International Journal for the Study of New Religions 1.2 (2010) 223–242
ISSN 2041-9511 (print) ISSN 2041-952X (online)
doi:10.1558/ijsnr.v1i2.223

How Old is the Wine? Ningen Zen Kyōdan and the Formation of Lay Zen Practice in Modern Japan[1]

Erez Joskovich

Tel-Aviv University

erezusan@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the development of the contemporary model of "lay Zen" that is nowadays prevalent in Japan as well as in the West. The main question that this article considers is "How was the Zen narrative and ideology modified to fit contemporary society?" By following the development of Ningen Zen Kyōdan, a modern Japanese Zen organization, the article will illustrate the ways in which Zen doctrines and practices were molded and reshaped to meet the rapidly changing life circumstances in modern Japanese society. This article suggests that such notions and practices evolved as part of an attempt to modernize Buddhism, as well as a cultural and religious response of Japanese Zen to challenges posed, inter alia, by modern Western thought. Such statements raise the question—is it still "authentic" Zen? Should this be considered a new phenomenon, or is it "old wine in new bottles"?

Keywords

Ningen Zen, laypeople, *koji*, Japanese religion, Zen, Buddhism

Introduction

From the second half of the twentieth century we have witnessed the rapid spread of Zen through Western society and culture. Zen centers have emerged throughout North America and Europe. The "blueprint" of Zen is now vis-

1. An early form of this article was first presented as a paper at the "Buddhism in East Asia: Traditions, Changes and Challenges" International Conference hosted by Delhi University 2010. The research for the this article was conducted at the department of Religious Studies at the University of Tokyo. I would like to express my special gratitude to Professor Shimazono Susumu for his guidance and support.

ible in almost every facet of daily life, from architecture through fashion and entertainment and all the way to technology. From its status as a typical Japanese Buddhist sect, Zen has become a worldwide phenomenon with a significant impact on modern culture.

In contrast to ideas inspired by Zen thought and aesthetics, the influence of Zen as a religious doctrine is far more limited, probably due to the relatively small number of actual practitioners. However, the most noticeable difference between contemporary Zen and traditional Zen is the fact that contemporary Zen is fundamentally a secular phenomenon. The traditional Zen practice conducted by Zen monks in the monasteries and temples has changed into a lay practice, experience, and method. Nowadays most of the people engaged in Zen practice, both in Japan as well as in the West, are not monks but laity who conduct their practice as part of their daily life in modern society.

In this article I would like to examine the construction of this lay Zen model through the history of what is perhaps the first lay Zen group established in the world—the Ningen Zen Kyōdan. By following the development of this group's ideas and practices I hope to provide a better understanding of the Zen phenomenon both as part of contemporary Japanese religiosity as well as in the global context.

The status of laypeople in the early Buddhist and Zen tradition

The concept of the laity (*zaike,* 在家; Pāli: *Upāsaka*)[2] in the Buddhist tradition has a history as long as that of Buddhism itself. This Buddhist notion, also known as "householders," is often contrasted with that of the monastic community. While the Buddhist monks strived towards liberation through maintaining a strict set of conduct, the lay community was obliged to provide material support to the monks and to observe only five basic precepts.[3] In doing so, laypeople were hoping to gain better rebirth, or, at the very least, avoid a worse one.

The spread of the Mahayana movement, which became the dominant Buddhist school by the fifth century CE, marks a change in the status of the laity in Buddhist thought (Shimazono 2006, 122–143). While early Buddhism emphasized individual release from the cycle of rebirth through the extin-

2. This article refers mainly to Japanese Zen, therefore unless mentioned otherwise it uses Japanese Buddhist terminology. However since this part relates to early Buddhism, the original Sanskrit or Pāli terms were kept.

3. The five precepts are: (1) not to kill living things, (2) not to steal others' belongings, (3) not to engage in improper sexual conduct (4) not to tell a lie, and (5) not to drink intoxicants.

guishing of the self, Mahayana stressed universal salvation. According to this ideal, not only a select few but everyone might achieve total enlightenment through the grace of the *bodhisattva*. In accordance, a number of Mahayana texts, notably the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra,* seem to promote the image of an enlightened layman — a person who has gained a high understanding of the Buddhist teachings, superior even to that of monks, without ever renouncing society.

The Mahayana's teachings encompass a sophisticated philosophical system, though some Mahayana schools, such as the Pure Land (*jōdo*, 浄土), simplified Buddhist practice to an expression of faith in the grace of the Buddha Amitāba (*amida butsu*, 阿彌陀仏). This devotional lifestyle of Buddhism has greatly contributed to the success of Mahayana in East Asia, and especially to its spread as a popular religion. Hence, for the first time, the once exclusive path towards salvation was made relevant for the laity.

As opposed to the Pure Land school that emphasized faith and devotion, the Zen school, which had originated in China around the fifth century, stressed the importance of "awakening." Zen thought may be viewed as representing a different aspect of the more universal Mahayana message, which is that the final Buddhist goal might be gained in this life time. The early Buddhist concept of total emancipation from suffering, reserved only for a select few, has been replaced by a sudden clear understanding or "seeing into the true nature of things" (*kenshō*, 見性). This understanding is not dependant on scriptures or an outcome of rigorous ascetic practice, but rather on the transmission of the "Buddha-mind" from master to disciple by various means such as ambiguous riddles (*kōan*, 公案) or dialogues (*mondō*, 問答) intended to point directly to the true nature of things.[4]

Seemingly, this understanding of Buddhism offers a path in which laypeople might engage in Buddhist practice and might even attain the Buddhist goal. For, if neither an in-depth understanding of Buddhist scriptures, nor abstention, are a necessity in attaining the goal, it is apparently open for laypeople as well as for monks.

