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A newsletter commentary on
Zen mysticism and its interaction
with contemporary Zen

◆◆◆ The sect of Buddhism

Hinduism for the most part might be considered as an *ethos*. In other words, it could be considered as a moral/religious disposition of a particular community as shown in its customary behavior. Looked at in another way, through the lens of religion, Hinduism, while still being an *ethos*, could also be seen as a kind of *universal church*. In the scheme of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, a “church” (using the Christian term for now) is wholly continuous with society, inclusive and universalistic, in addition to being hierarchically organized. Thus it would seem that Hinduism fits well within these parameters. But now, more importantly, under the same scheme of Weber and Troeltsch, “sects”, as a phenomenon, are spawned from churches, usually in response to dissatisfaction with church routine and bureaucracy. The traits of the sect, according to Weber and Troeltsch, really signify attempts to purify the original church. The sect isolates itself from society. One joins it voluntarily. It is exclusive and distinctive. There is no hierarchy such as a caste system. Membership is almost always based on a special, meaningful religious experience. Examples of Hindu sects would be Jainism, Buddhism, Vaishnava, etc.

In defense of the above theory, it needs to be borne in mind that the Buddha, before his awakening, was a member of the Hindu caste system and, therefore, was a full member of the Hindu church’s hierarchical scheme. Specifically, he was a member of the warrior cast (S., *kshatriya*). In fact, there were three castes, namely, the Brahman class who interpreted the *Vedas*, the warrior class, and the merchant class. In addition, there was an *out caste*.

At first, the Buddha’s behavior was not noticeably outside of Hindu mainstream religious thought. But then, like some other caste warriors of his day, he became skeptical of the effectiveness of Vedic rituals to fulfill their promise and saw, moreover, many of the Brahman class to be, for the most part, corrupt. This attitude is borne out in the *Upanishads* (the revealed part of the *Veda*) in which the warrior-teachers mentioned in the *Upanishads* openly challenged certain ideas of the Hindu church as represented by the Brahman class.

From this climate of spiritual tension noted in the *Upanishads*, the Buddha formed what might be called a “sect” in response to what he perceived to be the ineffectiveness of the Hindu church to satisfy the spiritual needs of its people. In a way, his efforts and the efforts of other warrior-teachers amounted to a reformation of the Vedic system. Such efforts, however, were not attempts to destroy the old Hinduism but were rather intended to cleanse it of its ineffectiveness. On this point, it should be noted that in the scheme of Weber and Troeltsch, “sects” never consider everyone to be saved. Only a few are saved who have become pure. In the case of Buddhism, only the Arhats are fully saved. As mentioned earlier, the sectarian is so in virtue of a certain kind of religious experience which falls outside of the larger church.

Whereas the universal church is salvationally inclusive; the sect understands that many are, in a word, damned. In some of the Pali Suttas the Buddha does, in fact, condemn the lot of mankind to inferior rebirths—in most cases, the hells. Later this attitude is amended with the rise of Pure Land Buddhism.

To conclude for now, it can be argued, and I think successfully, that Buddhism is a sect within the larger Hindu church or the same, the Hindu ethos. Like other Indian sects Buddhism came on the heels of Hinduism's failure to fully meet the religious needs of some of its people. These sects criticized animal sacrifices, the God, rituals of atonement, and the general belief that all beings are automatically saved if they follow the customs as set forth in pan Hinduism. □

◆◆◆ Divinatory thinking

Is thinking not permitted in Zen? Are we to understand that Zen comes by way of a special kind of psychic osmosis in which case thinking is unnecessary? Are we to take, literally, the words of Zen master Niu-t'ou Fa-jiang who said "Thinking brings unclarity"? Lumping the questions together, the answer seems negative. In fact, thinking is permitted in Zen—but rather, it is a special kind of thinking which I call *divinatory thinking*.

Let me now unpack the idea of what I mean by the term, "divinatory thinking". While it seems easy to understand the general notion of 'thinking', or at least some forms of thinking such as 'deliberation', 'calculation', 'reflection', etc., the notion of divinatory thinking is not in these categories. Rather it is thinking which is on a path of discovery moving from a state of ignorance or better still, moving from primordial *lost-ness* to a state of *finding-ness* in which awakening occurs as a result. We might consider as a pertinent example, somebody looking for something precious and valuable which they've lost, being unable to remember just exactly where they placed it last. Analyzing this kind of thinking, its trajectory is not directed at thinking about the object it desires as a mere thought, but seeks it, instead, as a concrete actuality. In other words, to give another example, when I look for my misplaced screwdriver, thinking about it mentally and abstractly is out of the question. I know what it looks like already. Rather, I want to find the real, concrete screwdriver—the one I need right now to install the door hinge.

