

FREEDOM: the practice of constraint

One must not act as one pleases . . . One must submit to all the restrictions.

*Pure Regulations of Zen*¹

The master said to the assembly: “When the great function works, it does not follow rules.”

*Transmission of the Lamp*²

The obvious tension between the images of Zen contained in the two quotes above provides an intriguing entrance into our theme in this chapter. On the one hand, a thorough reading of Zen literature will disclose the prominence given in the tradition to regulation, hierarchy, authority, and constraint. Living in a Zen monastery requires a thorough-going renunciation of many dimensions of freedom. On the other hand, we can see that Zen masters were widely thought to be rule breakers, free-spirited individuals whose “awakening” enabled them to laugh uproariously in the face of normal social constraint. So, which is the “real” Zen? Or if both images are true to the Zen tradition, how are they to be reconciled?

Freedom is an issue of considerable importance in Zen, and an issue that has been at the forefront of western interpretations of Zen since the very beginning. The background to our interest in this issue is the obvious prominence of “freedom” as a symbol in modern western thought. Western minds, already attuned to the significance of “freedom,” have been particularly attracted to this side of Zen.

Writing in the 1970s, and looking back over the brief history of western encounter with “Zen,”³ John Blofeld, by then one of the best

¹ *Pure Regulations of Zen*, trans. G. Foulk, in “The Ch’an School,” p. 82.

² Lu K’uan Yu, *Ch’an and Zen Teachings*, p. 209.

³ It is an irony of history that, at the same time that “Buddhist” interpreters in the Maoist-guided Chinese Buddhist Association were developing an understanding of “Buddhist Freedom” that would align with the particular communal demands of Proletarian Liberation, early western interpreters of “Beat Zen” were developing an understanding of “liberation” in radically individualistic terms as the freedom from authority, convention, and “society” at large.

known “transmitters” of Buddhism to the west, could see that “The recent widespread Western interest in Ch’an (Zen) owes much to the appeal of . . . unconventional ‘shock tactics’ and also to the sect’s seeming iconoclasm . . . as exemplified by the anecdote applauding a monk who chopped up a wooden image of the Buddha to provide a fire against the cold of a winter’s night.”⁴ Blofeld’s synthesis of western representations of Zen from this period focuses for the most part on the image of the Zen master as having attained a working liberation from social convention and all forms of cultural constraint. Taking their cues from the sacred biographies in classic Zen texts like *The Transmission of the Lamp*, their translations and interpretations imagined the great masters of the “golden age” of Zen as iconoclasts who scoffed at all traditional forms of authority. Their Zen rejection is pictured as radical and thorough-going; true masters repudiate authority in the form of teachers, texts, customs, and traditions. The story perhaps most often called upon to form this image is the account of the return of Lin-chi to Mount Huang Po, where, upsetting all hierarchy and deference, he slaps the abbot and master, Huang Po.⁵

The themes animating this narrative are not unusual in the classical Zen canon; indeed, they are paradigmatic. Enlightenment narratives for most of the great masters of Zen include at least one act in which some form of authority is radically rejected. Many of these are instances of rejecting the tradition, such as Te-shan ripping up the Buddhist sutras, freeing himself from their heteronomous power over him, or similarly, Nan-ch’uan’s claims that, at the moment of sudden awakening, he “freed himself from all that he had learned”⁶ in several decades of traditional study. More than anything else, however, the power of traditional authority was symbolized in the monastic hierarchy, particularly in the abbot or master from whom the “teachings” would be received. Rejection of any such authority was universalized for western readers by the importance given to the radical Zen admonition that, “if you see the Buddha [the apex of centralized authority], kill him!”

More specific instructions along these same iconoclastic lines are easy to locate in the canon. Huang Po is recorded as instructing monks that, “having listened to the profoundest doctrines, monks must behave as though a light breeze had caressed their ears, a gust had passed away in the blink of an eye. By no means should they attempt to follow such doctrines.”⁷ True practice,

⁴ Blofeld, *Beyond the Gods*, p. 118. ⁵ T. 47, p. 504c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 52.

⁶ T. 51, p. 257. ⁷ T. 48, p. 384a; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 103.

it seemed, required that one ceased “following” altogether; subservience to any form of authority seemed contrary to the image of the great masters’ autonomy. The opening “discourse” section of the *Lin-chi lu* is replete with admonitions against dependence on authority: “what I want to point out to you is that you must not accept the deluding views of others.”⁸ Given their tendencies to just such acceptance, Lin-chi laments that “students nowadays know nothing of Dharma. They are just like sheep that take into their mouths whatever their noses happen to hit against.”⁹ Contemptuous of monks’ failure to be independent, Lin-chi scolds them, saying:

Followers of the Way, you seize upon words from the mouths of those old masters and take them to be the true Way [and say]: “These good teachers are wonderful, and I, simple-minded fellow that I am, don’t dare measure such old worthies.” Blind idiots! You go through your entire life holding such views, betraying your own two eyes. Trembling with fright, like donkeys on an icy path, [you say to yourselves:] “I don’t dare disparage these good teachers for fear of making karma with my mouth!”

