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Ineffable Words, Unmentionable Deeds

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The Rhetoric of Immediacy
A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen
By Bernard Faure.
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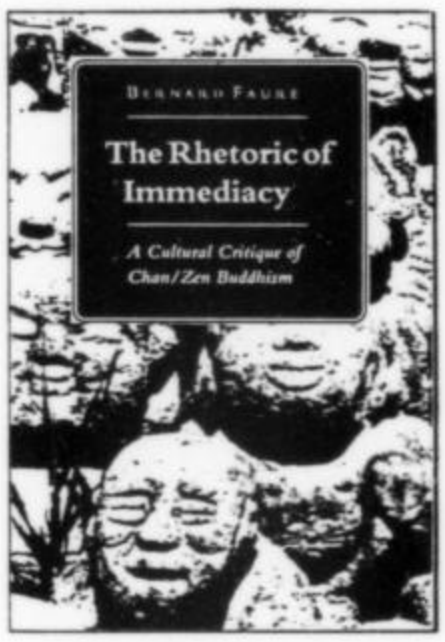

THE 'rhetoric of immediacy' is Bernard Faure's term for a mode of discourse that, in his presentation, distinguishes the Chan/Zen tradition in China and Japan from the rest of Buddhism. Readers exposed to the 'Zen' promulgated several decades ago by writers such as D. T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Thomas Merton will find various features of the rhetoric of immediacy familiar: its assertion of a mode of 'nondual' spiritual insight or 'sudden enlightenment' that puts one into direct contact with ultimate truth without depending on any symbolic media or practical devices; its stress on the historical (and yet inconceivable) 'transmission' of that ineffable, formless insight through a lineage of patriarchs who constitute an orthodox Zen school; its abhorrence of 'syncretism'; and its iconoclasm, anti-ritualism, and antinomianism. Suzuki and many of his epigones in the West, of course, were unabashed (not to say naive) champions of Zen. Posturing as insiders (none was actually a member of any Zen order) and caught up in the rhetoric, they were unable to acknowledge the fact that the tradition they represented was largely a discursive one—and all the more so for being lifted from its native home in East Asian monasticism and disseminated to Western intellectuals in books. Faure takes a giant step beyond that earlier generation of scholarship by making it clear that it is precisely rhetoric (rather than ineffable truth) that

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he is concerned with. The critical distance that he gains allows him to offer a far more sophisticated and penetrating analysis of Chan/Zen discourse, while remaining basically sympathetic to it.

Inspired by the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Faure employs what he calls a 'dual tracked' approach, interpreting the rhetoric of Chan/Zen on both 'the "phenomenological" level of beliefs and representations and the "objective" level at which these beliefs and representations appear as ideological products' (p. 37). On the first level, which entails analyzing the rhetoric as doctrine, Faure delineates a number of internal contradictions that give the rhetoric much of its dynamism and help to explain its dialectical reversals. He shows, for example, how the 'sudden enlightenment' position in the so-called sudden-gradual debate is really a *point de fuite* or vanishing point that the rhetoric strives toward but can never reach, since the very act of taking a position or representing anything at all presupposes a semiotic syntax, itself a sign of 'gradualism'.

Faure's mode of analysis, which enthusiastically exposes the logical weaknesses of the discourse, runs circles around the old Suzuki school of apologetics. The latter pretends to actually speak from the standpoint of perfect 'suddenness' and glosses over the obvious inconsistency of its own position by claiming that the contradiction appears only in the eye of the deluded beholder and not in the higher 'nondualistic' logic of enlightenment. Faure's more critical treatment of both the Chan/Zen tradition and his own standpoint as an author mirrors one of the most clever moves of Chan/Zen rhetoric, which is to flaunt the inconsistencies of one's own argument, thereby co-opting potentially embarrassing criticism and demonstrating one's insight into (and transcendence of) the inherent limitations of all linguistic formulations.

