Zen as a Social Ethics of Responsiveness
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Abstract

One reason traditional Chan or Zen did not develop a comprehensive social ethics is that it arose in an East Asian milieu with axiologies (Confucian, Daoist, and Shintō) already firmly in place. Since these value orientations did not conflict with basic Buddhist principles, Chan/Zen used its praxes and theories of praxis to supplement and enhance, rather than criticize, those indigenous ethical orientations. When we consider the intercultural relevance of Zen ethics today, however, we must examine how its traditional ethical assumptions interface with its Western conversation partners. For example, it is critical that Chan and Zen stress an ethics of responsiveness rather than (as is generally the case of the modern West) one of responsibility. This paper analyzes special philosophical problems arising when one tries to carry Zen moral values without modification into Western contexts.

Zen as a Social Ethics of Responsiveness

When discussing religious ethics, we should consider not only the specific religion involved, but also its cultural setting. When analyzing traditional Zen Buddhist ethics, therefore, we need to consider it as not only a Buddhist but also an East Asian movement. For discussing Zen ethics today, furthermore, we should also examine factors arising from its new North American or Western European cultural settings. The other papers in this special issue address the resources Zen Buddhism can bring to ethical considerations in general. As a preliminary consideration, this paper briefly addresses some philosophical problems in bringing an East Asian Buddhist ethic as a system into dialogue with Western traditions. In fact, I will try to show that even if we were to embrace an ethic based in traditional East Asian Zen Buddhism, we might not be able to bring that ethic *directly* into an American context. Some intercultural confrontation or significant adjustment might be necessary.

We begin with two points about the cultural context of China and Japan within which Chan/Zen Buddhism took form. First, the tradition arose in a cultural sphere with preexisting social values. Before Zen was even a glint in Bodhidharma's dharma-eye, China had adopted a rich and sophisticated set of prescribed social behaviors. The Confucian program for harmonious interpersonal relations was already widespread. And Daoism presented its own values that could—and in isolated instances did—compete with the Confucian norms. For the most part, however, there was a *de facto* compromise between the two axiological traditions. Namely, Confucianism applied to the interpersonal, while Daoism to the relations with the nature. This compromise was in place when Buddhism entered the country from India in the first centuries of the Common Era. Buddhism brought to the mix something the two indigenous traditions had lacked, namely, an analysis of the psyche's inner dynamics. (Buddhism also introduced to China a heightened appreciation for logic, epistemology, and metaphysics, but those fields are less important to our story here.) In this way the *de facto* compromise between

Confucianism and Daoism expanded to include Buddhist psycho-somatic-spiritual techniques. These techniques helped people behave like better Confucians in their personal relations and better Daoists in relation to the natural world. Such a blend was common long before Chan tradition arose as a new Buddhist tradition in China.

A similar cultural context prevailed in Japan before Zen Buddhism developed there. For example, in the early seventh-century Shōtoku (or Seventeen-article) Constitution, we find ideal social relations expressed in Confucian terms and the psychological attitudes necessary for social harmony expressed in terms of Buddhist egolessness. The Constitution barely mentions relations with the natural world. From other sources, though, we know the general orientation toward nature expressed proto-Shintō (*kami*-worship) sensitivities, some of which had folk religious connections with Chinese Daoism. In short: although the Shōtoku Constitution gave the Confucian-Buddhist link *de jure* status, from equally ancient times a proto-Shintō aspect was at least a *de facto* connection as well. A more explicit synthesis between Buddhism and Shintō evolved in esoteric Buddhist doctrine by the mid-ninth century. As was the case in China, this axiological context was in place in Japan long before Zen's full-fledged development in the early thirteenth century. Because readers of this journal probably know these historical facts already, we will not go into them any further here.

To sum up: Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen both developed in social-historical settings with well-defined ideals of social order. So, there was no need for Chan or Zen to say anything new about ethics unless there was some moral issue to address or confront. In India, for example, Buddhism had severely criticized the caste system for its assumptions about innate spiritual potential correlated with social class. In China and Japan, by contrast, there was little for Buddhism to criticize. It is not that East Asian Chan/Zen Buddhists never criticized any specific cases of social wrongs in their respective societies, but they did not pointedly criticize Confucian social *theory* as they had Hindu social *theory*.