Followers of the Way, it is only the great teacher who dares to disparage the buddhas, dares to disparage the patriarchs, to reject the teachings of the Tripitaka.”¹⁰

These iconoclastic themes struck a chord of recognition and agreement among early western readers of Zen texts. Zen monks seemed to reject tradition, authority, and hierarchy in their quest for a form of enlightenment which, like western “enlightenment,” incorporated freedom in the form of independence and autonomy into its image of greatness. This correspondence between ideals, however, should give us pause for reflection, allowing us to consider whether this reading of Zen has to some extent served to foster the interests and tastes already in the possession of modern interpreters rather than to bring them into scrutiny. Could it be that the modern western valorization of autonomous reason over authority, personal insight over tradition, and individuality over collectivity has so set the stage and parameters for western interpretations of Zen that the ideals and virtues of that very distant tradition would have been overshadowed by more familiar themes from western thought?¹¹

⁸ T. 47, p. 497b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 7.

⁹ T. 47, p. 498a; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 12. Note that, although the image of the sheep is a metaphor of uncritical acceptance like the one in western languages, there is a crucial difference. The failure of individual discrimination is seen, not in the sheep’s tendency to follow others, but in its failure to eat selectively.

¹⁰ T. 47, p. 499b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 19.

¹¹ Charles Taylor traces the history of the European concept of freedom as self-determination in *Sources of the Self*.

Several dimensions of the texts give rise to this suspicion.¹² The most important of these reflect the thoroughly collective or communal context within which these texts were studied and practiced. The communal structure of classical Zen life could hardly have encouraged the kinds of radical individualism both valued and assumed by early western practitioners of Zen. By the later T'ang, monasteries of the Zen sect were large, highly structured, and often somewhat isolated institutions. In some cases, like on Mount Huang Po, their relative isolation meant that they operated as a society in and of themselves.¹³ Like all other dimensions of Chinese society, Zen monasteries were organized hierarchically – everyone's exact place in the distribution of power, from the newest recruit to the abbot himself, was very clear. Rules and regulations structured all activities and all interaction, both within the monastery and in its dealings with the outside world.¹⁴ Before the Sung dynasty, the traditional Buddhist *vinaya* code of rules as it had been adapted to Chinese society was in effect in Zen monasteries. This code included precepts for ethical conduct, regulations for decision making and

¹² One of these might have been the possession of slaves by monks, nuns, and monasteries during this period of Chinese history. If "freedom" in the sense that we understood it was an important goal of Zen, then how could slavery have been practiced in Zen monasteries? Nevertheless, we are familiar with a similar disjunction in American history. Early colonialists and constitutionalists were singularly focused on the issue of "freedom." Yet that focus did not come into sustained conflict with the institution of slavery until the mid-nineteenth century. Concerning slavery on Mount Huang Po, we know nothing. It is very likely, however, that at least some Zen monks and nuns followed the general Chinese Buddhist practice of slave ownership. At the height of Huang Po's career, in 842, a court decision attempting to reduce the size, wealth, and power of the Buddhist clergy decreed that monks would legally be allowed only one male slave and nuns two female slaves. On this issue see Weinstein, *Buddhism Under the T'ang*, p. 119, and Bols, *This Culture of Ours*, p. 22.

¹³ This is not to say, however, that they were independent of the larger socio-economic world of South-central China. Although their projected image of self-sufficient communes, thriving on their own practice of labor, is important, that image does not fit the historical picture that we now have of the majority of these monasteries. While their own labor was a factor in the support of monastery life, dependence on lay patronage grew as Zen became more fully established in China. Monasteries were also enriched by collecting rent on land owned by the institution and by the sale of surplus produce. Since monasteries like Huang Po sometimes housed as many as 1,000 practicing monks, or even more, these required substantial economic bases to keep them going. Interdependence with the larger world of China was inevitable, no matter how much isolation they may have cultivated. See Collcutt, *Five Mountains*, chapter 7.

¹⁴ Fouk suggests the implementation of anthropological theories of "liminality" to understand the purposeful rule breaking and unconventional behavior that occurred in the ceremony of the abbot's "ascending the hall." In this case the rules permit blatant rule breaking within prescribed limits, especially the limits of time and place. Outside these limits, rule breaking becomes simply rule breaking, a punishable infringement rather than an enlightening activity. ("The Ch'an School," p. 36). This may be part of what Faure has in mind when he notes that "a constant dialectic between routinization and nonconformism seems at work in Chan" (*The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, pp. 16–17).

administration, and, in unbelievable detail, rules of behavior, speech, and etiquette for individual monks and nuns.

When the “Pure Regulations” of Zen monastic life (*ch’ing-kuei*) were adopted in the Sung, the collective character of Zen life and these regulations were emphasized further. Collective labor, collective meditation, collective meals, collective *dharma* discussions, collective sleeping arrangements – all of these came to be institutionalized with the new codes, thus possibly giving Zen a more thorough “collective” character than any previous form of Buddhism.¹⁵ Virtually no dimension of Zen monastic life depended upon individual preference and personal decision making. Freedom, in the form of autonomy at least, was not an important consideration. As the *Pure Regulations of Zen* put it: “One must not act as one pleases . . . One must submit to all the restrictions.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, in the midst of this “community of constraint,” “freedom” came to be an essential defining feature of the community’s purpose. This juxtaposition was clearly problematic for early modern interpreters of Zen, and, as a result, English translations and descriptions of “Zen life” featured those stories that seemed to show either lack of constraint or the willful act of throwing off constraint. The union of these two, freedom and constraint, seemed to be unthinkable. Isn’t “freedom” the absence of “constraint?” Zen Buddhists must not have thought so; otherwise how could they come to believe that freedom would be the outcome of this life of monastic restriction?

