REFLECTIONS ON ZEN AND ETHICS

Introduction

Quite a few years ago already the fast-growing Zen world in the United States was shocked by the news of scandal discovered in some U.S. Zen halls: sexual and financial abuses committed by Zen Masters. I have forgotten all the details already, but the facts confronted us all with an intriguing question, namely: How is it possible that Zen Masters (rōshis)—people who are supposed to be enlightened—commit such unethical, immoral acts? From the Zen world two rather contradictory answers were soon heard. One, (the answer explicitly voiced by Abe Masao) was that “A Zen Master who commits such acts proves thereby that he is not enlightened.” The presupposition here seems to be that transcendental wisdom is intrinsically linked to morality and directs the subject to lead a highly ethical life as a matter of course. The problem with this, however, is that the system of confirming the enlightenment of the disciple by the master (inka) is cast into doubt.

The second answer is rather the opposite of the first: “Enlightenment has nothing to do with ethics” and further “Zen has nothing to do with ethics.” I must confess that I never heard this answer explicitly formulated in all its definiteness by any of my Zen friends. The closest thing I ever heard directly was a statement made at the 1991 meeting of the Japan Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies by Nishimura Eshin, at present president of Hanazono University at Kyoto: “Zen has nothing to do with social engagement.” For the sake of possible later discussion, I shall tell you immediately what I thought when I heard this: that makes perfect sense, if Zen is merely the movement of ascent to the wisdom of emptiness. But is it? Is it not at the same time supposed to be a movement of descent in compassion?

What I have just said could serve as a kind of status questionis (state of the question) for the problem to be faced in this seminar, but the organizers have drawn attention to Brian Victoria’s book, Zen at War, in which the complicity of a good number of Japanese Zen Masters with Japan’s ultra-nationalism and militarism is documented. This book may broaden our perspective and permit or oblige us to formulate the question in a somewhat different way, namely as fol-

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1 This article is an edited version of a paper delivered at a seminar on “Zen zonder vuile handen [Zen without dirty hands],” held at De Tiltenberg, July 21-22, 2001.
lows: Does the transcendental wisdom of enlightenment also guarantee wisdom (soundness of judgment, without interference by the human passions) in worldly affairs?

But there is also a more practical aspect. It seems as if the revelations in Victoria's book of an unsavory period in the recent history of the Japanese Zen establishment have been a greater shock to European Zen adherents (who may have been living with an idealistic and timeless picture of Zen) than the aforementioned scandals in the United States. Moreover, the book has also evoked the indignation of some victims of Japan's dirty war. For these people, their indignation over the fact that Japan as a nation has never truly apologized for its crimes during the war is now compounded by their indignation that, with a few exceptions, not even the Zen Masters who, it now appears, fully collaborated with Japan's militarists, ever showed signs of repentance or offered an apology.

In this paper I will try to contribute to the discussion of the relation between Zen and ethics. (I say "try," for it is certainly not easy to do this). We are engaged here, I believe, in a reflection on the meaning, possibilities, and dangers of Zen in the West. And one way of formulating our basic question could be: First, what can we and can we not expect from Zen for ourselves as individuals and for Western society? Second, are there possible dangers involved in Westerners taking up Zen? I have divided this article into three parts: Religion and Ethics, Buddhism and Ethics (the secular world), Zen in the West: its situation, mission, and conditions.

**Preliminary Remarks on the Relationship between Religion and Ethics**

Much could be said, of course, about the relationship of religion and ethics or morality, but I must restrict myself to indicating briefly a few points that could have a bearing on our reflections on Zen. Let me begin by simply quoting the article on "Morality and Religion" in Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*. This article tells us that, at least in Western culture, religion and ethics have been seen as inseparable from one another and that

In fact, this distinction between religion and morality is a relatively modern one; the popular modern conception that religion and morality are separate is probably traceable to the Enlightenment. At that time, a number of thinkers sought to elaborate ethical theories based on reason or on widely shared human sentiments. In so doing they established the assumption that the norms governing conduct, morality, and ethics (that is, the effort to reason about or justify these norms) were separable from matters of religious beliefs. (Greene 1987: 92)

This was, of course, a very important step in the process of the secularization of Western culture. It may not be irrelevant to remark here that this step had apparently been taken much earlier in Japan, where the religions ceded the role of
norms and the underpinning of morality to the Confucian worldview no later than the beginning of the Tokugawa period (1600).

