

Zen Buddhism and Western Scholarship: Will the Twain Ever Meet?

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1. It's a Council, So What Needs Fixing?

Given the naming of this conference as a *samghiti* ("Buddhist Council") and the fact that such councils have traditionally served the role of addressing relevant issues concerning the *samgha* at various junctures in the history of the Buddhist religious tradition, this seems like a good opportunity to talk about the state of the relationship between East Asian meditative Buddhism (Seon/Chan/Zen) and the scholarship that investigates and reports on it.

If we reflect on the history of Buddhism, we should be able to acknowledge as an anomaly the present yawning chasm to be seen between North American / Japanese academic scholarship that deals with Zen/Chan and the corresponding practice community. We have on one hand a religious tradition that has, due to a combination of its own rhetorical choices and various historical turns, become largely bereft of the ongoing production of significant scholarship concerning its own history and doctrine (leaving aside for the moment the case of Korea). This is juxtaposed with an academic scholarly tradition, generated from its own radically different historical roots that has a historical-philological orientation that ends up being almost completely disconnected from the concerns of the practitioner within the tradition, be she/he a monastic or lay adherent. What is further interesting about this situation is the extent to which it has, despite its peculiarity, come to be taken for granted as normative – at least within Western and Japanese scholarship. The situation in Korea is of course different, and we will deal with this below. I will just here make mention of the fact that this difference is probably one of the main reasons why it is someone such as myself, who has spent a good deal of time observing and participating in Korean Buddhist discourse, who has come to be sensitive to this matter. We should also note that the degree of distance between Western/Japanese scholarship and the religious manifestations of Zen/Chan/Seon does not only present itself by contrast to the situation seen in Korea. It is also to be noticed in contrast to scholarly subfields that treat other culturally-derived

Buddhist meditative traditions, such as those of Tibetan Gelukpa and Theravāda Vipassana, in the extent to which the scholarship on those areas does extend into the domain of inner practice, not being so rigidly constrained to the confines of history and philology.

2. The Historical-Philological Character of Japanese and Western Chan/Zen Scholarship

Zen and Chan scholarship in Japan and North America, still almost entirely focused on medieval Japanese and Chinese sectarian manifestations, can be seen as being, compared with other areas of Buddhist scholarship, the most historically and philologically fixated among fields that study a tradition that has a modern-day presence. In Japanese and Western scholarly works on Zen and Chan, there is virtually no discussion of issues related to the actual internal content of Chan spiritual training. Such academic bodies as the Buddhism Section of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies (JAIBS) are not interesting in entertaining papers or panels that deal with internal—shall we say "theological" issues concerning the dynamics of individual practice. In both Japan and North America, if we want to talk about Chan or Zen in an academic setting, we are expected to discuss historical, philological, or institutional issues, and that's all there is to it.

While there will inevitably be a gap between the discourse of scholars who engage in research on a given religious tradition and the internal discourse of the members of that tradition, we usually see greater interaction in countries where scholarship is dealing with a native religious tradition. For example, the role played by theology in the West in its relationship to various strains of Christianity. While the average Sunday church worshipper will probably have little idea what is being taught in the seminar rooms of the academic theologian, the theologians in the church will be deeply aware of such things, and will be engaged in discourse with academic theologians. In fact, academic theologians and church theologians may in many cases be one and the same. Of course we will see the same thing, even to a heightened extent, in Islamic scholarship — and even in countries that are not originally Islamic. While much of Western Islamic scholarship deals with historical and social issues, there is also a significant element of it which deals directly with issues of personal faith, practice, and so forth that are part of the internal discourse of practicing Muslims.

In the case of Christianity and Islam in their native cultures, the religious traditions were even the primary transmitters of higher learning until the early part of the twentieth century. The relationship of Buddhism with Western scholarship presents a starkly different case. The Buddhist religion is a foreign religion, the study of which

emerged during the latter part of the twentieth century, the century of the emergence of materialism, secularism, and positivism—and only began to be studied and taught at North American and European universities on a widespread basis after the field of religious studies had been remade in the image of history. Thus, Buddhism was brought in as a foreign artifact to be studied by persons with a sufficient mastery of some ancient languages, equipped with enough philosophical depth to grasp such notions as dependent origination and emptiness.

