

Is There a Zen Ethic?

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I. The Problem

Philosophers often see Zen Buddhism as a tradition without its own ethic. On the subject of Zen ethics, friendly interpreters of Zen have been reluctant to propose that there is, could, or should be a distinctive, coherent, and consistent moral standpoint integral to Zen theory and practice. There is even more reluctance to suggest that the moral experience of Zen tradition can generate an ethical system in the philosophical sense, that is, minimally, a rationally coherent, consistent, communicable, self-critical, and generally relevant normative system.

Less friendly voices have suggested that Zen Buddhism is inherently antinomian. It is true that the tradition regularly displays a kind of moral iconoclasm. Moral iconoclasm appears vividly in connection with the therapeutic search in Zen for spiritual liberation. Zen therapy, an aggressive critique of self-enslaving habits of mind, includes moral discrimination, "picking and choosing," as one of its targets. Furthermore, when Zen tradition is not expressing therapeutic hostility to the ethical mind, it seems to rest in an attitude of indifference toward ethical reflection and criticism, thereby seeming to neglect a human domain of authentic needs and hard tasks.

That Zen Buddhism lacks, or seems to lack, an ethic does not mean that Zen tradition lacks moral content. Ch'an and Zen Buddhism have relied for centuries on general Buddhist and Confucian precepts, codes, virtues, and exemplars as the content of the moral life before and after spiritual liberation. Neither does the claim that Zen Buddhism lacks an ethic imply anything about the moral conduct of Zen Buddhists, who have demonstrated moral courage, noble self-

discipline, and empathic compassion amply in their history. Rather, the view that Zen Buddhism is without an ethic is a philosophical view, based on two assumptions. First, it is assumed that a philosophically sophisticated, self-conscious, and comprehensive ethic is not evident yet in Zen tradition. Second, it may also be assumed by some, within and without the Zen community, that there cannot or should not be a Zen ethic, that the term, "Zen ethic," would be both comic and contradictory.

It is difficult to argue that the first assumption is false. Zen tradition and its more philosophical interpreters, in fact, have shown little interest in developing an ethical domain within the philosophical agenda implicit in Zen Buddhism. The energies of the philosophers in recent times have been otherwise focused on Zen, especially on questions of ontology and existence, with aesthetics a more distant interest. Before looking at the separate, second assumption, that there cannot or should not be a Zen ethic, it would be useful to inquire why ethics receives so little serious attention among philosophers, present and past, who interpret Zen Buddhism.

Until recently, the modern, philosophical interpretation of Zen Buddhism has been shaped and accomplished almost entirely by Japanese philosophers. That they have not chosen to include a sustained ethical reflection in their inquiry may be a consequence of several factors. The eminence of German philosophy as the model for philosophizing in Japan has probably contributed to a disinterest in ethics, especially social ethics. The Japanese intellectual quest for modernity and for a modern Japanese nationalism has generated radical and highly political shifts of opinion on duty, happiness, and social responsibility, as well as a climate sometimes not hospitable to the voices of Zen. For some time now in Japan, fundamental ethical possibilities have been debated in official and popular media, as well as in intellectual circles. To express a "Zen standpoint in ethics" may be viewed as premature or futile, at this point in the national search for a sense of what it is to be Japanese in the post-modern world.

Perhaps another influence upon its philosophical agenda has been the eagerness of Zen's Western audience for the stimulating and corrective insights of Zen thought in the fields of metaphysics, existential psychology, theology, and aesthetics. These Western interests, while obviously shaped by the nature of the Japanese Zen resources available

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to stimulate them, certainly helped, in turn, to drive Japanese choices about the philosophical agenda of Zen Buddhism. Finally, it is difficult to escape the thought that Japanese philosophers, acting sometimes as interpreters with a mission, have evaded the development and presentation of an ethical standpoint because it is likely to be seen as subversive of the official truisms and moral performance of Western societies. It needs to be said, however, that Zen Buddhism will have only a marginal influence upon the West if it fails to penetrate Western culture's spiritual style to its living core: the moral heart and will, shaped by ethical inquiry.

That Zen Buddhism has not enthusiastically embraced the tasks of philosophical ethics is also evident when taking a longer, historical view. Deep involvement of Zen institutions and monks in the political life of Japan before the Tokugawa period generated little Zen-inspired reflection on social philosophy, unless one wishes to count elitist warrior codes as philosophical work. Where representatives of Zen involved themselves in public affairs and wrote about the Zen principles justifying their activity, as with Eisai and Musō, they fail philosophically to illuminate the political domain. We are left with the impression that Zen Buddhism is, in essence, indifferent to political values. This indifference is clear in the case of Dōgen, the most philosophical of traditional Japanese Zen interpreters, who chose to distance himself from both religious and secular politics for much of his career. Dōgen does offer some vital seeds for a possible Zen ethics, but his insights seem born from the soil of the life of monastic *zazen*, not from the needs and tasks of everyday life as lived in ethical consciousness.

The weak philosophical advance of Japanese Zen Buddhism into ethics is, in part, a consequence of the historical division of intellectual labor in Japan between Buddhism and Confucianism, a division inherited from Chinese culture. The dominance in Japan of Confucian values and Neo-Confucian interpretations in the ethical and political realms, a dominance enabled in part by Zen Buddhist scholars and teachers acting as bearers of Chinese culture, reached its peak during the Tokugawa period. Tokugawa ideological control and subordination of Buddhism to state purposes provided few opportunities for the development of a distinctively Zen Buddhist ethics and politics, to say the least. To all appearances, the development of a pragmatic, politically relevant, or interpersonally regulative ethic from the foundations of

Zen insight has not been a pressing need in historical Japan. Rather obviously, the philosophical virtues of Confucian ethico-political thought have been sufficiently compelling and lively in the past to satisfy those requiring sophisticated ethical vision.