However, the fact is that from its early days in China throughout its long history, Zen was understood as a monastic experience. Teaching authorization was exclusively kept for monks, and the Zen schools, later to become sects, were based on head temples or monasteries. Moreover, during its long

4. *Kōan* (公案) usually presents a position that comes in contrast with either the Buddhist doctrine or common sense. The purpose of a *kōan* is to exhaust rational thinking to the point of non-dualistic experience. The *mondō* (問答) is the discussion of the *kōan* between master and disciple. (Heine and Wright 2000, 3).

history the Zen tradition has accumulated an elaborate textual canon, which requires long years of study.[5] Despite the fact that laypeople were always a part of the Zen community, as countless references made by Zen masters from the sixth patriarch to Hakuin clearly show, the "transmission of the mind" (*Ishindenshin*, 以心伝心) was usually kept behind the temple gates and was not distributed freely in the "market place."[6]

The idealization of wise laymen such as Vimalakīrti, Hanshan, and layman Pang, might also support the notion that Zen is equally accessible to monks and the laypeople. But, if considered in the wider context of Zen rhetoric and alongside figures like the crazy Zen monk, the wise old lady, or the trickster, their role in a dialectical discourse between the institutional structure and the denial thereof becomes more apparent (Faure 1994, 115–131).

By challenging the structure, such figures actually help to reaffirm it. This dialectic tension between subversive ideology and the practical need to maintain an institutionalized religion is deeply rooted in the Zen tradition. In other words, it is a problem of preserving a tradition that fundamentally rejects any structure. This kind of discourse enables to maintain an institutional structure, while the iconoclastic tendencies are carefully contained in the form of stories, legends or anecdotes. And so, while the Zen narrative may lead to believe otherwise, the Zen monastic hegemony was not actually challenged until modern times (Borup 2008, 89–90).

Zen as a wide-spread lay practice is a relatively new phenomenon within the history of the tradition. In order to gain a better understanding of contemporary Zen, we should turn our attention to late nineteenth-century Japan, and not to Chan's ancient history. For, as opposed to the way it is often depicted, it was only during the Meiji period that laypeople Zen became an identifiable trend rather than the lifestyle of a few privileged individuals.

The lay Zen revolution in modern Japan

The Meiji restoration in 1868 brought about a rapid process of modernization in Japan. This process had tremendous impact on all of the traditional Buddhist sects and Zen among them. The newly established Meiji government promoted a nationalistic ideology that condemned Buddhism as a foreign religion. This ideology known as the *haibutsu kishaku* (廃仏毀釈; lit: abolish Buddhism destroy Shakyamuni) reached its peak in a series of organized attacks on Buddhist temples and establishments all over the country.

5. On the importance of textual learning in the Rinzai Zen tradition see Sogen (1994, 5–35).

6. See for example, Yampolsky (1967, 159–162; 1978, 57, 143, 178).

Aside from political changes, the Japanese society had undergone yet another profound transformation. The eradication of the strict class hierarchy, rapid urbanization and the breaking of traditional social ties caused great social turmoil and tensions. Tensions which, in turn, became the source of new spiritual and religious yearnings, as clearly indicated by the rising of "New Religions" (*Shinshūkyō*, 新宗教 or *Shinkō shūkyō*, 新興宗教)[7] during the same time frame. As Richard Jaffe describes, the clergy was stripped of its exceptional status and reduced to the level of ordinary citizens. This change marked a shift in boundaries between laity and clerics that likely had a major impact on the development of Buddhist thought in Japan (Jaffe 2001, 59).

Those important structural and conceptual changes in the world of Japanese religion at the end of the nineteenth century also set the stage for the emergence of laypeople Zen practice, which is the focus of this article. Newly established groups provided an alternative to the official Zen institute in which ordinary people could practice Zen in its "true essence." The groups held Zen meetings in specially designated halls and centers, where ordinary people could perform Zen meditation, study scriptures and practice *kōans* on a regular basis.

The narrative of Zen was redefined based on contemporary concepts in an attempt to readapt it to the modern period. From an elaborate ceremonial religious practice conducted in temples Zen was gradually reduced to a simple and practical system. Zen was no longer conceived as a religion, but as a character-building exercise or a method for self-improvement. A new form of Zen was born—Zen for a secular age.

One of the most influential lay groups is the Ningen Zen (*Ningen Zen Kyōdan,* 人間教団). With a history of more than one hundred years, sixty of which in its current form, it is without a doubt one of the major players in the formation of this new laypeople Zen practice. By following its growth and development, one can learn much about the new Zen model and how it came to be.

