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## Introduction to "Zen Social Ethics: Historical Constraints and Present Prospects"

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# Introduction to "Zen Social Ethics: Historical Constraints and Present Prospects"

Taigen Dan Leighton\*

## Abstract

This is an introduction to each of the four papers, to the response, and to the discussion generated in the context of their first presentation.

This collection of papers is from a panel organized by Chris Ives for the Ethics Section of the American Academy of Religion meeting in Philadelphia in November, 2005. As Chair of that panel I offer this brief introduction. The topic addresses a clear concern, apparent to scholars but also to many practitioners, about the problematic approach to ethics of the Zen Buddhist tradition and the place of ethics in its modern context. One major impetus for this concern is the challenge to Japanese Zen from Brian Victoria in his *Zen at War*, and the revelation of the active support by eminent Zen figures for Japanese militarism and jingoism before and during World War II. One assumption of these papers is that Zen's historical ethical failings may be symptomatic of internal problematics in the very structure of Zen philosophy and discourse, perhaps more heightened in its interface with the West and modernity.

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The paper by Tom Kasulis proceeds from the embeddedness of religious traditions in the ethical systems of their cultures. He argues that Zen Buddhism did not need to develop its own ethical construct since it was basically in harmony with the Confucian ethical system of East Asia. But in the shift to the West, and modernity, Zen Buddhism must adapt to a significantly different ethical (and epistemological) paradigm, and risk losing part of its own traditional identity, or retain its previous ethic, and risk becoming anomalous. Kasulis' stimulating definition of this paradigm shift is the move from the East Asian "intimacy" model of ethics, based on a world-view of interdependence, with a consequent contextual emphasis and a value of responsiveness. The new Western "integrity" model, on the other hand, is based on a world-view aimed at objective independence, in which different persons are seen as autonomous identities all equally subject to abstracted moral rules, with a consequent value of responsibility, as opposed to situational responsiveness.

Dale Wright in his paper directly confronts the issue of Japanese Zen masters' role in World War II and makes the case that morality is incidental to Zen enlightenment itself. He argues that Zen emphases on "no-mind" and non-duality, along with disdain for discriminative thinking, have been inimical to moral reflection. Wright claims that none of the stories in the koan literature deal with ethical dilemmas, and values of skillful means and wholehearted presence lack an ethical dimension. He proposes that Zen training programs do not address ethical issues, and that for those historical Zen figures who have demonstrated moral stature, this resulted from other incidental factors aside from their training. Wright argues that for Zen to find its moral bearings and be relevant to a modern context it must engage in critical thinking and reflection, and recover elements in its Mahāyāna roots that support such considerations.

Jin Park examines and compares teachings of the Korean masters Chinul from the 12th century and Sŏngch'ŏl in the 20th century as a focus for addressing issues in the interrelationship of wisdom and compassion in Zen thought, and questions about the processes through which compassion arises. She highlights and considers four problems for Zen ethics. The first,

derived from non-dualist negation of secular distinctions, is the ambiguity of ethical categories. The second is the subjectivism of Zen practice due to the individualistic nature of realization. Third is the ambiguity of whether the ethical agent is the essential (enlightened) mind, or rather the existential (unenlightened) mind. Fourth is the public meaning of awakening; how is it expressed to respond to suffering in the mundane realm? In the nuanced discussion that follows, Park addresses the tension between reclusion and compassionate activity, and the implications for Buddhist social action of the modern Korean Minjung movement (Buddhism for the masses).

Chris Ives begins by mentioning problems in Zen's appropriation of Confucian ethics, and also points out that while Buddhism has focused on individual psychological causes for suffering, there has not been a development from "Buddhist analysis of the human ego to a socio-political analysis of the collective ego." Ives provides a provocative exercise in constructive ethics, pointing out six aspects of Zen teaching that offer prospective resources for modern ideological critiques of social issues, including some discussion of how these might be applied to current societal situations. These six are: the questioning of binary thinking that divides the world into good and evil and allows modern nation-states to become "egos writ large"; second, psychological analysis through meditative awareness that can uproot ignorance, ill-will, and greed, such as is enshrined in consumerism; third, critiques of clinging and encouragements to let go of mental constructs; fourth, the analysis of views of self and objects as substantial and separate; fifth, critique of self-righteousness that can arise from reified constructs and desires for certainty; and finally, meditative practice that fosters more clear and vivid perception, challenging denial and complacency to potentially allow a Zen "prophetic" outlook.

In his response to these papers, John Maraldo makes cogent comments about each of the papers, but begins by noting that the standpoint of the authors is neither from within the tradition, nor externally from an objectivist perspective, but rather, somewhat sympathetically "as *concerned* scholars and world citizens." He also notes

the assumption, more or less honored by all the papers, "of identifying a vast array of divergent teachings and practices simply as 'Zen'." Maraldo provides useful comments on the complexity of the relationship of Zen to the Confucian tradition and its values. He further notes the consensus that a current Zen social ethic requires more than its traditional sources; even with Chris Ives' reclamation of traditional Zen resources for an ideology critique, the lack of such social criticism previously is apparent. Considering the dangers of adaptation from an intimacy to an integrity ethical orientation presented by Tom Kasulis, Maraldo suggests a middle way, or perhaps a mutation, like a fish becoming amphibian. In response to all the papers, including Dale Wright's warning of Zen's need for critical reflection, and Jin Park's suggestion of the potential from a more popular mass approach to Zen, Maraldo reminds us that "'Zen' has always been an evolving animal."

The audience for this panel actively responded with many questions, of which I will not attempt to give a complete account. But to mention a few points, in response to a question about the historicity of his prospects for a positive Zen ethic, Ives pointed out the legitimate role of a constructive speculation in the realm of ethical studies. Some audience members indicated, with concurrence from panel members, that the transgressions of World War II were not limited to Zen among Japanese Buddhists, but also were to a great extent a function of problems of Japanese culture as a whole. There was some discussion about how the problematic issues highlighted might be relevant to the Mahāyāna generally, not simply Zen; and on the other hand, there were comments about the potential of Mahāyāna ethics and bodhisattva teachings to support a revitalized ethics, and the varied role of the Mahāyāna in the Zen traditions. It should be noted, as indicated by John Maraldo, that "Zen Buddhism" is far from a monolithic tradition, and further studies in the history of Zen and ethics might well look comparatively at the diversity of its teaching approaches. In the contents of all the papers clearly the failure of Zen ethics in World War II was viewed at least somewhat with the subtext of that historical

failure's relevance to the response of modern Zen, but also of religion generally, to the current situation of American militarism.