Concerning the further evolution in the West, Greene points out that ethical theorists "have [recently] stressed the importance of various metaphysical or religious views in grounding, explaining and justifying commitment to the moral life" and remarks: "It is noteworthy that discussion of the question, Why should one be moral? returns ethics to basic matters of religion" (Greene 1987: 96). In any event, insofar as a culture or society needs morality, it stands in need of "a minimum number of shared values," so that one can maintain that "society cannot do without religion (and worldviews in general) as a source of meaning, morality and ideas concerning ‘the good life?’" (Vroom 1997: 229).

If we look at the issue from the viewpoint of religion, we are confronted with the question: Is religion intrinsically related to ethics or not? On this point Greene argues that that at least historically it has always been so:

Religions characteristically emerge and develop in a process of intense dialogue with the requirements of the moral life .... Religion is not reducible to morality ... but no one can deny that moral concerns in their fullest sense have been a central aspect of religious life. (Greene 1987: 105).

Would this mean that a religion, in order to be a full religion, should have its own specific morality? The question must be answered in the negative, if morality is understood as an "ethical system" in the strict sense, since many religious traditions do not "display ethical theorizing in the contemporary sense of an effort to work out and to justify moral norms in rational terms" (Greene 1987: 97). But we can go further in this negation, if we are in agreement with Thomas Kasulis:

If there is already an adequate moral system in place within the society, there is no necessity for the religion to develop its own ethical system. In fact, such a separately developed system could present theoretical difficulties by generating two competing ethical systems. (Kasulis 1990: 44-45).

Still, must not religion, in order to function adequately as a religion, promote a moral lifestyle, either by applying its own moral system or by endorsing an adopted one? I suppose that this is generally understood, although it may not be easy to pin down why exactly this is the case. The positive answer may look problematic if the question is formulated as follows: Is a religion (at least co-) responsible for the moral quality of the society in which it exists? But the positive answer is unavoidable when religion is practically identified with society, as was the case in medieval Christendom.
Buddhism and Secular Reality? Buddhism and Ethics

My considerations up to now may have sounded rather abstruse and not to the point. I trust that the further flow of my paper will make the connection between these preliminary remarks and what follows clear. Still, it may be good at this point to formulate a more concrete question. Since we are looking for the background—and thereby a better understanding and perhaps some kind of explanation—of some morally regrettable attitudes of particular Zen Masters, could it be that the nature of the Buddhist religion and its relationship to secular reality, especially to ethics, may throw some light on our problem? Or, to put the question in a more provocative form, can we detect in Buddhism and especially in its Zen form a propensity to nationalism and, more generally, to a relativization of ethical norms or, at the least, the absence of a sufficient defense against the onslaught of such tendencies? We must first consider the nature of Buddhism as a religion and then look at the history of the Buddhist tradition. However, the different elements that come into play can only be indicated here and not sufficiently be developed. Also, for the sake of convenience I will explore Buddhist traits mostly in comparison or contrast with Christian ones.

The first point I want to indicate is that, while it is clear enough that Christ’s religious message, like that of the prophets before him, is intrinsically ethical, this point may not be so clear-cut in Buddhism. With respect to Christianity, one of my former professors of philosophy at the University of Louvain, Albert Dondeyne, used to say: “It is a specific trait of the biblical faith that, in order to be authentic, it must emerge into an ethic of truthfulness, justice, and goodness.” In other words, Christianity is a “prophetic” religion that finds its expression in moral activity on the everyday or secular level (basically, by charitable action for the good of one’s neighbor). Or again, Christianity is other-centered and outward-directed (or ‘ex-centric’).