Like his treatment of the rhetoric as doctrine, Faure's sociological interpretations are largely abstract observations, divorced from concrete textual or historical examples. Nevertheless, he makes some interesting suggestions about ways in which the rhetoric could have been used by an elite to gain or maintain status. For example, the rejection of social or spiritual hierarchies, if it came from the mouth of a master whose status within such a hierarchy was secure, could be interpreted as what Bourdieu calls a 'strategy of condescension', that is, a negation that 'permits one to accumulate both the profits tied to the intact hierarchy and those provided by the purely symbolic denial of that hierarchy' (p. 39). In general, Faure's concern with the sociological dimension of the rhetoric of Chan/Zen is another measure of the great methodological distance separating this book from the previous generation of Western-language literature on Chan/Zen.

The most significant contribution of the book, however, is that it brings to light and analyzes many fascinating aspects of the Chan/Zen tradition that have been ignored or deemed marginal in the Western-language literature following Suzuki. Chapters 5 and 6 assay a reconstruction of the tradition's involvement in and attitude toward thaumaturgy from seventh-century China

down through medieval Japan. Faure argues that although Chan discourse appears relatively consistent in its reaction against the occult, in practice there were thaumaturgic elements in the Chan tradition that were pronounced early on, cropped up later in China, and reemerged strongly in the medieval Japanese Sōtō Zen school. Chapters 7 and 8 treat the cult of relics, mummies, and portraits of Chan/Zen masters, a conspicuous feature of the tradition that has indeed 'been largely neglected by orthodox scholarship, intent on arguing the originality and purity of "iconoclastic" Chan' (p. 133). Faure addresses the question of how these practices, which imply a mediation between the sacred world of the ancestors and the profane realm of the living, 'can be reconciled with the "sudden" ideology' (p. 135). Chapter 9 examines Chan/Zen funerary rituals, which flourished despite the fact that the Chan 'denial of the reality of death led to a theoretical rejection' of them (p. 180). Chapter 10 deals with yet another 'crucial mode of mediation . . . provided by the intermediary world of dreams' (p. 209). Faure observes that 'despite the Chan/Zen rhetoric of immediacy, dreams seemed to have played a significant role in the life of Chan/Zen communities' (p. 209).

Chapter 11 treats Chan/Zen attitudes toward and involvement in sexuality. Faure starts with the premise that 'antinomianism was central to Chan and in perfect harmony with the "sudden teaching" ' (p. 231), thus (in theory) giving license to moral laxity, but he argues that in practice there were various social and institutional restraints that set the 'limits of transgression'. Chapter 12 deals with 'another example of acculturation' in 'responses to local religion' (p. 258), namely, the reappearance or 'return' in Chan/Zen of tutelary gods, gods of the monastery, arhats, and (in Japan) kami. Despite the 'theoretical agnosticism—or even implicit atheism—of Chan,' Faure argues, 'the territorial expansion of Chan in China and Korea from the seventh century onward, and later in Japan, created a tension between this new orthodoxy and local cults' that 'resolved itself in a kind of polytheism' (p. 258). Chapter 13, finally, explores Chan/Zen atttitudes toward and use of ritual, albeit with scant reference to the concrete details of any specific rites. One of the author's main points here is that 'while the Chan theoretical claim for immediacy, in particular, paved the way for antiritualism, it also led to the opposite stance' (p. 284), namely, the ritualization of the rhetoric of immediacy.

Faure's treatment of these diverse topics is more thematic than historical. He draws examples of each type of mediation from a variety of texts conventionally associated with the Chan/Zen tradition and interprets them as universal paradigms, with little concern for matters of text criticism (for example, genre, redaction, and dating) or the specific historical contexts (chronological, geographical, social, and political) of the works cited. The approach is reminiscent of Suzuki's treatment of the Zen tradition as timeless and monolithic.