Furthermore, we should not neglect the insights of Chinese Neo-Confucianism on the broader question of the ethical capacity of any form of Buddhism. The Neo-Confucians had their doubts about the moral desirability and ethical validity of Buddhist thinking, and modern skeptics of the possibility of Zen and Buddhist ethics may well consult the likes of Chu Hsi (1130-1200) for support. De Bary has summarized for us the eleventh-century Neo-Confucian critique of Buddhism:

Where Neo-Confucianism reasserted ethical values, Buddhism was seen as inimical to such values and even a threat to civilized life. . . . From the Neo-Confucian standpoint . . . Buddhism undermined human values by stressing their relativity, transitoriness, and insubstantiality. Again, where Buddhism sought to deliver man from attachment to the ephemeral and illusory, to transcend change and the painful contingencies of the moral sphere, Neo-Confucianism saw change, not as threatening destruction, loss, and disillusionment, but as containing the potentiality for meaningful life, growth, and maturation. The latter values in turn were affirmed and sustained by the Neo-Confucians on the basis of defined codes of conduct, bodies of learning, and social institutions conducive to human life. Buddhism, if it did not finally deny these values and institutions, at least negated them in the process of passing beyond the karmic sphere of intellectual and moral involvement. Its essential indifference to human relations and social ethics did not preclude tolerance of given value systems, or even qualified acceptance of them, but it did effectively cut the metaphysical ground out from under any positive and final assertion of rational, moral or social imperatives.¹

¹ Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Introduction," *Principle and Practicality: Essays in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning*, eds. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 7-8.

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Neo-Confucianism appreciated and, in some ways, adopted the values and methods of self-cultivation of Ch'an Buddhism, but it asserted the importance of moral principles and rational investigation, giving parity or even priority to the latter. Contrasting its efforts to the Buddhism that had dominated China for a millennium, Neo-Confucian thought portrayed Buddhism as world-denying and dedicated to narrow self-realization, while picturing Neo-Confucianism as properly balancing spiritual cultivation with moral action and political service. This balance was articulated in the school of Chu Hsi in terms of "abiding in reverence" (i.e., detached contemplation akin to Zen meditation) and "investigation of things and the plumbing of principle" (i.e., empirical studies of the changing world and inquiry into persistent values of self, society and cosmos).²

The later Neo-Confucian, Wang Yang-ming (1472-1529), was more open to Buddhist insight than Chu Hsi and he saw moral potential in the Buddhist life. Yang-ming proposed that the mind in depth moved with an innate, spontaneous moral capacity and inclination and did so free of the rigidity so disliked by the Ch'an Buddhist masters. For Wang Yang-ming, mind, in its true depth, was best discovered and accepted through "quiet sitting" or meditation, but best expressed in moral action, specifically in human relations (in contrast to institutionalized role-behavior, where spontaneous, natural action is more difficult.)³

While Neo-Confucian thinkers like Wang Yang-ming were accepting Buddhist theories of the self and practices of quiet self-nurturing, some Ch'an Buddhist thinkers during the Sung and Ming were reaching toward moral and social expressions of enlightenment and doctrine. During the Southern Sung, Ta-hui Tsung-kao (1089-1163) "established the precedent for trying to solve secular problems in the light of Buddhist thought and to overcome difficulties through the mind of Ch'an."⁴

The Ming Ch'an master Yun-ch'i Chu-hung (1535-1615), in part to

² Ibid., p. 12.

³ Julia Ching, *To Acquire Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

⁴ Araki Kengo, "Confucianism and Buddhism in the Late Ming," *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 56.

counter antinomian excesses within the Ch'an ranks, vigorously asserted that "the essence of this mind is neither good nor evil, but its function is to practice good and to suppress evil . . . the precepts are the original ground of the mind of both Buddhas and sentient beings."⁵ For Chu-hung, both moral knowledge and moral discipline are rooted in the mind itself at its deepest levels, not in the domain of law and retribution. So, in contrast to T'ang and Sung masters, Chu-hung affirmed that moral ways are inherent to the source and expression of enlightenment. Greenblatt attributes this shift in Ch'an interpretation to Chu-hung's belief that Ch'an transcendence of morality had led to a denigration of morality by the unenlightened. To neglect moral discipline was dangerous to society and self.⁶

Chu-hung's concern was perhaps socially conservative, and contrasts with Tzu-po Ta-kuan (1544-1604), who vigorously attacked public officials for corruption and hypocrisy. Ta-kuan believed that enlightenment experience, revealing the integration and interdependence of all beings, generated great energy and action. The activity of the enlightened, in his view, was working in and on the world, even with enlightened "anger," to cleanse society of selfishness, while uniting with the sufferings of others in selfless compassion. After challenging the political authority, Ta-kuan was imprisoned, where he committed suicide, apparently out of a determination to sacrifice himself.⁷

The thought and examples of Chu-hung and Ta-kuan serve to slow any rush to accept the second assumption concerning Zen ethics: that there cannot and should not be a Zen ethic. Caution in this matter is supported by A. D. Brear, who has attempted to demonstrate that Zen tradition has viewed enlightenment as a state requiring moral and intellectual preconditions. Brear claims, however, that the moral actions of the enlightened spring spontaneously from Buddha-mind itself, without the ethical mediation of reflection, investigation, balancing of principles, and choosing.⁸ This view, that the enlightened Zennist acts

⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

⁶ Kristin Yu Greenblatt, "Chu-hung and Lay Buddhism in the Late Ming," *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, pp. 108-109.

⁷ Araki, "Confucianism and Buddhism in the Late Ming," pp. 59-60.

⁸ A. D. Brear, "The Nature and Status of Moral Behavior in Zen Buddhist Tradition," *Philosophy East and West* 24 (October 1974): 429-37. Brear's claim about the

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morally without reflection, calculation or rules, is found also in Dōgen's thought by Douglas Fox. Since the awakened man or woman acts from the Absolute within himself, "there is no barrier of self-conscious reflection between the stimulus and his response. His acting is his being, and he needs no puzzled intermission between the impulse and the act."⁹

Brear, Fox, and others rely upon a distinction between the terms, *morals* and *ethics*, that needs clarification at this point. By claiming that the enlightened act morally, but without calculation or hesitation, they seek to differentiate and separate morally responsible and worthy action from actions resulting from ethical reflection. The intention is to claim that the enlightened act morally, but without the encumbrances or "thought-coverings" of doubt, reflection, or calculation. Ethical judgment is viewed negatively as a more or less detached, rational activity that neglects the fullness, complexity, and subjectivity of human action. Ethical judgment cannot grasp the breadth and depth of action, especially action performed by the enlightened master. Ethical reflection, therefore, falsifies moral realities.