Buddhism, on the other hand, is basically inward-directed and concentric. It is sometimes called a ‘mystical’ religion in the sense that it seeks deliverance from the human quandary by finding unity with the indwelling Absolute, on a level transcending that of everyday human consciousness and activity. Kenneth Cragg’s insightful remark on the difference between the messages of Moses and Sakyamuni may point in the same direction. Cragg describes Moses as “wrestling with ethnic identity and social injustice. He encountered humanity, not in the raw of mortal fate, but in the raw of slavery, oppression and political despair.” He then characterizes Sakyamuni’s message as focused on “sheer human personal finitude, all politics, society, culture and history apart” (Cragg 1987: 247-48).

2I will be making liberal use here of Van Bragt 1990: 48ff.
This may be the place to repeat the question at which I hinted in the Introduction: Does Buddhist liberating wisdom, which is non-discriminating and beyond everyday human consciousness, guarantee also wisdom in discriminatory worldly affairs? In answering this question the Buddhist tradition does not speak with one voice. On the one hand, enlightenment wisdom is presented as equivalent to Sakyamuni’s own enlightenment and thus as a kind of ‘omniscience’, a total overcoming of a human’s initial avidya, whereby no dark corners remain either in the world or in one’s own person (including one’s past and one’s subconscious). On the other hand, however, there is the distinction between a Buddha (a simply enlightened one) and a Bodhisattva (an enlightened one who, instead of entering nirvana, decides to ‘return to’ samsara, the ordinary world, to save the deluded and suffering masses). It is then pointed out that, in order to be effective in his this-worldly mission, the Bodhisattva must attain a different ‘post-enlightenment wisdom’, a knowledge of ‘expedient means’ whereby to reach and influence people in their deluded and secular situation. In some of the presentations of the stages (bhūmi) leading to full bodhisattvahood, it is said that “He [the bodhisattva candidate] also acquires a knowledge of the arts and sciences like writing, arithmetic, medicine, etc.” (Dayal 1970: 288-89). In this view it appears to be clear that, for example, political and economic wisdom, a good grasp of mass psychology and of the dangers of nationalism or collective egoism is not automatically a part of enlightenment.

Secondly, Christianity as a religion is pervaded by its belief in the irreducible reality and religious importance of the ‘external’ (cosmic and social) world. What happens there, especially to people, is important in God’s eyes. This belief is ultimately based on or expressed in the doctrine of the creation of heaven and earth by God himself and on the doctrine of the Incarnation. In contradistinction, the whole tendency of Buddhism appears to be that only the mind is ultimately real and religiously important, while the outer world is not real enough to merit our concern. It is all a product of our minds and not more real than the phantoms and illusions that a skilled magician can make us see.

Explaining that the idea of “responsibility to society” is absent from Buddhism, Professor Kirita of Hanazono University writes:

Certainly, the term ‘society’ does not occur in Buddhism. The equivalent term ‘secular world’ (loka) refers to a world of extreme transitoriness with no real existence. There arose here no concept of an ‘ideal’ society, or of a ‘just’ (or ‘unjust’) society. (Kirita 1990: 6).

Winston King formulates the problem as follows:
For Buddhism, either Pali Canon or Mahayana variety, neither world nor self are what they seem to be. The importance of the world as it stands before the human being must be deflated (Pali Canon) or immanentalized into a higher self's transformed awareness (Mahayana). The important upshot for ethics is that Buddhism thus refuses to deal with the world on its own terms. It has no mandate to save the world, only to save selves from themselves. (King 1989:24)

This is important when it comes to what is now called 'social ethics' and to action for a better world. What is always heard from Buddhist dialogue partners in Japan is: "If you want a better world, purify your own heart-mind (kokoro)." However, one Western Buddhist counters this by saying: "We delude ourselves if we suppose that our zazen and its gentle good effects can alone have the corrective results that are now necessary for planetary survival" (Foster 1988: 59-60).