Two brief points will help us begin to work our way beyond this modern stumbling block. The first is that freedom is always “dependent” upon some structure of limitation in terms of which it will come to be defined or understood as free. “Acting freely” can only take place against a background of constraints: alternative choices, the possibility of unfree acts, and all the stage-setting features of any context of understanding. We cannot imagine a world without such constraints, without alternative paths and elaborate structures. If we could, we would see that such a world would not include freedom. Freedom is, in an important sense, always a movement in and among constraints. Point 2 follows from the first. If freedom and constraint are always to be found together, we can imagine ourselves, or Zen monks, freely accepting limitations on our individual will in order to make possible forms of freedom beyond those

¹⁵ This point is made in an interesting way by Foulk in noticing that monastic structure in India often separated monks into individual cells for meditating and sleeping, and that Chinese monastic style was fundamentally communal (“The Ch’an School,” p. 375).

¹⁶ Foulk, “The Ch’an School,” p. 82.

surrendered. The choice to accept such limitations is already an act of freedom. Zen monks joining a monastery voluntarily place themselves into a context of severe restraint.¹⁷ Why? Because in this free choice they inherit forms of freedom that would not be “choosable” otherwise. This theme is certainly not absent in modernity. Both “social contract” theory and theory of democracy imply that greater freedom becomes possible through the communal choice of constraint in certain areas. Perhaps closer to the case of Zen is the modern, “Kantian” doctrine that freedom consists precisely in choosing moral constraint – freely adhering to ethical norms lifts you out of causal necessities otherwise determining your existence. In each of these cases we can see that even in “modernity” individualism must be set into some larger context in order to make sense. Nevertheless, the focus of modern thought is on the individual and not on his or her implied relationship to something beyond the self.

We can see these individualist tendencies in the attention given by modern interpreters of Zen to acts and discourses which seem to reject all forms of “following.”¹⁸ What these interpretations have failed to notice, however, is that a reflexive paradox informs each such rejection in the text: readers are asked to follow the writer or speaker by accepting the plea to reject “following.” Huang Po’s discourse record had said: “having listened to the profoundest doctrines, monks must behave as though a light breeze had caressed their ears, a gust had passed away in the blink of an eye. By no means should they attempt to follow such doctrines.”¹⁹ Although “following” appears to have been rejected in this passage, the very next sentence calls for a new act of following, one already implicit in the first two sentences. It says: “To act in accordance with these injunctions is to achieve profundity.” Release or freedom from authoritative injunctions takes the status of a new injunction, authorized by no less an authority than the monastery’s abbot, Huang Po himself. Presupposed in the monastic context of the time was that experiencing the point of Zen practice would require this injunction to be heeded.

¹⁷ It is important to recognize here, however, that not all monks in medieval China joined the monastery out of free choice. Various constraints sometimes obligated them; economic vicissitudes, family pressure, and many other factors can be seen to be involved. Some boys were assigned or given to the monastic institution long before they had reached the age of decision making. Nevertheless, the ideal required free choice.

¹⁸ We can see this tendency in early western Zen literature from the “Beat Zen” of Jack Kerouac to the more academic style of Watts and Fromm, but also, and more influentially, in the English language writings of D. T. Suzuki who drew upon Western proclivities in introducing Zen to the west. ¹⁹ T. 48, p. 384a.

Although this injunction against following injunctions might be seen to put the monk in something of a bind, I suspect that this bind was only rarely experienced. For the most part, the act of “rejection” would have had a specific target within the bounds of intra-tradition debate, and would not have been taken to be universally applicable, especially not reflexively. The text, its writer, and the speaker it projects were all seeking a following. This can be seen inconspicuously throughout Zen literature, where, for example, the *Lin-chi lu* has the master say things like: “Take my viewpoint”²⁰ or, “See it my way.”²¹ The writing of the text, just like any original speaking of the words that may have occurred, presupposes the propriety of following, or acceptance, and of accord with its version of the tradition. Lin-chi, like the other great creators of the Zen tradition, is a rhetorician – he seeks to be persuasive, to teach, guide, and reveal through various forms of discursive practice. And persuasion always seeks a following.

Moreover, “following” is what Lin-chi himself should be understood as doing. Individualistic connotations ought not to be read into translated phrases such as “my way” or “my point of view.” This becomes clear when the text has Lin-chi say: “As for *my* understanding, it’s not different from that of the patriarchs and buddhas.”²² Lin-chi follows them; he stands fully within a lineage that he has appropriated into himself through decades of “following.” After all, Lin-chi addresses his interlocutors as “Followers of the Way” – *Tao-shun*. The “*shun*” are those who accord, comply, and follow a “way” which is not self-made and which stands beyond any individual participant in the lineage as the ground of the lineage itself. This “way” exists as a standard etched into images of “buddhas and patriarchs.” Accord with this standard – an act of following – is quite clearly what the text enjoins, as, for example, when the *Lin-chi lu* says: “If you want to be no different from the buddhas and patriarchs, just see things this way” (*ju shih chien*).²³

Judging from the perspective of the institutions which produced and sustained these texts, it is unlikely that anyone in this tradition would have understood the charting of this “way” as an individual endeavor. On the contrary, the “way” was that to which all individuality would be subordinated. So when the *Lin-chi lu* has the master gather a following by urging readers to “take my viewpoint,” or “see it my way,” the “my”

²⁰ T. 47, p. 497b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 9.

²¹ T. 47, p. 497b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 8.

²² T. 47, p. 502a; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 32.

