The Social Organization of Zen Practice

Constructing Transcultural Reality

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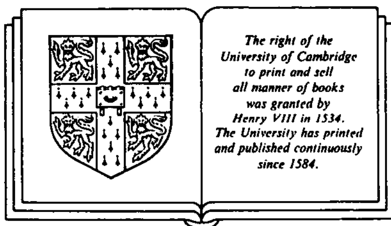

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To Jeana and Emilie

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Foreword

How is one to write about Zen Buddhism? It seems, on the face of it, an antidiscursive or even anti-intellectual religion, defying efforts to formulate its doctrine in so many words, or any words at all. It is famous for its putdowns of the intellectual stance, for its revelations through paradox, for its sudden experiences that break through ordinary concepts and perceptions and into the wordlessness of a truer reality. At the same time, its mysticism is antimystical: Zen practice shuns the deep trance states, requires meditation with eyes half open, and has insisted on groundedness in the ordinary world. It is no wonder that most writers on Zen fall back on paradoxes and exhortations, leaving the subject wrapped in an air of mysteriousness – or humor – that for Western sophisticates often seems to border on self-caricature.

The standard authors – Watts, Suzuki, Kapleau – have resorted to the use of paradox in their attempts to preach for an antidoctrinal doctrine. David Preston's account, though, takes a different route, and he comes closer to his goal, perhaps, than most of his illustrious predecessors. It may well be the most informative book yet written about Zen, or any of the Asian meditative religions. The author's approach is not to extol the religion, its therapeutic significance, or its cultural heritage. Instead, he takes us through Zen naturalistically, informing us of the ordinary reality of the experience: the physical setting, the members of the group, the teacher, the routine, the inner experience and its struggles. This review builds up to a wonderful revelation of the meanings of Zen practice. It is, in short, an ethnography of Zen Buddhism, an "insider's report." His account is full of the anthropological detail, the mundane reality of the whole enterprise, that the more uplift-oriented variety of Zen literature leaves aside. Yet Preston manages to use the mundane as a path beyond itself; and I suspect he captures more of the actuality of Zen than the flamboyant writers do.

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Preston's report is realistic and unromanticized. We are a long way from the Chan masters of ninth- and tenth-century China, with their blows and shouts awakening their thick-headed disciples. One of the weaknesses of the doctrinal–inspirational version of Zen literature is its anachronism; by focusing on the paradoxical koans and the tales of the great masters, these writers obscure the historical fact that this early, formative phase of Chan occurred long ago. Already when Chan arrived in medieval Japan (becoming Zen), the koans had been collected and turned into a form of student exercise, a discipline to be studied, a series of stages to be passed in a well-ordered monastic career. Although Preston's account is not historical, it gives us a fresher, clearer view of modern, institutionalized Zen, as it actually exists, that makes the more famous accounts look quasi-ideological by comparison.

But Preston does not try to deflate Zen either. His work is not an expose. In fact, it seems to achieve an unbiased expression of a Zen attitude in its very naturalism. Preston may actually have accomplished the writing of a Zen book about Zen, which turns out to be far different from the usual paradoxes and verbal clevernesses about one hand clapping.

Preston neither attacks nor endorses the doctrinal interpretation of Zen. He simply does not use Zen doctrine as his starting point or frame of interpretation; he tells what the Zen organization and its activities are like, from his own observation and experience and from interviews, gradually building up to a sophisticated evocation and analysis of meditation and its meanings. This naturalistic approach permits Preston to conclude his work with an intellectual analysis, precisely on the issue of nonverbalizable experiences. I think his presentation is successful, because, as a sociologist, he takes intellectual analysis simply as another natural activity. As a result, we learn more about Zen than we do from the more mystical and self-conscious accounts of it.

Preston's book has other merits as well, both as sociology of religion and as an advance in microsociological theory. As such, I believe it carries significance not only for social scientists but also for philosophers and theologians. Let me attempt to suggest where this significance lies.