The critical moving principle of divinatory thinking, which is necessary to make it work, requires that we really have a burning need to find truth in which the task of finding it becomes a matter of life and death. As it is easy to see, this moving principle is more than idle curiosity which questions, but not at a depth sufficient to engage the drive of divinatory thinking. Delving into the trait of curiosity a bit further, curiosity is thinking in which the chief interest is novelty and information gathering. In no case does it rise above our general satisfaction with ourselves as beings who already find solace in the everyday world and its offerings. In another aspect, curiosity will not cause an upheaval in our being, whereas divinatory thinking ultimately does lead to a profound change.

Having the capacity for divinatory thinking, in the case of Zen, brings with it a dissatisfaction with the everyday world and its classifications, at least a dissatisfaction with respect to *facticity* in which everything is identified by a perceptible fact (e.g., I am a certain height, weight, nationality, etc.). Divinatory thinking is not content with my facticity. It pays no attention to who I am as professor or as truck driver. For there are no facts in mystical awakening to which the hounds of divinatory thinking lead. Facts, which are constitutive of my character are just descriptions—mere labels which never go to the heart of who I really am.

Only divinatory thinking can answer the question of who am I. But more importantly, only divinatory thinking can walk the path of Buddhism where facticity has been, in a manner of speaking, renounced.

At the heart of divinatory thinking, in which it becomes of vital concern for me, it arouses almost an obsession for discovery as if I were like an explorer who is searching for a lost city which he had earlier dreamed about. By contrast, this is not what followers of some modern day Guru or Zen Rishi experience who depend heavily upon their master's instructions. In fact, it is quite the opposite of this kind of attitude. To illustrate this, it would be most ludicrous to imagine King Arthur's Knights waiting, sitting around the Round Table expecting the Grail to appear. But this is exactly what is happening when followers substitute divinatory thinking for Guru worship. In one sense it is spiritual laziness. In another sense, it is a denial of the path of self-discovery. □

◆◆◆ Emptiness of the relative

Nagarjuna (second century C.E.) stands as one of Buddhism's most important thinkers. He is credited with laying down the principles of the Mādhyamaka system which subsequently grew into Mākhyamika (i.e., followers of Mādhyamaka). Western interpreters have certainly found Nagarjuna's Mādhyamaka philosophy to be virtually intractable. His ideas, needless to say, have raised much controversy, far more than the Buddha's. By modern Brahmanical thinkers and European scholars, Mādhyamika is represented as leaning more or less in the direction of *nihilism* in which the highest values devalue themselves, to use Nietzsche's apt expression. In particular, they believe that the absolute, as the highest value, is utterly devalued in Mādhyamaka. For example, both assert that Nagarjuna's Mādhyamaka philosophy makes it clear that there is nothing non-illusory behind illusory phenomena. Furthermore, they observe that Nagarjuna nowhere repudiates, unambiguously, the ascription of nihilism by countering this call, leaving room for a transcendent value. However, the consensus among Chinese and Japanese thinkers and scholars is decisively counter to this direction. Their reading of Mādhyamaka is roughly as follows. Emptiness (*shūnyatā*) strictly refers to the relativity of phenomena and derived concepts based on intellectualizing sensory perception. By an elaborate dialectical treatment, the Mādhyamikas showed that our sensory experiences and the world of ideas which we derive from our sensory experiences are ultimately unsatisfactory. Thus, it becomes clear that the absolute or ultimate reality cannot belong to sensory individuals or finite things. In effect, conditioned things are empty of absoluteness. From a perceptual standpoint, even our very existential experience as human beings is likewise empty since it is always relational. With regard to absolute reality itself it is impossible to understand it by way of temporal concepts and human values so as to determine it in a sensory way. Not only is it impossible, it is contradictory because to make the absolute something determinate—and human—is to also make it relational (i.e., empty).

