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David L. Preston

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

A Sociological View of Zen

What makes Zen practice sociologically interesting? Although this entire book attempts to answer this question, a few points can be stated simply at the outset. First, Zen tends to be very different from what we often take as typical religious activity in the United States and Europe. Some of those who practice Zen, for example, do not even consider it a religion. It has no notion of a supernatural being and no conflict with science. In fact, Zen attracts many scientists and persons with advanced degrees. Second, like a variety of Eastern religious forms, Zen involves meditative practices and an explicit notion of training that uses such practices. A close examination of these practices necessitates a reconsideration of standard social scientific notions of what happens in “religious” settings. Third, Goffman (1974) recommends just this sort of study.

The first object of social analysis ought, I think to be ordinary, actual behavior – its structure and its organization. However, the student, as well as his subjects, tends to take the framework of everyday life for granted; he remains unaware of what guides him and them. Comparative analysis of realms of being provides one way to disrupt this unselfconsciousness. *Realms of being other than the ordinary provide natural experiments in which a property of ordinary activity is displayed or contrasted in a clarified and clarifying way.* The design in accordance with which everyday experience is put together can be seen as a special variation on general themes, as ways of doing things that can be done in other ways. (Goffman, 1974, 564; emphasis added)

Although this volume is clearly a study of a religious topic, its relevance is not limited to just religious issues or confined to religious interests. What are “strictly” religious issues? If they can be categorized at all, such issues would perhaps include those that concern trends in the growth or demise of various churches or denominations, or the problems of clergy in particular organized settings. Other examples of strictly religious issues

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might be proposed, but these examples serve to show what this study is not directly concerned with, namely, religion as it is ordinarily conceived of in America. Both commonsense and “enlightened” intellectual opinion often know what religion is. And what they know is that it is either for them or not for them, something to be valued or devalued, respected or disrespected. From the negative side of this certainty, there is little one can read or, in fact, imagine that would be interesting about religion. Previously, I had refused to label the material of this study as “religious” simply because it was too interesting to be so. Now, however, I am willing to call it religious but urge the reader to be cautious before assuming that the meaning of this word is clear. I will offer my own definition early in the study; however, we should remember that definitions often cannot address broader commitments and interests that have nonconceptual roots. The concerns and interests of this study go beyond an analysis of religion as the word is often used. They reflect directly on both personal growth and broader issues in social theory.

Approaching the Study of Religion

One of the most important studies of the psycho-social-spiritual boundary is that by Fingarette, who suggests the “evils” to be avoided in such a study.

I have in mind here two special evils. One consists in psychologizing the spiritual life (“reducing” it to psychology with nothing left over). The other evil consists in mistaking widespread, popular perversions of the spiritual life for the real thing, thus often providing incisive analyses of something which is familiar though incorrectly labeled. (Fingarette, 1963, 6)

As Bellah has pointed out, even Durkheim’s work on religion can be faulted as being reductionistic in that he accounts for religion entirely in terms of the social world. An example of this error is also found in Freud’s *Future of an Illusion*; more recent examples are available as well, including much of the work done on “cults” following the Jonestown incident and, in my opinion, Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*. As an alternative, Fingarette recommends finding authentic forms of spiritual expression and studying them. Surprisingly, this approach is rarely used by social scientists.

Those who approach spirituality under the guise of religious conversion typically assume that one who joins a religious group does so from a position of weakness (Heirich, 1977). Stress or other difficulties lead one to seek a personal transformation, so that one becomes willing to do what a normal, healthy person would not do – that is, accept a whole

new set of values and beliefs in order to reduce the dissonance or to overcome the crisis in which one finds oneself. This study does not make such an assumption: If new members are often dissatisfied with their lives and have a willingness to try something new, the *consequences* of such a willingness to change cannot be dismissed. Certainly one must be willing to enter a religious practice with a general attitude of receptivity, but this does not allow us to ignore what then happens or to define all cases, as is often done, as regression, escape, or retreat into magic or mythic modalities of collective being.

Another common assumption of many sociologists who study religion is that there is nothing special about religious socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; McGuire, 1981). Supposedly a candidate for membership in any group faces the same problems and the same processes in learning the group's ways. Two objections can be made to this assumption and the theories based on it. First, the notion of socialization itself is so general as to disguise what we want to examine in more detail – namely, the particular practices and activities that members use in particular situations to produce appropriate behavior and make sense of their circumstances. Second, although some religious settings can be seen as nearly identical to nonreligious settings, those examined in this study are clearly not so. In fact, what we observe in the Zen setting is to some degree a case of desocialization, unlearning rather than relearning.

