *Sanbōkyōdan* in Japan, however, Sharf remarks that modern Rinzai and Sōtō priests are generally indifferent to attacks by Yasutani and his followers against the clergy—as well as to the claim that *Sanbōkyōdan* alone preserves the authentic teachings of Zen (Sharf 1995, 419).

²⁵ Sharf 1995, 419, 425–426.

²⁶ From the back cover of the 35th anniversary edition of *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Kapleau 2000). With approximately a hundred members in 2007, Helsinki Zen Center, the largest Zen Buddhist association in Finland, also follows the Kapleau line of teaching (The Religions in Finland Project, A). Helsinki Zen Center was founded on August 13th 1998. Its main teachers are Sante Poromaa and Kanja Odland from the Zenbud-

Daiun Harada was both a professor at the Sōtō-affiliated Komazawa University and an acknowledged *Sōtōshū* Zen master, or *rōshi* 老師. He actively sought to create a synthesis of the two major Zen traditions of Japan, Sōtō and Rinzai, giving Rinzai-style *teishō* 提唱 (formal lectures on Zen themes) and using *kōans* in private interviews with students. In contrast to the generally held belief in *Sōtōshū*, Daiun believed that it was possible for any practitioner who was diligent enough—layperson and priest alike—to attain a sudden enlightenment experience, or *kenshō* 見性 (the word *satori* 悟り is often used synonymously). Yasutani continued to integrate what he saw as the best of Sōtō and Rinzai, seeking to return to the original teachings of Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), founder of the Sōtō school. Sharf argues that Yasutani broke with Sōtō due to a discontent with the Zen establishment and a desire to propagate *zazen* practice and the experience of *kenshō* outside monastic culture. Perhaps this explains why he soon attracted a number of foreign students.²⁷

Yasutani was succeeded by Yamada Kōun 山田耕雲 (1907–1989), a lay businessman who never ordained as a priest, nor acquired long-term experience in a monastic environment. He took *Sanbōkyōdan*'s philosophy a step further, advocating a form of Zen accessible to people of all faiths. This resulted in a *Sanbōkyōdan* that sees the complex ceremonial and literary culture of Zen monasteries mainly as a diversion from “true Zen,” the experience of *kenshō*. Zen—which is not regarded as a “religion”—can do away with robes, liturgies, devotional rites, and scriptures so as to concentrate all efforts on the realization of *kenshō*. The contemporary Rinzai and Sōtō schools are portrayed as examples of the dangers of institutionalization, ritualization, and intellectualization. Sharf acknowledges that Zen masters have throughout history warned of the dangers of attachment to ceremony, scripture, and doctrine. However, he claims *Sanbōkyōdan*'s rhetoric is made peculiar by the fact that while it was previously used in a monastic environment where ritual and doctrinal study were an essential part of daily life, it is now being directed at laypersons with little or no experience in such areas.²⁸

dhistiska samfundet in Sweden. Both have spent extensive periods of time in Philip Kapleau's Rochester Zen Center in New York. Helsinki Zen Center has branches in four Finnish towns. The oldest Zen Buddhist organization of Finland, Bodhidharma, had approximately 50 members in 2008, while Valkoinen Lumme, following Thich Nhat Hanh's Vietnamese-style Zen, had less than 10 members in 2007 (The Religions in Finland Project, A, B, C).

²⁷ Sharf 1995, 420–422.

²⁸ Sharf 1995, 422, 427–428.

Sharf hesitates to place *Sanbōkyōdan* among modern movements that have sought to reform and liberalize the Japanese Buddhist institution—beginning with the Meiji New Buddhists. He believes *Sanbōkyōdan* is made different by the fact that it does not seek reform from within the monastic establishment but rejects it, and has declared itself spiritually and legally independent from the mainline schools. *Sanbōkyōdan* teachers insist they are bearers of “true Zen,” that the mainline schools are fools, and that Zen monasticism in Japan is more or less dead.²⁹

Due to these factors, Sharf would consider categorizing *Sanbōkyōdan* among “New Religions.” He conducts a detailed comparison between *Sanbōkyōdan* and qualities generally attributed to New Religions, and finds several common features, such as a placing profound spiritual experience (*kenshō*) within the reach of everyone; reducing complex ethical, doctrinal and devotional teachings to a relatively simple practice (*zazen* and *kōan* practice); internationalization; radical modernization (Zen as a means of “personal transformation,” “eradicating the ego,” or achieving “clarity”—qualities attractive to an urban, educated, middle-class clientele); charismatic authority; antiestablishment rhetoric; and institutional volatility.³⁰

Therefore, it would not seem an overstatement to say that *Sanbōkyōdan*—taking New Buddhist rhetoric a step further—reshaped the understanding of modern Zen. It has for a large part been this reshaped version of Zen that the West has encountered in the teachings of *Sanbōkyōdan*-related Zen teachers and their successors, and which has come to shape the popular understanding of Zen.

²⁹ Sharf 1995, 434–436.

³⁰ Sharf 1995, 436–452. Despite the similarities between *Sanbōkyōdan* and New Religions, Sharf is wary of defining *Sanbōkyōdan* as a New Religion, pointing to paradigmatic problems in the field. On the one hand, classical buddhologists and orientalist—trained in philology and doctrinal history—tend to dismiss New Religions as “degenerate popularizations utterly devoid of doctrinal sophistication and subtlety.” On the other hand, scholars of modern Japanese religion—trained in sociology, anthropology and comparative religion—tend to focus solely on social, political, and economical changes following the Restoration when researching New Religions. Sharf expresses the wish that the study of modern religion were more “theologically” nuanced (Sharf 1995, 452–453). Helen Hardacre is on the same lines as Sharf, criticizing the concept of “New Religion,” originally coined by journalists, for focusing too much on new developments. She claims that the continuities of contemporary developments with previous eras of religious history are more impressive than the discontinuities (Hardacre 1999, 199–200). Due to the problems related to this discussion, I will not in this paper seek to define Dogen Sangha as a New Religion. I will, however, compare Dogen Sangha with *Sanbōkyōdan*.