While on the surface it is easy to read Mādhyamaka as being thoroughly nihilistic or treat it as a form of phenomenalism with nihilistic overtones as did the late Indian scholar, S.N. Dasgupta, one has to read Mādhyamaka from the standpoint of the Buddha's teachings to make any sense of it. For the Buddha treats emptiness in a qualified manner—not as an ultimate fact. The eye, for example, and the resultant vision which arises from the eye organ are said to be empty, but empty, that is, of *myself*. Indeed, I am not the eye or anyone of my sensory organs, including this body I believe to be mine. These things are part of finite existence or better still, they make up conditioned, dependent existence. These things will

ultimately show themselves to be relative and therefore, empty. But on the same token, I, *myself*, transcend the emptiness of all finite things. Apropos, I suffer only by identifying with things which are empty. Under this same reason, I cannot suffer if I do not cling to emptiness, instead, realizing the peace of nirvana which is eternally beyond the pale of causes and conditions which are empty. Thus, is one to understand the basis of Nagarjuna's Mākhyamaka. □

◆◆◆ Toward Zen's skepticism

Zen, it seems, has always had a reputation for being iconoclastic. True to the word, some followers of the Zen tradition (C., tsung) not only showed a marked disrespect for the outward signs of Buddhism but equally showed contempt for the Buddha's teaching, going so far as to openly deprecate the Sutras and the Shastras (i.e., treatises about Buddhist principles). In all fairness, some of this iconoclastic behavior is understandable in light of the historical context of Buddhist scriptural exegesis and the Buddhist institutions which promoted it. It should be noted that in the history of Chinese Buddhism, great emphasis was placed on memorizing texts and being able to lecture on their contents. As might be expected, the monk-scholar ideal was highly venerated by the imperial court. More specifically, the monk-scholar was venerated for demonstrating a prodigious memory in addition to possessing finely honed debating skills. Some monk-scholars, history tells us, committed a huge amount of Buddhist literature to memory which by today's standards seems extraordinary.

During the T'ang dynasty (618–906), any candidate who wished to become a Buddhist monk was required to commit to memory a number of Buddhist Sutras prior to being awarded a certificate of ordination. This requirement applied to all Buddhist monks; even those who wished to study Zen after their ordination period. The plausible reason for this requirement has to be found in the belief, at least during this time, that one's ability to memorize huge amounts of literature was a sure sign of a superior intellect. Roughly, three traits were required to become a noteworthy Buddhist monk of high recognition. Firstly, one had to be extremely pious, strictly following the Vinaya (disciple) observing all of the monastic *regula*. Secondly, one had to have memorized a good number of Buddhist Sutras and Shastras. Lastly, one had to be able to understand and lecture on the Sutras demonstrating their ability to clarify intractable subjects.

While on the surface it is difficult to fault the monk-scholar system, Zen proved to be fiercely skeptical of it. With the rise of the Zen ideal in China which had no interest in "words, paper, and brush" a tension developed and grew between Buddhist monks who were committed to literary practices (i.e., the monk-scholars) and those who were committed to mysticism. This phenomenon, it should be mentioned, is not unknown in comparative religion studies. The radical skeptical stance of Zen clergy against the monk-scholar ideal, flowering in the 8th-c, was certainly neither unique nor unexpected. But this kind of skepticism carried the seeds of its own undoing within itself in which it would eventually be changed by Pure Land influences in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in which Zen would become heavily faith based. The German philosopher, Hegel, noted that with skepticism comes "the disintegration of truth, and, consequently, of all content, and thus perfect negation." Not surprisingly Zen's skeptical attitude was soon faced with a crisis of faith as it stood on the precipice of the *nothing*. Almost by necessity, a new Zen emerges, one which is faith based in Pure Land practices. □

◆◆◆ A new transmission

Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, did not actually appoint a successor before he died but installed, instead, the *Platform Sutra* as the authority of Zen, replacing the former method of transmission. Henceforth, the transmission of Zen, as representing the essence of the Law (S., Dharma) would be invested in the *Platform Scripture*. Citing from Yampolsky's translation of *The Platform Sutra* Hui-neng before his death says the following to his ten disciples:

You ten disciples, when later you transmit the Dharma, hand down the teaching of the one roll of the *Platform Sutra*; then you will not lose the basic teaching. Those who do not receive the *Platform Sutra* do not have the essentials of my teaching. As of now you have received them; hand them down and spread them among later generations. If others are able to encounter the *Platform Sutra*, it will be as if they received the teaching personally from me (p. 173).

At this point, just before his death, Hui-neng, it would appear, has made the focus of his teaching as a *transmission*, the very text itself. This fact is not ambiguous for the *Platform Sutra* goes on to say:

These ten monks received the teaching, made copies of the *Platform Sutra*, handed them down, and spread them among later generations. Those who received them have without fail seen into their own true natures (p. 174).