²³ T. 47, p. 499c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 20.

is not a formal, personal possessive. Lin-chi understands himself as belonging to the way and not vice versa. For this reason he takes great pains to see that his understanding is “not different from that of the Patriarchs and Buddhas.”²⁴

If Lin-chi is “no different” than Huang Po and the entire Zen tradition, how could he be said to have “gone beyond” them? Like his predecessors in the lineage, Lin-chi has attained freedom. He is “no different” in that the “seal” placed upon his mind through subordination to the tradition includes, perhaps as its defining feature, the “stamp” of freedom.²⁵ The content of freedom – what it looks like and what it is – will differ. Each freedom will have “gone beyond” its predecessors. Nevertheless, the focus in Zen was on the ways in which this “stamp of differentiation” occurred through the surrender of “self.” In the act of turning yourself over to the tradition, there is “no self.” Lacking fixed identity, “going beyond” would be possible. As we saw when we considered Zen “historical consciousness,” however, images of previous “transcendence” tend to be erased from the “transmission” histories. When new images of freedom make their appearance, the biographies of past masters were updated to include these previously neglected dimensions of “their” enlightenment. Given *that* they were enlightened, the identities of the “ancients” would be revised throughout history in accordance with current, updated images of what it means to be enlightened. Accordingly, the “ancient Buddhas of India” are pictured speaking Sung-dynasty Chinese *koan* language. Through the practices of textuality, the “Patriarchs and buddhas” came to be “not different” than the recent Zen masters who had “gone beyond” them.

Being “not different,” however, is not the image of greatness projected by modern western Zen whose practitioners would turn to Zen in the wake of European romanticism precisely in an effort to differentiate themselves. This twentieth-century tradition could not help but absorb the values of modern individualism and to read Zen from the only perspective available to it. We can see this influence in an extreme form in

²⁴ T. 47, p. 499c; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 32.

²⁵ Two models of this process are attractive. One places identity and difference in sequence. The monk first appropriates the tradition by gaining its identity and then enters into the dialectical process of differing from himself. The past is transmitted as paradigm and challenge. Becoming an instance of the tradition, one then seeks differentiation through challenge and critique. The second model has these two processes occurring simultaneously. Because acts of identification occur in new contexts, critique and differentiation take place all along. It may not be necessary to choose between these models. They may overlap in that, although differentiation is never absent, more important consequences for the tradition follow from it at more advanced stages.

the autobiography of Alan Watts, entitled, appropriately, *In My Own Way*.²⁶ Although the character Tao is inscribed on the cover of the book, the emphasis in the text is clearly on the word “own.” Watts had undertaken to establish his “own way” so that acts of “following” could be avoided altogether. Autobiography – the self’s own constructive narrative – is the proper genre for this act of establishment, and a genre absent from the literature of the Zen tradition.²⁷ “Self establishment” is in an important sense the obverse of central themes in classical Zen literature because there the image of “accord” takes precedence. Overcoming self-assertion, the self is emptied so that accord with a “way” (tao) or a “path” (lu) can occur. Taking this difference seriously, and linking it to different forms of self-understanding, we can begin to get greater perspective on the kind of “freedom” experienced through the Zen rejection of authority and tradition.²⁸

A crucial question concerning freedom and authority is posed directly in the *Lin-chi lu*. It asks: “What is meant by ‘burning the sutras and images?’”²⁹ This is precisely what we need to understand – what do iconoclastic acts mean in Zen? The master answers: “Having seen that the sequence of causal relations is empty, that mind is empty, and that *dharma*s are empty – thus your single thought being decisively cut off, you’ve nothing to do – this is called burning the sutras and images. Virtuous monks, reach such understanding as this, and you’ll be free.”³⁰ How should we understand this response and its implied notion of freedom? We can begin by examining a simplified version of its structure. The sentence takes the form of: “Having seen X, Y, and Z, *this* is burning the sutras and *this* yields freedom.” What, then, fills in the content of X, Y, and Z? “Having seen or realized that causal relations are empty, mind is empty, and *dharma*s are empty.” Rephrasing, we might say: “Having realized ‘emptiness’ (*k’ung*) – *this* is burning the sutras, *this* is freedom.” If we now ask ourselves – what is the point of the Mahayana sutras being burned? – the answer is, quite clearly, “emptiness.” So, rephrasing once more, we could say: “Having realized the

²⁶ Watts, *In My Own Way*.

²⁷ Although one Zen text, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, reads in certain sections like autobiography, it is now clear that the text was not authored by Hui-neng and that its various narratives are better regarded as an early form of discourse record or *yu-lu* literature, which in this case were composed to serve strong political and polemical purposes.

²⁸ Frithjof Bergmann works insightfully on the necessary link between forms of self-understanding and corresponding forms of freedom in *On Being Free*.

²⁹ T. 47, p. 502b; Sasaki; *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 36.

³⁰ T. 47, p. 502b; Sasaki; *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 36.

essential point of the sutras – *this* is burning the sutras, *this* is freedom.” Freedom from the objective and heteronomous authority of scripture, therefore, results from an in-depth realization of its meaning. Appropriating or “digesting” the sutras into oneself overcomes their authoritarian “otherness.”