3. Buddhist Christian Dialogue

This is not to say that there has been no "theological" interest in Buddhism in the West. There has been in certain circles, but interestingly, yet perhaps not surprisingly, this interest has come mostly from those whose basic scholarly training was in Christian theology. With a few exceptions, those who became engaged in the resultant Buddhist-Christian dialogue have not dealt much with Zen, and to the extent that they have, their work has remained marginalized by the larger historical-philologically dominated trend. Their discussants on the Asian side,¹⁾ ostensibly participating as representatives of Buddhism, were also usually people whose original scholarly training was not in the field of Buddhism, and therefore their interpretations of Buddhism have often been based on a very narrow, and often erroneous understanding of Buddhist doctrine. This in turn served to mitigate against the possibility of their work being taken seriously on a widespread basis.

In terms of making theologically-based connections from the Buddhist side, scholars of Pure Land have been more successful, part of the reason no doubt lying in the readily observable affinities between Pure Land and Christian soteriology. Such an environ has also proven accessible for those whose Buddhist approach is broadly influenced by the Lotus-based schools such as Nichiren. But the most influential scholars of Zen have rarely included themselves in this kind of discourse. Not that participation would be easy, because even if they have soteriological interests, the self-power, meditative, enlightenment approach of Zen may not well fit the other-power orientations of such schools as Pure Land and Lotus, which have been facilitated in their participation in Buddhist-Christian dialog on that basis.

4. The Case of Buddhist Traditions Other than Zen

Although questions regarding the internal dynamics of meditation and associated liberative practices have been almost fully ignored in Zen studies in North America, this has not necessarily been the case with other non-Zen strains of Buddhism, a notable example being that of the Tibetan branch of Gelukpa, which comes thoroughly constituted by a highly developed scholarly system (*geshe* system), which allows for detailed discussions on the content of meditative practices, and concrete descriptions about what might be meant by the attainment of progress on the path. We have seen in the U.S., in places like the University of Wisconsin and the University of Virginia, how the Gelukpa monastic training system can be adapted in such a way that certain of its components can be included in Western graduate studies programs.²⁾ Overall, in the cases of Theravāda Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and Pure Land, there is much more engagement by scholars in discussions of the content of practice and doctrine. Within these traditions, neither their classical or modern-day forms exhibit the anti-language hostility that is seen to characterize much of modern Zen. Theravāda, while also containing its own relatively strong scholarly tradition, contains, at the same time, a much more accessible set of doctrines and practices on such matters as karma, reincarnation, and moral behavior, which are open to discussion and debate.

Even on the occasions when studies in Japanese Zen and Chinese Chan by Western scholars are carried out on topics that are ostensibly contemplative and soteriological in their content, such as the role of *mārga*, or sudden and gradual enlightenment, the content of the articles contained in such collections are almost exclusively historical and philological in their approach—nothing in any of these works would have much relevance to practitioners. Discussions of the actual meditative content of practitioners, possibilities of gauging or discussing progress, concerns with soteric issues and most of all, the admission that there might lay within the realm of possibility the attainment by ordinary people, of a state of distinctly enhanced awareness that demonstrates a pronounced level of freedom from the constrictions of personal prejudices and afflictive physical and emotional habits—(commonly called "enlightenment") are simply off the screen of modern Western scholarship on Zen. How has scholarship in this field managed to arrive to this state of affairs?

5. The Nature of the Chan Tradition itself

No doubt one of the main reasons that the study of Chan and Zen has become greatly focused in the activity of myth-deconstruction, is the impression derived

from the rhetoric of the tradition itself. Since at least since the ninth century, the East Asian meditative tradition sought to distinguish itself from more doctrinally oriented strains of Buddhism by laying stress on its intuitive, personal, experiential, non-textual, and apparently asystematic aspects—its inaccessibility via intellectual approaches. Zen masters and practitioners, both past and present, have traditionally been less willing to (and perhaps less capable of) presenting their message in a systematic, intellectually learnable doctrinal format as compared with the masters of other Buddhist schools. This approach has clearly made it difficult to analyze and report on the practical and doctrinal content in a systematic manner, leaving the only accessible options to be historical and literary approaches.

