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"Zen Social Ethics: Historical Constraints and
Present Prospects"

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Saving Zen From Moral Ineptitude: A Response to "Zen Social Ethics: Historical Constraints and Present Prospects"

John C. Maraldo *

The four articles on the historical constraints and present prospects of a Zen social ethics are ethical essays in an exemplary sense: although they reflect on what Zen social ethics actually is or has been, their primary concern is with what a Zen social ethics could be or should be. Insofar as the papers are descriptive, they describe a lack or a failure of ethics in the Zen tradition, the failure for example to avert complicity in Japanese militarism and the suffering caused from it. Even where they point to ethical resources within the Zen tradition they do so in the awareness that such resources were not explored, much less utilized, in the past. Yet...

Saving Zen from moral ineptitude is like saving fish from drowning.

There are at least three possible senses to this saying:

(1) It is nonsense to save fish from drowning and so it is unnecessary to try. From an inherentist perspective, the nature of water is everywhere and there is nowhere it does not reach (like Pao-ch'e's wind in Dōgen's *Genjōkōan*, or like Thales' water).¹ The only thing that needs to be done is to get rid of the discriminative thinking that is like putting an oxygen mask over our gills.

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(2) From an externalist perspective, it is not our concern where the fish—or Zen if you like—finds itself. Not that Zen is good and safe but that it will go the way it goes. It is not our job as scholars to be trying to save it. We can critique its failings but we're not reformers.

(3) Our four authors do not speak from either of those two perspectives. Rather they take a kind of internalist perspective—not that they necessarily speak from within the Zen tradition or for it, but rather that they speak as *concerned* scholars and world citizens. They would say, yes indeed fish can drown. "A fish out of water is out of its element"; it cannot extract life-sustaining oxygen from the hydrogen in water—it cannot breathe. Traditional Zen, as Tom Kasulis intimates, just might drown if it forces itself into a culture with a predominately different ethical orientation—one based on integrity and responsibility rather than intimacy and responsiveness. Or, as Jin Park implies, if it is forced into the atmosphere of traditional normative ethics where clear distinctions between right and wrong are deemed essential. (On the other hand, it might teach normativists a new way to breathe if they take the plunge.) Or, as Dale Wright suggests, Zen might drown if it doesn't change, go beyond itself, and evolve its notion and practice of enlightenment to include competence in ethical reflection. Or indeed when in Christopher Ives' view we are the fish, we can drown in our own ideologies, much as Japanese Zen nearly did before and during World War II.

In any case, something needs to be done. Zen needs to do something, or we need to do something with Zen. This is the contention of the four essays in this special issue. And to start off I will agree. I will also accept the convention of identifying a vast array of divergent teachings and practices simply as "Zen," as well as the assumption that Zen so identified is a living tradition that has the potential for change. Being ethicists, we want to know, how *should* things change? What *can* Zen be? Our authors make suggestions with a good deal of caution and a heavy dose of historical consciousness of what can go wrong. Together they challenge common stereotypes, often perpetrated by Zen Buddhists themselves, that Zen is beyond good and evil, that wisdom and compassion naturally facilitate one

another and enlightenment inherently has a moral dimension so morally blind Zen masters don't count as "true" Zen masters, or that, not relying on words and letters, Zen has detached itself from the realms of politics and social ethics, or that Zen has been of one piece with core Buddhist values. Critical scholars of Zen of course have already exposed these stereotypes as rhetoric removed from reality. But the authors here want to move on, and that's what differentiates their stance from the externalist perspective. Kasulis is interested in having Zen find its place in the American context, Wright in having it learn to respond to moral crises, Park in seeing wisdom turn into compassion, and Ives in developing a Zen critique of ideology.

The relative lack of traditional sources for a Zen social ethics

Each of the four articles illuminates points that are worth discussing separately. I want, however, to relate them to one another, and so I will switch back and forth between the four in a way that may violate their individual integrity. First is the matter the historical context of our ethical needs. Kasulis reminds us of something so obvious that it is often invisible: religious traditions that span countries, continents and centuries may have a continuing identity but are not self-contained and complete entities. They are deeply embedded in specific cultures that predominately follow distinctive ethical orientations, and sometimes a religious tradition relies on the broader culture to fill in its ethical dimension. Kasulis suggest that this is what happened with Zen as a Buddhist school that arose and developed in China. Zen did not have, because it did not need, a social ethic of its own. True, its institutions had their house rules and the tradition in general encouraged resolutions to practice non-killing, truthfulness, sobriety, and so forth. But to regulate communal behavior, Zen like other forms of Chinese Buddhism needed no more than to implement predominant Confucian values, which were not in conflict with basic Buddhist values. Indeed institutionalized Zen practices explicitly embodied Chinese Confucian precedents such as a hierarchical, family-like structure and expectations of loyalty to authority.