Koji Zen—personal cultivation at the service of the state

Ningen Zen traces its origin back to Imakita Kosen (今北洪川, 1816–1892), a major Buddhist figure in the Meiji period. Acting as abbot of Kamakura's Engakuji Zen Temple, Imakita was one of the first figures from within the formal institutions of Zen to open the temple gates to laypeople. Relying

7. A general term used to describe religious organizations that were founded in Japan since the middle of the nineteenth century, and gained popularity after the Second World War. The term refers to a great diversity of organizations considered to be outside the established religions (*kisei shūkyō,* 既成宗教).

more on Neo-Confucian values than on Buddhist ideology, Imakita promoted the ideal of *Koji* (居士)—a widely-learned government official, dedicated to Buddhist ideals (Sawada 2004, 144–165). According to Imakita, Zen practice was valuable as educational means for statesman and social services. It was meant to cultivate proper character and provide an ethical foundation for the new Japanese gentleman. Imakita realized the potential of the laity, not only in providing political and financial support to the monastic community, but also in promoting Buddhist teachings. Unlike other religions spreading at that time, Zen as taught by Imakita was never intended to be a popular movement. It was an elitist practice reserved for a small circle of statesmen, businessmen and young intellectuals educated in Western studies.

Among Imakita's disciples were major figures in the Meiji society, such as Yamaoka Tesshu (山岡鉄舟, 1836–1888) and Nakae Chōmin (中江兆民, 1847-1901). Imakita was often invited to give lectures about Zen teachings to lay audiences, and in 1875 he was asked to lead a newly established lay practitioners' society in Tokyo. This group, known as the Ryōmō Kyōkai or Ryōbō Kyōkai (両忘協会),[8] may have been the first Zen center in modern Japan explicitly dedicated to teaching meditation to laypeople. And, as Sharf indicates, it became the model for the urban lay meditation centers that were so influential in the propagation of Zen practice in the West (Sharf 1995, 8).

However, the Ryōbō Kyōkai was more of a cultural association than a religious organization. It served as a kind of club for educated men to meet and discuss art and literature as well as to practice Zen. The group members used to meditate together and received Buddhist teaching from Imakita when he was in Tokyo. However, the group members had also enjoyed cultural activities such as calligraphy and poetry. As Sawada indicates the group served as a gathering place for civil officials and intellectuals during their leisure time (Sawada 2004, 148). It is interesting to note that, from its very inception, modern laypeople Zen was considered more or less a hobby. This is not intended to underestimate its value, as some people take their hobbies very seriously, but rather to present one of its major characteristics.

While Imakita himself did not actively promote lay Zen as a new religious movement, the fact that a Zen master of his stature approved and encour-

8. *Kyōkai* (協会) or *Kyōdan* (教団) are Teaching Assemblies or Lay Societies. Those organizations originated at the end of the nineteenth century, and were common among many Buddhist sects, including the Jodo (浄土宗), Sōtō (曹洞宗) and Shin (真宗). Those groups were initially used as a means to reestablish the ties between the laity and the monastic community, ties that were severed by the collapse of the Bakufu's temple registration system (*danka seido*, 檀家制度), and by the anti-Buddhist movement. See Ikeda (1998).

aged laymen to practice Zen, both at Engakuji and in Tokyo, and by allowing some of his lay disciples to teach Zen, Imakita had an immense influence on the spreading of Zen among laypeople.

Imakita's well-known disciple, Shaku Soen (釈宗演, 1859–1919), had also played an important role in the popularization of Zen among the laity. Unlike Imakita, Soen belonged to the new Meiji generation. In addition to his training as a Zen monk he studied in Keio University and later traveled to Ceylon to study Pāli and Theravada Buddhism. Soen was one of Japan's representatives in the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, where he started the promotion of Japanese Zen to a Western audience (Snodgrass 2003, 248–258).

Soen promoted Zen, especially the Rinzai (臨済宗) doctrine, as the essence of Buddhism. This essence consisted of "pure experience" (*junsuitaiken*, 純粋体験), attainable through clear observation into the nature of things (Soen 1906, 111–113). According to this view, the true essence of Zen is the stripping away of all convention and conceptual thinking. In his teaching Soen adopted a highly iconoclastic aspect as a representation of the whole tradition, hence, dismissing the long historical and institutional heritage of Zen. He disparaged the value of textual learning and scholarship, which was at the foundations of Zen tradition for over a thousand years.[9]

Being a Rinzai abbot, Soen was surely well aware of the significance of ceremonies and study in the daily life of the Zen monastery, but he also understood the shift of power between the monastic and secular society. By detaching Zen from its formal religious context, Soen made Zen both applicable and attractive to modern lay people in Japan and beyond.

Shaku Soen was probably the first modern spokesman to express the concept that Zen is equal to the meditation experience and is an experience that is opposed to intellectual thinking**.** This concept gained great popularity and become the stepping-stone for the expansion of Zen to the West:

> Let philosophers and theologians say whatever they wish concerning the existence, nature, and activity of God; let them speculate as much as they wish on the theology of the universe and the destiny of mankind and many other abstruse problems of metaphysics; but let you who earnestly aspire to know what this life really means turn away from those wise men and reflect within, or look around yourselves with an open heart which watches and receives, and all the mysteries of the world will be revealed to you in the awakening of your Prajna. (Soen 1906, 144)

9. In the Rinzai tradition, for example, monks are expected to have spent several years in intensive doctrinal study, memorizing sutras and pouring over commentaries (Sogen 1994).

However, in his efforts to establish Zen's superiority over other religions, Soen adopted an ethnocentric stance, thereby defining Zen as the essence of the "Spirit of the East" and as embodied in the "Japanese spirit." Indeed, Soen did not hesitate to use Buddhism in support of the Japanese nationalism and Japan's war efforts (Sharf 1993, 7–12 and Victoria 2006, 25).