To appreciate the first objection that the use of the term “socialization” needs to be used very carefully, let us look at some basic assumptions about the social actor and how socialization occurs according to the two major ways of doing sociological research, what Wilson (1970) calls the “normative” and “interpretive” paradigms.

In the normative approach social interaction is seen as governed by rules. One learns a role, which is a set of rules and expectations, and behavior is accounted for by locating the actor in a structure of these shared expectations. Since all members of a social setting tend to agree on what is happening and what things mean because they are socialized into the same roles and norms, they can interact in an orderly fashion. A second feature of this approach is the demand that explanation be a deductive process. As in the natural sciences, facts are explained by deducing them logically from theory. The sociologist is seen to have a privileged position from which to observe and understand the processes and structures of the social world.

The major alternative to this normative approach – the interpretive view – is made up of various schools of thought and research (phenomenological sociologies and symbolic interaction to mention just two) that share a few common assumptions. The actor, not the rule, governs interaction. The actor is a working participant in the processes of making

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sense of the world by interacting with others. One does not just “release” behavior under certain structural conditions (as in the view of the normative perspective), but one negotiates an agreement on what seems appropriate and real in a particular situation. Further, because the world as seen through the eyes of particular social actors is given such importance, it becomes the relevant basis for understanding social activity. The normative notion that actors somehow lead their lives by the tenets of social theory without really knowing it is recognized as inadequate. To the extent that social theory is not based on actors’ realities and on the practices that actors use to devise a common reality, it is off the mark.

What happens, then, in the process of becoming a member of a group – that is, in the process of socialization – is quite different according to each of these viewpoints.¹ The current study closely follows the members’ experience and attempts to build an account of Zen practice that is informed by such experience. An explicit effort is made to follow the interpretive approach to the process of becoming a member, although our description and analysis goes beyond that suggested by this approach. Before turning to the argument that socialization in the Zen setting is considerably different from other settings, one last assumption that bears on this argument should be considered. Social scientific studies of religious or ideological groups commonly make the assumption that the truth claims of such groups must be criticized and shown to be of less value than the claims of social science. Coulter (1979) refers to this as the “ironic attitude” of these studies – ironic because social scientists assume that what they are doing to the objects of their studies cannot be done to their own perspectives and truth claims.

The contemporary Mannheimian sociology of knowledge and belief has perpetuated, with sociology, this constitution of members’ beliefs-about-society (or about certain of its features) as *essentially competing sociological theories* rather than as integral parts of the societies within which they are held. . . . Lay sociological beliefs are investigated for their possible *truth value*, rather than as empirical features of a society to be analyzed, along with other beliefs, in terms of their socially organized properties. (Coulter, 1979, 165; emphasis altered)

If we take Coulter’s advice, questions must be asked about how people come to experience a common reality in a particular form, what do they do to produce this experience, and how do they come to agree on its meaning? The focus is on how a particular reality is constituted, produced, and shared rather than on criticizing its alleged shortcoming vis à vis a scientific viewpoint.

This perspective urged by Coulter stops short of the relativism typical of many sociological studies. He believes his view is privileged – namely, a view that sees how all realities are produced or what they all have in

common. Ethnomethodology and phenomenological sociologies tend to argue in favor of an approach to the study of social aspects that does not stop just with ethnography or with understanding the meanings that members of a group share. They go beyond this to the study of the presuppositions and practices used by members of a group to produce a sense of shared reality. These practices and presuppositions are not usually known to members (even as they use them) but rather are prior to, and constitutive of, the meanings with which the typical ethnography deals. This study is informed by this approach.

How can the practice of Zen be studied as a social phenomenon? This study does so by asking the question, "How is a sense of shared reality produced among those doing Zen practice?" The answer, which is based on a variety of sociological theorists, is that the Zen setting is socially organized in such a way as to facilitate the experience of an alternative way of being, or a shared sense of reality. Of course, this claim could be made about any group – namely, that the reality that members share is the product of particular socially organized presuppositions, practices, and interactions. The possibility that the Zen and other similar settings have special features in this regard will be addressed shortly.

Schutz (1967) has argued that the reality commonly experienced in everyday life is but one of a wide variety of realities (or provinces of meaning). We also encounter the realities of fantasy, scientific theorizing, dreaming, and religious experience, for example. Each of these realities is constituted by what Schutz calls its cognitive style or the set of presuppositions and modes of activity that constitute it. Each is equally real and internally consistent, but commonsense reality is considered predominant because we must return to it to communicate with one another. In this view, religious experience is a reality that is linked to specific cognitive features seen to help produce the experience in consciousness. These features, then, become some of the elements for a sociological study of how the practice of Zen is constituted.