3.3 Zen as a Marketing Device

As Western Zen centers create new institutions and practices, such as residential communities, farms, businesses, neighborhood foundations, and hospices, they face the problem of relating these projects to Zen practice. According to G. Victor Sōgen Hori, an American-born Rinzai priest, there is no agreed-upon rationale for Buddhist businesses.³¹ However, one thing is for sure: when it comes to the publishing industry, Zen has for a long time been a big business. How much this has to do with the activities of Zen centers themselves—and how much with an exploitation of popular Zen imagery by the hip “well-being” and “lifestyle” industries of contemporary West—is another question entirely.

John McRae sees this exploitation as the inevitable side-effect of D. T. Suzuki’s missionary success.³² I would not count out the effect of Kapleau’s popularizing of *zazen* practice, either. In part due to these efforts, as social study surveys reveal, Buddhism is not always an exclusive religion like Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Rather, there is a large amount of “nightstand Buddhists” in the West who do not call themselves Buddhists but keep a book of Buddhist sayings on their nightstand or practice a little *zazen* when they get out of bed in the morning.³³ In addition to formal Zen practice, Zen has also become a more general “way of doing things,” an image promoted by popular books such as *Zen in the Art of Archery*,³⁴ *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *Zen and the Art of Windsurfing*,³⁵ *The Zen of International Relations*,³⁶ and *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Zen Living*.³⁷ In interior decoration magazines, Zen is used to denote a (Japanese-inspired) minimalist space. Zen as a popular adjective (“you look so Zen today”) and sense of aesthetics reaches an even wider audience than Zen as a form of transcultural spiritual practice.

³¹ Hori 1998, 75.

³² McRae 2003, 102.

³³ Wuthnow & Cadge 2004, 364.

³⁴ Herrigel, 1953. Yamada Shōji argues that by glorifying Japanese culture and misinterpreting his Japanese informants the German Eugene Herrigel gave in *Zen and the Art of Archery* birth to the modern, largely unsubstantiated myth that Zen notions lie at the basis of Japanese archery, or *kyūdō* 弓道. When the book first appeared, its success was fuelled by the popularity of D. T. Suzuki’s books at the time. *Zen in the Art of Archery* still remains a bestseller, affecting popular perceptions of the relationship between Zen and traditional Japanese arts (Shōji 2001, 26–28). The concept of the book has also served as a model in the creation in recent decades of countless books with the title “Zen and the Art of so-and-so.”

³⁵ Fox, 1988.

³⁶ Chan *et al.*, 2001.

³⁷ McClain & Adamson, 2000. All these and more examples can be found in McRae 2003, 101.

“Zen” also features in the names of countless businesses and products, such as *Creative ZEN* (MP3 player), *Zen Imports* (an Australian distributor in the outdoor, work wear, and recreation industry), and *Zen Business Bootcamp* (a training seminar for professionals for improved business practices). A Google image search of “Zen products” reveals everything from computers, cameras, MP3 players, and cars to clothing, furniture, and cosmetics. Zen has clearly acquired a different range of meaning in world popular culture compared to its usage within East Asian Buddhism. John McRae suggests that new associations include “an attitude of undistracted concentration,” “bare-bone simplicity,” and “ease of use.”³⁸ While agreeing with McRae, I would go even further and suggest that in world popular culture the term “Zen” has become a “floating signifier,” a word that does not point at any specific object or meaning but instead possesses certain abstract connotations such as “streamlined,” “sharp,” “clean,” “serene,” and “minimalist.”³⁹

In the contemporary world Zen can therefore be encountered in various forms and forums. It can be the Zen of traditional East Asian Buddhism or Japanese religious history, a modernized form of institutional Zen as encountered during a visit to Japan, the Zen of D. T. Suzuki or Alan Watts as present in numerous popular books on the topic, or the Zen of *Sanbōkyōdan* as practiced in countless Western Zen centers. Furthermore, it can be the Zen of “nightstand Buddhists;” the Zen of lifestyle magazines, fine arts and martial arts; or Zen as a popular adjective and sense of aesthetics—a way of being and doing things. Last but not least, Zen has in recent decades become a floating signifier used in the names of businesses and brands worldwide, with vague connotations of tranquility, simplicity and clarity.

All these understandings of Zen intermingle with each other, depending on the varying ways—and combinations of ways—in which each individual has come into touch with the notion of Zen, and together they create the puzzle that is the contemporary culture of Zen. In order to understand the rhetoric employed by contemporary Zen movements, knowledge of the basic pieces that make up this puzzle, as well as their historical origins, is essential. For it is in relation to this puzzle that they position themselves through such rhetoric—thus contributing to its ever ongoing construction process.

³⁸ McRae 2003, 102.

³⁹ The term “floating signifier,” used especially in the field of semiotics, was originally coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1950). I apply the concept here simply as a heuristic device for understanding the use of the term “Zen” in a highly commercialized context.