Historians might also want to emphasize ways in which Chinese Buddhist monks did come into conflict with Confucian society, namely by leaving their home and family (出家), practicing celibacy, cremating the body, in other words by severing “natural” family relations. But those considerations might not challenge Kasulis’ main point about the reliance of Zen and other Buddhist institutions on a pre-existing Chinese social ethic. In Japan as well the continuation of the Zen tradition meant a continuity in appealing to non-Buddhist stipulations of social behavior. At this point, however, we can interject Dale Wright’s reminder that at least some Neo-Confucians did not think Zen had enough moral consciousness – apparently any loan from Confucian tradition was unappreciated or found to be long spent with no repayment to society. And when Japanese Zen in the first half of 20th century participated in militarism, any Confucian ethic it borrowed was not enough to keep Zen leaders from complicity in inhumane behavior. Perhaps as Wright and Ives suggest, the complicity itself was due at least in part to Zen’s loan from that ethic, in particular the loyalty and patriotism praised as enlightened virtues. Perhaps there was also some hypocrisy at work, the failure to adhere to Confucian values and Buddhist precepts. In any case it is startling to people today, in Japan, Korea and China as well as in North America and Europe, to learn how Japanese Zen leaders used specifically *Zen and Buddhist rhetoric*, not identifiably Confucian terms, to rationalize their support for war. If a Confucian social ethic underlay Zen Buddhism’s orientation to communal behavior, or if Zen appropriated Confucian social ethics, we apparently think that basis or appropriation was not a sufficient ethical resource when we point out the moral failings of Zen.

To offer a social ethics Zen today needs other sources than its traditional ones. Even when Ives digs deep into the *Zen* tradition to identify seven practices as resources for ideology critique, his analysis suggests a recovery that recognizes how little the tradition up to now has engaged in social criticism. And when Wright and Park both suggest that there are resources in Buddhist traditions (the critique of the concept of enlightenment, or social activism of Korean Minjung Buddhism), they offer

these as partial ways to *reform* traditional Zen and suggest that the motivation to change arises elsewhere.

Prospective sources for a Zen social ethic

What then should the sources of a Zen social ethic be, and where are we to find them? This is the second consideration I will reflect on. Recall the ending of Kasulis' essay. There are two possible approaches to develop a Zen-based social ethic, and both seem to me to begin in the integrity-orientation; that is after all the predominant one in Europe and North America. One approach is for Zen to adapt its intimacy orientation enough to offer an argument and a critique (both are integrity oriented)—to offer a critique of the inadequacies of the predominant integrity orientation of Western ethics with its emphasis on rights and responsibility. But—following Kasulis' point here—who would want to criticize the view that individuals have rights and responsibilities? Does not our critique of wartime Japanese Zen masters assume these very values? Advocating an intimacy-based orientation would seem to mean merely appreciating their responsiveness to their own unique situation in Japanese society at the time. So if Zen follows that option in the West it will be like a fish jumping out of the water and hoping to live on land. The other option for Zen is to call directly upon integrity-based ethics as a source, to venture forth, adapting to a new environment that forefronts integrity values – in which case Zen may disconnect with its heritage; the fish may have to mutate and become something else, perhaps something amphibian.

Park also warns against something that would betray Zen's traditional orientation: she warns against traditional normative ethics, a more specific form of the integrity orientation. She indicates four problems with Zen social ethics (or its lack thereof): an ambiguity about categories like "right" and "wrong" and about just who the ethical agent is, a practice that seems subjectivist, and an unclear relation between awakening and ethical action. More to the point, she proposes that these four problems have become acute only in Zen's recent encounter with western society. To be sure, she

does not leave it at that but calls for a new ethical paradigm, an alternative to traditional normative ethics. Ives too is critical of a strong undercurrent of normative ethics, namely the binary thinking and dualistic modes of experience that can serve to keep us captive to ignorant ideologies. Perhaps Park and Ives are already taking the first approach mentioned by Kasulis. In any case, we seem to be left with a dilemma: rely on traditional Zen (as actually practiced) to supply us with resources for a social ethic, and we fall short; infuse Zen with foreign sources and we risk mutating Zen into something it isn't.