As sociology of religion. One of Preston's underlying themes is to expand our general understanding of the social nature of religion. Prevailing approaches in the sociology of religion are variants of social or psychological reductionism. Such analyses see religion as merely another instance of socialization – of joining a social movement, of community pressures, or of compensation for psychological stresses. Although these aspects of socialization may exist, Preston seeks to identify the distinctively *religious* element in its practices. In what way does religion escape from being merely another secular process? Preston's strategy, then, is to focus on

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how religious practices construct a special field of experience, one that is aimed at overcoming normal socially induced modes of perception and that is, so to speak, layered over them to provide an emergent level of reality. By the later chapters of the book, the evidence compiled by Preston reveals the methods by which socially grounded processes transcend themselves, with the creation or emergence of a transcultural level of reality. Religious practice, at its most profound, is intrinsically multileveled; Preston spells out the kinds of subjective, objective, and fundamental/intuitive meanings that constitute the reality of Zen. This approach gets closer to "giving religion its due" than most other efforts from the social sciences. Preston gives us an understanding of what is distinctive about religious reality, without ceasing to be a sociologist. The religious and social levels are not antithetical. However mundane the social level may appear, it is the base, and a self-transforming one, from which transcendental religious experience emerges. Preston's formulation should be of challenging interest to students of modern theology as well.

As sociological theory. Preston's work is based on the theories of social phenomenology and ethnomethodology, in combination with his own blend of the ideas of Bourdieu and Goffman and my own theory of rituals and emotional energy in everyday life. Let us briefly review some of the salient points of these theories.

Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is a radical social constructionism. Reality is not given but emerges from practices of reasoning in everyday life, which draws on the stock of "commonsense" knowledge in people's culture. Garfinkel gives a somewhat paradoxical tone to his social phenomenology by stressing the properties of indexicality and reflexivity. The theory of indexicality suggests that everything is embedded in a surrouding context that must be taken for granted in order to know what it is. If one tries to state explicity the assumed background, this leads to a still further context that is taken for granted, and so on. To avoid this infinite regress people use the procedures of commonsense reasoning. According to the theory of reflexivity, we live in a world of particular situations, although we use general concepts to interpret them; however, these general concepts are never directly seen but only illustrated by alleged examples of them. There is no escape from this circular relationship.

Garfinkel claims that the procedures by which people account for circumstances or events represent the way social reality was constructed in the first place. The ordinariness of the world is not given but is socially produced, although people censor their awareness of having done this cognitive work. Reflexivity is hidden by "the natural attitude." People assume that meanings will eventually emerge and do not insist that

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everything be meaningful the moment they experience it. Only when something happens to disturb their sense of the normal flow of action do they examine social reality; usually they offer "accounts" that quickly restore the sense of normality. The world is held together not because people agree on a single reality but because they refrain from questioning reality.

One might infer that Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is a bit like a sociological version of Zen. Here is a world that will not bear too much examination. Things are what they are, but only as long as we do not press very hard on them; when we do, meaning fades away as our explicit reasoning chases them into an infinite regress. A major difference between Garfinkel's concepts and Zen, though, is that whereas Zen puts its practitioners through long training to achieve this attitude toward reality, Garfinkel proposes that everyone already has such an attitude: It is the height of the mundane, the essence of commonsense practical reasoning. Ethnomethodology, in short, has no place for Preston's culminating idea of "transcultural reality," which Zen uncovers. The phenomenological camp tends toward relativism and the "local production" of infinite varieties of knowledge, none of which transcends its immediate circumstances. But Preston goes beyond Garfinkel's version of philosophical paradoxes and tries to understand the process of social interpretation and meaning construction in a naturalistic way, as an objective feature of the world. Religious reality, in Zen, is not merely local and subjective; it is transcendent and objective, and founded in natural, social processes that themselves have an objective contour that may be sociologically described.

Preston, in other words, is concerned with the social construction of religious reality. While sensitive to the procedures of everyday reasoning documented by the ethnomethodologists, he does not simply accept their relativism but seeks methods by which objective realities may themselves be naturalistically produced. There is theoretical precedent for this approach in the Durkheimian tradition, especially as developed by Goffman (whose ideas in turn I have exploited still further). In this view, subjective realities are collective products; but their base has an objective reality, because it is the ritualized interaction of real human bodies coming together in time and space that produces the symbols that represent collective experience. In Durkheim's fundamental model, rituals are interactions in which participants stereotype their actions; become mutally aware of a common focus of attention, and hence implicitly of the overriding presence of the group; and propagate a common emotion or mood. In this way participants produce symbolic, "sacred objects," charged up with a moral force because they act as reminders of a group-created common reality.