The truly pure moral action can only arise from selflessness, not from ethical rationality. This claim is illustrated with reference to the actions of enlightened masters. As enlightened persons, they act from deep immersion in Buddha-mind. The Buddha-mind is "beyond good and evil," that is, beyond or prior to discriminating thinking as the source of pure action. Yet, the essential quality of Buddha-mind in action is compassion, not power, beauty, or the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Therefore, the enlightened, acting "beyond good and evil" from the roots of Buddha-mind, always act compassionately. This is an interesting, if not compelling or clear ethical and psychological argu-

spontaneous quality and profound source of moral action is found earlier in Nishida Kitarō. Nishida claimed the "good will" acts directly and automatically from within, without dependence on the subject/object dichotomy. See Nishida Kitarō, *A Study of Good*, trans. V. H. Viglielmo (Tokyo: Ministry of Education, 1960), pp. 136-52. Also, see discussion of zazen and morality in Philip Kapleau, *Zen Dawn in the West* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1979), pp. 211-15, 227-58.

⁹ Douglas A. Fox, "Zen and Ethics: Dōgen's Synthesis," *Philosophy East and West* 21 (January 1971): 39. Fox's interpretation of Dōgen's ethics is corroborated by T. P. Kasulis: "No ethical principles or reflective weighing of values come into play. The authentication of one's act is ultimately internal and prereflective." See his *Zen Action Zen Person* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1981), p. 103.

ment. And it deserves more skeptical inquiry than it has generated within Zen ranks.

This distinction between enlightened, compassionating moral action and action dictated by ethical reflection is used to rescue some Ch'an and Zen masters from charges of immorality or antinomianism. Ch'an and Zen tradition tell of masters killing cats, burning statues, and performing other morally dubious acts. The ethical judgment of these acts would measure them against public standards (e.g., of cruelty to animals) available to the least enlightened worldling.

Perhaps the moral acts of the enlightened, accomplished without ethical pause for reflecting, weighing pros and cons, consulting others, wrestling with calculations of consequences, and other tossings and turnings, are moral simply because the Buddha-mind is acting through them. But, is this true of all their moral acts? Is it possible that some of their acts may not flow freely and directly from Buddha-mind, but be distorted by ego-clinging and psychic distortions to a degree that the acts must be declared unworthy? Of course, they can—and that is why ethical judgment has a place here.

Zen interpreters, in accord with Mahayana tradition, have emphasized that the quest for spiritual liberation requires by-passing the discriminating mind, which obscures the unity of things and, thereby, the basis for compassion. Ethics is an eminent expression of the discriminating mind. Ethics, therefore, obscures the basis of compassion. Further, ethics is the intellectual foundation of law, politics, human relations, and role-identity, all of which are artificial constructs obscuring reality and standing in the way of self-knowledge and natural, spontaneous compassion. This position on ethics is a necessary dialectical corrective to rigid legalisms and the dictatorships of the intellectuals.

But even D. T. Suzuki, the clearest modern exponent of this effort to evaluate ethics from what might be called "the satori standpoint," expressed the view that the Mahayana was deficient in ethics:

While the Buddha apparently taught a well-balanced practice of *Sila*, *Dhyana*, and *Prajna*, his followers became one-sided . . . and emphasized the one point at the expense of others. Mahayanism in one sense can be said to have gone too far in its speculative flight, almost to the point of forgetting its

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ethical code, the *Vinaya*, while the Hinayana adherents are apt to bring upon themselves the criticism of too much conservatism, and a refusal to adapt themselves to their ever-changing environment. . . . The problem that faces faithful Buddhists at present is how best to effect a complete reconciliation of the moral discipline of Hinayanism with the speculations of Mahayanism.¹⁰

George Rupp, in a useful essay on the evolution of Buddhist ethics, agrees with Suzuki's contention that Mahayana and Theravada traditions contain ethical standpoints which need to be synthesized. However, Rupp faults Suzuki for not going beyond the Mahayana notion that the real moral revolution is to change one's view of the world and to accept things as they are ("achieving a new viewpoint in satori"). Rupp calls for a Buddhist ethic that points the way to changing oneself and the world, not simply one's subjective viewpoint, in recognition of the reality of suffering and moral limitations.¹¹

Rupp proposes that both Mahayana and Theravada thinkers can and should continue the evolution of Buddhist ethics, recognizing that the Dharma, as the teaching of liberating truth, must take on new aspects in order to illuminate a changing world. Rupp claims that the direction of historical change is positive, that the world of *samsara* is developing toward ultimate realization, *nirvana*. This optimism is perhaps a rare theme in the Buddhist view of history, but he supports his optimism about the evolution of historical being by appealing to the bodhisattva ideal of working in *samsara* to actualize its potential as *nirvana*. Rupp's view of history needs elaboration: if his optimism about change and his concept of history stand the test of Buddhist inquiry, they could generate ethical and social forces not often seen in traditional Buddhism.

Regardless of the fate of Rupp's evolutionary optimism and hopes in connection with Buddhist ethics and social action, his view that the Dharma must address changing situations is hard to dispute. He rightly

¹⁰ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *The Awakening of Zen*, ed. Christmas Humphreys (Boulder, Colorado: Prajna Press, 1980), pp. 2-4.

¹¹ George Rupp, "The Relationship between Nirvana and Samsara: An Essay on the Evolution of Buddhist Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 21 (January 1971): 61-63.

implies that the Dharma must be more active and articulate in the twentieth century than in the past, because:

twentieth-century man is becoming increasingly persuaded that he can in fact influence the course of his history not only in trivial matters but also on profound and ultimately significant issues for which he must assume responsibility. A remarkable growth of social and political self-consciousness and the correlative awareness of the innovative capacities of human technology have become critical dimensions of man's experience.¹²

Rupp's position is that Buddhism as an interpretation of our experience is not viable in our time if it neglects or refuses to interpret as religiously significant our increasing ability to shape personal and corporate life in *samsara*. Clearly, part of that interpretation should be ethical, rational inquiry in the Buddhist community, inquiry investigating changing human conditions and choices and illumined in depth by the light of wisdom and compassion.