In promoting laypeople's Zen practice Soen adopted a more active attitude then that of his master Imakita. He had advocated Zen practice in Japan and in his travels to the United States; he even allowed lay practitioners to use Engakuji`s meditation hall along with the monks. In the 1880s he asked his disciple Shaku Sōkatsu (釈宗活, 1870–1954) to revive the Ryōbō Kyōkai lay organization. Unlike its former phase as a gathering place for the elite, this newly established group was much more inclusive. It gradually attracted thousands of practitioners and established centers all across Japan. This Ryōbō Kyōkai is considered to be the origin of the contemporary Ningen Zen organization.

Soen and his master Imakita demonstrate how, at the turn of the century, Japanese Zen masters promoted the narrative of personal cultivation through Zen practice among the laity. This personal cultivation was connected to the collective context of Japanese culture and society. Imakita joined together Zen and civil service, as part of the training of the Japanese gentleman in the newly established Meiji society. Soen coupled a clear perception of reality with the strong sense of Japanese national patriotism.

Both interpretations found footholds in the Mahayana narrative of the *bodhisattva*, which suggests that personal salvation is not the goal. Nonetheless, we can trace a far greater influence of Confucian values in Imakita's case, and a heavy lean towards Japanese nationalism in the case of Soen. In other words, the attempt to promote Zen to the general public was accompanied by additional adaptations of its narrative to the spirit of the time. We will encounter this tendency once again, with the development of the modern Zen narrative.

The spread of secular Zen during the Meiji period could be seen as an outcome of reformation pressures from within the Buddhist establishment. Leaders of the Zen sects understood that for Zen to regain its status it would have to target the modern urban educated elite. In this sense, this tendency is not new in the history of Zen. Traditionally, Zen had leaned on the support of the social elite, whether it was the Samurai in the Kamakura period or the wealthy Daimyō and merchants during the Edo period.

However, in order to better understand the development of secular Zen, one should also consider the continuous efforts made by laypeople to gradu-

ally usurp authority from institutional Buddhism and gain control over Buddhist doctrine (Sawada 2004, 145). In that respect, these reformation efforts could be considered as precedents in Zen's history. The spread of education and knowledge, in addition to political power, created a state in which, for the first time in Buddhist history, laypeople gained access to the *dharma* without having to rely on monastic mediation.

Ningen Zen—religion for the people of today

The *Ningen Zen* group was established after the Second World War by Tatsuta Eizan (立田英山, 1893–1969). Tatsuta began his Zen training as a high-school student at Zuigan-ji Temple in Matsushima. While studying at the Tokyo Imperial University, Tatsuta continued his training under Shaku Sōkastu, as a member of the Ryōbō Kyōkai. It is important to stress that unlike Imakita and Soen, Tatsuta himself was a biologist and was never formally ordained as a monk.[10] Although the Ryōbō Kyōkai is considered by Ningen Zen as its origin, it is important to stress that Tatsuta established Ningen Zen as an independent organization that is not affiliated with Engakuji. In this sense Ningen Zen marks the final expropriation of the monopoly on Zen teaching from the traditional Zen establishment.

Ningen Zen set its goal as promoting a modern Zen practice: one established on individuality, freedom and equality. The group upholds Zen as a religion for modern men and women—a religion that is humanism. Ningen Zen's ideology and rhetoric are strongly influenced by modern science and rationality, and it rejects any religious "secrets" or mystery. It criticizes contemporary Zen institution as inadequate, and looks back to the origin of Zen practice as a source of inspiration. In fact, the group's understanding of Zen practice could be considered a modern reformation attempt of the Zen tradition:

> The urgent necessity in the information technology society of today in which the primal interests of people incline to economical success, science and amusement, is to propel the real religion that proves Tao by awakening one's real nature and clarifies the true meaning of human life. The status of present day religion itself also does not respond to this mission. For example, the monks in Japan generally perform only funeral ceremonies and memorial services for the dead. And in various places in the world the antagonism in the faith in God is bringing about miserable tragedies of war. (Ningen Zen Japan)

10. Tatsuta's writing's about Zen is very "scientific." His major work "Character Building and Zen" (*Ningen Keisei to Zen*,人間形成と禅) published in 1959 contains many tables, diagrams and charts; it resembles a scientific research more than it does a popular book about Buddhism.

Like many advocates of modern Buddhism, including those of the Japanese New Religions, the starting point of Ningen Zen's ideology is that modern society is teetering on a breaking point. Technology and science brought about complexity and anxiety while traditional religion lacks the tools to meet such problems. Zen is portrayed as the only religious doctrine that is compatible with modern science:

> Therefore Zen is a religion that no factors inconsistent with the principles of science at all. Zen has no gate and is open to all who seek to awaken the real self. A religion of such free and rational features cannot be found anywhere else in the world. (Ningen Zen Japan)

The premise is that the more science advances, spirituality recedes and the balance between materialistic culture and spiritual culture is disrupted. Ningen Zen aims to restore simplicity and harmony to modern social principles based on a realization of true human potential. By practicing Zen, the individual discovers the true meaning of being human and becomes a useful member of society. Ningen Zen portrays itself as providing relief in the form of Zen practice, hidden until now behind closed temple gates:

