

## CONCLUSION. *Zen in theory and practice*

When we discover that we have in this world no earth or rock to stand or walk upon but only shifting sea and sky and wind, the mature response is not to lament the loss of fixity but to learn to sail.

James Boyd White<sup>1</sup>

During Huang Po's time, he left all the monks who followed him and became involved in the general work at Ta-an Monastery, where his continuous practice consisted of sweeping out all the rooms. He swept the Buddha hall and the Dharma hall. But it was not continuous practice done for the sake of sweeping out the mind, nor was it continuous practice performed in order to cleanse the light of the Buddha. It was continuous practice done for the sake of continuous practice.

Dogen<sup>2</sup>

Zen Buddhism has been practiced in East Asia for well over a millennium. During this lengthy historical period, the Zen tradition incorporated into itself many of the spheres of culture – or cultural practices – that were dominant in its time. Theoretical thinking, or philosophy, was one of these, and the Huang Po texts are fine examples of its Zen form in the early Sung period. Nevertheless, Zen Buddhism is not primarily a philosophical movement. Indeed, criticism of theoretical reflection from the perspective of Zen meditation practice is ever present in Zen literature. Even when Zen Buddhists do philosophize, as Huang Po certainly did, practice, not theory, is the emphatic focus of reflection. Therefore, it seems important that we conclude these meditations by asking, first, how should we understand the relation between meditation and philosophy in Zen Buddhism, and, second, how should we understand the relation between our own theoretical reflections on Zen and the practice of Zen?

<sup>1</sup> White, *When Words Lose their Meaning*, p. 278.    <sup>2</sup> Francis Cook, trans., *How to Raise an Ox*, p. 198.

Once again, we can take our initial lead on this issue from John Blofeld. Following the discussion of “Zen doctrine” in his introduction to the translation of Huang Po, John Blofeld addresses the topic of “Zen practice.” The practice he had in mind, and the one that he knew would need to be discussed, was meditation. The word “Zen” means “meditation” and this practice, variously conceived, has always been important to the tradition.<sup>3</sup> The issue of Zen meditation posed a serious problem for Blofeld’s understanding of his own book, however, because, as he admitted, Huang Po seemed to have very little to say about this topic. Uncertain about what to make of this absence in the Zen master, Blofeld wrote that “Huang Po seems to have assumed that his audience knew something about this practice – as most keen Buddhists do, of course.”<sup>4</sup> This was, of course, a sound assumption on Blofeld’s part: practitioners in a ninth-century Chinese Buddhist monastery would have known something about this practice, so much in fact that, whether a Zen text discusses it or not, we can be confident that this practice could be found not too far in the background of the discussion. Nevertheless, the question must be significant: if the origins and early centuries of the Zen tradition were heavily focused on seated meditation, why do we find in Huang Po and in the avant-garde Zen tradition of his time a relative disinterest in meditation? Why do we find the practice of meditation being so frequently criticized in the Zen monastic discourse of that period?

Answers to these historical questions can be found in a number of places. Let us take just one, however, as an impetus to our own reflections on the issue of theory and practice. It is clear from many sources that, in addition to their practice of silent meditation, Chinese Zen monks of this period pursued a theoretical practice aimed at rethinking the entire domain of meditation. One theory being practiced to this end claimed that there is nothing for meditative effort to achieve since all human beings already possess the “Buddha nature” that has been their birthright all along. Therefore, Ma-tsu, the lineage founder, would speak as if to absolve monks of the necessity of “constant sitting” because “everyday mind is the Way,” not the extraordinary mind of prolonged disciplinary sitting. Following Ma-tsu’s theory, Huang Po would instruct his followers that “since you are fundamentally complete in every respect, you should not try to supplement that perfection by such meaningless practices.”<sup>5</sup> This theory was taken to be worthy of considerable

<sup>3</sup> Foult is right, however, to insist that there is no single element of the Zen tradition that can legitimately be conceived as the essence of the tradition throughout its history (“The ‘Ch’an School”). <sup>4</sup> Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 19. <sup>5</sup> T. 48, p. 379c; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 30.

meditation; dedicated monks would “practice it day and night,” both when they were in seated meditation and when they were not.

In the time that Huang Po’s text was being composed, it appears that the relations between thought, practice, and all other activities were being radically reconceived. One form that this reconceptualization seems to have taken is a critique of the idea that meditation practice is a special activity located outside the domain of ordinary life. Meditation was thought to be more effectively practiced when it was not considered a separate and sacred dimension of life, but rather as the conscious awareness present in all human activity. If the point of meditation was to elevate the level of awareness in daily life, transforming all moments and all activities in enlightening ways, then raising meditation above and separating it from daily life would be counterproductive. Instead, meditation was to be universalized; that is, all acts, no matter how ordinary, were to be performed as though they too were meditative practices. Rather than limiting meditation to a certain number of hours in the meditation hall, monks were encouraged to live all moments of life meditatively, no matter what the external form of the activity currently under way. When properly theorized, meditative practice was to encompass everything: daily monastic labor, ordinary conversation, eating, bathing, breathing, and so on. When monks pondered the common Zen phrase, “In chopping wood and carrying water, therein lies the marvelous Way,” they were simply practicing the most transformative Zen theory of their time, a theory aimed at making all of life one continuous act of meditation.

