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Zen's Debt to Confucianism

Russell Kirkland

Professor Emeritus of Religion and Asian Studies, University of Georgia

What follows is a paper presented long ago, at the American Academy of Religion, Upper Midwest Region, 1993. Naturally, as I read it today, there are many thoughts that I could add. But on the whole, it seems to present a thought that is still sound and worth considering.

I should note that this was not an article composed for a scholarly journal: rather, it was an oral address for an audience of scholars and teachers of religious studies, none of whom were specialists in Chan or Zen studies, or even in Buddhism. This paper was composed with that audience in mind. Were this to have been a scholarly presentation to specialists, it would certainly have been framed quite differently.

Also, there are now quite a few good scholarly overviews of Zen's origins, and new critical essays on how we today (perhaps Westerners especially) should think about Zen's origins. Among those, a few warrant mention here. Several are studies on which I published book notes in *Religious Studies Review*:

Dale Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Jeffrey Broughton, *The Bodhidharma Anthology: The Earliest Records of Zen* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

Albert Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

More challenging to read, but rewarding for those with the patience to do so, is Alan Cole, *Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

And essential for distinguishing common misunderstandings from the facts of Zen's origins enlightening introduction to the study of Zen's origins is John McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation,*

and *Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

The heuristic metaphor of Chan/Zen's maternal and paternal cultural ancestry was based on a more detailed interpretive analysis of the origins of Pure Land Buddhism in China, presented at the International Association for Shin Buddhist Studies (Berkeley, 1991). A revised version of that analysis was published in this journal: "Pure Land's Multi-Linear Ancestry: A New Metaphor for Understanding the Evolution of 'Living' Religions," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, 3rd series, no. 2 (2000): 177–189.

Finally, I will note that the passage cited here from Herbert Fingarette's book on Confucius should not be construed as indicating that I judge it the best interpretation of what Confucius taught. I make certain to alert students to the fact that Fingarette was a philosophy professor who could not read Chinese, and that he based his views entirely on translations and studies in English by mid-twentieth century scholars (despite its later publication date). It is also clear that Fingarette was quite mistaken in his assertion that some of Confucius' primary teachings—such as that his society had once followed *li* (禮, "ritual activity"; morally and socially extended as: "doing what is proper") but later lost it—was no more than pious fiction. Research on bronze inscription texts has shown that, at least at times, some of the rulers of feudal statelets in the centuries before Confucius did follow a shared set of moral principles, just as our world's leaders today follow "international laws" and "diplomatic protocols"—at least at times.

In sum, what appears here is not what I would have written today, if I were to approach the matter fresh. But I believe that it remains a worthwhile presentation for general audiences, and that it still provokes thought about how religions evolve within distinct historical and cultural settings.

The tradition that we know as Zen Buddhism originated in China around the sixth century of the Common Era. Zen, of course, says otherwise: it claims that the tradition originated a thousand years earlier, in India. A story that has become very well-known in the West is the story of Zen's Indian beginnings during the days of the Buddha himself. According to that story, Zen originated in an event now known as "the Flower Sermon." One day, instead of preaching to his disciples, the Buddha merely held up a flower and said nothing. All the disciples

were puzzled, save for one, who, the story goes, intuitively grasped the Buddha's message. He then supposedly transmitted that wordless message to one of his own disciples, and it was handed down from master to disciple until it was finally carried to China by a monk named Bodhidharma.

Though this colorful story is oft-repeated, it is important to realize that as history goes, it is pure fiction. Though Zen does have certain connections to Indian Buddhism, they are of a much different nature than our usual picture would have us believe. Zen's Indian roots were not personal, in the sense that Indian Buddhists carried Zen teachings to East Asia. Rather, Zen's Indian heritage was of a completely textual nature. That is, as Buddhism evolved and grew in early medieval China, certain Buddhists gravitated toward certain Mahāyāna texts, particularly the wisdom literature known as the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*). Certain of the ideas presented in the *Prajñāpāramitā* writings and other Mahāyāna texts made sense to those Chinese Buddhists, who defined their vision of Buddhism in those terms. They eventually established their own monastic order, and taught and practiced Buddhism in a style that had no real historical precedent in Indian Buddhism. After a number of generations, however, they felt a need to legitimize their order in new terms: rather than merely present teachings grounded in concepts found in ancient Mahāyāna texts, they concocted the pious but totally fictitious story of the direct historical lineage going back to the Buddha's "Flower Sermon."¹

