

Introduction

i: Moral Law As the Basis for Zen Meditation Practice

It is a thesis of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* that "the moral law leads to religion" (*KP*, 130). I understand Kant to mean by this that the practice of religion is the necessary, culminating stage of a person's effort to live life in accordance with the requirements of morality. Thus the effort that human beings make to realize the requirements of morality is, when viewed from a Kantian perspective, the true foundation and *raison d'être* of religion, and it is only in relationship to this effort that religious principles and beliefs can be called valid (see, e.g., *KP*, 144, n.6).¹ It is another thesis of Kant's second *Critique* that without conscious and willing obedience to the requirements of moral law there can be no "consciousness of freedom"—this latter phrase referring to my awareness that I have, or at least seem to have, the capacity to be self-determining, to be the first cause of my own thoughts and actions (see *KP*, 30). This study is an attempt to organize an interpretation of the practice of Zen meditation around these two theses.

The purpose of the study is limited to sketching out one possible interpretive approach to the practice of Zen. Not wanting to lose sight of a possible forest by focusing too closely on individual trees, I felt that the risk of confusion would be too great were I to attempt both to present a coherent overview of a possible Kantian interpretation of Zen practice *and* to present rigorous arguments in support of all the various Kantian, Buddhist, and comparative philosophical theses upon which this interpretation is based. So, in the interest of providing the overview, I have chosen to leave open the question whether this interpretation can be defended against many specific criticisms that might be raised against it. Thus this book is intended only as a preparatory sketch, or outline, of a Kantian interpretation of Zen practice.

Since the terms 'freedom' and 'moral law' can be used in a variety of ways, the reader should know that I will be trying to use these terms in a manner consistent with the way Kant uses them in the *Critique of Practical Reason*—keeping in mind that Kant did not see himself in that work as using language in a manner that differed significantly from its popular use:

I have no fear, with respect to this treatise, of the reproach that I wish to introduce a new language, since the kind of thinking it deals with is very close to the popular way of thinking. . . . To make up new words for accepted concepts when the language does not lack expressions for them is a childish effort to distinguish one's self not by new and true thoughts but by new patches on old clothes. [KP, 10]

Like the terms 'freedom' and 'moral law,' the term 'Zen meditation'—or *zazen* as it is called in Japanese—has been used and interpreted in a variety of ways. There are, of course, many traditions and accounts of Zen meditation practice—each of which must be understood in its particular historical, cultural, and linguistic context. Thus I have tried to make my use of the terms 'Zen meditation' and *zazen* as unambiguous as possible by limiting the focus of this study to the texts of a single Zen teacher. Also, in order to avoid problems caused by my own ignorance of Asian languages—as well as those ambiguities that inevitably arise when texts are translated from one language and culture to that of another

er—I have chosen to use an account of Zen practice that was given in contemporary American English. These two considerations, plus others referred to above in the preface, have led me to select as the account of Zen meditation practice to be used in this study the lectures of Zen master Shunryu Suzuki.

A Japanese Sōtō Zen teacher who lived and taught in the United States from 1959 until his death in 1971, Shunryu Suzuki's missionary efforts attracted many followers and resulted in the establishment of the first Sōtō Zen monastery in the West, the Zen Mountain Center at Tassajara, California (ZM, 10). Suzuki lectured to his American disciples and students in their own English language, using a minimum of Buddhist philosophical language in his talks. A series of Suzuki's lectures, addressed to beginning lay students of Zen Buddhism, has been transcribed and published in the widely disseminated book (currently in its twenty-eighth paperback printing), *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. To supplement the account of Zen meditation given in these lectures, I will refer to other lectures delivered by Suzuki to his advanced students and ordained disciples at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Many of these Tassajara lectures have been published in the San Francisco Zen Center journal, *Wind Bell*, while others are available in unedited transcript form at the Zen Mountain Center library.