Further still, from the above, we learn that copies of the *Platform Sutra* were actually transmitted and disseminated. The Sutra, thus, served as a kind of certificate of transmission. In section 38 of the Sutra, Hui-neng says that, "Unless a person has received the *Platform Sutra*, he has not received the sanction." He then goes on to stipulate that the "place, date, and the name of the recipient must be made known, and these are attached to it [i.e., the *Platform Sutra*] when it is transmitted."

Does the aforementioned call into question much of the so-called Zen transmission after Hui-neng? There is every reason to believe that it does. What kind of impact should this have on the present day Zen community? Hopefully, a lot. From this, it can be argued that a "Roshi-centric" Zen errs and even an institutionally invested Zen errs in the absence of fully transmitting *via* the *Platform Sutra*. Apart from the authority of the Sutra and how it lays out the transmission, present day certification, it would seem, in no way follows the tradition set forth by Hui-neng.

While another topic for a future discussion, let me briefly say that careful analysis of the contents of the *Platform Sutra* even calls into question the very practices of modern Zen especially its heavy emphasis on zazen (sit down meditation). Actually, Hui-neng never discusses zazen except to redefine the term. He gives no weight to the practice of sitting cross-legged, keeping the back straight, and following the breath. Supportive of this, he says of zazen (tso-ch'an) that it means to "be without obstruction anywhere and inwardly not to activate deliberation." Even more to the point, Hui-neng further says that "meditation" is to see our original nature (i.e., Buddha-nature) which transcends confusion (cf. section 19).

Overall, it appears that Hui-neng's teaching, as disseminated in the *Platform Sutra*, runs counter to the direction which modern Zen is taking. Yet, even to this day in China, as a carryover from the older tradition, one who seriously wishes to become a student of Zen is told

to study the *Platform Sutra*. In fact, a candidate for ordination is asked about the contents of the *Platform Sutra* so important is its value to the life of Chinese Zen. □

◆◆◆ One pointedness

One pointedness meditation [hereafter, OPM] was the chief meditation of early Zen Buddhism if we examine the historical evidence at hand. Hung-jen, the “Fifth Patriarch” (601–674) said that OPM “is realizing that the Dharmakaya of the Buddha and the nature of sentient beings are identical.”

OPM, specifically described, is the focused negation of the moving (i.e., phenomena) in which the adept adjusts his concentration in such a way that he is able to fix it on an *unmoving mind-point* midst the moving. Read another way, OPM makes access with the Dharmakaya thus linking it with our own true nature which is hidden in the coils of our mundane existence.

Let me expand on OPM further. In our natural, everyday life, the body and our attention is always churning and shifting; moving from one thing to other; moving from the interior of our being to the exterior, and back again. Our body, pictured as a huge coil of nerves in a constant state of excitation, has, for the most part, escaped the constraining power of Mind (not to be confused with the post-Cartesian psychological mind). In a way, Mind’s lower part (which is in contact with the phenomenal world) is like a wild horse which has not been broken. However, in OPM the higher Mind disciplines our wild nature. This is to say that Mind, at least in meditation, attempts to constrain the nervous system so as to limit and channel its play. If Mind can fix on a theoretical *point*, internally visualized as an exceedingly small dot, the result of this *fixing*, portrayed as a magnifying glass concentrating the sun’s light on a piece of paper, will cause a subsequent energy shift, being immediately sensed by the adept. In other words, OPM redirects the body’s natural, untamed inclination to extend itself in nature (i.e., samsara). This natural extension is by the Chinese called “*chi*” (or in Japanese called “*ki*”). It corresponds to Plato’s *appetitive energy* and Freud’s “*Id*”. Basically, in a word, we are dealing with *raw desire* which wishes to extend outward. But when OPM is at work on *raw desire*, something unexpected happens. The latter becomes channeled and redirected into what the Indian Buddhists call the *madhya channel* (lit., central channel) which is the central energy axis of our being at a right angle to the phenomenal world. Thus, as beings, we discover that we are animated transcendent to our psycho-physical body. As geometrically depicted, transcendence is perpendicular to the plane of phenomena. From the standpoint of our body’s senses, transcendence is an exceedingly small theoretical *point*.

By correctly engaging with OPM the adept makes repeated access to the Dharmakaya of the Buddha. This has the salutary effect of *de-habituating* the tendency, on the part of sentient beings (i.e., our spirit), to reengage with phenomena and by doing so, avoid further contact with samsara. □