One of the many forms that meditation could take was theoretical or philosophical reflection. Thus, “theory” could be refigured in the mind as “practice.” Although in some ways this may seem an odd conclusion, it would not have surprised anyone in the Buddhist tradition. On the contrary, from very early on, meditation was divided into two basic forms. One form (*samatha*) is non-discursive silence – stopping thought activity and pacifying the mind – and the other (*vipassana*) is philosophical meditation, a conceptual meditative practice. Zen meditation can be found abundantly in both kinds. When *zazen* takes a non-discursive form, the intention of its practice is to calm the mind of pointless and frenetic activity. In this case it seeks to clear away the meaningless chatter that obstructs mindful presence in the world; it opens the senses to experience the world in ways that are otherwise obscured. This is a non-discursive, non-conceptual practice, even though, upon reflection, theories can be found in the background: theories about the relationship

between silence and enlightenment, theories about what the mind is and how it can be transformed, theories about what reality is and how it can be experienced, not to mention practical theories about how to do it. In the actual practice, however, theory stands in the background, framing the practice by making it self-evident to practitioners why and how it might be performed.

When, on the other hand, *zazen* takes a linguistic and thoughtful form (*vipassana*), the mind is to be enlightened through a sustained transformation in thinking. In this case mental images provide the lens through which new dimensions of reality are opened to view. John Blofeld alludes to this in his discussion of Zen practice when he includes in a list of practices “unremitting effort to see all things in light of the truths we are learning.”<sup>6</sup> “Truths,” in the form of thoughts and images, shed a light on “all things” that transforms the way they are experienced. How things appear differs in accordance with alterations in the mental “light” that is shed on them. Light reflected through the doctrine of emptiness, for example, shows the world one way, while the doctrines of compassion, sudden enlightenment, and mind-to-mind transmission will display it in other ways. The point here is that, by traditional Zen standards, dwelling in Zen light by thinking its doctrines *is* Zen meditative practice.

This point, however, is frequently misunderstood. Both scholars and practitioners, east and west, tend to misrepresent the role of thought in meditation by holding to an untenable dichotomy between thought and meditation. Taking this point of departure, they might assume the obverse of Blofeld’s claim that “if we practice Zen it must surely be because we accept its cardinal doctrines” because one cherished doctrine in this tradition is that Zen is a religion without doctrines.<sup>7</sup> But this doctrine about Zen can neither account for itself nor the presence in Zen of precise forms of thought that support its sophisticated practice. Zen theory is a form of Zen practice that sustains other practices by showing how, why, and to what end they might be worth performing. It is not an optional addition to Zen practice. Although practitioners may proceed with practice on the belief that doctrine is dispensable, the net result is not non-doctrinal practice. Instead it is practice guided by doctrine that is naive and poorly developed, because it has not undergone thoughtful appraisal. Zen scholars have tended to accept this view of Zen without the critical evaluation that has been applied so carefully to other dimensions of Zen.

<sup>6</sup> Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> We should note that in later years Blofeld too began to teach that not only Zen but Buddhism itself did not depend upon doctrinal truths.

There are important limits, however, to this way of setting Zen theory over other forms of practice. Perhaps most important is the realization that all thinking or theory, whether religious or not, is already shaped by practice. The word “practice” here means, simply, “what we regularly do,” the patterns of activity that we share with others and that form our socially constructed world. Human practices, or patterns of activity, establish the background or context within which thought takes place. Everyone’s perception of the world and their sense of what is possible within it are pre-formed by these practical forms of life. They construct the basis or context for thinking. Although all human beings share this common ground, differences are significant. Our patterns of thought will come to be shaped quite differently depending on whether we spend many hours each day with others in *zazen* or farming or doing social work or analyzing the stock market. Each practice in each of these social worlds directs and shapes the mind with its own distinct language, set of concerns, hopes, and fears.

Therefore, from this angle of vision, we can see the role that practice plays in shaping theory, and thus, their reciprocal character. Intertwined, theory and practice continually shape each other. The way you live your life and the way you understand it are mutually determining. In Buddhist terms, they “co-arise,” neither one able to sustain itself in the absence of the other. “Practice” is the actualization and embodiment of theory, which, in implementing theory, continually hones, revises, and reorients the world view that gives rise to it. Reflective thinking seeks to make practice explicit, self-conscious, and subject to criticism and revision. It helps everyone continue asking: practice of what, why, and toward what end? These theoretical questions show the essential reciprocal relation between practice and theory in Zen and elsewhere.