Since Zen originated in China rather than India, it is important for us to understand that Zen was indelibly imprinted with Chinese concepts and values. Zen was really a blend of ideas from distinct Asian civilizations, a merging of Mahāyāna Buddhism with the indigenous value-systems of East Asia. Just as Zen in Japan was affected by certain elements of the indigenous Japanese tradition known as Shintō, Zen's earlier history in China was deeply and permanently influenced by the ancient Chinese value-systems of Confucianism and Taoism.

The idea that Zen was influenced by the Chinese tradition of Taoism is not a new one. Zen practitioners have long cherished stories from the Taoist classic *Chuang-tzu*, and Zen life has long been influenced by its style: an impish humor, an irreverence toward convention and "common sense," a distrust of intellectualization, and an extraordinary teaching method. That method foregoes any form of discourse in favor of a radical and unexpected jolting of the student's thinking

process, an attempt to de-rail his ordinary state of mind to open the way for a completely different experience of reality. Zen's Taoist heritage is well known, both within the tradition and among Asian and Western scholars.² In fact, I have sometimes even suggested to my students that Zen in early medieval China can be understood as an effort to find Buddhist answers to Taoist questions.

Be that as it may, I feel that it is important not to oversimplify Zen's historical identity. Zen's origins are really fairly complex, and it is vital that our attempts to understand them are informed by a careful assessment of how Zen evolved within an East Asian cultural context. The idea that Zen was simply a form of Indian Buddhism transplanted to China actually makes little sense when one contrasts Zen thought and practice with many of the earlier forms of Buddhism. For instance, Zen seems to have little in common with the so-called "original" teachings of Buddhism—the four noble truths, the eightfold path, the concepts of impermanence (*anicca*) and "no-self" (*anatta*). The earliest form of Buddhism supposedly taught the reality of suffering and a method for ending that suffering, but all these concerns are generally unknown in the Zen literature of China and Japan. While Zen does continue to employ the idea that the goal of Buddhist practice is "enlightenment," it no longer explains the goal as nirvana, and no longer describes it as a state in which one is liberated from the cycle of life and death (*samsara*). To that extent, one could argue that Zen disregarded the entirety of Indian Buddhist soteriology. Such an argument would have its merit.

In part, the absence of ideas like nirvana in Zen can be explained very simply in terms of the fundamental worldview of the culture in which it evolved. Back in ancient India, virtually everyone—Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, etc.—had assumed that life is a cyclical process of eternal rebirths, and had assumed that life is inherently unsatisfying. The Chinese and Japanese, on the other hand, had never entertained such views at all, and were in fact generally quite loath to accept them: to the Chinese and Japanese, life is, in general terms, good, and the world in which we live is our natural and proper home, not a place of suffering—the "first noble truth" of what modern minds take to be "the Buddha's original teachings." Given these facts, it would hardly be expected that East Asian Buddhism would maintain the same conceptual framework that had characterized Indian Buddhism.

In addition, it is necessary to remember that Buddhism in India had already undergone a profound transformation by the time that it was transported to China along the Silk Road of Central Asia. The soteriological framework that we generally think of when we think of Indian Buddhism had long since been overlaid and in part superseded by new versions of the Buddhist path, which are generally known by the name Mahāyāna. Though Mahāyāna Buddhism took many forms, what most of them shared was a rejection of the earlier Buddhist soteriological scheme, in which the goal had been liberation from rebirth. Mahāyāna texts from India, in fact, often argue that once one gains experiential awareness of the ultimate truth, one realizes that all such categories as nirvana and samsara are meaningless. And in fact, it was precisely such Mahāyāna concepts that caught on in China and Japan, not only because these concepts lacked the earlier insistence upon seeing life as suffering, but also because certain indigenous Chinese philosophies presented life in somewhat similar terms.