> But as a matter of fact, this actual state of affairs has been kept in secret within the Zen temples and was never brought to light publicly to any eyes outside. Now in this new century where the urgent demand for a real religion is exalted in the spiritual crisis of human beings, it is the time that secrecy should be made open to all. For these reasons, Ningen Zen Kyodan has broken this old tradition and opened the gate for all seekers who aspire to accomplish Zen practice. (Ningen Zen Japan)

Ningen Zen portrays itself as a revolutionary turn in the history of Zen. They distinguish their practice from the traditional layman practice in the Zen tradition. This is based on the claim that the Ningen Zen founder received, for the first time in Zen history, a Dharma Seal (*inkashōmei*, 印可証明)[11] and is regarded as part of the official Zen genealogy—a status that was traditionally restricted to priests. It is for this reason they claim their Zen to be both an authentic practice and at the same time addressing laypeople and not monks.

The thrust of Ningen Zen practice is mainly directed towards Zen meditation (*zazen*, 座禅). Ningen Zen's ideology emphasizes the experience of *kenshō*, spiritual awakening and clear understanding of human nature. *Kenshō*

11. Approval of the disciple's experience by the teacher. An acknowledgment of the disciple's ability to be a teacher in her/his own right. (See "Digital Dictionary of Buddhism," *East Asian Dictionaries,* n.p., n.d. Web. 11 Jan. 2010. <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>)

is gained by meditation on a *kōan*, representing not only the true meaning of Zen but the totality of Buddhism. Understanding human nature is identified with understanding reality. When one realizes his full potential as an individual he becomes a more useful member of society. Tatsuta defined the objective of Ningen Zen as educating people to live their lives in an "upright, delightful and harmonious way," creating an harmonious society—an earthly paradise (*sekairakudo*, 世界楽土) (Tatsuta 1959, 146–150).

> Our Sangha aims to build up an earthly paradise by turning the wheel of the Great Vows for benefiting ourselves and at the same time others, savoring the true human life." (Tatsuta 1959, 3)

The Ningen Zen practice

Ningen Zen practice is centered on the training hall or *dōjō* (道場).[12] The *dōjō* is located in a traditional-style Japanese house. The meditation hall (*zendō*, 禅堂) is a spacious *tatami*-mat room decorated only with one or two calligraphy scrolls. Unlike the meditation halls in Zen temples, or even other lay Zen groups I visited, the Ningen Zen *dōjō* stands out in its simplicity, lack of icons or specific sectarian characteristics. Even basic Buddhist artifacts, such as an altar (*butsudan*, 仏壇) or a Buddha image (*butsuzō*,仏像) are absent from the Ningen Zen's *zendō*.

Meditation meetings (*zazen kai*, 坐禅会) are held in the *dōjō* three or four times a week, during the evenings on weekdays and during mornings on the weekend. Usually there are six to twenty participants attending each session. Upon entering the *zendō*, participants follow a strict protocol of behavior that dictates ways of walking, preparing the meditation seat, bowing, chanting, *et cetera*. From observation, this conduct appears to be based on the Rinzai monastery protocol.

The meetings usually last for about ninety minutes, with two sitting sessions of about forty to forty five minutes each. During each session, an elder member is patrolling the hall carrying the *keisaku* (警策)[13] in his hands, monitoring the members and correcting their posture if necessary. After the sitting, the members take part in a quick cleaning of the meditation hall.

12. *Dōjō* (literally a hall for practicing the Way) is a general Japanese term for a hall used for practicing traditional arts, usually martial arts. In Japan there are currently seventeen Ningen Zen *dōjōs*. My description is based on fieldwork I conducted in two of these *dōjōs,* the Tokyo *dōjō* and the group's main *dōjō* in Chiba province.

13. A *keisaku* is a wooden stick used to strike the shoulders of meditators to wake them when they are dozing or to encourage them in their sitting. Unlike its customary use in Zen monasteries, in Ningen Zen it is used only upon a person's request.

During weekend meetings the members also enjoy tea and snacks in the dining room.

A newcomer to the *dōjō* is initially instructed with *sūsokukan* (数息観), a meditation method that focuses the mind by counting breaths. Although meditation on breathing is a common practice in Zen, Ningen Zen claims their method to be most effective (Tatsuta 2001, 13). They place great emphasis on breath-counting meditation, not only as preparation for the "authentic" practice of *kōans,* but as an important practice in and of itself. Ningen Zen developed *sūsokukan* into a very complex and technical method that involves three kinds of counting which differ according to the practitioner's ability and progress. This technique is said to bring many benefits, including good health and better concentration (Tatsuta 2001, 1–8).

In common with other lay Zen groups, Ningen Zen also greatly emphasizes the experience of *kenshō* through the practice of *kōans*. After a certain period of attending the groups meetings, a new member is offered a chance to meet the *rōshi,*[14] and ask for his guidance in *kōan* practice. The *rōshi* inquires the new member for his purpose in practicing Zen, to which the new member is debriefed in advance to answer that he aspires to attain *kenshō*. He is then presented with his first *kōan*, usually "The original face."[15] The student then meditates on this *kōan* and tries to come up with an answer for the next interview. Unlike in other lay Zen groups, there does not seem to be a special emphasis on the importance of passing the first *kōan*. In the Ningen Zen, both *kōan* practice and *zazen* are considered lifelong practice.[16]

Approximately every second month, an intense meditation period (*sesshin*, 攝心) is held at the *dōjō* for a few days. During the *sesshin*, participants follow a daily schedule consisting of *zazen* meditation, lectures on Zen scriptures given by the *rōshi* (*teishō*, 提唱) and private interviews (*sanzen*, 参禅). In the *sanzen* the student has to present his understanding of the *kōan* to the *rōshi*, who judges its correctness. An important part of the daily practice during the *sesshin* is the *samu* (作務), a period of work, such as gardening or cleaning, considered as concentration in motion.