In the Zen tradition, the purpose of saying that everything is religious practice is to bring daily life to awareness, to point out the patterns of daily activity to the one living them. This is a very productive theory. Anyone who practices it will be less likely to ignore any aspect of their life; cultivating the practice, they gradually perform each activity with greater and greater awareness. The danger of the theory that “everything is practice,” however, is that it may obscure the opposite point: that in the midst of the many practices people perform, a few are worth elevating because they have an important bearing on the quality of all others. Both meditation and philosophy might be placed in this group. “Everything is practice” should not be taken to mean that it doesn’t matter, therefore, which ones are chosen or how they are

placed in relation to each other. It does matter. Not all practices are equal in their qualitative powers. What the theory is meant to highlight is the state of mind in which all activities are performed. This should not, however, be confused with the question of which among the many activities are most worth choosing to do. When they do get confused, the danger is that, in attempting to elevate ordinary life, spiritual life is debased or lost. Although one goal in the Zen tradition is to eliminate the distinction between “ordinary” and “spiritual,” this elimination is only effective when the ordinary has been elevated to the level of the spiritual, and not vice versa. That the distinction is “empty” in Buddhist terms does not mean that it is without important function. Lacking some distinction like this, no transformative awakening would ever be sought, nor attained.

To test these meditations, an experiment in thought is productive. Reversing the idea that theory is actually practice, consider whether, in contrast, philosophy and meditation might both be regarded as theory. Framed in this way, both theoretical reflection and meditation could be considered “theory” insofar as both require a temporary step back out of ordinary life; they are exceptional practices requiring the suspension of ordinary practice. They are both temporary, artificial, experimental removals from worldly activities for the intended purpose of reconfiguring one’s overall orientation to daily life. Philosophical thought and silent meditation are the same in this fundamental respect. While all practical tasks are performed on the world, so to speak, these two practices suspend work on the world, requiring instead a self-conscious step back to work on the “spirit” of the performer him- or herself. It is in this sense that they are spiritual activities, in clear distinction from most other dimensions of daily activity or practice.

This gives us two seemingly contradictory alternatives. Is philosophical reflection really a form of practice, like all activities, or is it better to regard reflection and meditation as two forms of theoretical removal from ordinary life? In this case, we can have it both ways, since both bring into view some dimension of the matter inaccessible to the other perspective. In fact, it is counterproductive to think of either as the final word on the matter. “Skill-in-means” – the Buddhist virtue of flexibility in conception – is the ability to move in principle between points of view, each informing the other so that greater and greater comprehension results. Stopping short of this comprehension to finalize a doctrinal position is a self-imposed limitation that is unnecessary and misleading. While philosophical meditation is clearly a practice, like non-discursive

meditation, it is a practice that removes one from the practical sphere of everyday life so that greater perspective on life might be gained. The step back into theoretical practice is made in order that other practices might be transformed and elevated.

Stepping back out of the rush of everyday life to reflect or meditate is also, in effect, stepping back out of the self; it sets up an opportunity to consider being (theory), or to strive to be (practice), something other than what you have been so far. That is clearly the overarching point of Buddhist practice: to transcend yourself, to go beyond yourself, to become someone wiser, more insightful, more compassionate, more flexibly attuned to the world than the self you have been. In Zen Buddhism, this transformative process is deeply ensconced in institutional structures and is maintained over time in the form of relatively stable traditions. This, of course, does not match the image of Zen we find in much western literature where a significant degree of tension exists between “institutional structures” and the spirit of Zen. The iconoclastic dimensions of Zen are interpreted frequently to encourage the search for enlightened self-transcendence on one’s own, individually, thus avoiding the alienating features of hardened institutions and overbearing traditions. This form of individualism, however, is rarely found in East Asia, in the Zen tradition or elsewhere. Even where it is found, it has been made possible by the traditions and institutions that encourage individuals to consider such a quest. Lacking institutions and traditions altogether, Buddhists don’t inherit the “thought of enlightenment” at all, in any of its forms; they would not receive the bequest of models, ideals, images, and symbols, all of which give rise to the quest, sustain it and, on occasion, bring it to fruition. In every culture, institutional traditions place images of excellence before individuals and lay out for consideration the alternative forms of practice at their disposal. As has been the case in most traditions of self-cultivation, “transcendence” occurred in Zen through processes of idealization, the projection and internalization of ideal images of human cultivation handed down from one generation to another in the form of traditions by the institutions responsible for them. Zen monks studied the masters before them, in person and in literary image, and then adapted their own comportment to those models. Through these texts and these ideals, monks studied who they could be and what kinds of practice might be entailed in attaining those identities. The initial posture required in this practice of self-cultivation would have been one of self-effacement before images of excellence – the enlightened masters of Zen. Imitation of

these ideals was neither unenlightening nor impossible since monks understood these images of excellence to be instances or models of their own true nature – the Buddha nature inherent within them.