A specifically *Zen* ethic can and should develop as part of a general Buddhist evolution in ethical self-consciousness more skillfully and vigorously engaged with contemporary moral issues arising from changing personal and social conditions. While participating in pan-Buddhist ethical dialogue, Zen ethics can consult its own special tradition for confirmed as well as latent ethical insights, offering these insights to the communities where Zen finds itself placed in the modern world, especially in East Asia and in the Western industrialized world. Additionally, the search for and testing of Zen ethics should re-vitalize the Zen community itself, in thought and practice.

II. Toward a Zen Ethic

Several reasons can be advanced in defense and explanation of efforts to develop a modern, philosophical Zen ethic. First, the philosophical agenda of Zen has too long avoided ethics. The philosophical portrait of Zen is, therefore, incomplete and lop-sided.

¹² Ibid., p. 65.

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Without an adequately articulated ethic, a philosophical interpretation of Zen lacks comprehensiveness, as well as practical usefulness.

Furthermore, it may be that ethics is one of the keys to unlock the mansion of metaphysical idealism in which much Zen interpretation seems trapped, perhaps unnecessarily. Forcing the ethical discussion may help bring about a creative "dropping of the mind," casting off anachronistic philosophical models and styles, discovering more contemporary models and building interpretations from the Groundless up. Zen ethics, consequently, can help, on some levels, to energize the general philosophical adaptations in Buddhism called for by Luis Gómez:

Philosophical adaptation, as well as doctrinal adaptation, is of vital importance in contemporary Buddhism. Philosophical discourse is still an important route to intellectual import and respectability. In the West it has been the most important road to theological and intellectual integrity since the Middle Ages. Established sects must all give a cogent theological account based on the most contemporary philosophical critique. But not surprisingly, the requirement is for contemporary explicability. In this, most exercises in religious philosophy have come short. By appealing superficially to philosophical forms that hold little or no attraction for modern Western intelligentsia, Buddhism displays, to the Western analyst at least, a certain lack of vitality.¹³

Second, Zen ethics, as a pluralistic process of inquiry into the moral consequences of Zen practice, liberation and insight, is increasingly needed in Zen groups and communities. As they create and sustain environments for liberation, in different and evolving cultures, they face new opportunities and obstacles that demand ethical clarification, debate, and consensus. This is obviously the case in Zen communities outside Japan and probably true in modern Japan as well, as Robert Bellah insists.¹⁴

Third, the development of a modern Zen ethic may be helpful out-

¹³ Luis Gómez, "Expectations and Assertions: Perspectives for Growth and Adaptation in Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist* 16 (Autumn 1983): 42-43.

¹⁴ Robert Bellah, "The Meaning of Dōgen Today," *Dōgen Studies*, ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), pp. 150-58.

side Zen communities. Zen Buddhist reflection on personal moral concerns, such as sexuality, equality, intimacy, and careers, can only add to the development of a wider, deeper, more sensitive conscience in individuals and communities. Perhaps Zen ethics will develop to the extent that someone will catch us off guard by venturing a Zen ethical analysis of an option like abortion. Similarly, framing Zen experience and insight in ethical terms useful in social inquiry and debate may educate and intensify the attention given to issues of exploitation, violence, liberation, and justice. Our difficulty in imagining where to start a *Zen* ethical critique of, say, genetic experimentation or Keynesian economics suggests the Zen Buddhist insulation and isolation from these kinds of modern issues, as well as the need to find the ethical linkages which help people to consider them from a Zen Buddhist perspective. Is it desirable or necessary to maintain a holy, monastic silence on these matters?

Finally, making an effort where possible to develop a Zen ethic seems appropriate in the light of the Bodhisattva ideal of Mahayana Buddhism. Granted that an ethic can be a prison, a trap, a delusion, and a hindrance, yet we should know that an ethic, especially an ethic viewed as a process of inquiry and as an exercise of humility, is a skillful means, *upaya*. As a tool of wisdom and compassion, an ethic is capable of pointing to special truths, of teasing the ego away from greed and fear, and of drawing us into dialogue and community. An ethic can be a means for directing wills and institutions to the issues and realities of suffering. How can the intellect and energy needed to rescue all beings be mobilized without the ethical calculations that direct and govern our moral sensitivity? Moral concern without ethical inquiry, skill, and even cleverness is likely to be blind and ineffective. The Bodhisattva vows, pledged by individuals and, implicitly, by Zen communities and their institutions, require steady, skillful, concerted efforts to save all beings and to root out defilements. Waiting for enlightenment so that one may do these things spontaneously and naturally, without effort or purpose or self, has never been the way of the Bodhisattva. Meanwhile, individuals and communities will make use of whatever ethic lies at hand, be it Confucian, Christian, Marxist, or existential. The ethic for Zen Buddhists can, however, be Zen Buddhist.

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A. Some Preliminary Observations

A complete account of Zen ethics will involve descriptive, meta-ethical, and normative work. Clearly the bulk of the threefold work lies ahead. Odd as it seems, much of this work is simple and obvious, but largely unnoticed and untended, to the eye of a Western philosopher.

The descriptive task is to develop more complete historical and empirical description of the moral thought and practices of Zen and Ch'an Buddhism, through scholarly study of the records and communities of Zen tradition, including Western developments. For example, psychological studies of Zen experience have yielded insights, theories, and concepts that can be taken up into the moral psychology of the Zen life. We need to know, for instance, how and if the opening up of a new viewpoint in *satori* or in *zazen* empowers or directs compassion, or non-violence, or courage.