Faure's interpretations of the data, generally creative and insightful, are also vitiated at times by historical errors. To give a few examples, the auction of a deceased master's personal belongings at the time of his funeral could not have

been a 'striking feature of this collectivization of death in Japanese Zen' (p. 191) because such auctions are well attested in the Chinese monastic codes that Faure cites. The claim that there were 'specifically Chan funerals for Chan monks (during the Song)' (p. 203) is belied by the comparative study of the funeral manuals of Chan, T'ien-t'ai, and the Vinaya school. It is not true that the development of the practice of 'entering the room (*nyūshitsu*) . . . seems to have been a Japanese phenomenon' (pp. 292–93), for this too is well attested in Chinese ritual manuals. Nor is it accurate that sexuality 'was elided in Chinese Vinaya and Chan/Zen "Pure Rules" ' (p. 237).

One of the unifying themes of the book is the idea that all of the diverse phenomena treated exemplify a 'discrepancy between Chan theoretical discourse and its practice' (p. 305). This 'wide gap between theory and practice', the author argues, is both created and covered up by a 'linguistic taboo' (pp. 49 & 70), inherent in the rhetoric of immediacy, which forbids acknowledging the importance of symbolic and practical mediations in the Chan/Zen tradition. One of the aims of the book is to break this 'conspiracy of silence' (p. 40) by exposing the fundamental discrepancy or 'fault line' that runs through the tradition. As Faure states in the Epilogue,

> Chan, I argued, distinguishes itself from other religious trends by its insistence on immediacy and its denial of all traditional mediations. Yet it is clear that these mediations were always present, even (or precisely) when they were most vehemently repudiated. This fault line, which I followed throughout representations of Chan attitudes toward dreams, thaumaturgy, death, relics, ritual, and gods, has been usually silenced or explained away—both by the tradition itself and by its scholarly replication—by means of notions such as the Two Truths. (p. 305)

Rejecting the old model of an essentially 'pure' Zen that only became involved in mediations as an expression of 'skillful means' or as a concession to popular religiosity, Faure casts about for new interpretive approaches that can acknowledge mediations to be an integral part of the Chan/Zen tradition while still privileging immediacy (or rather, the *rhetoric* of immediacy) as the tradition's distinguishing mark.

Early on in Chapter 1, and at various points in chapters 5 through 13 as well, Faure embraces a sociological mode of interpretation that explains the 'return' of rejected mediations in terms such as the 'routinization of charisma' (p. 16), the ossification of 'heresy' into 'orthodoxy' (pp. 17–20), the 'institutionalization' of Chan as a monastic community (pp. 17–24 & 124–25), and 'popularization', 'secularization', and 'acculturation in response to local religion' (pp. 66, 100, 258 & 314). The concept of 'return' at work here is problematic, however, for it implies that in some original state of affairs in the history of Chan, prior to the changes (the '-izations') that occasioned their reappearance, the various mediations had been literally (and not merely rhetorically) abandoned. Many Japanese scholars have in fact envisioned a pristine early Chan sect that practiced what it preached (that is, immediacy) by isolating itself from lay society on

the one hand and rejecting the conventional forms of Buddhism monasticism on the other. As Faure himself points out, however, the historical evidence pertaining to the early Chan school is itself largely rhetorical in nature and thus cannot be taken as evidence of Chan practice. Backing away from the sociological interpretation, Faure realizes:

> Indeed, it may not be a case of a 'pure' teaching becoming 'corrupted' because of social factors. The very notion of the original 'purity' of Chan seems to have arisen simultaneously with or even posterior to the notion of its 'degradation.' Thus there is a danger in regarding the institutionalization of Chan as a deviation from a 'pure' Chan experience. One would thereby simply replicate a certain type of traditional discourse and end up reintroducing an 'essence' of Zen. (p. 25)

This generalization puts Faure back where he started, looking for a way to explain the 'gap between theory and practice'. The answer he gives, finally, is that the ineluctably 'dichotomic' nature of Chan, the 'agonistic tension' produced by the simultaneous denial and reintroduction of mediations, creates an 'essential indecidablility' (p. 316) that is irreducible: it cannot be accounted for (or 'resolved') within the framework of any single model. Since all solutions are necessarily one-sided, Faure seems to conclude, the best one can hope for is to fully understand the nature of the problem.