Durkheim himself favored the hypothesis that a group's symbols directly

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reflect the physical structure of the group, a hypothesis that has had to be abandoned for lack of evidence. Durkheim's primary interest was in moral realities, sentiments of solidarity within the group; on this level, his dictum that the religion symbolizes the constraints of membership in society is defensible. But it neglects the transcendental aspect of religion, its capacity (which emerges only in rather cosmopolitan religions) to point not only beyond the existing society but even beyond the cosmos. This is the kind of "transcultural reality" at which Zen is pointed. And indeed, a sociological justification for seeing such a formulation of transcultural reality as an emergent *social* property comes from a later development of the Durkheimian tradition, the work of Erving Goffman.

Goffman's *frame analysis* avoids the extremes of sheer physical objectivity and subjective relativism by using a set of levels building on one another. Human beings orient first to the "primary frameworks" of the physical world and human bodies within it; they then can construct *transformations*, which change the meaning of activity into make-believe, contests, ceremonials, deceptions, and other reformulations. Transformations can be built on transformations, resulting in high levels of complexity. The framing continuum is in principle open-ended at the "upper" end, but grounded in an objective physical world at the "bottom." Thus, rituals can become increasingly reflexive, self-referential, and sophisticated; the realities that they construct – or reveal – are precisely this formative, multileveled nature of the human world itself.

Preston makes a creative extension of the theory of interaction rituals, taking it onto new grounds and achieving new results. In effect, he is proposing that Zen meditation is itself a type of ritual, especially focused back upon itself. At the "bottom" end, it is grounded in the human body. Here Preston connects with the ethnomethodology on embodied practices developed by David Sudnow (another of Goffman's former pupils). Preston's Chapter VII, "Doing Zen Meditation," draws a striking parallel to Sudnow's analysis of the experience of learning to play jazz piano. In both cases, one learns to let the body take over from the mind; yet through this "letting go," the mind goes not downward but upward, toward a higher level of communication or of consciousness.

Apart from the special application to religious practices and meanings, Preston's work has another benefit that theoretical sociologists should ponder. It happens that Zen is a particularly good site on which to explore the nature of reflexive subjectivity, of consciousness and the unconscious, of emotion and cognition, and their multiple levels of meaning. The transcultural reality that Preston – and Zen – reveals is the self-constructing nature of the human mind itself.

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Preface

To write about Zen is a challenging task. Those who practice Zen or who are sympathetic to it for aesthetic reasons often find words inadequate to describe the richness and vitality of the realm. Those more critically disposed find any seeming reluctance on the part of the writer to dissect the Zen setting as dispassionately as any other to be annoying and even perhaps to reveal an overabundance of misplaced respect – a suspicion that can lead to rejection of the value of the writing as a whole.

This book tries to please both groups. In other words, I have tried to express some features of members' (including the writer's) experience in the Zen setting, and the insights glimpsed therein, in the language of sociology. This approach entails some compromises, although not destructive ones. In their classical writings, the practitioners of the major meditative forms have often expressed their experience in terms that are recognizably psychological and have attempted, in the most general sense, to make some contribution to the understanding of the mind and its operation. In contrast, the present study tries to see Zen practice in terms that take seriously the collective (i.e., social) processes of forming and reforming our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

My position is that meditative practices such as those found in the Zen setting directly affect the social and psychological processes that are the basis of all shared experiences of reality. This view is not new. Its psychological equivalent can be found in classic texts on meditation and in contemporary psychological literature. This approach, however, has not been used to examine meditative practices sociologically, that is, with the emphasis not on individual but on group processes that both support meditative activity and produce agreement on its meaning. I hope to contribute to the understanding of how one comes to be a member of a Zen group and similar groups using meditative practices, and to show the important differences between such groups and those lacking these

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practices. One result of this analysis will be an appreciation of the inadequacy of received notions in social theory of what is involved in socialization – the process of becoming a member of any group.

Further, the descriptions and analyses presented in this study suggest not only that the processes of joining a religious group using meditative practices are different, but that what is joined itself is qualitatively different from what is normally taken as mundane reality in all its myriad local forms. I hope to illustrate that the claims made by transpersonal psychologists studying features of human experience (religious experience, for example) that go beyond typical notions of personality and ego have a sociological dimension as well. I am, then, exploring possibilities suggested by Ken Wilber's (1983) advice to identify the fundamental psychosocial relationships constitutive of the contemplative realms.