Probably Chan/Zen's greatest social change from the prevailing social ethic related to the monastic life. But even there, if we substitute the monastic community for the Confucian family, the social organization is not as different as one might have assumed. The master-disciple pattern of deference and nurturing is reminiscent of the parent-child Confucian relation. Chinese Chan Buddhists sometimes even referred to their lineage lines as "houses" of Chan and these houses were Chinese in form (which is to say, mainly, Confucian-based social structures). Like the rest of Chinese society, monastic relations mirrored Confucian patterns of seniority. Politically, the Chan/Zen Buddhists often saw themselves as loyal subjects of the imperial state, even serving as court advisers (again, in contrast with Indian Buddhist monasticism's more common isolation from secular government). Furthermore, as the later Chinese Neo-Confucianists recognized, it was not all that difficult to bring together the Confucian ideal of *ren* (humaneness) with the Buddhist ideal of compassion. Even the Confucian literati ideal found its way into Chan/Zen monastic life as the Five Mountain literary and aesthetic traditions, for example. In its relations with the natural world, the Chan/Zen monastery did not radically

depart from basic Daoist values of *wuwei* (acting without agenda) and *zijan* (spontaneity or naturalness).

The conclusion is that if we look to East Asian Chan/Zen Buddhism for a systematic ethical orientation distinct from the general ideals of East Asian behavior, we will be hard-pressed to find one. That is our first point: traditional Chan/Zen did not develop its own ethical system because it arose in a society with a social system not inconsistent with basic Buddhist principles. This is different from saying Zen Buddhists were "beyond good and evil," or that they were antinomian. Novices came to the Chan or Zen monastery already enculturated into a social and natural morality on which the Buddhist teachers could build without much explicit criticism.

A second observation about Zen ethics and East Asian morality qualifies the first point. The Chan/Zen monastery, like any other community, had an interest in its members' moral development. Although the ideal moral behavior in the monastery might not be all that different from Confucian benevolence or Daoist naturalness, the Chan/Zen *training* resulting in such behavior had a distinctively Buddhist flavor. The link between Buddhist practice and social behavior led to a new term and emphasis in China: *jielu* in Chinese; *kairitsu* in Japanese. To understand how this term developed, we go back to the earlier Indian context. In India, Indian Buddhists took vows aimed at transforming their own attitudes and behaviors. These are the *śīla*. Contrary to some accounts in the West, these so-called "precepts" are not commandments or moral oughts about what is right or wrong. They are more like resolutions (such as New Year's resolutions) that one imposes on oneself for the sake of personal improvement. If one were prone to drunkenness resulting in violent behavior, for instance, one might resolve on New Year never to drink alcohol again. That does not necessarily entail that "drinking alcohol is intrinsically immoral or evil," but only\something like "since drinking alcohol is not conducive to my acting properly, I vow to give it up." In general the *śīla* have such force in Indian Buddhism.

In Indian Buddhism there were also rules for social behavior governing sangha. These law-like communal rules are the *vinaya*, regulating the behavior of monks and nuns and, in some circumstances, laypersons as well. They include not only the rules but also sanctions. So, these are not really full-blown moral principles either and are more akin to "house rules." For example, they include (in the Theravāda *vinaya)* prohibitions against eating after noontime and against wearing gold adornments. Of course, there may be moral norms behind some rules—for instance, prohibitions against stealing—but one finds that kind of rule even today in, say, the rules for youth hostels as well. In itself, this hardly constitutes a philosophical moral system.

The culturally significant point is that East Asian Buddhists (unlike their Indian predecessors) commonly combined the equivalents of "*śīla* " and "*vinaya*" into a compound term, "*jielu*" in Chinese or "*kairitsu*" in Japanese. This suggests they saw an intrinsic connection between self-imposed disciplinary resolutions and appropriate communal behavior. That is, one's spiritual praxis makes one a better communal member. The appearance of the compound term, in effect, mirrors the previously discussed East Asian understanding of what Buddhism brings to a society advocating Confucian and

Daoist behavior. That is, the East Asian assumption is that Buddhism (including Chan/Zen) does not put forward a new value system. Instead, it outlines a praxis enabling people to behave as the pre-Buddhist ideals of the society advocate. (Although we will not explore this here, one might argue that Chan/Zen is more a praxis for developing virtue than a system of value-laden rules distinguishing moral and immoral behavior. This would make its character more akin to a "virtue ethics" in some ways.)