The claim for intellectual inaccessibility is especially strong in present-day manifestations of Zen in North America, where the nascent Zen communities have taken very strongly to the anti-intellectual approach, often frowning upon analyses of what actually occurs in practice, adhering to such slogans as "just don't know." It is just as common in North America for Zen practitioners to look down on scholars as lacking in personal spiritual attainment as it is for scholars to be appalled at the Zenist's lack of understanding of the historical roots of their own tradition. And the general tendency toward anti-intellectualism that is to be seen in American culture fits quite well here. On the part of Zen practitioners, there is, in the best of circumstances, minimal awareness of, or interest in the work of scholars, except perhaps for the cases where scholars publish translations that are accessible to the general reader. In the worst cases, there is outright hostility toward the work by scholars on Zen, as so much of critical historical scholarship cannot but by its very nature end up debunking myths that so many Zen practitioners hold to dearly.

From the academic side, there is little interest, and likely complication to be seen in attempting to seriously test the tradition's claims regarding the merits of meditation practice, or the possibilities for the attainment of enlightenment. As a scholarly research project, it would not, in the normal production cycle of books and articles, be possible to simply decide to sign up for a year's membership in a Zen center, and come away able to give a viable report on the process of attaining enlightenment. As the broader Buddhist tradition tells us, without the right orientation and motivation for practice, there is no guarantee of any sort of personal attainment.³⁾ Virtually all Buddhist schemas of practice, meditative or otherwise, take a profound level of "faith" (*śraddhā*) to be the fundamental key for the success of practices. Given the need for this kind of commitment, how is the average, non-practicing scholar supposed to be say anything of substance about the content of practice from the perspective of personal experience? It would seem, at least on the surface, that the development of the absolute kind of faith given as the requirement for Zen enlightenment would be in direct contradiction to the function of standard scholarly criticality (I'll try to argue eventually that this need not be

the case, but at least in terms of basic approach, we must acknowledge the potential for difficulty here). Does this not preclude the possibility of Zen practitioners and scholars ever engaging each other on anything close to the same wavelength? Perhaps not in every single case, since it may well be that there is a scholar whose inclination is such that he may engage himself in a sustained and devoted meditation practice that might carry through at least to the extent that his or her own obstructions and afflictions become apparent enough to merit serious attention, thus allowing the possibility for at least a modicum of attainment. It may also be the case that a devoted meditation practitioner (monastic or lay) might eventually turn to scholarship as a means of expression of her or his insights.

But the task of making scholarly inquiry directly upon living manifestations of the tradition in a fair and balanced manner need not be limited to the approach of serious and sustained personal engagement in Zen cultivation by the scholar himself. As Franz Metcalf has demonstrated in his entrancing 1997 dissertation⁴⁾ much of an evaluative nature can be gleaned through the conducting of imaginative, yet methodologically rigorous studies where scholars make use of the approaches of psychology and ethnography in seeking to identify such factors as personal growth and development, if one is willing to openly and positively attune oneself to what the members of the tradition are expecting, practicing, and attaining.

6. Japanese Roots in the Scholar / Practice Disconnect

In taking note of the tendencies of the scholarly and practitioner sides in this polarity in North America, we would be missing much if we did not point out the deep Japanese roots involved involved—on both sides of the issue. First, the brands of Zen that have become popular in America, based mainly on a group of Sōtō and Rinzai transmissions, have come to North America under the deep anti-intellectual influence of their Japanese predecessors. American Zen practitioners have been taught from the start to understand Zen to be a thoughtless state, a form of practice where the intellectual approach is strongly eschewed, and questioning of any kind (especially the authority of its roshis) is frowned upon. Unfortunately, the major Korean Seon movement that has become popularized in the West, that of Seung Sahn, has tended also to replicate these Japanese models. Thus, American Zen, perhaps even more than its Japanese counterpart, constitutes a religious body where expertise in Buddhist doctrine is quite commonly viewed even seen as an obstruction to the attainment of *kenshō*.