To this point what I have said about Zen holds equally true for most forms of East Asian Buddhism. But while there are certainly many characteristics that Zen shares with its cognate branches of Buddhism in China and Japan, there are also ways in which Zen is nearly unique. And it is upon those unique characteristics of Zen that I wish to concentrate here today. In particular, I wish to focus upon Zen's peculiar soteriology, a soteriology which is often expressed as a non-soteriology. Most forms of Buddhism explain the spiritual life as the treading of a path (*mārga*)—either the “eightfold path” of early Buddhism, or the “bodhisattva path” of Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is upon this issue that Zen seems to depart most radically from most of the earlier Buddhist tradition: Zen frequently argues that there is actually no reason to try to tread a path, for the goal is not something off in the distance, but rather something that is already inherent within one's own present reality. “Enlightenment,” says Zen, is not really the attainment of a new personal reality, but merely the re-attainment of one's own original reality. And while Zen traditionally justified such ideas in terms of certain elements of Indian Mahāyāna thought, the somewhat radical thesis that I shall present here today is that those Zen ideas may well have owed something to the indigenous Chinese tradition of Confucianism.

One of the best-known modern presentations of the thought of Confucius is a little book entitled *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, by the

philosopher Herbert Fingarette.³ In attempting to convey Confucius' concept of the ultimate human ideal, Fingarette writes as follows:

The imagery of Confucius does not lead us to dwell upon the person arriving at a destined or ideal place.... Instead, the spiritually noble man arrives at a condition..., the condition of following the Way without effort and properly. He arrives at that tranquil state that comes from appreciating that it is the following of the Way itself that is of ultimate and absolute value. Thus in this respect it does not take time to "reach" the goal since one does not have to arrive at any particular point on the map: to reach the goal is simply to set oneself to treading the Path now—properly, with correct appreciation of its intrinsic and ultimate significance.⁴

While Fingarette wrote those words to try to express the Confucian way of life, they hold a certain resonance for those who study Zen Buddhism. In both its Chinese and its Japanese forms, Zen frequently insists that one must forego the concept of a spiritual goal that one must learn somehow to reach. Instead, one must simply give oneself over to the practice of Zen. The best expression of these ideas is found in the thought of the famous thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen. Dōgen deeply affected the way in which Zen was later taught and explained by arguing that the practice of Zen is not intended to lead one toward the achievement of a goal. There is, he insisted, really no "goal" to be achieved, so what is important is merely the practice itself. To be specific, the practice of Zen in Dōgen's tradition consists of nothing more than "sitting." One is not sitting in an effort to undergo some sort of profound transformation—one is just sitting. The soteriological act consists of no more than an everyday activity, but an activity that we now learn to engage in without thought or effort.

It is at this point that I wish to suggest a meaningful continuity between the ideals and practices of classical Confucianism and those of Zen Buddhism. Neither tradition has any use for theoretical abstractions. Each begins and ends in the individual's everyday life. In Confucius' teachings, the extent of the soteriological enterprise is merely to live one's life. That is, one should not, of course, merely live one's life carelessly or thoughtlessly. Rather, one re-focusses one's attention on the authenticity of one's being as it inheres in one's everyday life. One focusses on one's natural social and familial roles, and on the forms whereby one enacts those roles. It was to such roles and forms of personal interaction that Confucius referred when he exhorted his students to give themselves over to *li*. *Li*, which originally

referred specifically to religious ritual, was transformed by Confucius into the focus of the individual's spiritual life. Confucians loved ritual, even simple and everyday ritual, because the willingness to invest oneself in the ritual demonstrated one's integrity and one's commitment to the moral and spiritual life. It can be argued that the Zen master Dōgen was doing precisely the same. In his tradition, the practice of sitting is not conceived as a practice that will eventually transform one into a buddha. Rather, like earlier Zen theorists, Dōgen assumed that everyone already possesses within oneself the essence of ultimate reality—the buddha-nature. Hence, in a sense, one is already a buddha, but must simply learn once again how to act like a buddha. Similarly, in Confucian terms, one does not have to leave behind one's everyday life in order to practice *li* and thus to become a father or a ruler: the roles of father or ruler are already inherent in one's everyday life. But it is only by committing ourselves to acting like a father or a ruler that one's fatherhood or rulerhood comes to actual fruition. One must adopt proper attitudes, and must personify those attitudes by proper social and ritual action.