A third consideration which could be relevant to the position of ethics in Buddhism is the fact that Buddhism is initially and basically a 'monastic' religion. The samgha, understood as the monastic order of those who have left family and society behind, together with the Dharma and the Buddha, is one of the three 'jewels' to which every Buddhist entrusts him/herself. It is absolutely central to Buddhism and it is at the samgha that the lion's share of Buddhist teaching is directed. This explains why Buddhism never worked out a detailed set of rules for life in the secular world. It is probably the case that this lack of moral guidance for lay people became one of the main reasons for the disappearance of the Buddhist religion from its country of origin, India.

A final remark: Christianity has always regarded history as basically a 'conflictual' rather than an harmonious process (as the battleground between good and evil) and has stressed the duty of the Christian to engage in that battle to overcome evil. In contrast, the Buddhist ethos appears to share in a larger 'Asiatic' conception, that stresses harmony and conformity in the cosmos and society. "[The role of the human being] is not to transform the world and to intervene in it, but to hold it together and to support it by harmonizing into it and by playing the role assigned to him by life" (Vachon: 1990: 5). The following remark by a Western adherent of Zen may then serve as a kind of transition to our brief consideration of Buddhist history: "Worse, the centuries of social constraint seem to have injected the poison of conformity into the very bloodstream of the Dharma" (Foster 1988: 51).

That is where we will leave the discussion of the nature of Buddhism in general and its relationship to ethics. But what about Zen in particular? Much is said

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3 Not entirely certain that I shall be able to make this point sufficiently clear later on, I want to say already now that, with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, I do not believe that the historical realities called religions have an unchanging nature or 'essence'. 'Nature' here is
already, I believe, if one remarks that on many points Zen tends to radicalize (especially in its rhetoric) the tendencies present in all Mahayana Buddhism. Thus, for instance, adherents of Zen tend to be very clear in their affirmations that “mind is the only reality” and that “Buddhism is beyond the dichotomy of good and evil.”

If we look at the history of the Buddhist tradition, we can limit ourselves fortunately to ‘East Asia’, the world dominated by Chinese culture, since it is there that Zen originated and spread. Two developments in this cultural world may be of great importance for us: Buddhism’s acceptance of subordination to the state and Buddhism’s ceding of the realm of ethics (and society in general) to Confucianism. The monks who, coming for the most part from central Asia via the silk road, first brought Buddhism to China were thoroughly convinced that the Buddha was superior to whatever worldly authority (the Chinese emperor included) and that the Buddha Law or Dharma (the way to enlightenment) deserved precedence over the King’s Law, i.e. the moral and legal ordering of society. However, in a China where social order and especially the emperor as bearer of the Mandate of Heaven were central to religion, their Chinese converts rather soon came to accept the principle that Buddhism, like all religion, had to be in the service of the state. Buddhism thereby lost the capacity to exercise a critical role toward the temporal order and the powers that dominate it.

It was this Sinic form of Buddhism that was brought to Japan, with the result that even the strongest religious figures of Japanese Buddhism, no matter how much they differed from one another in the interpretation of the Dharma, all held the principle: “Buddhism for the protection of the state.” It is no wonder, then, that when, from the end of the Tokugawa era on, Buddhism was attacked for ‘not being Japanese’, the various Buddhist sects went all out to prove in word and deed that, on the contrary, they were the real backbone of the state and faithful servants of its policies.

The second important factor is that the Buddhism that entered the Chinese cultural sphere did not feel the need to work out its own ethical system for the

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4 This was symbolically expressed in the following question and answer. Question: if a Buddhist monk (as representative of the Buddha) meets the emperor, who should bow first? Answer: the emperor, of course.