Some philosophical work has meta-ethical implications for Zen ethics. For example, recent explications of Dōgen's thought may support thinking through some meta-ethical problems in Zen ethics, as well as raise new questions.¹⁵ A perennial stumbling block in Zen ethics is to make the leap from the standpoint of enlightenment, or *nirvana* "beyond good and evil," to the existential situation of moral choice, of *samsara* clouded with anxiety and clinging. It is not clear how the assertion, *nirvana* is *samsara*, can be used to support moral action in a lively way, since paradox tends to halt thought and action. Paradox is a good starting point for Zen therapy, but probably not for Zen action. The linguistic forms in which Zen moral action and principle are described and recommended are another meta-ethical focus deserving attention. Should a Zen ethic be communicated directly and discursively, or indirectly, through parable, silence, shouts, and koans?

A critical meta-ethical question is the question of authority, which has conceptual and social dimensions. A Zen ethic is, in part, a guide to decision-making and action. By what authority does one decide on a particular course of action? If a Zennist chooses a particular career because it more closely serves the value of compassion with all beings,

¹⁵ See, for instance, Fox, "Zen and Ethics"; Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person*; and LaFleur, ed., *Dōgen Studies*.

why does she choose compassion? What justifies her acting according to compassion? Why should she be moral at all? So, the meta-ethical question of authority asks us, in an ontological way, to make clear and distinct the grounds upon which Zen values rest and from which they may logically arise. Further, are those grounds rationally or intuitively available? Are they revealed in texts or in the gestures of the enlightened?

On the other hand, the question of authority is social. Who will determine the principles and applications of Zen moral conduct? Shall norms arise out of direct, personal experience (what kinds of experience)? Shall we be "lamps unto ourselves" in matters of morals? Or, shall a teacher or community serve as authority? In what ways, why, and where? In the modern period, if authority will rest in the Zen community, rather than in a master, a new but critical return to the *Vinaya* texts on consensual monastic discipline will be in order, as well as careful study of the moral ecology of differing Zen monastic traditions and experiments.

Another question concerns the relationship between teacher and student in Zen training. Far more is known about the psychological conditions characteristically found in this relationship than about the ethical conditions and constraints that might convey some measure of how wisdom and compassion are actualized in the encounter. This is an especially keen issue in Western Zen, and raising it also raises radical and pressing questions about the nature of Dharma transmission and religious community, about the expression of compassion and the qualities of Zen liberation.

Some might argue that the question of authority is answered already: that the ontological source of value and value concepts is Buddha-mind, which becomes available to us primarily in the lives, deeds, and words of Zen sages, if not in our own direct experience. Does this mean, among other things, that the ethical resources of other philosophical schools and theological traditions are not useful, much less necessary, for Zen ethics? Or, can Zen ethics be enriched and even enabled only through consultation with the moral experience and ethical thought of Christians, utilitarian philosophers, Marxists, and others, as once Ch'an Buddhism was in its encounter with Neo-Confucianism?

Ethics in its more practical functioning often relies upon specialized

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disciplines and bodies of learning in the explication of problems, decision options, and consequences; thus, ethical analysis of a problem of justice is best carried on with at least some reference to descriptions of the situation as developed by political and economic sciences. The meta-ethical question in this regard is, perhaps, how to balance the problematic "objectivity" of the sciences with the radical "subjectivity" of Zen, for these two methods of apprehending a situation will impact upon each other in complex ways. Again, in investigating the world, should Zen ethics prefer the findings of "systemic" sciences, like ecology, and avoid sciences working with mechanistic models of the world and of sentient beings?

Morally significant and ethically interesting knowledge of the world can emerge also from other sources, including cultural revolutions, social movements, and artists. Zen ethics must include methods of interpreting and appropriating all gates to the truth. Zen, for example, needs to learn from the experience, suffering, insights and ways of life of women, obviously, for women's experience has been ignored and distorted in Zen tradition. The extension of ethical consideration in Zen ethics should reach to children and animals, even to rocks, perhaps. As Zen ethics addresses questions of nuclear war strategy, animal liberation, poverty, and environmental degradation, how shall it learn from and integrate the insights of other moral points of view and ethical thought? What is the appropriate Zen style for supporting and challenging other moral points of view?

Finally, the normative aspect of the work of Zen ethics requires inquiry, debate, and testing of specific moral models, principles and norms. Moral models and norms can illuminate the moral dimensions of experience, awaken and focus moral sensitivity, guide decision-making, and help us find a balance among competing principles.

B. The Bodhisattva Model: The Norms of Wisdom and Compassion

A search for normative principles of Zen ethics quickly finds proposals that the *bodhisattva* model offers a powerful, central, and traditional resource. The bodhisattva, as understood in Mahayana tradition, is the synthesis of wisdom and compassion, of radical self-knowledge with dedication to the peace and well-being of all beings. Furthermore, by declaring that the everyday world is a Buddha-field,

that samsara is the place within which nirvana discloses itself, the bodhisattva model validates moral engagement and transforming action in everyday life. The Mahayana literature celebrates the depth achievement of the bodhisattva in self-transcendence and spiritual freedom, while insisting that this self-transcendence opens upon all beings. Because the bodhisattva encounters all beings without self-regarding desires, fears or delusions, there occurs an effulgence of acts of compassion, delivered with appropriate and effective means to the end of rescuing, saving, healing all beings.

Zen tradition has more clearly appropriated and expressed the wisdom dimension of the bodhisattva model, to the apparent relative neglect of the exercise of compassion. A Zen ethics must help revive and remake the role of compassion in Zen thought and practice. Ultimately, of course, Zen ethics acknowledges that wisdom and compassion are ontological categories, their dialectical unity beyond the ethical domain. However, the ethical domain must minimally claim wisdom and compassion as expedient principles for ethical analysis and judgment, as virtues for cultivation, and as clues to moral development and expression.

Contemporary discussions of bodhisattva wisdom and compassion treat these terms descriptively, rather than prescriptively. That is, wisdom and compassion are viewed not as something that a bodhisattva, or anyone else, *should* do, but what a bodhisattva does, in fact, do. It is assumed that wisdom and compassion are states and expressions of the being of the bodhisattva. As such they are not seen as principles for actions or as duties, but as spontaneous, natural out-flows of the bodhisattva nature. The bodhisattva compassionates from a source prior to thinking, in a state of No-mind where no distinction appears between self and other. The analogy is imperfect, but the bodhisattva's compassionating is like breathing: it happens of itself, effortlessly, involuntarily, peacefully, almost somnambulistically.