4. Dogen Sangha Rhetoric

4.1 Origins and Organization of Dogen Sangha

On Dogen Sangha's (*Dōgen sanga* ドーゲンサンガ)⁴⁰ Japanese homepage, the group describes itself as a community of people who study Dōgen Zenji's 道元禪師 Buddhist philosophy (*zenji* is an honorific title used for particularly high-ranking monks). In Japan, Dogen Sangha lists gatherings at Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto, as well as the Aichi and Kanagawa prefectures. According to Dogen Sangha, its members represent men and women of all ages and various nationalities. On the top page of the English version of Dogen Sangha's homepage, there are pictures of the Tokyo group, which is almost completely made up of Occidental men. This and the fact that Dogen Sangha's Japanese name is written in *katakana* leads to the image that Dogen Sangha caters to an Occidental clientele. On the Japanese homepage, Buddhist philosophy is said to make life happy. With the help of *zazen* practice, which is described as an easy and comfortable practice that can be performed at one's own home, the future is said to take care of itself.⁴¹

The head of Dogen Sangha is Nishijima Gudō Wafu 西島愚道和夫 (1919–), who has written books on Dōgen's philosophy in Japanese. Some of these have been translated into

⁴⁰ To be precise, my presentation of the views of Dogen Sangha in this paper is based on an analysis of Kajo Zendo—Dogen Sangha's loosely affiliated branch in Finland—through the rhetorical analysis of *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog* maintained by the head of Kajo Zendo, Markus Laitinen. My analysis is based on the premise that on a suitably abstract level a core philosophy is shared by all the main disciples of Nishijima Gudō, including Markus Laitinen, Brad Warner, and Peter Rocca. Based on this premise, I will be making generalizations concerning the whole of Dogen Sangha—defined as an organizationally loose new Zen Buddhist movement that has spread worldwide and especially into the new media, and not only as the original *Dōgen sanga* group located in Tokyo and lead by Nishijima. This wider definition of Dogen Sangha also explains why I do not map out the particulars of lineage transmission concerning Nishijima and his disciples, which would lead to a differentiation between Warner and Laitinen, for instance, as representatives of distinct lines of transmission. The results of this analysis are only viable in as much as Kajo Zendo is representative of the basic characteristics of this new Zen Buddhist movement.

⁴¹ Dogen Sangha's English Homepage; Nishijima Wafu's *Dōgen sanga*, A, B. In the original, the description goes, 仏教哲学は現在を楽しく生きるための理論です。一部に言われている来世を期待する内容ではありません。坐禅という手段を使って自己管理を円滑にすることが目的です。坐禅は厳しい修行では無く、各家庭で実施することができる。安楽の法門です。(Nishijima Wafu's *Dōgen sanga*, B) Perhaps it has become something of a trend in contemporary Japan to see Zen practice as providing a counterbalance to the strict schedules, demands on efficiency, and stress of Japanese society by proposing an alternative attitude of freedom and ease. George J. Tanabe presents this as a central notion of works such as *Zen no yomikata* 禅の読み方 by the popular lay Buddhist author Hiro Sachiya ひろさちや (Tanabe 2004, 302).

English, German, French, Spanish, and Korean.⁴² From 1940 to 1965 Nishijima received teachings from Sawaki Kōdō 沢木興道 (1880–1965), a renowned Sōtō master and professor of Komazawa University. In 1946, Nishijima graduated from the University of Tokyo as a law major, and later worked for the Ministry of Finance and at a securities financing company. In 1973, at the age of 53 Nishijima became a Sōtō priest under Niwa Renpō 丹羽廉芳 (1905–1993), 77th abbot of Eiheiji 永平寺, one of *Sōtōshū*'s principal temples, and in 1977 received Dharma transmission from him. Nishijima soon became a consultant to the Ida Ryōkokudō company, and in 1987 established the *Ida Ryōkokudō Zazen Dōjō* 井田両国堂坐禅道場 in Tokyo. In the 1980s, he began to lecture on Buddhism in English, attracting foreign followers. Currently Nishijima, now in his nineties, continues to give *zazen* instruction and lectures on Dōgen in Japanese and English. In 2007, Nishijima named the US-based punk-rock-bassist Brad Warner as his successor. Warner has written various popular books on his interpretations on Zen, most notably *Hardcore Zen* (2003).⁴³

Precisely speaking, “Dogen Sangha” only refers to Nishijima’s group in Tokyo. The group has no legal organization, common rules, or member registry. Branches of Dogen Sangha are related to each other primarily because they have all been founded by disciples of Nishijima, and all hold Dōgen as a supreme authority regarding Zen philosophy. There is no agreed-upon organizational profile, and each group has the power to choose for itself which aspects of the tradition to emphasize. However, Dogen Sangha considers all groups to be authentic Zen communities. Dogen Sangha claims that its lineage descends directly from Dōgen,⁴⁴ despite the fact that Markus Laitinen, founder of Dogen Sangha branch Kajo Zendo (2009–),⁴⁵ remarks in *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog* that Dogen Sangha does not follow the guidelines of *Sōtōshū*. Currently Dogen Sangha has groups in Belgium, France, Finland, Germany, the UK, Ireland, Sweden, and the US.⁴⁶

⁴² Nishijima Wafu’s Dōgen sanga, A.

⁴³ Nishijima 2005, 2; Nishijima Wafu’s Dōgen sanga, C. Warner’s other books include *Zen Wrapped in Karma Dipped in Chocolate* (2007), *Sit Down and Shut Up* (2009), and *Sex, Sin, and Zen* (2010).

⁴⁴ Markus Laitinen, e-mail message to the author, Oct 1st 2010.