The Confucian ideal of consciously correct performance of ritual might even be seen as the origin of the famous Japanese practice of the "Tea Ceremony" (*cha-no-yu*): the simple ceremony of sharing tea first took shape within the setting of the Zen monastery, then took on a life of its own in Japanese society. In the ceremony, one is not sharing tea in order to accomplish some distant goal: one is simply sharing tea, in accordance with the proper ritual forms. It seems to me no coincidence that the texts of classical Confucianism had much earlier articulated an idealized "community drinking ceremony," wherein moral training is submerged in the "harmonious pleasure" of ritualized interaction.⁵

My point here is simply that when Zen practice is expressed in terms of performing an everyday human activity properly and effortlessly, it is employing terms that were inherent within the Confucian cultural tradition. The goal in both Confucianism and Zen is not to escape our ordinary life, or even to transform it, but merely to rededicate ourselves to living our everyday life in a proper manner, thereby recovering our own authentic reality.

We see here another sense in which Zen shares with Confucianism a fundamental ideal that sets it apart from many other forms of Buddhism. In most of the Buddhist tradition, the fundamental *problematik* of human life concerned the individual's sense of self. "Early

Buddhism” frequently suggested that the assumption that one possesses a real, abiding self is a delusion. Most of Buddhist practice—such as abandoning secular life in favor of a monastic existence—was designed to subvert personal attachments and a sense of individual selfhood. Zen, by contrast, sometimes seems to say things that the early Indian Buddhists might dismiss as misguided heresy. For example, the best-known of all Zen writings, the eighth-century Chinese text known as *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, describes the goal of religious life as merely recovering our own “original nature,” which is understood as inherently pure. Such ideas would seem to contradict the early Buddhist concept that there is, in reality, no abiding self. Zen theorists managed to find passages in a number of Mahāyāna scriptures that seemed to them to justify the concept of an inherently pure ground of personal reality. But we must also remember that the Zen theorists of medieval China had been educated in a culture that gave implicit primacy to Confucian ideals. And one Confucian ideal that would have been well-known to all educated people in medieval China was the idea of the original purity of human nature, as formulated by the classical Confucian thinker Mencius. As we later see in the thought of Neo-Confucians like Wang Yang-ming, one could easily make sense of the entire Confucian approach to life by expressing it as a return to the purity of one’s “original mind.”⁶

My point here is not that Zen Buddhists must have derived their understanding of the religious life directly and exclusively from Confucians like Mencius, rather than from Indian Buddhist sources. Rather, what I wish to suggest is merely that the way in which Chinese Buddhists understood and practiced the religious life may well have been subconsciously shaped by ideals and values that were endemic to their own social and cultural milieu. That is to say, they were indeed devoted Buddhists, and could justify their ideas and practices in terms of Indian Buddhist scriptures.⁷ But it seems reasonable to suggest that they tended to see value in those specific Buddhist texts that expressed the spiritual life in terms that made the most sense to them.

Clearly, the Buddhists who gave us the Zen tradition embraced certain elements of their Buddhist heritage while rejecting other elements, with which they were not so comfortable. I merely wish to suggest that it was partly the common Confucian intellectual and spiritual heritage that helped render certain Buddhist concepts and values

more comfortable to those medieval Chinese than other Buddhist concepts and values.

With these facts in mind, I present the following elements of Zen tradition as elements that are shared with the indigenous Confucian tradition of China:

1. The focus is upon “real life,” upon the individual living person, rather than upon theoretical abstractions.
2. We recover our original pure nature.
3. The human being is perfectible: no one is inherently incapable of achieving the ideal. Yet in reality, few people will actually attain that ideal, and our teachings are really for that special few.
4. No external powers are involved: we attain the ideal through our own individual efforts. (Ironically, this idea makes more sense in terms of “early Buddhism” than in terms of Mahāyāna traditions that emerged in China, like Pure Land.)
5. We re-achieve what the great exemplars of old achieved (the Confucian “sage-kings” / the Buddha).