But of course "Zen" has always been an evolving animal; we need only read the recent work of historians of Chan to see what diverse forms it has taken over the centuries. At the end of his article Kasulis mentions Nanquan's cat, how the Zen master cut it in two (when his East-hall and West-hall monks were arguing and could not respond to his challenge). Kasulis asks, should we judge the case from an integrity orientation and be scandalized (Dōgen's disciple Ejō also wondered if cutting the cat broke a precept²) because it was not fair to the cat, or should we respond from intimacy and be there for the cat (*and* the monks). Kasulis offers us a cat already cut in two. The animal that is Zen, ethically whole or not, has already evolved in a western environment and has incorporated practices that probably derive from western cultures. I am thinking in particular of the role that women have assumed in Zen communities, of the more flexible and open nature of the communities compared to Asian Zen monasteries and temples, of the questioning of authority, the diffusion of authority structures in some communities and the abuse by authorities in others, of the concern for social justice and Zen involvement in Engaged Buddhism. Zen in the West and Zen in the East under the influence of Western Zen is responding to the call for critical thinking and moral reflection. I am not saying concerned parties need only sit back on their cushions and let it happen. It is happening in part because of concerned scholars who are participating in the work of remaking Zen. People like the four presenters, whether they individually consider themselves spokespersons for Zen or

not, are already helping implement the reform of Zen. People are already experimenting with recombinant Zen genetics.

Zen social ethics in the making

Zen social ethics is very much in the making, and we can look to what actually is going on. In his book, *Intimacy or Integrity*,³ Kasulis offers a much more detailed analysis of how an intimacy-based ethic works than he has been able to present in the present essay. I would suggest some added analysis of how the two orientations are already working together (and sometimes against each other) in current trends in western Zen institutions. Park shows that in Zen's own teachers wisdom and compassion have often been at odds, but she suggests the possibility that this tension can actually help transform efforts to translate enlightenment into altruistic actions. I think the suggestion of a productive tension is very promising; we need to learn more about it has worked. Wright's warning is that Zen may lose not its identity but its usefulness (and I think he means its life) if it foregoes cultivation of critical ethical reflection. He is not concerned about the source of critical practice; it is inevitable that Zen today face up to the task of seeing "what's going on in the world." It would seem though that teachers will have to incorporate some concrete methods *into traditional Zen practice* to expand the "thought/aspiration of enlightenment" so as to comprehend ethical reflection, and it is not clear what these methods might be. Perhaps we could look to some socially-conscious Zen teachers like Robert Aitken and Bernard Glassman to see. Ives mentions not concrete methods but six points that I take to be very much matters of practice, activities that one can get better and better at: calling dichotomies into question, undergoing self-analysis, critiquing clinging and substantialist constructs, dissolving attachments, and so forth. These practices require a good deal of intimate acquaintance with oneself and abandonment of habits that place oneself against others. At the same time I think that all six can be universalized – in the sense that Kant's categorical imperative can be. The question is whether Ives' imperatives are solely matters that each must

practice for himself or herself, even when living in a community. Some would find this practice not sufficiently “social.” But are there not communities to which we can look, to see what happens when people put at least some of the six ways into practice?

Whatever the further research and reflection I have suggested shows up, one thing is clear: the prospects for a Zen social ethics are not simply hopeful possibilities for some future time; they are visible here in the present.

Notes

¹ At the end of his *Genjōkōan* Dōgen cites a dialogue between a monk and Master Pao-ch’e of Mt. Ma-ku. As Pao-ch’e was fanning himself, “a monk came by and asked, “The wind’s nature is eternal and omnipresent. Why, reverend sir, are you still fanning yourself?” The master replied: “You only know that the wind’s nature is eternal, but you do not know the reason why it exists everywhere.” The monk asked, “Why does it exist everywhere?” The master just fanned himself.” Translated in Francis H. Cook, *Sounds of Valley Streams: Enlightenment in Dōgen’s Zen – Translation of Nine Essays from Shōbōgenzō*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 69. At the beginning of western philosophy, the Presocratic Thales proposed that all things essentially were water.

² As recorded in Dōgen’s *Zuimonki*, Ejō asks whether cutting the cat would be a crime. See Reihō Masugata, *A Primer of Sōtō Zen: A Translation of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*. Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1971, p. 9.

³ Thomas P. Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.