⁴⁵ The group changed its name from Dogen Sangha Finland to Kajo Zendo on October 21st 2010 (Kajo Zendo Blog, Oct 22nd 2010). According to Markus Laitinen, there was no special drama behind the change of name. The name was changed simply to avoid confusion regarding what constitutes Dogen Sangha. As each of its branch groups functions independently, Laitinen wanted this to be reflected by his group having its own name (Kajo Zendo Blog, Oct 22nd 2010).

⁴⁶ Kajo Zendo Blog, Nov 12th 2010; Markus Laitinen, e-mail message to author, Oct 1st 2010.

Leading figures in Dogen Sangha all keep popular weblogs, from Nishijima's *Dogen Sangha Blog* (in both English and Japanese) to Warner's *Hardcore Zen*, and Peter Rocca's *The Stupid Way*. Markus Laitinen has also been an enthusiastic blogger, writing actively on both *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog*, and currently on *Kajo Zendo Blog*. As a typical format for proselytizing purposes, weblog text would seem like a suitable genre for studying the rhetoric and philosophy of Dogen Sangha.

That Dogen Sangha rhetoric can be detected by analysing *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog*, as I shall do in the following section, is testified by the close relationship between Laitinen and other Dogen Sangha leaders. Peter Rocca visited Finland in 2010, performing a *jukai* 受戒 ceremony to ordain members of Kajo Zendo as Buddhists, and holding the Northern Dogen Sangha Sesshin from August 19th to 24th 2010. In 2009, Laitinen visited Nishijima in Japan, living at his home for a week, and being ordained by him. Brad Warner has visited Finland twice, in 2009 and 2010. Two of Warner's books (*Hardcore Zen* and *Zen Wrapped in Karma Dipped in Chocolate*) have been translated into Finnish. Laitinen also maintains close e-mail correspondence with Warner, Rocca, and Nishijima.⁴⁷ In this paper, I approach Dogen Sangha widely as a new movement within contemporary Japanese Zen Buddhism whose prominent affiliates all share a basic conception of Zen. As one of these characters, Markus Laitinen is as good a subject of research as any.

4.2 Rhetorical Analysis of *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog*

In the following, there will be an analysis of Dogen Sangha rhetoric, focusing on direct and indirect identifications and divisions made by Markus Laitinen, head of Kajo Zendo, in his *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog* from November 11th 2009 through to September 30th 2010.⁴⁸ There are altogether thirty-three posts by Laitinen, ranging in length from one third to five A4-size printouts. The text is frequently accompanied by photographs and video clips, and on top of the page there is a picture of Laitinen sitting in *zazen* meditation against a rock, with the accompanying text, "DOGEN SANGHA FINLAND BLOG: Soto Zen in Helsinki. SIT OR DIE!"⁴⁹ All in all, *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog*, created on the Blogspot platform,

⁴⁷ Kajo Zendo Blog, Apr 18th 2010, Oct 22nd 2010.

⁴⁸ Permission to use the weblog as research material has been obtained from Markus Laitinen (e-mail message to author, Oct 1st 2010).

⁴⁹ The weblog is in Finnish. All quotations are English translations by the author.

has the typical layout and features of a contemporary weblog. The weblog is public, so the assumption can be made that the text has been written not only for Sangha members but a larger Finnish-speaking audience as well.

The analysis itself follows Ainomaija Lehtonen's format, in which the inspection is divided into three themes: theory and practice, experience and spirituality, and social factors. Lehtonen has, as in this study, applied rhetorical analysis to a textual body in order to increase the understanding of a specific socio-historic context—in Lehtonen's case, eco-communities in Finland.⁵⁰ Furthermore, within each theme, I will distinguish relevant God-terms. After introducing all the themes, by means of a summary of the findings, a terministic screen will be constructed for Dogen Sangha's way of perceiving social reality. The latter part of the study will proceed to contextualize the terministic screen with earlier developments within the modernization process of Japanese Zen Buddhism in order to shed light on how Dogen Sangha relates to this process.

Regarding the first theme, theory and practice, Laitinen opts for a rather liberal and modern interpretation of the Buddhist belief system. Buddhist ethics, mythology, and doctrine are presented by him as a hindrance to the path of Zen if understood in a literal or theoretical sense.⁵¹ This is connected to Nishijima's interpretation of Dōgen's philosophy, according to which, "Buddhism is different from both idealism and materialism: Buddhism itself is a philosophy that is based on action."⁵² This philosophy is utilized to argue against "idealism," which covers a wide range of beliefs and practices that distance one from Zen as direct action.⁵³ "Action," therefore, could be seen as one of Dogen Sangha's God-terms, which is used as the basis for many a smaller philosophical stance.⁵⁴ On the same note,

⁵⁰ Lehtonen 2001, 106, 121–123.

⁵¹ See for example, "...I know how not to lie and I know how to act according to the laws of society without having to read about these things..." (May 25th 2010); "...it is now possible in Finland to practice within a tradition which doesn't require belief in supernatural teachings or anything that seems strange." (Jun 7th 2010); "...personally I believe that Buddhist mythology with all its demons and hungry ghosts is only symbolic and metaphoric depiction, which must not be taken as the truth or as things that actually exist" (Jul 11th 2010); "...I don't believe in literal rebirth, in other words that when I die I will be born into a new body as the same bloke..." (Jul 11th 2010)

⁵² Nishijima 1998, 185.