Interpreted in this light, the famous image of Te-shan ripping up the sutras in liberated ecstasy is the image of Te-shan in the moment of having appropriated and internalized them. Is Te-shan destroying the text and subverting its authority because his realization is in conflict with that projected by the text? Clearly not. Te-shan’s realization is understood to be an actualization of the same “way” that gave rise to the Buddha’s realization which is written into the sutra, just as Te-shan’s realization is imprinted into the textual account of his iconoclastic act.³¹ The freedom Te-shan receives *through* the sutra includes within it a dimension of freedom *from* it, and it is in this respect that “going beyond” will have occurred. The second dimension of freedom, however, is acknowledged to be a function of the first.

That iconoclastic acts are not denunciations of an authority that has been broken and overcome is similarly implied in the life of Lin-chi. After having slapped his teacher, Huang Po, thus flaunting his freedom from Buddhist authority, Lin-chi settles down in the monastery to study under the master, possibly for as long as two decades. The liberating act of “casting off” was incorporated into a more encompassing intention directed toward communal practice which included obedience, loyalty, and learning. It is these latter virtues that our early renderings of Zen “freedom” were unable to accommodate.

For those of us who have been raised in a modern European cultural tradition, this co-operation of freedom and obedient subsumption to authority is difficult to conceptualize. Modern western thought has tended to place freedom and obedience in a dichotomous relation. In the wake of Enlightenment-era thinkers, we tend to assume that recognition of and obedience to any authority prevents the free use of one’s own autonomous resources. Similarly, from the various forms of romanticism, to which we owe much of our interest in Zen and cultural otherness, we learn that obedience to traditional authority prevents the development of one’s own creative, imaginative spirit. These cultural

³¹ The change here is simply that, for some readers in the epoch of Zen ascendancy, the Te-shan text about text-ripping made for a more provocative narrative than those purportedly being ripped. This would not, however, have authorized anyone in the tradition to claim that Te-shan, or the discourse record of his act, was “more enlightened” than the Buddha or his sutras.

preferences and decisions can now demonstrate to us why our western interpretations of Zen have ignored the monastic institutional setting within which radical, iconoclastic acts of freedom were performed. Our interpretations of these acts have assumed and required a background picture of the Zen masters as individuals free of all communal context, liberated from ties to socially ordained ideals and projects.

As a more complete account of the historical, institutional setting of classical Zen becomes available, a paradox emerges for the western interpreter of Zen. The paradox is this: the pursuit of freedom in Zen was understood to be actualized in the act of surrendering one's freedom to a cultural institution and to those individuals who currently represent it. Not only was it assumed that subsumption to authority is not antithetical to freedom, such subsumption was understood in classical Zen to be the primary condition of freedom's possibility. Recognizing the finitude of his own ability both to conceive of and to achieve freedom, the postulant freely chooses a career of following. This act of subordination requires a set of correlate beliefs – minimally, that the Zen master does embody the freedom he teaches and, through compassion, does in fact seek the postulant's subsequent liberation. Typically, the authority of the Zen master is conceded in proportion to his reputation and image, and commands freely given consent in that same proportion.³² Moreover, the achievement of freedom by individual practitioners does not terminate their ties to the communal, institutional setting. Indeed, the greater the career, the more those bonds may have been imposed and accepted. The two posthumous names affixed to Huang Po's career show this juxtaposition. The final sentence of his "transmission" biography reads: "The Royal Court bestowed upon him the posthumous name, 'Zen Master Free of Limitations,' and named his pagoda, 'Expansive Karma.'"³³ Karma is "limitation" itself, and it "expands" everywhere. "Freedom" becomes manifest within it. Karma is one limitation from which freedom cannot occur since it makes freedom both possible and available. Huang Po's achievement of freedom, proclaims the Royal Court, will be disseminated throughout the Empire, the expansive realm of karma.

One way to achieve greater perspective on this issue is to consider the role that 'imitation' had in the daily life of Zen practitioners. Understood as a form of submission and renunciation of autonomy,

³² In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer contextualizes and shows the limits of Enlightenment-era dichotomies between freedom and authority, thus offering ways to conceive of premodern forms of freedom. ³³ T. 51, p. 266.

imitation is often taken in modern western thought to represent an antithesis to freedom. Thus we ask of the Zen texts: to what extent was imitation of the master, or of discursively projected images of masters, thought to entail a renunciation of freedom, and to what extent was the imitation of authority figures assumed to be a means of attaining the freedom already possessed by these masters? What, in brief, was the place of imitation in Zen monastic practice?

Our first response to this issue must be that a potent critique of imitation is ubiquitous to classical Zen texts. Rote memorization and mindless repetition were subjected to heavy ridicule by the great teachers. These passages are particularly interesting and we will have occasion to look at several very closely. But one hermeneutical justification for our interest in them is the fact that western interpretations of Zen have inevitably selected these passages as representative of the best of the Zen tradition. One need not look far for the background to our interest here – enlightenment-era critiques of imitation, arising from both science and its romantic opposition, have sharpened our propensities as moderns to see an act of imitation as “unoriginal,” “uncreative,” and “unfree.” On the basis of those modern critiques we have quite naturally been deeply appreciative of what has appeared to be a forceful statement of a similar sentiment in Zen texts. Once again, the Zen tradition seems to have added justification and sanction to our deepest instincts: those who copy have failed the crucial test of autonomy. Freedom and imitation are mutually exclusive.