Now let us turn to the present, asking whether Chan/Zen has something important to contribute to religious ethics in today's cross-cultural conversations. We first need to address the issue of fit. Present-day American social ethics is linked with Abrahamic (especially Christian) values. Does this present a fundamental *theoretical* challenge to basic Buddhist values as did the Hindu endorsed caste system in ancient India? Or do the contemporary American values of social ethics raise no serious problems for Buddhist practice, as was the case with Confucian-Daoist-Shintō mixes we found in mainstream ancient East Asian cultures? In addressing such questions, it is again crucial to distinguish whether there is a flaw in fundamental ethical values, not merely a sordid history of hypocrisy. That Christians (or Jews or Hindus or Confucians) have acted immorally is different from saying they acted so *because* of their Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or Confucian values. The issue for Buddhism generally or Zen Buddhism particularly was whether the values of a *good* Hindu or *good* Confucian obstructed the practice of the Buddhist dharma. As we have noted, because of its moral investment in the caste system, Hindu social values—not just hypocritical Hindu behavior—was the target of Indian Buddhism. In the East Asian context, by contrast, the Confucian-Daoist values presented no such threat to Buddhist praxis. Therefore, even though there were undoubtedly a good number of morally despicable Confucians or Daoists in history, there was no need to criticize the Confucian or Daoist moral values themselves, just the behavior of the hypocritical individuals. Applying this idea to the present situation, should American Zen Buddhists develop a special social ethic that opposes the basic Christian-derived social values dominant in the society? Or should their primary concern be how to develop good people who would live up to the best of Christian (or Jewish or Muslim) social values? This is one set of questions behind the discussions in the ensuing essays in this special issue of *JBE*.

A second complexity is a more philosophical point about the nature of cultural orientations. The distinction between justifications for ethical values and the values themselves points to a critical issue for how a Zen social ethic might develop in an American context. In my book, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (University of Hawaii Press, 2002) I argued that two philosophical orientations—what I call "intimacy" and "integrity"—often vie for dominance in a given cultural context. Foregrounding one orientation over the other single dominant orientation nurtures compatibility and synergy among the various philosophical fields such as epistemology, metaphysics, modes of argument or analysis, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. On one hand, the benefits of such compatibility and synergy are clear. How you talk about reality, how you develop methods for knowing that world, and how you ground your forms of ethics and politics, for example, should ideally follow similar forms of reasoning. The disadvantage, on the other hand, is that the stronger the commitment to

the dominant form of orientation, the more difficult it becomes for fruitful philosophical interactions with cultural systems whose philosophies better fit the other orientation. The relevance to the present topic is that Chan/Zen developed chiefly within cultural orientations stressing intimacy, whereas the modern West has developed mainly within orientations stressing integrity. Zen has thus nurtured values foregrounding responsiveness (both cognitive and affective) to situations, whereas the modern West has nurtured values foregrounding responsibility to general principles and rules. Thus, the real disconnect between the two traditions is not so much disagreement about whether a particular action is ethical or not. Instead the disagreement is over how ethics itself works: how one determines what is ethical and argues over difficult cases. To elaborate on this point, we need to clarify the key differences between an integrity-based ethics of responsibility and an intimacy-based ethics of responsiveness.

Let us begin again with integrity. Integrity assumes the relation between self and other to be an external relation, that is, the relation between two independent entities has to be constructed. This means the ethical relation is not inherent in the person or things (the "is"), but must be developed, most often according to some external value or principle (the "ought"). For the sake of brevity and simplicity, we will focus here on how integrity determines how one should treat other people (rather than things).