⁵³ See for example, "Our practice so easily becomes idealistic, and we may begin to imagine that it's essential to memorize those precepts or learn Buddhist theories. We may also imagine that it's essential for the sake of zazen practice to burn incense and get ourselves into some sort of a mystical Zen atmosphere. True practice has nothing to do with incense or quoting precepts. True practice is action, and doing concrete things." (May 25th 2010)

⁵⁴ See for example, "You may practice zazen. You may think you're a Buddhist or doing something highly important... You may pursue enlightenment... Guess what? It doesn't matter. The Buddha is dead, Dogen is

“Dōgen” could also be considered as one of Dogen Sangha’s God-terms, since his words—especially Nishijima’s interpretations of the *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏⁵⁵—are seen as the law.

As far as practice is concerned, Dogen Sangha is not as liberal as in the case of theory. In fact, practice has such a high place in Dogen Sangha’s philosophy that the words “practice,” “to practice,” and “practitioner” are often used synonymously to denote, respectively, the lifestyle advocated by Dogen Sangha, living according to this lifestyle, and serving as a follower. “Practice” is also the most common word featured in the titles of Laitinen’s web-log posts.⁵⁶

There are two main focuses of practice. The first one is formal *zazen* practice in the *shikantaza* style.⁵⁷ Regular *shikantaza* practice is the basic foundation upon which Dogen Sangha’s very existence lies as heir to the Sōtō school.⁵⁸ Secondly, the practice should extend to all facets of life—otherwise, it is deemed futile.⁵⁹ This view of Zen practice as both strongly connected to formal *shikantaza* and as something that must extend to all aspects of

dead, Bodhidharma is dead. And those who are alive won’t take a shit on your behalf. You must do it by yourself.” (Dec 12th 2009)

⁵⁵ “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye,” a seminal work of Dōgen’s, written between the years 1231 and 1253. *Shōbōgenzō* includes sermons and commentaries on *kōans*, and is written in Japanese, which was extremely rare for Buddhist texts at the time. *Shōbōgenzō* is for a large part written in highly abstract language, and is still very widely studied today. There are numerous conflicting interpretations of various parts of *Shōbōgenzō*, and it has been quite common for contemporary Japanese Zen masters to make interpretations of their own while criticizing those of others. Yasutani Hakuun from *Sanbōkyōdan*, for instance, says, “Beginning with Nishiari Zenji’s *Keiteiki*, I have closely examined the commentaries on the *Shōbōgenzō* of many people in modern times, and though it is rude to say it, there are an exceedingly large number of places where they have failed to grasp its meaning...” (quoted in Yasutani 1996, xxii)

⁵⁶ See for example, “Just let go and continue to practice” (Dec 12th 2009); “About the nature of practice” (Sep 4th 2010); “Devoting oneself to the practice” (Sep 30th 2010).

⁵⁷ In *shikantaza*, practiced in a formal sitting meditation posture, attention is not directed at any specific object, as in counting breath or *kōan zazen*. The practitioner rather aims at simply resting in a state of alert awareness. *Shikantaza* was especially advocated by Dōgen.

⁵⁸ See for example, “Nothing, *nothing* CAN replace concrete practice” (Jun 7th 2010); “...if you don’t practice *zazen*, if you don’t seek to do what’s best for yourself and others, beautiful words and speeches mean nothing...” (Sep 4th 2010); “Abandoning everything means to be dedicated. It is to practice as if your hair were on fire. And practicing is possible everywhere, in everything. Without *zazen*, however, there is no practice. This doesn’t mean that everyone should sit for large amounts of time but instead it means dedication. If you can’t find time in your life to sit once or twice every day, regularly, you are either lazy or have an unhealthy busy life.” (Sep 30th 2010); “We have a very easy-going atmosphere, you can laugh and joke around here, but when *zazen* is practiced, it is practiced seriously and conscientiously. In the case of *zazen*, you must not be too light-hearted, and neither are any exceptions allowed from our line of practice.” (Aug 14th 2010)

⁵⁹ See for example, “Dogen himself strongly emphasized that we have the opportunity to be present in every moment, to practice in every moment, in every act. Dogen wrote a lot about how important it is to concentrate on exactly what you are doing, and how no act, no action, should be separated from the practice. He often emphasized that if we cannot practice the Buddha Way precisely where we are, then wherever do we imagine we can practice?” (May 18th 2010); “Practice, however, does not end with sitting but continues everywhere we are and in everything we do. Practice cannot be separated from everyday life, since everyday life itself already is practice. If we cannot do our best with our families, in our studies, at work, then where can we do our best? Once a week during a group sitting session? In a monastery or a temple?” (Aug 14th 2010)

life is one of Laitinen’s primary teachings. Therefore, “practice” as the highest goal of the followers of Dogen Sangha could be seen as another God-term. In table 1, the above discussion is summed up into identifications and divisions made either directly or implied by Laitinen in *Dogen Sangha Finland Blog*.

Table 1. Identifications and Divisions Concerning Theory and Practice.