5 It has to be remarked here that the Christianity that had recently arrived again from the West and was also criticized (maybe most of all by the Buddhists) for not fitting into Japan equally tried to prove its fidelity to Japan by collaborating with the nationalist policies.
people, since there was already in place a moral doctrine of high quality in the form of Confucianism. Thus, there developed, as it were, a division of labor and responsibilities between Buddhism, which was supposed to take care of the spiritual life and the afterlife, and Confucianism, which took charge of social life and of everyday morality. Joseph Kitagawa could therefore write: “Thus … there never developed [in Japan] an independent Buddhist community which would nurture Buddhist normative principles concerning the social, political, and cultural dimensions of human life and society” (Kitagawa 1966: 110).

It was, then, not the Buddhist revolutionary idea of the equality of all humans, whatever caste or nation they may belong to, that carried the day in Japan but rather the Confucian ethos, which has always considered the harmony of society to depend on vertical, hierarchical relationships and has limited its outlook to the group in power. Loyalty to the sovereign, which in the Chinese scheme still had to compete with filial piety, became the uncontested supreme value in Japanese Confucian ethics.

The presence of the rather strict and universally accepted Confucian ethics in the Chinese cultural sphere allowed the religions there to take a generally relaxed attitude toward ethics and to declare unequivocally that religion is beyond ethics. Shinran, for example, the founder of the Shinshū branch of Pure Land Buddhism proclaimed in his own way that salvation has nothing to do with objective good and evil. And an influential introduction to Shinshū doctrine states about his main doctrinal work:

Consequently, it is no good to look in Shinran’s Kyogyoshinshō for answers to the problems concerning people’s way of life in space and time. This book does not present a ‘rule of life;’ it does not say a word about what people should do in order to lead a better life. (Ryōji 1998: 23)

The end result, as already stated, is that in its history Buddhism never worked out an ethical system of its own. Buddhist authors can therefore write, for example: “Buddhism has no ethics—an ethics capable of becoming a creative force to shape a new economics, new politics, etc.” (Nishitani 1990: 141); “there has never been created, nor does there now exist, anything which can be properly called a Buddhist ethic” (Kirita 1990: 8). Instead, at least in the ‘Far East’, Buddhism adopted and promoted the Confucian moral system: “Japanese Buddhism has endorsed the Confucian social morality, blending it with its own religious psychology and anthropology” (Kasulis 1990: 49).

Our considerations up to now appear to justify the conclusion that, at least in theory, the realm of moral activity in the world is only of secondary importance to Buddhism. And, indeed, I believe it to be true that the central theory of Buddhism tends to relativize the moral life. In actuality, however, Buddhism has al-
ways been more than that; it has always functioned among the masses as a fullfledged religion and, as such, has certainly had a profound beneficial influence on the moral lives of many peoples in Asia, contributing in a major way to the especially tolerant and compassionate 'humanism' we find there. It can then be argued that Buddhism exerted this influence mainly by the borrowed ideas of karma and reincarnation. In that perspective, the acquirement of merit by means of a good moral life is, indeed, an absolute condition for a good rebirth—the only goal for which (most) lay people are supposed to be able to strive. 6

In this roundabout way we come then to what I consider to be the crux of our question, which I further see as two-pronged. First, it is a basic doctrine that the Buddhist path in its entirety comprises three constitutive elements: *sila*, which comprises the moral and monastic rules, *dhyana* or inward concentration, and *prajña* or transcendental wisdom. The goal of the path or the Buddhist ideal, therefore, lies in the perfection of these three elements. The traveler, who reaches this goal is called an 'enlightened one', but he could also be (and occasionally is) called a 'holy one'. It is generally recognized that the practice of *sila* by itself does not lead to Buddhist perfection or liberation, but the original understanding is, I believe, that moral perfection is the *conditio sine qua non* of liberation (and maybe also an end in itself besides liberation). Scholars have also debated whether the moral activities and virtues enjoined by the early Buddhists and Theravadins constituted a mere means to the goal of enlightenment or an end in themselves. "Perhaps it is more accurate to say that for the arahant (‘perfect being,’ Skt *arhat*) ... religious realization and ethical action were utterly inseparable" (Greene 1987: 500).