To preserve integrity, I should treat other people as autonomous agents having the right to determine their own actions freely, including choosing the relationships into which they enter. This suggests further, as Kant pointed out, that I should never reduce the other person merely to a means for my own ends. The other person is entitled to have his or her own ends and to work toward them with autonomy. How can one ensure or test whether a proposed relation is going to maintain the integrity of both parties? The test is simple: if the proposed action would really preserve the integrity of both parties, each party would be theoretically willing to reverse the proposed action. To test whether the action I propose would violate the other's integrity, I need only imagine that the other were to act that way toward me. This is the normative foundation for a number of ethical theories, from the golden rule, to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, to John Rawls's theory of justice. All have in one way or another affirmed that for a relation *aRb* to be ethical, one should be willing to enter that relationship *(R)* without foreknowledge as to whether one will be the *a* or the *b*.

Such an ethics of integrity often generates formal principles. Because the ideal ethical relation is external to the parties involved, the specifics of the two parties have their own integrity outside the relationship. So, theoretically it makes no difference who the *a* and *b* are when they enter into the ethical relationship. The relationship is something added to the integrity of each individual. That allows the relationship *(R)* to be universalized such that it can be expressed as a formal moral principle or rule. That is, if an external relation is ethical, it is equally so whether the situation involves *aRb,* or *bRa,* or *cRd,* and so on. In the integrity orientation, what makes the relationship ethical is the *R,* not the *a, b, c* or *d.* When this *R* is abstracted from its concrete contexts, it assumes the character of a universal (that is, nonparticularized) ethical maxim or principle. Politically, this is the logical basis for the concept of rights. The integrity of the individual is preserved by the

claim that each person has the right to be treated according to certain rules. Again, we can view Kant's theory of the categorical imperative as based on precisely that insight. According to Kant, to test the validity of a proposed moral maxim, we must be able to imagine it is not simply a hypothetical, but a categorical. That is, we must be able to imagine consistently that it could be a universal law binding on all human interaction: the R pertains regardless of what or who the a and b may be. (In some forms of Western environmental ethics, this allows the concept of rights to apply to nonhuman natural things. The integrity of the natural object is to be recognized and preserved.)

An important corollary to such integrity-based reasoning is that the principles themselves can mirror or be mirrored in a society's legal system. This follows from the idealized universal quality of the external R linking a and b. Even outside the legal system, an integrity-based ethics may entail the imperative to judge the morality of another person's actions. That is, because the norm lies in something outside my particular situation, I may be required not only to act morally myself, but also to prevent others from acting immorally (for example, in harming the innocent). This marks the logical transition from individual to social ethics. The importance of this judgmental aspect of responsibility for the public good will be clearer when we contrast it with intimacy's emphasis on ethical responsiveness. So, let us turn to that now.

When a cultural orientation of intimacy dominates, how would my ethical behavior toward others be articulated, analyzed, and evaluated? Whereas integrity emphasizes external relations, intimacy emphasizes internal relations. So, intimacy starts not with discrete entities of self and other connected by a constructed external relation, but instead begins with the assumption of an interdependent self-other that inherently already has a connection. The self and other do not have to form a link to be related because they already overlap in an internal rather than external relation. For intimacy, when we analyze the specificity of interdependent relations (the *is*), we discover the normative relation (the *ought)* already exists by the very nature of the interdependence itself. So, when I act on the other, I am--at least to some extent--acting on myself. As integrity's ethics sought to preserve the integrity of the people involved, intimacy's seeks to highlight or enhance the intimacy between the people involved. In the intimacy orientation, ethics demands I open myself to the other and accept the opening of the other to me. The basis of such a morality is in making the plight of the other, at least in part, *my* plight. Conversely, my well-being, my happiness, my joy is only my own insofar as it is at least partially shared with another. I avoid harming others because in part such actions harm myself in some way as well. In early Indian Buddhism the morally functional terms (*kusala* and *akusala)* mean not "good" and "evil," but rather, "skillful" and "unskillful." Early Buddhism assumed that to engage the other morally is also to take care of oneself, especially one's own progress toward enlightenment. The Mahayanist, including the Chan/Zen Buddhist emphasizes along the same lines that we need to get beyond sympathy to reach compassion. Ultimately, sympathy is an external relation in that I feel sadness and regret in the face of suffering that is not mine. We might say responsibility calls on us to feel sympathy for the plight of others. ("There but for the grace of God go I.") In the internal relation of compassion, however, I feel *with* the other person; the suffering of the other is also part of me. ("I feel your pain.") In the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra,*

when the sage Vimalakīrti was ill, a bodhisattva was sent down from the heavens to ask why he was sick. He replied, "I am sick because beings are sick." Compassion breaks the shell of the ego so that the pain of others enters our own being.