Theme 1: Theory and practice		
	Identification	Division
Lifestyle	Freedom to choose	Fixed mold
Ethics	Come from personal experience	Ethical theories
Buddhist mythology	Metaphoric/symbolic interpretation	Literal interpretation
Buddhist doctrine	Irrelevant for the most part	Held in high regard
Rebirth	Irrelevant (whether exists or not)	Concrete rebirth exists
Formality	Formal zazen practice	Overall formality
Zazen	Dedicated zazen practice	Lazy zazen practice
Community	Community supports practice	Solitary practice

In the realm of spirituality and experience—the second theme—Laitinen has a liberal attitude towards how spirituality is reflected in the choice of lifestyle. What is crucial, however, is that practitioners of Zen stop emulating notions and ideals of what they should be like, and simply become true to themselves. Especially silly and useless are attempts at being “Zen-like” or “saint-like,” filling one’s life with Zen-related paraphernalia.⁶⁰ When it comes to enlightenment, however, Laitinen has a clear stance. He sees enlightenment as a dangerous notion which creates the delusion that it is possible to attain a mental state instantly eradicating all of life’s problems. The goal of practice is not thought to be enlight-

⁶⁰ See for example, ”One of the regular practitioners at our Sangha has created the term ’Zen porn’... For example, you go sit on an autumn lawn during full-moon, or read Zen poems and become so Zen and holy and stuff; you identify your life with Zen, become a Zen practitioner, Zen can be seen and felt everywhere... As my teacher Peter has written in his blog *The Stupid Way*, ‘Of course, it’s not always easy to be ourselves. Because we think maybe there’s something wrong with us, or other people won’t like us or we won’t fit in and things like that. But one thing we can learn from Buddhism is that just to be ourselves is the best way...’” (Dec 20th 2009)

enment but practice itself.⁶¹ This confirms the significance of “practice”—understood in a specific way—as a God-term of Dogen Sangha. Table 2 below illustrates identifications and divisions made by Laitinen regarding spirituality and experience.

Table 2. Identifications and Divisions Concerning Spirituality and Experience.

Theme 2: Spirituality and experience		
	Identification	Division
Enlightenment	Unimportant as a goal of practice	Focus on attaining enlightenment
Change in lifestyle	Being who one truly is, without pretense	Clinging to and emulating notions and ideals
Choice of lifestyle	Freedom to choose	Conformism

Relating to the third theme—social factors—Dogen Sangha has a loose internal structure as a whole, and Laitinen’s group is no exception. There are no mandatory membership fees, nor is a member registry kept. People can come and go as they please. Laitinen acts as the leader of Kajo Zendo under the guidance of Peter Rocca. In a larger perspective, Kajo Zendo belongs to the lineage of Nishijima Gudō, which claims to trace its lineage back to Dōgen. In practice, however, leadership and internal hierarchies at Kajo Zendo are not especially strict.⁶²

In outer relations, Laitinen is very accepting of other Buddhist groups.⁶³ The criticism he makes is unspecified and indirect, focusing mainly on certain ways of understanding

⁶¹ See for example, “...because Master Dōgen’s teachings are based on realism and are down-to-earth, there is no place for idealism. That’s why the purpose of practice is not some idealistic notion of some mind-blowing enlightenment or any other nonsense, but the goal of practice is rather the practice and practicing itself.” (Nov 15th 2009); “I really don’t like the word *enlightenment* at all, it is so idealistic and dangerous in leading practitioners astray, making them imagine that the goal of practicing zazen is some euphoric, mind-blowing state, which removes all problems at once. Hah. Enlightenment (etc.) really sucks.” (Dec 2nd 2009)

⁶² Dogen Sangha Finland Blog, Sep 12th 2010.

⁶³ See for example, “The Buddhist Center Sampo is a very unique place. Five different Buddhist groups gather there to practice, and their traditions all diverge from each other in their teachings and points of emphases. I think this is a source of wealth and freedom! Buddhism is a very wide and varied Path, and it’s only a source of wealth that a practitioner can choose for himself an appropriate path to follow... Despite obvious differences, they all follow the path set by Gautama Buddha himself, which is a singular path to happiness and balance, and to me it is a genuine and the only path.” (May 18th 2010)

Zen, Buddhism, and practice—not specific organizations. The looseness of Kajo Zendo’s organizational profile, both internally and externally, is perhaps a reflection not only of its relatively small size⁶⁴ but also of a conscious decision to avoid institutionalization. This interpretation would seem to be consistent with Warner’s sympathetic attitudes towards counterculture in general. Therefore, “freedom” from institutional chains could perhaps also be regarded as one of Dogen Sangha’s God-terms. Table 3 specifies identifications and divisions made by Laitinen regarding the social dimension.

Table 3. Identifications and Divisions Concerning the Social Dimension.

Theme 3: Social dimension		
	Identification	Division
Community profile	Loose organization, individual communities	Formal institutional religion
Relationship to other Buddhist organizations	Differing practices and beliefs allowed, same core	Orthodoxy of certain practices and beliefs
Financing	Practicing is free of charge, donations accepted	Fixed membership payments

Put together, the God-terms discovered are “Dōgen,” “action,” “practice,” and “freedom.” These notions create a terministic screen through which followers of Dogen Sangha approach the field of Zen. A collection of interpretations, made primarily by Nishijima, of Dōgen’s teachings are held as the supreme authority on matters pertaining to Zen philosophy and practice. These teachings focus on Zen as a philosophy based fundamentally upon direct action, within which lie the keys to a good life. Therefore, doctrinal, intellectual, and ethical learning is in vain.

The capacity for direct action needs to be cultivated by regular and committed *shikantaza* practice, out of which the atmosphere of practice is expected gradually to permeate

⁶⁴ As member registries are not collected either by Dogen Sangha’s Tokyo-based group or Kajo Zendo, it is difficult to estimate how many active practitioners are involved in the groups. In the spring of 2010, Laitinen said that there were tens of active practitioners at Kajo Zendo (Dogen Sangha Finland Blog, May 18th 2010; Markus Laitinen, e-mail message to author, Oct 1st 2010).

all aspects of life. Because practice is thought to cultivate direct action in the present moment, ideals of attaining enlightenment and outer attempts at appearing “spiritual” are considered disturbances to genuine action-practice. The community of fellow-practitioners and line of teaching are appreciated, but since individual autonomy is highly valued, they are not set within a strong institutional framework that would be too binding to the individual. Through the above terministic screen, Dogen Sangha is related in specific ways to other elements within the contemporary culture of Zen. These relations are the main focus of the following sections.