The degree of reliance on, and influence from Japanese models on American Zen practice is widely known (and even prized among the Zen community). At the same time, while the depth of the influence of Japanese Buddhist scholarship on that of the U.S. is well known, the extent to which its secularized approach and

disconnection from broader intellectual discourse has left its mark on North American based Buddhist studies has not yet been sufficiently acknowledged. The influence of Japanese research methodologies on the Buddhist Studies programs is pervasive, given the number of well-placed North American scholars who have received their graduate research training either directly from Japanese mentors, or from American mentors who got their training in Japan. Thus, the Japanese tendency toward positivistic methodologies in history and philology prevails. This includes not only Japan and China specialists, but researchers of Tibetan and Indian Buddhism as well. The continued proliferation of this approach, where Buddhist studies remains largely disconnected from issues in the practice community can readily continue largely unnoticed, since, for both North Americans and Europeans, Buddhism is not a native religion.

But what about Japan, a country with a rich Buddhist history going back almost 1500 years? How is it that Buddhist Studies in that country have become so secularized and disconnected from the religious tradition, and from society as a whole? How is that this approach has become normative? For a long time I wondered if anyone was ever going to talk about this, and so I was delighted recently to hear a conference presentation by Prof. Shimoda Masahiro (University of Tokyo) which deals precisely with this issue. As Shimoda points out, Japanese Buddhist scholarship, especially that typified in the work produced by the members of the JAIBS, is a fairly new creation, having its origins after the Meiji restoration, strongly influenced by the methodology of Buddhist studies developed in nineteenth century Europe, *an area entirely outside of the world of living Buddhism*. It has had, as its main approach, the attempted definition of textual and sectarian lineages through philology, and the historically precise search for the real, historical Buddha. This present form of Buddhist studies in Japan was further secularized in the atmosphere that prevailed after the war, and is typified by the works of such venerable scholars as Hirakawa Akira and Nakamura Hajime, taking a distinctively secularized, positivistic approach that resonated with the strong tendencies toward secularization exhibited by Japanese society as a whole. In the development of this approach, it was tacitly understood that scholars doing research would deal only with attempts at a historical reconstruction of the development of schools of Buddhism going from the time of Śākyamuni to the middle ages or so, with the agenda of defining an historical "essence" of Buddhism. There would be no delving into, or touching upon issues related to the activities, practices, beliefs, or problems of contemporary Buddhism, either in Japan, or the rest of Asia. As Shimoda puts it, during this period of the development of Buddhist studies in secularized postwar Japan, a "mutual tacit agreement" was made between the research scholars and schools of Japanese Buddhism, that their activities would be "hermetically sealed" from each other.⁵⁾

North American, and more recently, an increasing number of Korean scholars have,

for better or worse, taken this nineteenth century European-Meiji Japanese model as their own paradigm for what constitutes "Buddhist scholarship." ⁶⁾ And while much credit is due to the deeply learned and strictly disciplined Japanese scholars, and Japanese-trained scholars who have provided us with so much access to Buddhist canonical texts and the histories of their development, this tendency has led Buddhist Studies, in Japan and elsewhere, to become an odd, isolated field, which is not only utterly bereft of the capability of communicating with the practice tradition that which it is originally linked, but is also left out of the discussion of intellectual issues in our society as a whole. Buddhology in Japan is notorious in its own land for its lack of interest in societal issues and inability to engage in conversation with disciplines other than itself, except perhaps with other types of historians.

Unfortunately, an analogous disconnect between Buddhist Studies and the larger academic intellectual milieu exists in the States, and this is sorely evident when I attend the AAR each year, and venture out of the Buddhism sessions to panels on theology and society, which deal with rich, exciting, postmodern, current intellectual issues that we can all share in, and offer responses to. I find the Buddhist Studies panels, by comparison, to be on the whole boringly fixated on minor details that are wholly irrelevant to the larger world of interdisciplinary intellectual discourse. Why must we Buddhologists leave ourselves out like this?

7. The Example of Korea: Thickly Entwined Models of Practice and Scholarship

The fact that North American Buddhology has grown thus under strong Japanese influence is also seen in the continued tendency to ignore the Buddhism of Korea, extremely rich in its history, and possessed of one of the most visibly active, and intellectually vibrant practice communities in the present world. This ignorance in the West regarding Korean Buddhism is unfortunate not only for the wide gap left in the understanding of the history of East Asian Buddhism, but also in the lack of awareness, both for practitioners and scholars, of the long existence of a rather different sort of scholastic tradition, indeed, an entirely different cultural approach to understanding both religiosity and its scholarly apprehension.