14. *Rōshi* (老師) literally means old teacher. In the Zen tradition, it is usually an honorific title which refers to someone who has trained for many years and has deep understanding of the teaching. It is important to stress that traditionally this title was reserved only for monks.

15. This *kōan* has several versions in the Zen tradition. Ningen Zen uses the following version "what is your original face from before your mother and father were born?" (父母未生以前にいける自己本來の面目何似？)

16. On *kōan* and *kenshō* in other laypeople Zen groups, see Sharf (1995).

In addition to z*azen* meetings and *sesshin*, the *dōjō* also hosts activities usually connected to traditional Japanese arts like the tea ceremony, calligraphy and *Kendō* as well as meetings and activities specially designated for high school pupils. In many ways, the *dōjō* is more of a social institute than a religious one. Assuming a similar role to that of a community center, the *dōjō* is a place where people who share a common interest can meet and interact with neighbors and acquaintances. As opposed to the very formal atmosphere in the *zendō*, the atmosphere in other parts of the *dōjō* is rather casual and members often discuss daily matters over a cup of tea.

The *dōjō* might be considered the essence of lay practice. In the *dōjō*, laypeople can acquire independent religious authority and gain direct access to the Zen experience without having to depend on the mediation of the priesthood. The *dōjō* offers the practitioner a chance to temporarily assume the role of a Zen monk, without the need to shed his or hers other identities, such as a family member, a professional, a student *et cetera*.[17]

Ningen Zen practice distinguishes itself with certain unique characteristics. Ceremonial features, such as sutra recitations or making offerings to Buddhist images, have been replaced by secular practices such as raising the groups' flag in a ceremonial way every morning during *sesshin*, singing the group hymn in an afternoon lineup, or a special recitation before and after meals. In addition, the Ningen Zen *kōan* curriculum is based on a collection compiled by the movement's founder Tatsuta, and not on *kōan* collections that are in general use in Zen monasteries.

However, the group has also kept traditional Zen artifacts, symbols and ceremonies. In the *dōjō* most of the members wear black robes and small *kesa* (袈裟),[18] similar to those of monks. The manner in which *zazen* itself is being conducted and some of the rituals accompanying it, like the *sanzen* and the lectures on the scriptures, are almost identical to their monastic counterparts. The sitting period is measured by using an incense stick and customary bells are used to announce the beginning and ending of each session. The interaction with the Zen Master is very formal and includes various kinds of formal bowings and prostrations, very similar to the customary manner in Zen monasteries. Moreover, the *rōshi*, despite being a layman, while delivering a service, is seated on a special high chair traditionally reserved for respected priests.

17. In this context it is interesting to point out that many Buddhist monks I talked to refer to lay Zen as a hobby and their own practice as a profession.

18. A rectangular ceremonial vestment that is worn draped over the left shoulder by Buddhist monks ("Digital Dictionary of Buddhism," *East Asian Dictionaries,* n.p., n.d. Web. 11 Jan. 2010. <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb/>).

Zen in daily life

The benefits of the state of mind acquired through *zazen* are praised for their usefulness in everyday life. Ningen Zen publications encourage their members to make *zazen* an inseparable part of their daily life, and *zazen* is described as the essence of all Zen practice. There are numerous references to the practice of Zen and its relation to daily life. Many articles on topics such as Zen and business, Zen and education, or Zen and health, discuss how to introduce Zen into such fields, where it is said to offer great benefits.

Two of the most prominent practical benefits claimed are tension reduction and enhanced concentration. Thus, by spending time in *zazen* meditation, an individual will become more efficient and actually gain time, a precious commodity particularly in contemporary Japanese society. Zen ideology is identified with time saving, waste prevention, hard work and so on, in synergy with the modern Japanese social ethos. "Modern Zen is not meant for people with free time on their hands, but rather for busy people" (*Zensha no seikatsu,* NZK 1997, 22–25).[19] Ningen Zen endorses the practice of Zen by company workers and businessmen. Zen practice is said to develop the ability to make decisions independently and to lead others. It is therefore highly recommended for business managers (*Keizai to Zen,* NZK 1995, 18–27).

A "man of Zen," according to the Ningen Zen ideology, is constantly in a search for his true self and that is the very essence of living independently. This idea of an independent man repeats in many of the Ningen Zen writings. An independent man or woman should be able to be more successful in assuming responsibilities and contributing to society (Tatsuta 1959, 147–148). Ningen Zen emphasizes the importance of incorporating Zen into modern education, as it is said to contribute to creativity and originality. Dignity and honor between human-beings is one of the main pivots of the movement. Ningen Zen stresses the importance of equality between human beings and categorically rejects sexual and racial discrimination. Education in the spirit of Zen should let every pupil express his individuality as part of the group's general harmony (*kyōiku to Zen*, NZK 1999, 4–7).