Placing emphasis on the institutional “givenness” of these cultural ideals as they are experienced by practitioners, and upon the imitative reappropriation of these ideals, should not be taken to imply, however, that the self’s role in Zen practice was simply passive, or that the tradition was so conservative that it was not open to change. Accordingly, we should notice that classical Zen texts project not just one image of excellence but thousands of them – an enormous pantheon of historical and historically constructed saints. The repertoire of possible ways to be a self was immense, showing that previous efforts to construct an enlightened identity each demanded some degree of differentiation. Emptied of previous selves, monks were initiated into processes of constructing identities by synthesizing and reshaping the variety of patterns bequeathed to them through the tradition. “Established convention” and “distinctive identity” were not held to be in opposition since the established models *were* distinct identities, and since one’s own act of self-construction would inevitably push in some new direction.

Indeed, as we have seen, one of the most intriguing images in the texts is the example of Zen masters rejecting convention and refusing to follow custom and pattern. This custom was itself a focal point of imitation, a pattern of Zen practice. Although the quest for enlightened life begins when the practitioner is moved by admiration to imitate the image of previous masters, the practice of imitation is not itself enlightened behavior. It does begin the quest, however, by teaching the practitioner how to recognize his or her own deficiency in relation to the model and how to begin the process of self-modification.

Through this process, each participant defines a distinct relationship to traditional resources, and, in doing so, the tradition is transformed. Newly revised images of the ideal emerge as new generations adapt the tradition to new circumstances. It is here, perhaps, that we find the greatest theoretical strength of the Buddhist tradition. In the wake of the doctrines of no-self, impermanence, dependent origination, and emptiness, human beings could easily be understood in flexible and non-essentialist terms, as capable of differentiated possibilities. Indeed, the greatest of the traditional Zen masters were understood to be innovators, who, like Huang Po, put substantial pressure on the traditions they were inheriting. Like others before and after him, Huang Po was expected to “go beyond” the figures of excellence that he had idealized and imitated.



Lacking a fixed essence, what possibility for human cultural transformation could be ruled out in advance?

The tension between traditional models of excellence (the results of prior activities of “going beyond”) and the current act of going beyond those models through critical innovation is potent in its creative force. Positive idealization gives substance and concrete shape to the tradition; critical appropriation builds the tradition by pushing it beyond its old forms into further refinement or reformulation. Zen practice requires correlating these positive and negative functions so that they sustain each other over time.

Each practitioner had to do this on his or her own. Doing it, however, required “awakening.” Only when stirred out of complacency do practitioners ask crucial questions. In the Zen tradition, one of the critical functions of the awakened masters like Huang Po was to expose the sleepy routines of everyday life, to show the ways in which even Zen discourse tended to objectify and substantialize the self, such that “the self” became a topic about which one could hold forth, all the while forgetting *who* it was that was holding forth. To counteract this tendency in discourse, Zen masters sought to force the self as “I” into manifestation, to bring the self out of its place of hiding within the language and customs of the tradition. When Hui-hai Ta-chu, the “great pearl,” came to the master Ma-tsu to study Zen, Ma-tsu shocked him with the question, “why are you here searching when you already possess the treasure you’re looking for?” “What treasure?” In response to which Ma-tsu replied: “The one who is right now questioning me.”<sup>8</sup> This was Ma-tsu’s favorite line and the text has him present it to all of his students at precisely the right moment: the moment when, through prior cultivation, the “I” is prepared to emerge into self-awareness. This is about *you*, not “the self” in general, or some other self! Who are *you*, and what are *you* doing? When, on another occasion, Ma-tsu was asked, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?” he bent the inquiry back upon the asker: “What is the meaning of your asking at precisely this moment?”

As a question posed to modern, western interpreters of Zen, Ma-tsu’s question could hardly be improved upon. What is the meaning of “our” asking at precisely this moment in our own history? Why are we interested, and what is the point of the modern western engagement with Buddhism? Asking these questions brings our own act of reading and

<sup>8</sup> Pas, *The Recorded Sayings of Ma-tsu*, p. 94.

thinking into view. Who are we, the ones who engage in these meditations across cultural and historical lines? These questions are crucial for the reflective reader of Zen Buddhism today. They are also similar to questions that Zen texts like *Huang Po* sought to evoke in meditative readers of earlier times. The connection between these questions across historical eras is the focus on self-awareness. Thus we realize that when we are studying Zen, what we are also inevitably studying is . . . ourselves, regardless of when we are studying or why. And that, clearly, is the point of Huang Po's Zen. Realizing this, and imagining the gleam in Huang Po's eye, is all that it takes to bring these meditations to fruition.