The reasons for these differences have a long history, which have been outlined in a number of books and articles by Korea specialists. But to summarize as briefly as possible, aside from the earliest period of transmission of Chan into Korea, the character of Korean Seon, mainly typified by that seen in its major Jogye lineage, has been one of an admixture of *gong'an* meditation techniques with extensive doctrinal study that includes a pronounced intellectual/philosophical tendency. The most influential figures in the Seon tradition, such as Jinul, Gihwa, Hyujeong, and in the modern day, Gusan and Seongcheol, are best known for their thorough

discussions on how to engage in *gong'an* meditation (as opposed to characterizing it as something that can't be talked about), their assertion of the need for doctrinal studies to balance *jwaseon* meditation, and their intense intellectual argumentation regarding the proper apprehension of the implications of gradualism and subitism. So, to begin with, the Korean meditative tradition has maintained, for almost a millennium, an intellectually rich scholarly dimension — something not seen in Japanese Zen.

As the field of Buddhist Studies developed in Korean higher academic institutions, its general character could not have been more opposite from that seen in Japan. While there have been plenty of Korean scholars whose interests were primarily historical and philological, Buddhist Studies in Korea at the same time has maintained a deep connection with, and interest in, the current situation of the living Buddhist tradition of its own, and other countries. Throughout the twentieth century, right down to the present day, the most significant, and arguably the most interesting component of Korean Buddhist studies, is that it takes place within a discourse that moves without border between the monasteries, Buddhist universities, and secular institutions, where we find continued debates over what we might best characterize as "theological" issues: issues concerning faith, practice, enlightenment, especially as seen in problematic texts such as the *Awakening of Faith*, and the sudden-gradual issue as elaborated through the *Platform Sūtra* and *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*; Jinul's pronouncements on the *gong'an* and subitism, Seongcheol's subsequent critiques of Jinul. These issues continue to be debated at Korean conferences on Buddhism, and continue to appear as central topics in dissertations produced by major universities such as Dongguk, SNU, Goryeo University, etc. They remain as perennial topics in monastery-hosted conferences, which are invariably attended by a mixture of clerical and academic scholars. Thus, there is an understanding in Korea such that a Buddhist studies conference will be attended by practitioners, and that the content of the overall discourse will be far more attentive to issues of doctrine and practice than one will see in Japan, Europe, or North America.

8. What is Lost in the Disconnect?

My purpose here is not to claim that the Korean model is necessarily superior (although I do personally prefer it), but simply to point out that there is more than one way of doing things. Those who attend Korean Buddhist studies conferences know that the mixture of scholars, monks/nuns, practitioners — and perhaps vocal protesters from other faiths — does not always work especially well. But it is certainly never boring. And it is also not my intention here to claim that there is anything inherently wrong with the historical/philological Zen research that has been

done so far, as I have up to now been a rather visible participant in this kind of work, especially on the Internet. The problem with this mode of scholarship is the exclusiveness of its dominant role. First, the lack of discourse that is of interest to the living tradition itself tends to accentuate the natural tendency for scholarship to close itself off in white-towerism. The lack of interest in issues of personal practice tends to lead, by extension, to a lack of discourse with society in general. These kinds of tendencies are the ones which most concern Shimoda, who pragmatically also recognizes the greater need for Buddhist studies programs to show the relevance of what they do for the academic community in general, to offer something of interest to students in an increasingly competitive atmosphere in higher education in times of shrinking enrollments and budgets.