Another major benefit *zazen* practice holds according to Ningen Zen is health. The way this point is addressed in the Ningen Zen ideology is perhaps one of the best examples of a laypeople Zen discourse. On the one hand, wishing to remain loyal to the traditional spirit of Zen, Ningen Zen clarifies that originally Zen practice is not meant for health purposes.

19. All the references from the movement's monthly journal, *Ningen Zen* (hereafter NZK) were translated into English by the author.

> Originally the goal of Zen practice is not pursuing and maintaining good health…In Zen practice one is demanded to be indifferent to his life. The saying that the famous Bukkō Kokushi (佛光國師) had practiced [zazen] so hard that when he finally experienced the great death (大死) his body literally smelled like a corpse. (*Kenkō to Zen*, NZK 1996, 26)

But, on the other hand, Ningen Zen emphasizes Zen's good influence on physical health. Based on the modern discourses of "body and mind connection" Ningen Zen stress how Zen can help maintain good health and even contribute to longevity.

> If we look on Zen history we see that many Zen monks had a long life. For example it is said that Jōshū lived to the age of hundred and twenty and Hakuin lived to the age of eighty four in spite of the fact that he suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis. If we consider the average life span at that time we must admit it is truly surprising. (*Kenkō to Zen*, NZK 1996, 26).

Accordingly, much of Ningen Zen's advertising, like ads, pamphlets, website, etc, place more emphasis on z*azen*'s advantages as a stress relief method and its aesthetic than on its features as a genuine religious practice. Those advertisements offer people a chance to enjoy serenity in the midst of the modern urban society turmoil.[20]

Ningen Zen's ideology and practice might be described as a combination of two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, the movement presents itself and its teaching as a revolution in Zen history. It clearly claims to be distinguished from the monastic movement by addressing itself specifically to laypeople. And, indeed, many of the movement's ideologies and practices are new and did not exist within the realm of traditional Zen. On the other hand, the movement claims to represent authentic Zen, and many of its customs resemble traditional Zen practice.

Ningen Zen as a new religion

The category "Japanese new religions" encompasses many methodological problems, as it may lump together a wide range of groups and organizations with very little, if any, common grounds. The category ranges from well-established movements such as the Sōka Gakkai, to radical and fundamental organizations like Aum; from Buddhist oriented groups like Shinnyo-en (真如苑) to Judeo-Christian oriented religions like Mahikari (真光) and Makuya (幕屋). In *Kurozumikyō and the new religions of Japan*, Helen

20. According to a survey I conducted in one of the group's *dōjōs* in Tokyo, more than 70% of the respondents stated tranquility and health was their main goal in *zazen* practice.

Hardacre addresses the problem by suggesting few common characteristics to the great diversity found in the Japanese new religious movements (Hardacre 1986, 3–7).

Some of the characteristics suggested by Hardacre, such as worldly benefits, or "the use of contemporary scholarship to refer to a world picture" are highly visible in the case Ningen Zen. Furthermore, the "vague dividing line between laity and leaders," that Hardacre regards as one of the major characteristics of the New Religions, is also one of the fundamental aspects of Ningen Zen's "lay Zen."

These considerations, alongside its historical background and some of its ideological aspects, make it tempting indeed to categorize Ningen Zen as a New Religion. However, other major characteristics identified by Hardcare as being at the core of New Religions, such as evangelistic proselytization, and dramatic conversion are noticeable in their absence from Ningen Zen's discourse and practice.

As Shimazono indicates, the worship of the founder or his successors as a living deity is an important characteristic in many of Japan's new religious movements (Shimazono 2004, 6). Such worship does not exist in Ningen Zen. Although Tatsuta Eizan, the founder of the group, is highly respected, he is not regarded as divine and no traces of his worship are present in the group's practice.

Ningen Zen teaching completely lacks the syncretism which characterizes many, if not all, Japanese New Religions (Shimazono 2004, 7–12). Despite all the additions and modifications made by the group, the main sources of teaching remain those of the Rinzai Zen sect. Other influences such as animistic beliefs or Christian thought, which are also considered to be central features in New Religions ideology, are nowhere to be found in Ningen Zen.

New Religions emphasize the notion of "individual salvation." This religious concept was gradually dismissed by traditional Japanese Buddhism, which during the Edo period (1603–1868) had developed into a very ceremonial religion. It was this religious concept, important especially in times of social turmoil, which largely contributed to the success of New Religions in the modern era. Ningen Zen, on the other hand stresses "personal awakening" and not "individual salvation" as its main goal, the difference being that Ningen Zen's discourse doesn't promise relief, or escape from this world anguish, but self fulfillment within the world.

Another major distinction between Ningen Zen and New Religions is the lack of healing rituals. Such rituals, destined for the preservation and restoring the group member's physical health, are customary in many new reli-

gious movements (Westley 1980, 36). While Ningen Zen does claim that Zen practice has many health benefits, relief from a specific illness is not promised. There are no healing ceremonies or talismans, which are typical to many New Religions.

Lastly, while Ningen Zen considers itself a turn in Zen's history, it still regards its practice as inseparable from the Zen tradition, thus not meeting Hardacre's criteria of self-identity. As an organization based in a well-established tradition like Zen, and given that Ningen Zen lacks some of the most fundamental characteristics of a New Religion, it would appear that an attempt to categorize Ningen Zen as a new religious movement would be problematic.[21] In this sense as well, it is very hard to distinguish the bottles from the wine.