Schutz's theories can be improved upon and expanded by reference to the work of ethnomethodologists. Particular practices used by members are examined and rules outlined for understanding how one makes a shared sense of reality out of the flow of everyday life. For most who work from this perspective, language plays the key role in shaping social reality. This emphasis on language and talk can lead to difficulties, however, when applied to a Zen setting. Talk is deemphasized in Zen practice, and nonverbal training of the body (and mind) is made prominent. A study of how Zen reality is constituted, then, must focus closely on this process of body (and mind) training and its experience on the part of the practitioner. This focus parallels the work of some sociologists, even if it is a less well followed path.

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Social meanings are continuously created and recreated through the situated praxis which presupposes, preserves, and uses those meanings. Thus, “table” is a gloss for the cognitive, practical, and interactional work through which “table” is enacted. . . . From this point of view, the table is created and sustained by virtue of what is done to, with, or about it. (Pollner, 1979, 249)

One could extrapolate then from Pollner: “Zen” is a gloss for the cognitive, practical, and interactional work through which “Zen” is enacted. Like any other social phenomenon, it is defined by the activities that accomplish it. Seen in this light, Zen practice is a set of activities, attitudes, and rituals that are organized by the notion of enlightenment into a more or less coherent, if flexible, whole. The practice includes sitting meditation, chanting, interviews with a teacher, hearing talks by a teacher, as well as the activities and work assignments of *sesshin*. It can include any and all the activities of life – eating, walking, and working – depending upon one’s commitment to maintaining a meditative stance in these various activities.

The most challenging problem in doing a sociological study of Zen (and similar phenomena) is indicated by the fact that Zen itself claims to be uncommunicable in words.² Many stories are told about this difficulty. A young student or an official asks a Zen teacher for some explanation and the teacher responds with a seemingly nonsensical gesture or statement. For example:

Whenever he was asked about Zen, Master Gutei simply stuck up one finger. He had a boy attendant whom a visitor asked, “What kind of teaching does your master give?” The boy held up one finger, too. Hearing of this, Gutei cut off the boy’s finger with a knife. As the boy ran away screaming with pain, Gutei stuck up one finger. The boy was suddenly enlightened. (Yamada, 1979, 25)

What are we to make of this? According to Wilber (1983, 133), all transrational forms of religion share this difficulty of expressing the reality there encountered in mental-egoic (rational) terms: “For spiritual knowledge itself is not symbolic; it involves direct, nonmediated, trans-symbolic intuition of and identity with spirit.”

This would seem to limit severely an approach to Zen as a socially mediated, reflexively organized phenomenon. But this limitation is not as severe as it appears at first sight. I do not argue that Zen is nothing but socially shared meanings. Rather, an account is presented of how Zen practices contribute to the attenuation of the reality-building practices of everyday life; the facilitation of an alternative set of reality-producing activities typical of the transrational realm; and the production of a sense of shared reality among members.

In doing this I am constantly aware, both theoretically and experien-

tially, of the problem of reducing spirituality to social determinants. Thus no claim is made that spiritual knowledge is socially organized in the sense that it is symbolically mediated (although this argument is indeed often made by others). Instead I will argue that the practices facilitating such knowledge are socially organized and, further, that the consequences of such knowledge are observable in social action, even if they cannot be expressed in normal language. This conception of Zen as a sociological phenomenon, then, clearly goes only part way in dealing with the phenomenon in its richness. Focusing in this fashion on the constitutive processes and the work members do to accomplish this reality at best just approaches the limit beyond which such “working” and “doing” cannot be performed. According to the experts, true spiritual knowledge can exist only where there is “surrender” (Wolff, 1976), “non-doing” (Benoit, 1955), or an attitude of active passivity.

Admittedly there are a variety of religious forms that gain access to and express this knowledge somewhat differently. One contemporary Zen teacher writes:

Zen Buddhism does not pervade the cosmos. It presents essential nature – universal mind – but it does so as a particular teaching. Confusing the specific teaching with its vast and undifferentiated subject is a trap that has caught several tigers. (Aitken, 1978, 17)

Put simply (for this issue is considered in greater detail in Chapters VII, VIII, and IX), for the purposes of this study Zen is seen as a reality that is socially organized to the degree that it is learned and shared, and study of these socially organized practices can reveal how people collectively produce and come to agree on the reality of the Zen experience. This involves examination of practices and assumptions, both formal and informal, with an interest in learning something about how this form of reality is encouraged, facilitated, and expressed.

The emphasis put on experience and training of the bodymind in a Zen setting is such that efforts to focus on them involve a close examination of the interactions and experience of members. My primary concern is with learning how members come to share common experiences and meanings in this rather esoteric setting, and how particular practices figure into this process of personal transformation and membership acquisition. I will attempt to show how the group’s practices especially, but also their beliefs to a lesser degree, contribute to the realization of a particular way of being human that is rather ambiguously referred to as “Zen.”