4.3 Reframing the Contemporary Understanding of Zen

The anti-intellectual rhetoric of the Zen tradition derives in part from a traditional definition according to which Zen is based on a direct transmission of enlightenment from mind to mind, without reliance on words.⁶⁵ As time has passed, this rhetoric has been developed further by various schools of Zen into distinct anti-intellectual philosophies. When combined with the New Buddhist division of Zen into “pure experience” and “cultural accretions”—later promoted in the West by D. T. Suzuki in theory and *Sanbōkyōdan*-related Zen centers in practice—this anti-intellectual rhetoric has taken on a form in which “culturally specific beliefs” have been separated from the “essential philosophy” of Zen.

In popular Zen literature, such rhetoric is often used to support the argument that Zen practice is easily accessible to anyone, since it does not require familiarizing oneself with religious beliefs, doctrinal details, or strange rituals. Dogen Sangha utilizes its own Dōgen-based version of this rhetoric in a similar fashion, taking the popular teachings to their logical conclusion—the stripping away, in Zen practice, of most beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and other elements traditionally associated with a Zen Buddhist worldview and lifestyle. However, there has to be something “Zen” to base the practice on, and in the case of Dogen

⁶⁵ The classic definition of the significance of Zen in relation to other schools of Buddhism in East Asia, attributed to the legendary 6th century founder of the Chan school, Bodhidharma (but actually dating to the 12th century), is the four-line stanza, “Not relying on words or letters / An independent self-transmitting apart from any teachings / Directly pointing to the human Mind / Awakening to one’s Original Nature, thereby actualizing Buddhahood.” (translation by Abe Masao; see Abe 1997, xiii) In fact, the origins of anti-intellectual rhetoric can be traced back to earlier Chinese Buddhist, Indian Buddhist, and Taoist sources—perhaps most of all to the general attempt to deal with a vast amount of often conflicting Buddhist scriptures and doctrines during the Sinicization of Indian Buddhism (See for example, Liu 2006, 209–330).

Sangha, that something is *shikantaza*, the regular and dedicated practice of which is stressed as being of utmost importance.

Much like *Sanbōkyōdan*, which presents *kenshō* as the core of Zen available to anyone, Dogen Sangha presents the more abstract *zazen*-related “practice” as an absolute, something done for its own sake, and available to anyone willing to dedicate themselves to regular sitting. While this is in-keeping with the traditional emphasis of the Sōtō school on *shikantaza* and its avoidance of enlightenment speech, the philosophy appears peculiar when stripped of almost all the outer features and beliefs of institutional Sōtō, and directed at people outside of Japan with no experience in such matters. Robert Sharf made this same remark on *Sanbōkyōdan*, and perhaps *Sanbōkyōdan* has laid the foundation upon which Dogen Sangha has been able to create an even less ritualistic and belief-centered form of Zen—one that appeals to contemporary people. In so far as *Sanbōkyōdan*, as Sharf suggests, has been particularly attractive to the educated middle-class in the West, Dogen Sangha goes even further in “democratizing” Zen with its flair of counterculture and emphasis on personal freedom, which are likely to make it attractive to demographics Zen has not tended to reach. These demographics include an urban, anti-establishment generation of youth that spend large amounts of time surfing the internet. This argument is supported by the fact that all major Dogen Sangha leaders are active users of new media for proselytizing purposes.

Dogen Sangha also responds to Zen as an instrument of the marketing industry, being highly critical of notions and images of Zen typically found in lifestyle magazines and conveyed by Zen-titled products. These ideals include the notion that the aim of Zen is to be “one with the universe,” or to act or dress a certain way; that there is a specific Zen aesthetics of harmony and minimalism; or that a practitioner of Zen needs in the first place to acquaint himself with elements of traditional Japanese culture. Instead, Dogen Sangha prefers individuality, and even a touch of anarchism. Laitinen, for instance, says,

Zen sucks. And that’s why it can be liberating. There is nothing special about Buddhism or Zen. Dogmas and teachings and precepts cannot provide us with balance, but rather our own personal practice under the guidance of teachers can do so. But things should be questioned. The teacher’s word is not the law. The supposed teachings of Gautama Buddha are not truth or reality itself. They are words, and words don’t correspond with reality, and that’s why you must also be able to have

fun on behalf of the Buddha's teachings, albeit without any sort of hostility; yes, even Gautama Buddha farted and even he had smelly poo, even if some refuse to believe that Buddha had to poo.⁶⁶

Dogen Sangha also arises out of contemporary Japanese society, responding to phenomena within the Japanese Buddhist scene. According to Mark Rowe, there is an internal struggle to maintain a pure center based on texts and founders, as opposed to various traditions and customs practiced by common folk.⁶⁷ This is perhaps a repercussion of the discussion initiated by the Meiji New Buddhists, and maybe also of a contemporary “Westernization” of Japanese Buddhism—as Japan has recently been in touch with the popular forms Japanese Buddhism has assumed in the West during the 20th century. Nishijima found the perfect solution to this dilemma by founding a group of his own which is based on the text *Shōbōgenzō*, and the founding figure *Dōgen*, without being associated with the problems of institutional Sōtō. Furthermore, the idea that Zen provides a counterbalance to the stressful lives of contemporary Japanese, popularized by Buddhist authors such as Hiro Sachiya, is also present on Dogen Sangha's Japanese homepage, presenting the claim that Zen is an easy practice that makes life more comfortable.