How old is the wine?

We have witnessed the evolution of lay Zen from the end of the nineteenth century, when the gates of the temples first opened until the development of independent laypeople Zen groups in the second half of the twentieth century. This new form of Zen, that first developed in Japan to serve ideological and practical needs, had ended up setting the stage for Zen's leap into Western society. For although in Japan monastic Zen is still thriving, there is no doubt that in a global perspective, it was lay Zen practice that endured. Aspects such as the emphasizing of the *kenshō* experience as the essence of Buddhist practice, alongside the simplification of Zen tradition and its identification with *zazen* practice, or the emphasis on Zen's health virtues, became some of the main characteristics of contemporary Zen in Japan and outside of it.

However, the lay Zen narrative in contemporary Japan, as reflected in the case of Ningen Zen, still differs from its Western offspring. While Zen in the West is largely considered a personal striving towards awakening, Japanese lay Zen strongly emphasizes the social context of the practice. This might be explained by the enormous influence Confucian values have had throughout Japanese history and, especially, the part they played in the Meiji restoration.

For over a hundred years, Zen has undergone constant evolution, from the Neo-Confucian values of Meiji through individualism, capitalism to health awareness of the late twentieth century. It is not by a single attempt or at a specific point in time that the contemporary lay Zen practice was invoked,

21. In his article "*Sanbōkyōdan*: Zen and the Way of the New Religions," Robert Sharf discusses another lay Zen group, the Sanbōkyōdan in the context of New Religions. Although I disagree with many of his conclusions, I find his observations very relevant to this discussion. See Sharf (1995).

but rather, it is the outcome of constant efforts to preserve Zen's role and position in Japanese society as times are changing, that created the practice and narrative.

Throughout its long history, the Buddhist tradition constantly adjusted itself to new cultures and new eras. An attempt to define or identify the 'original Zen' will most likely fail. It is impossible to look at the Zen phenomenon through lenses clean of the ideas which have been associated with it during the last century. Furthermore, it is possible that there is no, and never has been, an "original Zen."

In conclusion, the lay Zen model should not be viewed as a degeneration of a former pure essence, or as an entirely new religious phenomenon, but rather as a living tradition in the midst of great challenges. Contemporary laypeople practice is no less "authentic" then when Zen first emerged in China in the sixth century, or when it first arrived in Japan in the thirteenth century. In all of these cases, Zen was modified to suit the new cultural and historical environment. For Zen has been constantly served in a "new bottle," perhaps to a point in which it is no longer possible to estimate how old the wine is. And, perhaps it is not that important, since Zen, as experienced by people around the world today, is the one that actually exists, while the so-called "pure Zen" might be found only in books.

References

Borup, Jørn

2008 *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism : Myōshinji, a living religion*. Leiden: Numen book series.

Faure, Bernard

1994 *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hardacre Helen

1986 *Kurozumikyō and the New Religions of Japan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Heine, S. and Wright, S.D

2000 *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ikeda, Eishun

1998 Teaching Assemblies and Lay Societies in the Formation of Modern Sectarian Buddhism. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 25(1–2): 11–44.

Jaffe, Richard

2001 *Neither Monk nor Layman: Clerical Marriage in Modern Japanese Buddhism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ningen Zen Japan website

n.d. "The religion for the people of today". http://www.ningen-zen.com/ningen-zen/home.shtml (accessed 11 January 2010)

Ningen Zen Kyōdan

1999 *Ningen Zen Kyōdan 50 Nenshi*. Ichikawa: Ningen Zen Kyōdan shuppanbu.

1995–1999 *Ningen Zen*[NZK]. Tokyo: Ningen Zen Kyōdan shuppanbu.

Sawada, Janine Anderson

2004 *Practical Pursuits: Religion, Politics, and Personal Cultivation in Nineteenth-Century Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Shaku, Soen [Soyen]

1906 *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*. Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company.

Sharf, Robert

1995 Sanbōkyōdan: Zen and the Way of the New Religions. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22(3–4): 417–458.

1993 The Zen of Japanese Nationalism. *History of Religions* 33(1): 1–43. doi:10.1086/463354

Shimazono, Susumu

2004 *From Salvation to Spirituality: Popular Religious Movements in Modern Japan.* Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.

2006 "Bukkyō to taishūjiritsu shisō" in *Gendai to bukkyō,* edited by Sueki Fumihiko, 122–143. Tokyo: Naridehansha.

Snodgrass, Judith

2003 *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Sogen Hori, Victor

1994 Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery. *Journal of Japanese Studies* 20(1): 5–35.

Tatsuta Eizan 立田 英山

1959 *Ningenkeisei to Zen*. Tokyo: Ningen Zen kōdan shuppanbu.

2001 *A Guide to Susokukan.* Ichikawa-city: Ningen Zen kōdan.

Thomsen, Harry

1978 *The New Religions of Japan*. New York: Greenwood Press.

Victoria, Brian Daizen

2006 *Zen at War.* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Westley F.R.

1980 "Purification and Healing Rituals in New Religious Movements." In *Rituals and Ceremonies in Popular Culture*, edited by Ray B. Browne, 36–47. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Yampolsky, Philip

1971 *The Zen Master Hakuin: selected writings*, New York: Columbia University Press.

1978 *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. New York: Columbia University Press.