Perhaps the most famous passage relative to the theme of imitation is the following which I quote in paraphrase from a *koan* text, the *Wu-men kuan* (*The Gateless Barrier*):

In place of conventional instruction, the master, Chu-chih would guide his disciples to enlightenment merely by lifting a finger. On one occasion, a disciple imitated him. Responding to a question from a visitor, he simply raised a finger the way he had seen his master do it. When Chu-chih heard about this, he took a knife and cut off the disciple's finger. Crying out in pain, the disciple began to run away. The master then called to him and as the young monk turned around, he saw the master lifting his finger. At that moment he was enlightened and realized that simple imitation is insufficient. The experience must appear from within.³⁴

Not only does the story assert the inadequacies of imitation, but also, at least by suggestion, it links the critique of imitation with enlightenment

³⁴ *Wu-men kuan*, case 3.

itself. Experiencing the failure of imitation seems to have evoked an experience of “awakening.” In another passage, we find Lin-chi scolding his disciples for their acts of imitation: “Followers of the Way, you seize upon words from the mouths of those old masters and take them to be the true Way [and say]: ‘These good teachers are wonderful, and I simple-minded fellow that I am, don’t dare measure such old worthies.’ Blind idiots!”³⁵

Imitation inevitably involves some form of self-deprecation, a subordination which in the case of Lin-chi seems to be under criticism. A story about the master Huang Po, immortalized by its selection for a *koan* collection, finds a metaphor for the imitator. Criticizing his followers for their very act of following, Huang Po drives them out of the *dharma* hall with a stick, yelling: “You’re just a bunch of dreg-drinkers.”³⁶ Henceforth, all imitators were to be called “dreg-drinkers,” based upon the ancient Chinese belief that those who drink the dregs of the wine bottle partake of leftovers, remains from others who have come first and who have consumed all that is truly worthy of consumption. The dreg-drinking imitator draws upon the resources of others and is not self-sustaining.

Although this textual evidence seems to support a straightforward critique of imitation, other passages complicate the issue, either by enjoining imitation or by failing to notice any conflict between imitation and authentic freedom. In a passage toward the end of the *Chun-Chou Record*, Huang Po is lecturing to his followers on how they ought to perform a meditative practice in the midst of daily activities. While the implication is perfectly clear that they ought to follow his instructions and do as he says, he finally comes right out and says what, from the perspective above, ought not to be said: “Why not copy me,” he says, “by letting each thought go as if it were nothing, as if it were decaying wood or stone.”³⁷ Indeed, it is not without good reason that the bulk of Zen texts from this period consist in descriptions of the acts and sayings of the great masters, recorded and codified for mimetic purposes. The image of the Zen master is the image of awakened perfection set out before practitioners for the specific purpose of imitative repetition.

Elsewhere, we find Huang Po honing the critique further while, at the same time, dissolving any necessary conflict between imitative obedience and the way of freedom. The text says: “Furthermore, if one does

³⁵ T. 47, p. 499b; Sasaki, *The Recorded Sayings of Lin-chi*, p. 19.

³⁶ *Pi-yen lu*, case 11. This story appears earlier in many Zen collections.

³⁷ T. 48, p. 383b; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 62.

not actually realize the truth of Zen from one's own experience, but simply learns it verbally and collects words, and claims to understand Zen, how can one solve the riddle of life and death? Those who neglect their old master's teachings will soon be led far astray".³⁸ Two messages converge here: that one must not "neglect [one's] old master's teachings" by failing to appropriate it in imitative practice *and* that merely memorizing, repeating, and following the script is one way to neglect the teachings. In the latter case, the teachings are neglected through a failure to take them up into one's own experience and self. This is a failure in appropriation, a "digestive" failure. What we find, then, is a distinction made between an authentic practice of imitation and an inauthentic miming that never penetrates to the depths of experiential practice. Imitation itself is not antithetical to freedom, only certain forms of it.

By what implicit criteria has the distinction been made between appropriate imitation and imitation as failure? The scope of valid imitation is suggested in the following advice from Huang Po: "This is not something which you can accomplish without effort, but when you reach the point of clinging to nothing whatever, you will be acting as the Buddhas act. This will indeed be acting in accordance with the saying: Develop a mind which rests on nothing whatsoever."³⁹ Followers here are enjoined to follow two dimensions of their ideal. First, "acting as the Buddhas act" projects the appropriate model for imitative acts; followers are to be like the Buddha. Second, "acting in accordance with a saying" specifies where one would look to get a glimpse of how Buddhas did, in fact, act. This source is "saying" – the language and discourse of the tradition. Act and saying converge here since the way the Buddhas acted is only available in the linguistically constituted forms of the tradition. Notice, however, what it is in the Buddha's acts and discourse that this passage encourages the reader to grasp and to copy: "Develop a mind which rests on nothing whatsoever"; "when you reach the point of clinging to nothing whatever, you will be acting as the Buddhas act." The one image that continues to stand amidst the various postures of critique and subversion in Zen is the image of the great masters in their liberating act of release – the non-clinging, non-grasping, selfless form of freedom. We return to the character of freedom as release later; the crucial point here is that this freedom is actualized in imitative practice wherein the practitioner learns to put him or herself

³⁸ T. 51, p. 266c; Chang, *Original Teachings*, p. 105. ³⁹ T. 48, p. 383b; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 62.

into accord with the comportment of the Buddhas who have themselves “let go.”⁴⁰

The pivotal Chinese character in the passage above is “*ying*,” “to accord or correspond.” The right kind of imitation is taken to put the practitioner into accord, not just with a particular paradigm but also, and more importantly, with the entire lineage of paradigms, each representing to successive generations what “accord” would entail. Moreover, this mimetic model was thought to be most immediately present in the concrete character and behavior of one’s personal Zen master – a contemporary instantiation of the lineage. For this reason, no strict separation tended to be made between what the teacher had to teach and his or her particular method and style of teaching it. Consequently, participation in the Zen master’s message inevitably included the imitation of its speaker. Through long study and practice under the guidance of the master, monks would indiscriminately appropriate all dimensions of the teaching. Familiarity with the master’s words entailed, in addition, a familiarity with his acts, movements, gestures, and bearing. The particular language a master drew upon in his teaching was also, inseparably, what he was teaching and, therefore, what the student was learning. Initiates were initiated, not just into a set of ideas, but also into a certain comportment and orientation in the world that accompanied the ideas.