Inside the growing Western Zen movement, what is being lost by this situation of non-intercourse, if anything? The answer to this question would depend much upon one's personal understanding of the implications of Zen practice. I do personally know a few prominent Zen teachers in the West who have no problems whatsoever with learning lessons from critical scholarship on the tradition. After all, to whatever degree Zen (and any other form of Buddhism) is supposed to be about seeing things as they really are, any method that peels away layers of delusion could be seen as part of one's overall practice, and clearly the criticality offered by academic training could, when seen from this perspective, be turned into a valuable component of one's training – and vice-versa. Is not the construction of the tools of critical thinking one of the most valuable benefits of pursuing an advanced degree in the humanities? Where, from the perspective of seeing things with an unprejudiced and keen eye, does the difference lie between good scholarship and Seon/Zen practice—unless one holds to the notion debunked again and again by the Korean Seon tradition's greatest teachers, that Seon is nothing but mindlessness.

Nonetheless, for the devout Seon/Zen practitioner to benefit from such a sharply critical scholarly approach, she or he would probably need to have, as the *Awakening of Faith* says, enough "confidence that truth really exists, confidence that practice can get results, and confidence that when practice does get results there will be boundless merit."⁷⁾ In other words, the Zen practitioner's own experience in the practice of meditation and enlightenment may need to be solid enough that the most trenchant of critiques of the system bring no loss of confidence in the reality of one's experience. Once this sort of perspective is firmly established, any scholarly critique of the practice tradition that is accurate could be seen as contributing to its eventual greater health. On the other hand, the Zen practice tradition would stand to lose much by shutting itself off from the potential of gaining from the insights and historical precision of critical scholarship—unless its adherents believe that every myth must be maintained intact for the tradition to survive and for practice to have its efficacy.

9. Obtaining Enlightenment by "Wrestling with Paradoxes" :

Whoever Said So?

In arguing for a broadening of the channel of interest between Zen practice and scholarship on Zen, we proposed as the main benefit for the scholars side, the potential for widening the scope of what we do, and think about, and allowing for greater involvement in the broader intellectual community. Yet even within the present narrow historical-philological approach there is an extent to which a greater concern and respect for the actual content of practice – the taking of the chance that practice may actually engender dynamic changes in a person's psyche, could serve to enhance the researchers own level of critical accuracy. This is especially relevant when it come to the task of translating and interpreting classical materials. In other words, the arrogant rejection of observations derived from the experiences of personal practice—and importantly, a degree of sustained and earnest personal practice (not simply a sesshin or two at a Zen center) offers a chance for error and misinterpretation to appear on those occasions where discussions of the content of Zen must brush up against what happens in actual practice. A salient example regarding this kind of issue arose in the leadup to last year's AAR Zen Seminar, and was pursued briefly in the seminar itself.

The matter came up while I was perusing one of the papers to be presented at the seminar, which contained a line which stated that "Chan practitioners attain enlightenment after a long period of wrestling with the paradox of the *kōan*." Now, I know that this is a fairly commonly accepted view of the situation. Certainly *gong'ans* do often present a paradoxical problem, and meditators are initially drawn into the *gong'an* largely due to their paradoxical character. So at first, I passed this by without a second thought.

To proceed further from this juncture, I have no recourse but to come out and admit that I have been engaged in steady and earnest engagement with *gong'an* practice for twenty years now. I have no official teachership status in any particular sect by which to claim any authority, but I can state with a fair degree of certainty, based on (1) my own experience, (2) conversations with other veteran practitioners, and (3) my readings of classical *gong'an* literature, including the original *gong'ans*, their classical commentaries, a later commentaries by people such as Dahui and Jinul, that no one who has seriously and consistent engaged with *gong'an* meditation for a sufficient length of time for their practice to mature is any longer "wrestling with paradoxes," when they sit down and take up the *hwadu*. While one does get pulled in to the *gong'an* at the outset based on its paradoxical character, after one has learned how to focus on it properly, such that it is engaged with full consciousness in a state of cessation of discursive thinking, all there is, is the single *hwadu*, be it close or far, deep or shallow, depending upon

the quality of the individual sitting. If you read the source literature, the commentaries on *gong'an* collections, or the detailed explanations of *hwadu* observance by someone like Jinul, that's pretty much the way you'll see it explained. So, as far as I can tell, this characterization of the process of attainment of enlightenment through "wrestling with paradoxes" is defensible neither through attestation by personal experience, nor by scriptural evidence.