The analogy of compassionating to breathing is imperfect because breathing, unlike the compassionating described in the *Diamond Sutra*, can be brought under voluntary control, is certainly subject to emotional turbulence, and can express not only spontaneous life process, but also aware, interactive, thoughtful, willful action, as in speech. But, perhaps, an important lesson appears in this analogy. There is considerable resistance evident in Zen interpretation to the no-

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tion that the enlightened person compassionates thoughtfully, in a calculating way with the usual hesitations. The source of this resistance to the idea of deliberative compassionating is the belief that deliberation is a function of "the dualistic mind," of false consciousness. However, Zen is not opposed to thinking, deliberation, and calculation. It is suspicious of thinking, feeling, and so on when they arise from and are tools of the false self, the self-isolating, self-insulating ego. The enlightened person thinks (feels, speaks, acts, and so forth) from a different perspective, the perspective of the open self.

Furthermore, the notion of the bodhisattva's moral spontaneity overlooks the idea of the bodhisattva vow. A vow is a deliberate act, a free, thoughtful designing of the self in the present, for the future. The bodhisattva vow is viewed in the early Buddhist literature as a powerful commitment, penetrating all karmic levels, and irreversible. Importantly, the vow is made before enlightenment is achieved. It is a moral act, hardly spontaneous, and a constraint upon natural freedom. The prestige, persistence, and acceptance of at least the classic Four Bodhisattva Vows in Zen suggests that, among those not yet enlightened, as well as with the enlightened, it is appropriate to promise to do and to be "someone" in the future: one who will save all beings, root out defilements, walk all paths to truth, and achieve the awakened, open mind and heart of a Buddha.

From the standpoint of Zen ethics, then, the Zen life includes a will to cultivate oneself in certain specific ways, and a will to relate oneself to others in true and helpful ways. This view of the Zen life and the practice that is in harmony with it do not necessarily preclude the Zen view that, on the psychological and ontological levels, there is "no self to cultivate" and "no others to relate to." However, from the ethical standpoint, "no self to cultivate" does not mean "no cultivation, no practice," but "cultivate no-ego" in one's choices and habits. Similarly, "no others to relate to" means, in Zen ethics, "do not relate to others as 'others.'"

Zen ethics in the bodhisattva model, it may be seen, is two-fold in its focus: self-cultivation and helping others, wisdom and compassion. To further exploration and clarification of the ethical implications of Zen wisdom and Zen compassion, the wisdom focus can be described and elaborated by viewing it as the key term of a Zen "ethic of self-realization." The theme of compassion might provisionally be explored as the

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central principle in a Zen "ethic of mutuality," an interpersonal, social, inter-species view of the way of compassion. These explorations may demonstrate, in a simple, preliminary way, that Zen ethics involve a clear set of virtues to be cultivated, as well as a set of principles to regulate interpersonal and social decision-making in particular situations.

The life of the Zen Buddhist, the way of Zen, is clearly understood and talked about in teleological terms, as Nishitani Keiji indicates.¹⁶ The goal of Zen practice is compassionating wisdom or, stated more personally, a character directed, cultivated, or unfolded in such a way that it is increasingly free of internal hindrances to loving action, and courageous enough to express itself in the face of external obstacles to loving action. Vigorous, painful, and prolonged efforts to discover and nurture the seeds of this character characterize Zen at its best. Paradoxically, however, it is believed that the root of this character is already present and is from the beginning expressing itself in the very effort to discover itself. Zen practice is, then, "Buddha making Buddha." But, most commonly, Zen practice begins not with this awareness, but with a desire to be released from suffering, a yearning to function more freely, a sense that one has not yet known and manifested one's whole or real self, that there is a goal to be reached.

The Zen search for self-realization centers on the practice of sitting meditation, *zazen*, in an appropriate environment. While the search is inward and intuitive, it proceeds with the support of an external framework of routines, symbolizing ceremonies, and social support, the latter focused in the exemplary master who embodies the hope and perhaps some features of the form of self-realization. The search inward becomes a vortex, a drawing in and letting go of habits of the ego in body, speech, mind and heart. At the same time, a new, fundamental posture of selfhood emerges, sometimes dramatically.

The new self-posture achieved in Zen is said to be marked by the increasing presence of specific moral qualities, perfections, or virtues, the *paramitas*. These are usually described as psychological dispositions to act more generously and patiently with others, to more willingly refrain

¹⁶ See Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 270-85. Also, Robert A. F. Thurman, "Guidelines for Buddhist Social Activism based on Nagarjuna's *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels*," *The Eastern Buddhist* 16 (Spring 1983).

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from the cruder immoral deeds (hostility and lying, as well as killing and stealing), to pursue vigorously and heroically one's moral course, to refine further one's mastery of the paths of inwardness, and, finally, to practice (or trustfully rely on) the perfection of wisdom, *prajna-paramita*, a virtue characterized as feminine and maternal, describable perhaps as the mysterious source of all virtues, or perhaps as a trans-moral symbol for the realized self.

The Zen ethic of self-realization, while sometimes described as a psycho-spiritual quest for freedom from hindrances to a freely flowing, natural selfhood, is also clearly a discipline of virtues of character, involving training in habits of body, speech, and mind. For example, as blockages to free self-functioning are removed, the Zennist often undertakes simple, ritualized daily chores or engages in highly formalized and intricate art forms. Clearly these forms are vehicles for and of the radical openness and creativity of Emptiness or *sunyata*. These practical and aesthetic expressions have their psychological dimensions, but they are also, at their best, ethical: they are effective means to cultivate, support, and teach the *paramitas*, in their practitioners and others. The arts of Zen, finally, become useful media in that their presence and practice support Zen wisdom and compassion and challenge the works of selfishness in the wider society.