In view of the great apparent difference in nature of the two, it has probably never been easy to explain why transcendental wisdom and moral perfection should go hand in hand, and it would not be surprising if we found in the history of Buddhism a tendency to negate or at least to relativize the importance of *sila*. I myself am not enough of a Buddhist scholar to dare venture an opinion on this point but, in view of putting our problem in a broader perspective, it would be helpful if Buddhist scholars would produce some indications of this. Let me provisionally quote only Daisetz Suzuki:

While the Buddha apparently taught a well-balanced practice of *sila, dhyana*, and *prajña*, his followers became one-sided. Mahayanism in one sense can be said to have gone too far in its speculative flight, almost to the point of forgetting its ethical code, the *Vinaya*. (Suzuki 1980: 2)

And, specifically with regard to Zen, James Whitehill has this to say:

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6 Time does not permit me to inquire into the real influence which the Buddhist idea of compassion (karuna) exerted.
It is true that the [Zen] tradition regularly displays a kind of moral iconoclasm. Zen interpreters, in accord with Mahayana tradition, have emphasized that the quest for spiritual liberation requires by-passing the discriminatory mind, ... ethics is an eminent expression of the discriminatory mind .... (Whitehill 1987: 9-16)

The second point is not really different from the first one, but it approaches the question from a slightly different perspective, namely the character or 'structure' of the Buddhist path. As you know, the question of whether Buddhism is a religion or not was hotly debated in Western scholarly circles around the beginning of the 20th century. Basing themselves on the oldest Pali texts, several scholars then opined that Buddhism, rather than being a religion, is a kind of spiritual method or/and philosophy. Although these opinions were mostly based on a very limited knowledge of Buddhism as an historical reality, I think that there is some truth in what they claimed and I am inclined to formulate that partial truth in the following way.

The Buddhist path is a composite reality, essentially exhibiting two poles, which I shall (provisionally) call 'religion' and 'yoga'. 'Religion' I understand in the usual sense as that cultural reality that is made up of doctrine, faith, objects of worship, rituals and symbols, a social structure and, indeed, a moral code. By 'yoga' I understand a psychological or rather psychosomatic method or technique to reach an altered and ultimately transcendental state of consciousness.

It could then be argued that the yoga pole represents the core of the Buddhist path, since Buddhist salvation or liberation is described as transcending the dualistic mode of ordinary consciousness with all the suffering this involves, and that all the rest is non-essential to Buddhism, an adventitious, expedient means for people who cannot practice the real thing. However, that things are not so simple as presented here appears, for example, in the fact that, in this way of reasoning at least 90% of Japanese Buddhism, in which that element yoga is entirely absent, cannot be called true Buddhism. Indeed, yoga in itself is not religious and does not even necessarily lead to a more humane form of humanity. It can be practiced simply in view of obtaining preternatural powers, which can be used for the fulfillment of one's egocentric desires. Another way of indicating that yoga alone, insufficiently informed by a sound religiosity, can lead to has been tragically demonstrated recently by the poison gas attacks on Tokyo's subway lines by members of a yogic...
It is probably true that, of all the different forms of Buddhism, Zen puts the most stress on yoga. It may, therefore, be most exposed to the danger of underplaying the importance of the religious aspect and to the less desirable consequences thereof. In the West Zen has mostly been introduced from the perspective of yoga and with, as it were, a deliberate obfuscation of its religious aspects. As a result, the European monks participating in a Spiritual Exchange Program who had read that literature and then had occasion to share the life of different Zen halls in Japan, were dumfounded at discovering a religious atmosphere as dense as in their own Christian monasteries. Taking the long view, I for one am convinced that it is due to this religious atmosphere that Zen has mostly succeeded in preserving its sanity as a path of self-transcendence. It is not impossible, however that, in the general Japanese neglect of the Vinaya Japanese Zen in the 20th century did not attach sufficient importance to the moral life and to karuna.