The hermeneutic bind that Faure finds himself in, however, is at least partly of his own making. He succeeds in demonstrating that the dialectical tension between immediacy and mediacy lies at the heart of Chan discourse and is not merely a dichotomy that he himself has read into it. The distinction he draws between theory and practice, however, is not native to the tradition. In particular, the assumption that theory (doctrine or belief) precedes and guides religious practice, and that practice which fails to coincide with theory entails contradiction or hypocrisy, is largely alien to East Asian Buddhism. There is no reason to assume that Chan masters who used the rhetoric of immediacy to reject specific practices necessarily intended their words to incite any concrete actions or changes in behavior (although changes in attitude or understanding clearly were an aim), and no reason to assume that persons who accepted the rhetoric as an expression of religious truth necessarily felt any contradiction between that truth and their customary religious practices. The existence of any such intentions or perceptions of contradiction within the Chan/Zen tradition must be demonstrated by concrete, historical evidence, and to avoid circularity of argument that evidence must consist of more than the usual rhetorical rejections of practice.

No such evidence is adduced in the book, however, for the simple reason that it does not exist. What the historical record does show, as the book itself makes amply clear, is that for more than a millennium the Chan/Zen rhetoric of immediacy has flourished right along with, and in a certain sense depended on, a wide range of mediating practices. If anything, this suggests an amicable and stimulating marriage of 'theory' (if we still want to call it that) and practice in the Chan/Zen tradition.

Faure's examination of the relationship between the rhetoric of immediacy and specific religious practices is also rendered more complex (and perplexed) than it need be by an ambiguous definition of the Chan/Zen tradition. On the one hand he takes the position that what set Chan apart from the rest of Buddhism was not its use of mediations but rather its ideology of immediacy. On the other hand his persistent use of the notions of the institutionalization (pp. 17, 68, 125 & 309) and ritualization (pp. 68, 122, 184 & 297) of Chan, and his treatment of thaumaturgy, relics, funerals, dreams, sexuality, and gods as examples of specifically Chan uses of mediations, combine to give the impression that Chan/Zen may also be distinguished by its unique institutional arrangements and practices. It is the latter conception that frames the thorny (for Faure) question of how, within the Chan/Zen tradition, the rhetoric of immediacy could have given rise to, or permitted the adoption of, so many practices that seem to contradict it. If, however, Chan is defined as a rhetorical position taken vis-à-vis a wide range of established practices deriving from the broader Buddhist and native religious (Chinese and Japanese) traditions, then there is really no discrepancy between theoretical discourse and practice within the Chan tradition after all.

Although the book vacillates between these two definitions of Chan/Zen, historical criticism leaves little doubt about which is more viable. In the first place, it needs to be stressed that none of the numerous practices discussed by Faure was actually unique to or developed within the Chan tradition in China, although some of them came to be associated exclusively with the Zen school in Japan following their transmission to that country in conjunction with the ideology and mythology of Chan. Secondly, my own research has shown that the so-called institutionalization of Chan in the Tang dynasty and later is a myth, fostered first by Chan ideologues in the Song dynasty to justify their takeover of the existing Buddhist monastic institution from within and used later by modern Japanese apologists to explain the contamination of 'pure' Zen by extraneous beliefs and practices. Never an institutionally distinct or independent entity in China, the Chan school was not distinguished by its practices but indeed by its rhetoric and mythical genealogy—two powerful ideological weapons that were used successfully to create a socially and politically privileged elite of 'enlightened masters' within the Buddhist clergy.

Despite its conceptual ambiguities and historiographical lapses, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* is one of the most stimulating and challenging books ever written about East Asian Buddhism. Readers who persevere in hacking their way through its luxuriously overgrown verbiage will be rewarded by truly insightful vistas of bottomless chasms and distant peaks, flowering puns and mutant etymologies, stunning flights of free association, and encounters with many species of exotic facts, not to mention the tracks and droppings of latter-day giants of social-historical theory. The journey is a must for cartographers and biologists of Asian religions and all others who think they know their way around the forests of Zen.