It is odd that interpreters of Zen have usually neglected to explore the ethical dimensions of the Zen arts, how the tea ceremony and *kyūdō*, Japanese archery, for instances, demand, in a limited form, the concentration of will, training of body and mind, patience, and trust of Zen training itself. It is even more puzzling that what we assume is necessary to the practice of an art, namely, study under a teacher, practice and repetition, and a long contest with oneself to be transformed by the art, many assume is not necessary in the practice of an ethical form or ideal, at least in a systematic, self-consciously organized way. Rather, it is as if we are asked to believe that moral patience, unlike the gracefully simple gestures of tea ceremony, is artlessly generated by meditation practice, and courage in the face of life and death, unlike the releasing of the bowstring, comes naturally or spontaneously to the Zen sage. This view assumes the *paramitas* are spiritual graces given with enlightenment, not moral virtues acquired through cultivation.

The virtues of patience, kindness, and energetic zeal are much in evidence in the hortatory rhetoric of Zen teachers encouraging layper-

sons and monks in the moral life. But, only the *paramita* of meditation is systematically and regularly practiced. Why is there not a methodology and practice hall for patience, as there is for meditation? The literature differentiates meditation from patience, so it is not sufficient to note that patience is required in the meditation hall. The differentiation of the virtues suggests they are separable in their coming to be and expression at some level. Surely, patience lends itself to systematic investigation, practice, and development. But apparently it has not been viewed this way.

The more clearly interpersonal virtues of the bodhisattva have not been emphasized to the degree that meditation has in interpretations of the Zen life. This lack of emphasis or even attention is due, perhaps, to the view that the virtues of patience, vigor, morality, and generosity are not virtues at all, subject to deliberate cultivation, but graces, spiritual by-products or gifts of the psycho-spiritual states developed in meditation or flowing from Buddha-mind.

The moral *paramitas* have not been the focus of Zen life for another reason: Zen tradition's long-standing suspicion of moral effort. Zen masters are persistent in declaring that hard work will not produce enlightenment or spiritual freedom, at the same time they prod their students to maximum efforts in meditation. Doing meditation vigorously or performing the other virtuous acts will not make you a Buddha. To believe it will is like believing you can make a mirror by polishing a brick with great vigor.

The paradox of cultivating self-realization (by seeking it one loses it) seems to be doubly true of the moral virtues. A key parable of Ch'an and Zen speaks to this. Bodhidharma, the fountainhead of Ch'an Buddhism, was asked by the Emperor, "How much merit have I gained by my generous endowment of monasteries and temples?" Bodhidharma replied, "No merit." This has been interpreted to mean that no collection of good works will add up to spiritual freedom and release from suffering. Bodhidharma is declaring that the goal of Buddhism transcends a moral calculus and concerns for one's own salvation. But this exegesis of "No merit" can lead to moral indifference and sloppiness in Ch'an and Zen.

Bodhidharma's "No merit" is an invitation to consider in depth the role of the moral act in Zen self-realization. "No merit" may be more

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like a koan than a direct reply to the Emperor's request for a moral measurement. Perhaps "No merit" means that the only authentic generosity is selfless giving that flows from the enlightened self. Or, perhaps Bodhidharma is refusing to serve as an external authority for the Emperor. Perhaps his "No merit" is an utterance from the dissolving ground of Buddha-mind, where the relativity of all acts is disclosed in *sunyata*. But is it clear that "No merit" reveals the futility of ego-wrapped giving or permits moral passivity?

Is it self-evident, from a Zen point of view, that a moral act or a character disposed by self-cultivation to moral action cannot point to and bring about a profound self-realization? Even granting that the *paramitas* flow as graces from Buddha-mind, is the reverse movement impossible: that the practice of the Buddhist virtues leads to and imbues one's efforts with wisdom and compassion? Can we speak of a *moral satori*, as we speak assuredly of insights and enlightenment, however partial and small, in the practice of the arts?

Imagine a Zen master of the moral arts, whose special path is the search for compassion through the practice of kind words. He teaches a discipline that begins with learning to speak kind words in all situations to different people. The discipline deepens as students train in listening and observing the recipients of kind words, and it extends to awareness of how the body and mind can be integrated into the expression of kindness. Imagine, further, that years of practice in the art of kind words lead to a kind of selfless openness to every recipient, a fine tuning to human need, an *upaya*-like selection of words, tone, volume, rhythm, hand position and body posture, and the delivery of the healing gift of kind speech. Of course, the master might heal with the gift of silence or with a "Kwatz!", but surely he would have a wide repertoire of means to the end of expressing bodhisattvic kindness in speech.

It would be difficult to claim that this "Zen of kind words" was less difficult or less worthy than other paths, such as swordsmanship. Indeed, it might have more merit. Further, it should not be difficult to conceive the possibility of *satori* openings and development in such a practice.

Bodhidharma's "No merit," therefore, can be imagined as arising not only from Buddha-mind, but also as made possible through cultivation of a language, a form of mutuality among all beings that is

sometimes expedient to use, notwithstanding communication "without benefit of words and letters." That is, "No merit" does not entail "No cultivation of moral acts."

"No merit" may also even permit us to think of a Zen "ethics of mutuality" centered in principles, guided by reason and logic, enriched by empirical investigations, and decided by communities. The Emperor has asked Bodhidharma if his generous gifts for the construction of monasteries and temples are good, of benefit to monks and Emperor, Sangha and Empire. Perhaps "No merit" is the conclusion of an investigation into the costs and benefits of all this construction activity? "No merit" may mean that the pacification of society achieved through the construction of hundreds of religious establishments is a good balanced by harm to wildlife and watersheds resulting from the deforestation accompanying the harvesting of too many trees for temples. That Bodhidharma may have used a utilitarian calculus before Bentham invented it is not what is odd about this imaginary proposal that Bodhidharma is a brave ecologist. What seems odd is Bodhidharma's calculating the balance of benefits and harms in the light of public knowledge. Is the idea of Bodhidharma calculating environmental costs of massive social-political construction projects incompatible with the revered image of Bodhidharma contemplating the wall?

A Zen "ethics of mutuality," defined as "interpersonal and social ethics conducted in the light of the Buddhist principle of compassion," and implying the use of reason and empirical investigation, is needed in the unfinished philosophical domain of Zen ethics.¹⁷ Several philosophical voices within Zen have called for a socially relevant moral expression of Zen.¹⁸ Few have seen this as requiring or legitimiz-

¹⁷ Thurman discusses principles for Buddhist socio-political ethics found in Nagarjuna and applies them eloquently, if sketchily, to some modern issues, in his "Guidelines for Buddhist Social Activism." Also see the homiletical meditations of Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* (Berkeley: North Point Press, 1984).