Zen in the West: Its Situation, Mission, and Conditions

The very existence of this seminar, together with the many reactions (mostly on the internet) to Zen at War, are sufficient indication that the recent coming to light of unsavory aspects of the Zen establishment has caused quite some turmoil and soul-searching in the relatively young world of Western Zen. I think we can rejoice in this, on condition that it does not discourage people and cause them to give up their efforts to develop the inner life. That would be too bad, for it is clear enough that Zen’s ideal of interiority is sorely needed in our present Western culture.

We can rejoice in it first of all because this vivid reaction is evidence of a high ethical sensitivity and sense of social responsibility among Western Zen practitioners. Personally, I must say that the paucity or lack of reaction to these same facts on the part of Japanese Zen has troubled me a great deal. The Japanese did not, of course, have to wait for Victoria’s book to learn about these facts, since the books in Japanese by Ichikawa Hakugen, which became Victoria’s main sources, were published between 1967 and 1975. But I have the impression that the main reaction of the Japanese Zen people has been: “That Ichikawa is a maverick and he had an axe to grind.” One can add to this that only the Sōtō Zen sect has published a (belated) apology for their complicity in the war and

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7 This reminds me of what G.K. Chesterton (1925: 214) said in his inimitable style about the Fraticelli, these heretical followers of Saint Francis of Assisi: “What was wrong with these people was that they were mystics and nothing but mystics; mystics and not Catholics; mystics and not Christians; mystics and not human beings.” Unfortunately, I had to translate this passage back from French into English.

8 This year, at the instigation of a Dutch victim of the Japanese war machine in Indonesia, Kubota Roshi, the leader of the Sambō Kyōdan, a Zen organization of mixed
no apology at all has been forthcoming from the different branches of the Rinzai sect. Incidentally, a Japanese translation of Zen at War has recently been published and it is not unthinkable that the Japanese, who are notoriously conscious of their international image will display more of a reaction this time.

The second advantage of the present turmoil is that it presents a cogent occasion for asking some important questions such as: How can we characterize the situation of Zen in the West? What can the West expect from Zen? Could it be that in order to play a beneficial role in the West, Zen has to undergo a rather deep transformation?

In the West Zen finds itself operating in what is often called a 'post-Christian culture'. For our purposes, this means first of all a culture in which the Christian religion is no longer generally recognized as the norm and backbone of morality and where, as a result, the transmission of values and ideals is in jeopardy. H.M. Vroom has characterized the situation as follows:

As a consequence of pluralism, the Christian religion has declined as an institution shared by all. The judiciary and public education are neutral with respect to worldviews. Apart from a number of values recognized by governmental and educational agencies, there are no ideas of the good life that are transmitted consciously. (Vroom 1997: 230).

In this culture Zen finds itself outside of its Confucian milieu in whose ethics it was deeply embedded. What this could mean for Zen is intimated, for example, by Bernard Faure:

Zen’s stress on ‘spontaneity,’ so valuable in itself, must be understood against the background of a society ruled by Confucian etiquette. It loses much of its meaning in a permissive society. And is bound to degenerate into what Dōgen may have called a ‘naturalist heresy’ (jinen gedō ???). (Faure 1985: 91).