Nonetheless, somehow (I do not know the original source, but I would tend to suspect D.T. Suzuki) the idea has gotten into currency in the our Zen scholarly community that one is supposed to attain enlightenment by thinking about paradoxes (the entertainment of "paradoxes" or "two doxa" requires discursive thought). You can't think about two doxa when you are maintaining deep concentration on the *hwadu*. If one wants to maintain, more precisely, that the practitioner engaged in the *gong'an* attains enlightenment in the process of the resolution of some deeply-sensed existential conflict of doubt vs. faith, that might be acceptable, and can be confirmed in the source literature. But that sort of thing is a far cry from the notion of "wrestling with paradoxes."

A scholar who lacks the experienced of sustained engagement with the *gong'an* will probably, in most cases, have little reason to have a second thought on the matter, and even if s/he did, will have no recourse but to guess at what might be the case, and perhaps rely upon the characterizations made about *gong'ans* by such people as Suzuki, whose authority on the *gong'an* is, to put it mildly, questionable. Not having sufficient experience in the practice itself, the scholar who approaches the matter through texts alone, will have no idea what distinction is being made, nor why such a distinction is important. This is not scientific.

So I raised this issue on our Zen Buddhism listserv, and was immediately beset by counter-arguments defending the paradox approach. But none of the counter arguments showed any confirmation from either source texts or attestations of personal experience. One response made on the listserv, and repeated later on in the seminar itself cited the commentary from the opening chapter of the *Wumen guan* which says "Don't think of it in terms of 'has' or 'has not.' " But to me, this is precisely the point. If one *were* to think of it in terms of 'has' or 'has not' , that would be thinking in terms of paradoxes. The commentator is telling us exactly, not to do that.

When the topic was raised again in the seminar itself, the arguments in favor of enlightenment attained by wrestling with paradoxes continued to be vague and lacking in textual support, which I found odd, in the company of esteemed philologists. One scholar ventured the proposal that paradoxes can be found in the *prajñāpāramitā* literature, and are therefore permissible here. This, of course, begs the question. I am not claiming that paradoxes are not found in *gong'an* literature; I am claiming that the advanced meditator who is coming close to the actualization of enlightenment is not (and cannot) be *thinking* as such, any longer. Another scholar,

identifying himself as a representative of the Japanese Rinzai tradition, argued that the Rinzai tradition starts with *samatha* meditation and then proceeds to kōan, but I was not able to discern the relevance of this to my own point. My very foolish suggestion that that there was perhaps a difference between the Japanese and Korean approach was happily seized as a way of letting everyone off the hook. In fact, the problem here has nothing to do with cultural variations in Seon and Zen. The problem, as I see it, is that people are attempting to tackle *gong'an* literature with no serious attempt at sustained practice of the *gong'an* itself, and have not experienced a level where discursive thinking is shut down, where one still maintains a one-pointed awareness of the single word of the *hwadu*. Therefore, the possibility of reading the source text and misunderstanding it is considerable.

"YOU CAN'T SAY THAT WE HAVE TO BE KŌAN PRACTITIONERS TO STUDY ZEN BUDDHISM."

This is the way I am often admonished when I present this issue. I'm not saying that. How could I ever wish to deny myself the enjoyment of all the superb, careful, insightful, historical, philological, and philosophical works that have been produced by brilliant scholars with such broad mastery of languages and methodological skills? What I am saying, is that if the work you are going to do is going to brush up against areas that deal with dimensions of personal practice, and inner experiences like those seen in meditation, and you yourself have little or no direct experience in these areas, and you are not even interested in asking practitioners directly to see what they have to say (as Franz Metcalf has done), you are going to be prone to make mistakes. You are not going to know what is important, and what isn't. The fact that I was practicing Zen meditation for some time before learning classical Chinese for myself allowed me to know, for example, even as an undergraduate reading Yampolsky's translation of the Platform Sutra, that he simply didn't understand much of what he was reading. He didn't understand the dynamism and shifting of perspectives that are intrinsic to Chan teaching, and thus, as he indicated repeatedly in his footnotes, he was continually befuddled by apparent inconsistencies in description of the formless doctrine from one page to the next.