It cannot be emphasized enough that Zen is not an intellectual enterprise and the account of it found in this study is not at all that suggested by the teachings of Zen (although it is not entirely incompatible with these teachings). The goals and practices of Zen are soteriological, whereas those of sociology are both different and more limited. This does not prevent Zen practitioners from recognizing an adequate sociological account of their practice. Those members of the groups studied who have read all or parts of this manuscript have found it to be a credible description of their experience in general. I suspect that it will be found generally adequate for Zen groups in America.

I readily admit that I am no expert on Buddhism and thus cannot even begin to make my view of Zen conform to some orthodox standard, whatever that might mean in a Zen context. The view of Zen Buddhism found in this work is largely that of the writer, which has been shaped by doing Zen practice and by interacting with the teachers and, especially, the members of the groups studied. American Zen practitioners are not always well informed on Buddhism beyond some acquaintance with its most basic teachings. This lack of knowledge is not a fault for our purposes; it simply constitutes part of the context in which Zen exists in America. Because Zen emphasizes "a special transmission outside the Scriptures" (Suzuki, 1956, 9) that is based largely on meditative practices, the neglect by some practitioners of textual training is entirely understandable.

Chapter I gives a statement of the main concerns of the study, its purposes, and the methods used to produce this account. The next three chapters describe the Zen experience. In Chapter II, I discuss the social characteristics of members as well as the formal organization of one center and its physical layout. Chapter III introduces a Zen teacher and outlines some forms of his interaction with students. The issue of authority is raised in this chapter but deferred until after meditation is discussed as

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a reality-building process. Chapter IV then considers how and what one learns in a new-practitioner's workshop and discusses some varieties of Zen practice. These descriptive chapters provide the basis for the theoretical discussions that follow. Chapter V presents a somewhat modified symbolic interactionist view of Zen practice and introduces the issues that are pursued in the next four chapters. Chapter VI develops an alternative to the constructionist perspective on conversion by treating meditation as a social phenomenon. Chapter VII gives an example of how Zen experience is accomplished around the problems of pain and of actively trying to "do" meditation. Elements of the social organization of Zen practice are also outlined. Chapter VIII examines ritual meditative practice and its consequences. Periods of intensive practice (*sesshin*) are examined in terms of how they contribute to the attenuation of old habits and practices of reality construction and the development of alternative reality-construction practices. Chapter IX considers three different meanings of Zen practice and how they are produced by different practitioners using different practices. Finally, in Chapter X I make some observations of a general nature about the relevance of this study for sociology.

Without the encouragement and support of many people this work would not have been completed. In its early stages, the efforts of Professor Leonard Pinto of the University of Colorado, Boulder, were especially encouraging. Later, Richard Boyle gave generously of his time to read various drafts of my work and allowed me to use his extensive unpublished manuscript on the structure of mystical teachings.

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Professor Robert Ellwood of the University of Southern California and Professor Bennett Berger of the University of California at San Diego read the entire manuscript and made helpful and sometimes quite critical suggestions for improvement.

Professor Randall Collins of the University of California at Riverside read the manuscript carefully and insightfully, and his review resulted in a significantly improved revision. His scholarship, attention to subtleties of argument, and openness to sociological explorations that might seem marginal to his interests are greatly appreciated.

My greatest debt intellectually is to those whose names appear recurrently in the list of references. They are my most recent teachers in so-

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ciology. The writings of Ken Wilber, whom I have never met, could not have been more helpful. His work promises to be the basis for a whole new direction in the study of religion. The writings of Herbert Fingarette encouraged me to undertake the study of a topic that is marginal to mainstream sociology and showed me how it could be done. I have learned much from the work of Katsuki Sekida, Phillip Kapleau, and Joseph Damrell, and all deserve special thanks. On rereading their work, I often realize that much of what I had been thinking of as my own ideas I actually learned from them.

I would like to express special thanks to my teacher Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi-roshi, the abbot of the Zen Center of Los Angeles. His support of my research made the interviewing of staff and other members of the Los Angeles Center possible at a very busy time.

I would like to thank the members and teachers in both Los Angeles and San Diego who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Charlotte Joko Beck, the teacher in residence in San Diego, and Elizabeth Yuin Hamilton deserve special mention in this regard.

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