In the West Zen also finds itself displaced from an environment permeated with Buddhist religiosity. On this point a consideration by the late Fujiyoshi Jikai, once a central member of the F.A.S. society, may be relevant. Pointing out that many people who practice a form of Eastern meditation are, in fact, looking for a new religious identity, he continues:

On the other hand, this new religious identity itself has to be seen as a problem. Many people just think of it as the self-realization of man as an individual. The various meditation methods of Zen, etc. . . are used bodily for health and beauty, on the one hand, and mentally as clinical techniques or mystical methods of unification with the spirit, on the other. They do not actually serve as basic constituents for the creation of a new culture. Jikai 1985: 13)

lineage with a great following in the West, has also written an apology.
What, then, can Western culture reasonably expect from Zen? Not, of course, that Zen, by itself or even together with other Eastern spiritual paths, could save Western culture from barbarism or the total loss of moral norms and ideals. But it can be reasonably expected that Zen would adopt as its own the remaining good points of Western ethics and help to underpin and universalize them by its own psychological and anthropological tenets—somewhat in line with what Zen has been doing with Confucian ethics. And the minimum that can be demanded is, of course, that Zen does not unduly relativize and undermine the best points of Western ethics, such as, for example, the drive for the full recognition of human rights. If Zen would have that debilitating effect, it would be liable to the same criticism the Neo-Confucians leveled at Buddhism in medieval China:

From the Neo-Confucian viewpoint Buddhism undermined human values by stressing their relativity, transitoriness, and insubstantiality. Its essential indifference to human relations and social ethics ... did effectively cut the metaphysical ground out from under any positive and final assertion of rational, moral or social imperatives.9

This 'etherization' of all outward reality is certainly a conspicuous trait of practically the whole Buddhist tradition. Still, it could be asked whether it is really compatible with the original message of the Buddha. In his unsophisticated way, one champion of the Engaged Buddhism movement, Sulak Sivaraksa, radically places this in question by simply remarking: "If we do not regard suffering as something real and threatening, we do not take the message of the Buddha seriously" (Sivaraksa 1988: 10).

To the question, then, of whether Zen in the West will have to undergo a rather deep transformation in order to remain a humanly sane movement and to have a beneficial influence on Western individuals and on Western society as a whole, the answer appears to be 'yes'. The American champion of Tibetan Buddhism, Robert Thurman, takes this for granted:

I also think that all of the existing forms of Buddhist ethics, always closely appropriate to their cultural setting (including these that consider themselves 'trans-cultural,' such as Zen or Vajrayana) have flaws, are inherently open to modification, and require evolutionary effort based on their own rational and pragmatic principles. (Thurman 1996: 88)

In particular, it appears that Zen in the West will have to pay more attention to ethical norms and motivations than the Zen movement ever did in its Eastern context and to place karuna and its expedient means resolutely in the center, It may even have to work out its own 'Zen ethics'. Whitehill, a strong advocate of a Zen ethics, writes the following:

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Zen ethics, as a pluralistic process of inquiry into the moral consequences of Zen practice, liberation and insight, is increasingly needed in Zen groups and communities. As they create and sustain environments for liberation in different and evolving cultures, they face new opportunities and obstacles that demand ethical clarification, debate, and consensus. This is obviously the case in Zen communities outside Japan .... (Whitehall 1987: 19)

Zen people in the West can, therefore, not afford simply to repeat the traditional Zen rhetoric about ethics. They will have to be creative and especially so when it comes to social ethics and the place of (and motivation for) social engagement on the Zen path. For, traditionally, “Buddhism is extremely other-worldly, refusing to enter into the various affairs of human society, politics, economics ....” (Nishitani 1990: 230). And, especially with regard to the ecological problem, David Loy has the following to say:

Zen practice evolved to deal with the problem of the individual ego, and the threat of man's 'species-ego' seems to place us in a very different situation. We cannot assume that the traditional East-Asian forms of Zen by themselves are adequate for dealing with this new social problem. Unfortunately, mankind cannot collectively 'forget' itself in Dogen's sense. How to proceed here is unclear; we must find new ways. Western Buddhists are now struggling with the problem of how best to integrate personal practice and collective social action. (Loy 1985: 121-22)

To have the last word myself, I would only like to add that, of course, Christianity too is not ready with its answers to all the new social problems. Therefore, the search for answers can be, at least partly, a common one—a search in dialogue.

LITERATURE