This dissociation from the dimension of personal experience is also the main factor that results in the lack of appreciation of the real implications of seminal doctrinal positions, such as that of the sudden/gradual approaches. I don't know how many times I have heard from scholars that the teaching of the sudden approach of enlightenment by a master to a student is merely a rhetorical device, and that there is no actual difference in the content, pace, or quality of the practice that occurs, that there is no actual difference in the quality of enlightenment or the way it is attained. How can such a conclusion be so lightly drawn by someone who has not

undertaken serious, sustained, personal engagement with Seon cultivation? Thus it is again, a conclusion being drawn by persons who are outside of the practice tradition—or at least outside of a tradition where the discussion of sudden/gradual distinction forms a central component of the instruction—as it does, for example, in Korea. The basic assumption that underlies such suspicious discourse, is that the experience of enlightenment itself is nothing more than a delusory phantasm—nonetheless maintained as part of the tradition's "rhetoric." If the basic assumption is being made at the outset that there is no experience such as enlightenment that is actually attainable by people, how can any other conclusion be drawn? The testimony from a participant in the tradition, for whom a qualitative experience is taken from each kind of teaching, could make a significant difference here. But as things presently stand, the consideration of such a testimony never even appears on the screen.

Thus, the whole internal dynamic of meditative practice and such intimately related factors as faith, awakening, suddenness and gradualness, remain largely unaddressed, and there is no avenue for discourse with the modern living tradition, except perhaps to debunk it by disclosing all of its dirt. Yet we should pay attention to the fact that it is on the occasions that modern scholarship has engaged the tradition on modern issues of doctrine and practice that by far the most interesting and heated discussion has opened up. One example that one may readily cite is that of the excitement that was generated by the writings of the so-called Critical Buddhists. It was because their work was the critique, not merely of a historical event, but of the central doctrine of a modern living tradition, that it had such power, and that it drew such a reaction.

To repeat, I know there will some who will think that I am attempting to cast out the mainstream of our present methodologies for research on Zen. I am not. The level of critical nuance that has been attained by modern scholarship, in its mixture of history, philology, sociology, and lit-crit is vitally important to the health of our field, and can also be helpful to the development of the nascent Zen tradition in the West. But it is not the case that the current state of affairs cannot be improved upon, and made to be far more dynamic than it is at present. I take the utter lack of ability to engage the modern practice tradition—and by extension, society at large—in any way, shape, or form to be the most conspicuous indication of this shortcoming. So what I am suggesting here not a rejection of our methodological past, but an enhancement of it that includes a slight widening of perspective. This is something that cannot be initiated by the practitioners side, because they lack the tools and materials possessed by the scholars. Neither side has anything to lose, and no matter what happens, changes will not be rapid, as both sides are already so firmly rooted in their present ways. It is time, I think, to at least begin talking about it.

Notes

1. For example, Masao Abe.
2. The Tibetan Buddhist studies program at the University of Virginia offers courses that examine Tibetan meditative practices and even gives training in Tibetan Buddhist debate, modeled along the lines of the traditional Tibetan *geshe* study track.
3. Therefore, even when Western scholars go and live and practice in Buddhist monastic situations for a significant period of time, what they end up reporting on are manifestly observable things such as monk's lifestyle, training, curriculum, occupations, travel habits, etc. While such studies are both fascinating and important, they also show the difficulty of carrying out studies concerning internal issues of spiritual cultivation.
4. "Why Do Americans Practice Zen Buddhism?" (University of Chicago, 1997). Metcalf, using a combination of psychological and ethnographical methodologies, takes a positive approach in assessing the careers of "interpreters" at the Zen Center of Los Angeles, finally arguing that "the Zen growth process creates a religion qua habitus, an excellent, non defensive paradigm for religion in this relentlessly plural society." (UMI Abstract).
5. At the time of this writing, this paper by Shimoda, tentatively entitled "Liberating Ourselves from Modernity: Some Reflections on Buddhist Studies in Japan" is still an unpublished work in progress. Thus I am unable to offer precise citations from this text. We should greatly look forward to the eventual publication of this landmark paper.
6. I leave out European scholars here, because it more likely that they have exercised greater influence on Japanese Buddhist Studies than vice versa.
7. 信理實有 信修可得, 信修得時有無窮德 (T1844.44.203a22-23)