The idea that I wish to raise for consideration today is the idea that any real human being—in any age or culture—ultimately cherishes a given religious belief for one implicit reason: because it makes sense to her or him in terms of that person’s life experience. The Buddhists of early medieval China encountered a wide variety of religious concepts in the literature that they had inherited. But some of those concepts made more sense to them than others, and became more central features of their teachings as well as of their lives. Some Chinese Buddhists—that is, the Buddhists among whom the Pure Land tradition evolved—saw the scriptural doctrine of *mappō* as being true and important because it harmonized with their own conceptions of history and their own perceptions of contemporary reality. Others—the Buddhists among whom the Zen tradition evolved—focussed instead upon such scriptural concepts as that of the buddha-nature, because it harmonized with certain traditional Confucian ideals. I believe that it is here that we may gain a heightened sensitivity to the fact that religious people sometimes find themselves at a subtle juncture, at which ideals and practices inherited from their professed religious tradition coincide with conscious or unconscious ideals inherited from a distinct cultural tradition. The

result in such cases will be concepts and practices that center around that confluence.

In conclusion, I wish to offer a metaphor. The Zen tradition, like all human individuals, had two parents. But like most human individuals, it carries only one surname. Zen goes by the surname of Buddhism, because it is a product of earlier Buddhism, and wishes to understand itself in terms of that heritage. But in certain very meaningful senses, Zen is equally the product of indigenous Chinese cultural traditions, including both Taoism and Confucianism. Thus, Zen can be said to have had two parents—Buddhism and Chinese tradition. But, like people in most cultures, it identifies itself explicitly as the offspring of only one of those parents. In China and Japan, as in our own society, no one carries the surnames of both parents. But it would be naive and unfair to ignore the contributions of the parent whose surname the child does not carry. The Zen Buddhists of medieval China wanted to be Buddhists: they expressed their ideas and practices as Buddhism, and traced their lineage quite literally to Indian Buddhist sources. But it must not be forgotten that Zen was conceived, born, and raised within the matrix of Chinese culture, and carries the unmistakable imprint of that culture.

It often seems as if Zen wishes to be seen as a timeless truth, sprung miraculously out of the depths of reality itself, like Athena, who sprung directly from the mind of Zeus. Zen does present itself as Buddhism, but often does not publicly acknowledge its roots in Prajñāpāramitā Buddhist concepts. It claims to be a “direct transmission outside the scriptures,” passing itself off as a sort of Gypsy. By the same token, Zen seldom acknowledges what we might call its maternal heritage—the rich complex of Chinese attitudes, ideals, and values that constantly shaped and leavened the Zen religious life. We might even extend the metaphor, and refer to Confucianism and Taoism as Zen’s maternal grandparents. The debt of Zen to the ancient Taoist tradition is not a great secret (though few have even considered exploring Zen’s affinities with the medieval Taoist religious tradition). But no one to my knowledge has recognized that Zen seems to owe a debt to its other maternal grandparent, Confucianism. A sensitivity to the elements that Zen shares with Confucianism would seem to be important for appreciating Zen’s real place in the history of Asian religion and culture.

NOTES

1. It is important for us not to misunderstand the nature of this story that is so well known to so many of us: it is not objective history, **nor** is it even sacred history. Unlike traditions like Christianity—which, by self-definition, stand or fall on the historicity of certain events in which the tradition is theoretically grounded—Zen has never pegged the validity of its practice upon the accuracy of its legendary origins. In fact, the story of the Buddha's "Flower Sermon" is a fiction with which centuries of Zen Buddhists were never even acquainted: far from being an ancient historical account, it was actually quite unknown in Indian Buddhism, and indeed to the founders of Zen in sixth-century China. In reality, the story first appears in a Chinese text of the eleventh century, long after most of the events had occurred that constitute the central history of Chinese Zen.
2. The readiest reference is Heinrich Dumoulin's summation of Zen, *Zen Enlightenment: Origins and Meaning* (New York: Weatherhill, 1979), 25–34.
3. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
4. Fingarette, *Confucius*, 20–21.
5. See the translation of Hsün-tzu, chap. 20, in Burton Watson, trans., *The Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 118–120.
6. A useful reference for these matters is Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition: The Thought of Mencius and Wang Yang-ming* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).
7. The Chinese *Platform Sūtra* demonstrates clearly that Hui-neng (or at least the text's author) based his concepts of Buddhism directly on the *Diamond Sūtra*, a Prajñāpāramitā text. The research of Yanagida Seizan and other scholars has shown that early Zen writers drew heavily upon such Mahāyāna scriptures as the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*, the *Śūraṅgama-sūtra*, and even the *Lotus Sūtra*.