A method – a way of doing the study, of actually becoming familiar with and documenting a group’s particular way of life and its meaning to them – still remains to be considered.

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On Going Native

A basic prescription for students who use a participant–observer method of studying a particular group is: Be careful not to “go native” (Bittner 1973). The disciplined observer has a privileged position from which to study social processes only as long as a fine line is walked between what has been called the “absolutist stance” on the one hand and the “natural stance” on the other. The former is that typically taken by the scientific observer of the social world and involves methods and logics that we have briefly outlined under the heading of the “normative” paradigm. This stance involves explaining social behavior in terms that are not real for the persons doing the behaving. The scientist assumes a special view that the person in the street does not have and, thus, is supposedly in a better position from which to account for social forms. The natural stance is, simply put, the viewpoint of the actor, the person being studied. The danger with getting too close to this stance is that the participant–observer ceases to “see” the social processes under study but comes to experience them as familiar. One must, according to this advice, remain outside this experience of the world as natural. The desirable study comes when “the retention of an unbiased interest in *things as they actually present themselves* to the perceiving subjects” is maintained (Bittner, 1973, 122).

This advice is sound, especially given the goals of a phenomenological sociology, one of which is to become and remain aware of the role of presuppositions in constituting shared experience. However, in the experience of the present writer, who was a member first and only later developed the desire to report on the setting sociologically, this advice came too late. So what can be said to legitimate the de facto stance from which the present study was undertaken?

First, there is the issue of what it means to be a member of the group studied. Actually anyone who wants to can be a member and will be considered such almost directly on beginning the practice (and paying the dues). However, this relative notion of membership has nothing to do with the actual accomplishment in Zen practice that is a much more interesting measure of membership. This second notion is similar to the process of, say, learning to do jazz improvisation, where one has abundant evidence of the validity or shortcomings of one’s claim to membership among jazz musicians. It is one thing to want to be a member and even to think that one is so; it is another entirely to be able to accomplish the skilled activities in which true membership resides. In the Zen setting, for the present writer, it was not as easy to go native as one might imagine. Let us pursue this notion.

Because beliefs and claims to truth in the form of propositional knowledge are such a small part of doing Zen practice, these early, easily as-

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A han (wooden sound piece) with rope and striker. The rhythmic strikings of wood on wood is a common sound during *sesshin*. A sign for the front door of the zendo hangs unused in the background.

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similable features that usually mark membership in a group are not relevant. The new practitioners are presented with a situation in which they are expected to do meditation and other rituals and discouraged at the same time from talking about “Zen.” Highly abstract questions that do not have to do with the actual practice are labeled “philosophic” and considered inappropriate and distracting. Certainly a few theoretical statements are made about the goals of doing Zen practice, the nature of the self and so on, but these are so abbreviated as to be not very helpful in making sense of things.

Practically, however, one comes to use theoretical terms like *samadhi* (concentration) and *makyo* (intense feelings or hallucinations) to see and locate one’s experience and share it with others (Preston 1981; also see Chapter V below). This seems to fit the definition of going native – that is, accounting for experience in terms used by members. But using such terms is not merely a matter of reflexively organizing experience to find such “objects” and “events” in one’s environment. What these terms are based on is the activity of meditation and the states of consciousness associated with it. Although there are some unique features to Zen members’ experience that can be accounted for in terms of their reflexive use of terms learned in the Zen setting, much of what meditators encounter is similar to meditative experience in other settings as well.

Meditation is not an activity or practice unique to any one group and is, in fact, a practice widely shared by the esoteric forms of the major world religions. Of course particular forms of meditation differ from group to group but there is a core of demands and experiences that are common to all (Carrington, 1977; Goleman, 1977; Maliszewski, Twemlow, Brown, & Engler, 1981; Shapiro, 1980; Wilber, 1980). This study takes the position that the practice of meditation can be done without going native to any particular group.

Further, using recent research as well as classic texts (cf. Brown, 1977; Shapiro, 1980), the argument is made that the sorts of experiences encountered during meditation are such that they cannot be dealt with simply as features of a particular group’s “local knowledge.” Certainly some experiences are, but I will argue (as others have done) that the process of meditation is a form of phenomenological reduction (Sekida, 1975), a looking at rather than through the normal processes of reality construction (Brown 1977). Thus the process of learning to meditate in a Zen setting cannot be treated simply as accepting a new set of typifications (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967) or cognitive presuppositions and practices that then are constitutive of the Zen member’s experience.

The reason it is not so easy to go native, then, is that one needs to realize some accomplishment in meditation before one can actually ex-