As we saw above, integrity's emphasis on external relation naturally led to an ethics of principles as well as rights. What follows then from intimacy's emphasis on internal relation? Rather than abstracting general principles that would apply to any person in similar circumstances or position, intimacy engages us in the particularities of the overlap with the other. When acting morally according to that model, I enter—at least in part— into the situation of the other. Thus, the ethics is "situational" and guided by love: engagement is the result of love. For intimacy, therefore, knowledge has affect; knowing is a feeling out and intuiting as much as thinking and observing. In this way, there is a natural transition from intimately knowing another person's pain to empathizing with it in a responsive manner. To directly know the pain (wisdom) is to feel the pain as one's own (compassion). There need be no recourse to evaluating abstract or general moral principles or universal rights. Intimacy's ethics and its way of knowing are by this process inescapably linked.

To put this in another way, we could say that in the integrity orientation ethics is primarily a morality of principles; in the intimacy orientation, by contrast, ethics is a morality of love or compassionate engagement. Integrity's moral demand is to be *fair to* the other person; intimacy's is to *be there for* the other person. Integrity generates a morality of responsibility, whereas intimacy generates a morality of responsiveness. An integrity-based ethics will highlight autonomy and the rights of the individual. These will be the basis for judging not only one's own actions, but also those of others. Intimacy, on the other hand, will highlight the distinctive, perhaps unique, interrelations involved in any specific case. The goal will be a heightened responsiveness to pain or suffering without any sense of individual rights. Furthermore, it will be difficult, sometimes nearly impossible, to judge the actions of others on moral grounds. One has to *be there* in the situation to judge.

Cultures foregrounding one orientation will often have trouble communicating and cooperating with cultures foregrounding the other orientation. Without shared ground rules of analysis and persuasion, coordinated action is difficult. Consider the kōan of Nanquan's cat. Whenever my American students hear the story of how the Chinese master cut a living cat in two to make a point, they are aghast. How can that be right? Isn't it a basic Buddhist principle that one should not harm any sentient being? If we say the master is justified because he is enlightened, isn't that saying some people are "above the law" because they are special and know what is best for everyone? But isn't that also what the Nazis said? How can we distinguish the two in our moral judgments? Such questions naturally arise in a context where the students are steeped in integrity's notions of principle and rights. The intercultural problem is whether Zen should adopt such an integrity language to address such questions even though the original action was understood in an intimacy-dominant context. Or should instead the teacher explain the intimacy context, arguing that such a setting is necessary for ethical training and behavior, even though it lacks reference to individual autonomy, the separation of fact and value,

innate rights, or the universalization of moral principles upon which we can judge the morally of others? This is the cultural dilemma American Zen Buddhists face if they hope to bring Zen ethics into American society.

In conclusion: to find its home in an American context, a Zen-based social ethic has two alternative strategies. First, it could argue for a shift in modern Western thinking, claiming something inadequate in the integrity orientation itself. Specifically, Zen could argue ethics is not a matter of individual responsibility, moral rules, general principles, or a strong sense of integrity based in duty. Taking this option, Zen would run the risk of seeming an alien critique on what has been central to most modern Western ethical, social, and political thinking. The other alternative would be for Zen to adapt its message to a more integrity-mode of reasoning and argument. It would begin talking about responsibility, duty, rights, ethical mandates, and so forth—all ideas that have been alien to Zen in its East Asian contexts. This choice runs the danger of severing Zen from its East Asian heritage and styles of thinking. That is a kōan we must engage if we wish to bring a Zen perspective to our Western ethical practices and discourses.