A specific form of self-understanding supports this emphasis on imitative practice. Imitation implies some form of dependence. Those who imitate understand themselves as dependent on foregoing models rather than as autonomous and unconnected. They experience their own finitude and connection to others. This dependence on others, however, is not thought to inhibit freedom, but rather to make it possible. Implicit in this recognition is the Buddhist doctrine of “dependent origination” in its emphatic Mahayana form: the freedom of each “originates dependent” on the freedom of others. The student receives the transmission of freedom from the teacher in the same way that the teacher had received it. Seen in genealogical terms of successive

⁴⁰ One story about Huang Po, which eventually made its way into *koan* case number 7 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, displays for our meditation his “post-critical” reappropriation of imitative ritual. Huang Po is bowing before an image of the Buddha when a novice, the future Emperor in retreat, challenges his pious act by asking how it instantiates the “non-attachment” and “non-seeking” he advocated. Huang Po responds that, just like “non-seeking,” bowing is his custom. All acts imply some “seeking” and “attachment,” aside from which no existence at all would remain. Passing through attachment, the Zen master appropriates new forms of seeking, now critically honed and “emptied.” Beyond critique, the criticized practice may reappear, refined and reshaped.

generations of teachers and students in a lineage, imitation is the essential practice. The one who is most able to receive the transmission is the one who will later be most able to give it.⁴¹ Notice, however, that the “form” in which the tradition is received is multiple and various. Zen literature offers an incredible array of models to imitate. Out of this variety, each Zen student must construct a new one. Each must synthesize a certain set of chosen images into one more or less coherent life. New creations, new forms of freedom and selfhood, appear through Zen history as new sets of models are brought together under new historical circumstances.

Having examined the explicit dependencies entailed in the Zen path to liberation, *specifically* those linked to the monastic institution and to communal practice, we can now look from a somewhat different angle at images and figures of freedom which project that goal before the minds of practitioners, and which, at the same time, problematize our earlier representations of Zen freedom. Among these figures is a substantial vocabulary in classical Zen texts which functions to generate an understanding of the human condition, or, in this case, the conditions from which one seeks liberation. The primary structural feature that unifies these metaphors is their common concern with “closure” and “constraint.” If we ask, “Emancipation from what?” we find the following key terms: *ai*, to obstruct; *chang*, to screen; *ch’u*, to hold; *chueh-ting*, to fix; *p’ien*, to enclose; *ke*, to limit; *ch’ien*, to view from a fixed perspective, and numerous metaphors projecting borders, boundaries, and limitations of all kinds. Communicated through this complex of terms is an awareness of a condition of enclosure or bondage. Ordinary human life is enclosed within limitations from which some form of freedom is possible.

Corresponding to the negative form of these constraints is a second vocabulary related to the Zen conception of freedom, which is similarly negative. Overthrowing initial negative obstructions is a second or double negation which manifests the point of the Zen tradition in an experience of “sudden liberation.” Freedom is actualized, according to this second set of symbols, through the process of abolishing, *li*; cutting off, *tuan*; destroying, *mieh*; severing, *p’o*; exhausting, *chin*; breaking through, *chueh*; and so on. Each set of verbs is understood in terms of the other. Their mutual dependence implies that the character of

⁴¹ For an excellent discussion of the theme of imitation in modern European thought and literature, see Weinsheimer, *Imitation*.

Zen freedom is dependent upon the character of constraint, and vice versa. Reading Zen well requires close attention to both; changes in one “co-arise” with changes in the other.

This act of overcoming through negation is not the same, at our initial level of analysis, as familiar religious structures through which the negative – evil – is overcome in its cancellation by the good. What distinguishes the act of negation in Zen is the extent to which it consists in an effort to break through the existing framework within which good and evil have been dichotomized in the first place. The following two passages from the *Pai-chang kuang-lu* show the character of this effort to overcome duality through the posture of “non-grasping”:

Q: What is liberation of mind and liberation in all places? The master said: don't seek Buddha, don't seek Dharma, don't seek Sangha. Don't seek virtue, knowledge, and intellectual understanding. When sensations of defilement and purity are abolished through non-seeking, don't hold on to this non-seeking and consider it correct. Do not dwell at the point of ending, and do not long for heavens or fear hells. When you are unhindered by bondage and freedom, then this is called liberation of mind and body in all places.⁴²

When the mind of purity and impurity is ended, it does not dwell in bondage, nor does it dwell in liberation; it has no mindfulness of doing, nondoing, bondage or liberation – then, although it remains in the world of samsara, that mind is free.⁴³

In the background of statements like these in Zen texts are doctrines fundamental to Buddhist thought and practice, most notably, the concepts of impermanence, no-self, release from desire and craving, and, subsuming all of these, the Mahayana concept of emptiness. Freedom in Zen develops through the deepening realization of one's own emptiness or groundlessness, of one's constant exposure to the forces of contingency and flux. For this reason, Buddhist freedom is less an acquisition and an attainment than the result of a renunciation. Freedom is less an expression of power than an abdication of power, a letting go and a release of grip. In Huang Po's rhetoric: “Relinquishment is the *dharmā*!”⁴⁴ Replacing metaphors of ground, assurance, and stability are figures of groundlessness and displacement.