¹⁸ See Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, pp. 218-85. Also, Abe Masao in *Zen and Western Thought*, ed. William R. LaFleur (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p. 248, and in "The Oneness of Practice and Attainment: Implications for the Relation of Means and Ends," *Dōgen Studies*, pp. 109-11. Also, Francis Cook, "Dōgen's View of Authentic Selfhood," *Dōgen Studies*, 142-48. And, Gómez, "Expectations and Assertions," pp. 44-46.

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ing some use of the tools of social ethics, namely, psychological and social sciences, empirical methodology, reason, expertise, and so on, as skillful means to the end of a compassionating society. But, as Gómez has suggested, to release Buddhism for this and other new tasks demands at least a critique of tradition: "one must kill the Buddha, and kill the Patriarchs of the Zen tradition."¹⁹

III. Conclusions

Whatever normative principles emerge, in old and new shapes, from Zen ethical inquiry and construction, they should appear in forms that meet a double demand. On the one hand, Zen principles for the work of ethics must be carved, to some degree, to fit the language forms of ethical discourse as conducted by philosophers and others. This demand would tend to curtail the use of parable, Zen story, koan, shouts, or silence in response to questions of ethical justification, calls for clarity of definition, charges of mystic fogginess, or accusations of nonsense. These have their role, but not in most ethical discourse. Certainly, Zen ethical principles can be subjected to the same critique and standards of ethics as other teachings are: clarity, coherence, consistency, universalizability, and satisfaction?

The second demand, ironically, is not to abandon the indirection in ethical communication made possible by parable, story, and other characteristically Zen forms of expression. The search for clear, distinct, testable, and shareable principles and strategies in Zen ethics must be carried much further than it has been. Yet, the conceptual forms in which the ethical truth of Zen is focused, and the lives in which it is embodied, should be as transparent to Emptiness, *sunyata*, as possible. Emptiness, or creative openness to the heart of all beings, needs the forms of ethical principles, and ethical principles are oppressive without creative openness. The way in which Zen principles are formed, used, and lived will result in greater or lesser openness, lightness, and freedom among those teaching, learning, and hearing them.

Zen ethics should be conducted with a spirit of lightness. "Lightness" means here a deft, tentative handling of cases and prin-

¹⁹ Gómez, "Expectations and Assertions," p. 41.

principles, and an avoidance of clinging in self-defense to principles. Lightness is necessary for two related reasons. First, all thinking, including Zen-focused philosophical thinking, is subject to Zen's sense of the transcendent, namely, that truth cannot be wholly captured in the form of thought. In the face of this transcendent dimension of truth, the thinker practices humility. Second, the same sense of the transcendent evokes humor, the lightening recognition that Zen ethics is always incomplete and may be playful.

The lightness of Zen ethics will permit its forms, its principles and rules, to unfold in an open and creative fashion. By enhancing openness and creativity in the doing of ethics, it is possible also to promote the ethical capability so critical to Zen: a Zen principle of action should be *existentially appropriated* by a human being in such a way as to preserve the freedom and responsibility of the person making the appropriation, for the appropriation of a principle can be a freeing or an enslaving affair. A Zen principle appropriated to oneself in a spirit of clinging is not a Zen principle. A Christian principle appropriated to oneself in the mode of self-loosing, awakened, compassionating, creative openness is a Zen principle. It is a matter of more than content (e.g., a set of Zen ethical principles), for Zen ethics must be conducted and lived existentially, in a passionate inwardness so profound that it opens into the hearts of all being.²⁰

While lightness, humility, humor, creativity, openness, and indirection are affirmed as signature qualities of Zen ethics at its best, it is still necessary to articulate a *path* or *system* for the doing of Zen ethics. Viewed as a conceptual and normative system, Zen ethics will encompass general principles, pre-eminently wisdom and compassion. Other principles will include the *paramitas* of generosity, patience, self-mastery, and so on, as well as norms of tolerance, respect for all life forms, and non-violence.

The normative system might usefully include a matrix of heuristic

²⁰ My concern here is inspired by my reading of Kierkegaard, especially in his theory of "indirect communication"; see my "The Indirect Communication: Kierkegaard and Beckett," *Art and Religion as Communication*, eds. James Waddell and F. W. Dillistone (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974). Nolan Pliny Jacobson finds Kierkegaard in parallel with Buddhism on somewhat the same point, in his *Understanding Buddhism* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 91-98.

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rules that assist in generating creative and complete applications of general principles in relation to particular cases. Heuristic rules are not moral rules detailing behavior. Rather they are aids to thinking that assist discovery, generate complexity, and text completeness as general principles are brought into relation to actual cases and experience.

For example, in systematically thinking about the “good” of wisdom or awakening as an everyday goal, it is useful to make wisdom a richer concept by placing it along a traditional Buddhist psychological axis: that the person is “body, speech, and heart-mind.” Thus, the goal of wisdom is viewed as possessing bodily and linguistic-social forms, as well as inward references. If we add to this axis the heuristic rule that the awakening of the individual implies the simultaneous awakening of all things (following Dōgen), then a complex, creative, practical, systematic, and critical matrix emerges. In this matrix one sees that my awakening body involves the awakening of the world’s body: a few more steps leads to the conclusion that the principle of awakening entails, logically and ethically, the protection and freedom of animals, trees, and ecosystems. Buddhist thought is rich in material from which these heuristic rules will be formed.

While Zen ethics is a normative system, generating light conceptual forms for decision-making in personal, social, and planetary affairs, Zen ethics is also a path, a deeply personal and moral way of life supporting and supported by ethical reflection. Especially as the Zen encounter with world civilization extends and deepens, Zen’s practitioners and interpreters will be estimating the worthiness of the Zen life in ethical terms, and will be called upon to explain themselves. The habits they cultivate, the disciplines they develop, the witness they make, the communities they grow—all should speak clearly and helpfully of wisdom and compassion. Some of Zen’s speaking can only be done through a Zen ethic.