4.4 Dogen Sangha as the New Wave of Zen

Dogen Sangha appears to have most of the properties of New Religions Robert Sharf recognizes in *Sanbōkyōdan*. In Dogen Sangha, spiritual experience is placed in the reach of anyone willing to commit to the simple practice of *shikantaza*—into which the complex ethical, doctrinal, and devotional teachings of Buddhism are reduced. Dogen Sangha represents a strongly internationalized and modernized form of Zen, with perhaps more followers outside of Japan than within Japan. Dogen Sangha has charismatic authority figures—Nishijima Gudō and Brad Warner in the forefront—who have become renowned worldwide. Antiestablishment rhetoric is common. Institutionally, Dogen Sangha is even more volatile than *Sanbōkyōdan*, with no member registry, a loose organizational structure, and independent practice groups spread around a wide geographical area. The question of lay

⁶⁶ Dogen Sangha Finland Blog, Nov 15th 2009.

⁶⁷ Rowe 2004, 384.

versus monastic practice is no longer relevant to Dogen Sangha—so strong has become the lay orientation of Zen practice in contemporary West.

As in the case of *Sanbōkyōdan*, it is perhaps uncalled for to define Dogen Sangha as a New Religion. Moreover, in Dogen Sangha there is clear continuity with the modern Sōtō institution as well as traditional Sōtō due to the lineage of transmission, respect for Dōgen, and practice of *shikantaza*. It is, however, a curious observation that, as far as lineage is concerned, reference is made after Nishijima directly to Dōgen—between whom there is a gap of seven centuries. That this gap is not accounted for would seem to testify to the notion that Dogen Sangha is in its philosophy very much reliant on the teachings and interpretations of one particular contemporary character, Nishijima Gudō.

There are, however, some novel characteristics in Dogen Sangha unprecedented among Meiji New Buddhism or *Sanbōkyōdan*. Dogen Sangha moves comfortably in the sphere of new media, and some of its leaders, especially Brad Warner, write in an amusing and entertaining fashion. When a sympathetic attitude towards counterculture and liberal thinking are added to this equation, Dogen Sangha represents a vogue, new wave form of contemporary Zen. Meiji New Buddhism and *Sanbōkyōdan* have laid the foundations Dogen Sangha builds upon in its image of an even more transcultural, subjective, contemporary, and youthful Zen than could possibly have been envisaged by its predecessors.

5. Conclusion

According to the rhetorical analysis conducted in this paper, Dogen Sangha views the field of Zen through the terministic screen of being a philosophy of action, realized through the practice of *shikantaza*. This philosophy is ultimately justified by attributing it to Dōgen. In order to attain the state of Zen-as-action, there are very few outer requirements, and even the community of practitioners and teacher-student relationship are kept relatively loose. Dogen Sangha therefore positions itself in opposition to Zen as institutional religion, and to exotic images of Zen as something related to serenity of mind and elements of Oriental art and culture—promoted by nightstand books on Zen and lifestyle magazines, which draw from writings by figures such as D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Eugene Herrigel. In the latter sense, Dogen Sangha is also critical of Zen as a contemporary marketing device,

while simultaneously exploiting new media, the money-making word “Zen,” and a counterculture flair for proselytizing purposes.

Without the foundation laid by Meiji New Buddhists, on the one hand—especially the notion of transcendental spiritual experience lying at the core of “correct Zen” which is free from culturally specific features—it would not be possible for Dogen Sangha to almost completely renounce the beliefs and rituals of institutional Zen. On the other hand, were it not for the popularity in the West of the Harada-Yasutani method of practice in the latter part of the 20th century, originating from *Sanbōkyōdan*, the West may not be accepting enough of Dogen Sangha’s counterculture vibe and highly simplified form of practice. Furthermore, Dogen Sangha, no doubt, rides on the wave of Zen as a feature and trend in popular culture, even as it responds critically to this reality.

The contemporary culture of Zen is in ceaseless motion. While historical streams, such as the repercussions of Meiji New Buddhism and the introduction into Japan of the word “religion,” continue to influence Oriental and Occidental perceptions of Zen, they also blend in with more recent streams, cumulate, and usher Zen into new pathways. The Zen of *Sanbōkyōdan* and Dogen Sangha have found their way into a West that thirsts for the experiential heart of Zen without traditional monastic commitment, and desires to maintain an idealistic image of Japanese Zen masters as bearers and transmitters of a transcendent, universal realization. Dogen Sangha—one of the latest streams within this socio-historic network—has entered the internet and captured the attention of a young audience. Future will tell how this generation responds to Dogen Sangha’s Zen, alter it, and usher in new streams of Zen as it matures.

On February 12th 2011 Markus Laitinen’s Kajo Zendo announced on its weblog that it will be resigning from the Buddhist Center Sampo in Helsinki due to differing views between Markus Laitinen and members of another Finnish Buddhist organization on who is entitled to use the title of “monk” and how Zen should be presented. By February 15th 2011 the post had already received eighty-two comments, with practitioners of Kajo Zendo and other Finnish Buddhist organizations disputing these issues.⁶⁸ This discourse would be an interesting topic of further research—focusing on the questions of how Dogen Sangha’s peculiar way of presenting Zen caters to the needs of its members, how they receive the

⁶⁸ Kajo Zendo Blog, February 12th 2011.

meanings embedded in the movement's rhetoric, and how this rhetoric is responded to by members of other Buddhist organizations.

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