Zen monastic practices, therefore, encourage and foster a renunciation of security and all the various mental acts through which we grasp for it. They seek to undermine the practitioner's deeply reinforced sense

⁴² *Pai-chang kuang-lu*, found in *Ssu-chia yu-lu* and *Ku-tsun-su yu-lu* (Cleary, *Sayings and Doings of Pai-chang*, p. 81). ⁴³ *Pai-chang kuang-lu*; Cleary, *Sayings and Doings of Pai-chang*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ T. 48, p. 381a; Blofeld, *Huang Po*, p. 40.

of self by de-framing and unsettling fundamental modes of self-understanding. Submission to this process of displacement is represented in Zen texts as a frightening experience. In the moment of full exposure, freedom is terrifying. Numerous literary figures develop this image of the “void” and the corresponding fear that it can evoke in any human being sufficiently open to experience it. The Huang Po fascicle of the *Transmission of the Lamp* likens the experience of freedom to being suspended over an infinite chasm with nothing to hold onto for security. Common to many Zen texts is the image of the moment of liberation as a letting go with both hands, a leap off a hundred-foot pole. These images of freedom cultivate a sense in the practitioner that liberation entails a fundamental defamiliarization with oneself and the world. Enlightenment sheds a kind of light on things that exposes their obviousness to destabilizing forces. Normalcy comes to be seen as a function of a particular stage-setting or framework, and of a particular complex of relations, that not only could be otherwise but – given impermanence – will be otherwise.

Notice, however, how the process of de-structuring is not a call for abandonment. Unattached, having “digested” the “emptiness” of ritual, Huang Po nonetheless continues his ritual of prostration before the Buddha. Even though the “Buddha” may still be present, this “presence” has been transformed. Although allowed to be thrown into question, the Buddhist monastic structure and all of its intricate particularities are not abandoned. In Buddhist doctrinal terms, the realization of “dependent origination” in practice is not a rejection of what has thus originated, but rather a reorientation of one’s relation to it. The “emptiness” of things allows one to let go of things, and thus to be released from one dimension of the hold that things have on us. Displacement reworks freedom by means of replacement, a new orientation, and an ability to move in and among relations. Freedom is thus both finite and relative, a situation in the world that has particular rather than universal form.

Several dimensions of this experience warrant particular mention. First, freedom of this sort is not quite the same as that pictured and idealized by the European Enlightenment, wherein emancipation is the progressive attainment of power and maturity. The European ideal centers on self-possession, consciousness in command of its processes, freeing itself from the repressive forces of authoritative power and the prejudice of immature conceptualization. Zen freedom, by contrast, evokes images of relinquishing autonomy and the will to power in their various

forms – the will to explain, the will to certain knowledge, the will to control, the will to security, and so on. It is in this sense that the key to Zen freedom is the figure of renunciation.

Second, the radicality of this act of renunciation is occasioned by the pervasive character of the obstruction that it is intended to overcome. Unlike the modern European focus on epistemological concerns – the concern to attain accurate representation through avoiding error – Buddhists envision a systematic distortion that pervades all human understanding. Rather than establishing a framework for the discrimination of truth and falsity, Buddhists entertain the possibility that the frameworks we employ for the process of securing truth are themselves subject to the distorting impacts of desire and ignorance.

Third, instead of conceiving of “liberation” as an act of appropriation – something that the subject achieves or attains – Zen texts envision “awakening” as something that occurs to us. Sudden enlightenment is an event that befalls the practitioner, beyond his or her control. Indeed, awakening is thought to occur only in the open space of renunciation, wherein control has already been relinquished.

Finally, rather than conceive of liberation as a kind of autonomy that transcends relations and their limiting, defining forces, Zen and Buddhist conceptions focus on ways in which human beings can be awakened to this relatedness. Instead of liberation from the destiny of finite placement in the world, the Zen Buddhist envisions an awakening to this placement and to its inconstancy and multiplicity.

Several of these points would have provided doctrinal dilemmas for early western interpreters of Zen for whom freedom was associated with the autonomy and control of a unified and stable self. From this point of view, freedom entails breaking ties of one form or another, rather than the recognition of relatedness. When early interpreters of Zen applied this view consistently, they understood Buddhist freedom as the transcendence of finitude itself. On this reading, Zen conceptions and practices of freedom are especially interesting when they can be seen as exceptions to this transcendental pattern, when attention to communal, linguistic, and institutional grounds highlights the relational qualities of this freedom. Seen in this light, freedom is not the abandonment of dependencies and connections, but rather a kind of movement in and among relations. Of more interest than freedom from the world is freedom within it. This reverse image of freedom, I would maintain, could be extremely valuable in providing an alternative set of images

and point of departure for contemporary reflections on our own concepts of “freedom.” Such employment for Buddhist texts, however, requires that we first of all listen to the otherness of their thinking. We must look, not only for how Buddhist freedom corresponds with our own, but for ways in which its differences could transform our freedom, and thus set us free.