In applying Kant's theses concerning freedom and the moral basis of religious practice to the account of Zen practice given by Suzuki, I will be arguing that Buddhism, as Suzuki explains its practice, is rightly understood as a religious practice based upon respect for and obedience to moral law. I hope to demonstrate that respectful obedience to moral precepts is not, as one prominent Buddhist scholar suggests, merely "ancillary" to the full realization of the Buddhist teaching,² but rather ought to be considered the very essence of such teaching. Indeed, according to the interpretation of Zen practice advanced in the following chapters—an interpretation suggested by the Zen teaching story that is this book's epigraph—the practice of Zen meditation itself is ancillary (albiet essential) to a Buddhist's effort to live life according to the requirements of moral law.

This Kantian interpretation of the role of moral precepts in Zen practice is being offered in the hope it might contribute to the

discussion of a question that has arisen simultaneously with the introduction of Zen meditation practice in America: What—if any—relationship is there between sitting cross-legged in meditation and respecting and obeying moral rules? Precisely because it is natural from a non-Buddhist viewpoint to ask such a question, acknowledgment that any relationship exists between practicing Zen meditation and obeying moral rules has not come spontaneously from American students of Zen. Indeed, Alan Watts—one of the first and most influential Americans to become seriously interested in the practice of Zen—suggested in his little book *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, that the practice of Zen reveals a “comparatively limitless” sphere of existence that is “entirely beyond the categories of good and evil.”³ To dwell within this sphere, Watts said, is to view the different patterns of human conduct with the same sense of wonder and acceptance as we view different constellations of stars in the night sky:

Looking out . . . at night, we make no comparisons between right and wrong stars, nor between well and badly arranged constellations. Stars are by nature big and little, bright and dim. Yet the whole thing is a splendor and a marvel. . . . There is a standpoint from which human affairs are as much beyond right and wrong as the stars, and from which our deeds, experiences and feelings can no more be judged than the ups and downs of a range of mountains. [ibid., 5]

In his narrative history of Buddhism in America, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Rick Fields cites an incident that suggests that what might be called the American temptation to sever the connection between practicing *zazen* and respecting precepts of common morality has not been confined to Americans studying the unfamiliar ways of Eastern Buddhism, but has affected some Asian teachers of Buddhism in America as well. In his discussion of Zen Buddhist practice in the United States, Fields refers to a young Japanese Zen monk of the 1960s who, “fresh from the monastery and used to the conventional morality of Japan, had been swept off his feet by the freedom of American women, and had slept with one or more of his students.”⁴

Certainly, if the practice of Zen Buddhist meditation, or *zazen*, is viewed neither in the context of the Buddhist monastic tradition nor in the context of common morality, it is far from obvious why mastery of a particular cross-legged posture and way of breathing should be related to any particular kind of moral behavior. Thus it is understandable why even advanced students of Buddhist meditation in America, whether they be Asian or Caucasian, might adopt the view that the practice of *zazen*—like the practice, say, of swimming or archery—can be undertaken and developed independently of the practice of observing moral rules. If, however, *zazen* practice is viewed in the context of Buddhist tradition, it is clear that in addition to the study and practice of certain physical and psychological techniques such as sitting upright, following one's breath, and maintaining mental alertness, the process of becoming fully initiated into the practice of Buddhist meditation has traditionally involved an important moral dimension as well. For when one becomes an ordained member of a Zen Buddhist community, the traditional ordination ceremony culminates in the initiate's formal acceptance of a body of moral guidelines referred to as the "Bodhisattva precepts."⁵ In reference to these precepts, Eihei Dōgen, the thirteenth-century Zen master whom Suzuki, in the preface to *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, calls "the founder of our school" (ZM, 22), states categorically:

It may be said that it is because monks strictly observe the precepts that they are the paragons of the three worlds. Therefore if you wish to do *zazen* and pursue Buddhism, you should first observe the precepts. How can you expect to become a Buddha or patriarch if you do not guard against faults and prevent yourself from doing wrong? . . . The words "receive the precepts first of all" already truly express the highest supreme Law.⁶

And of the *Jukai* ceremony, in which Zen Buddhist initiates formally vow to faithfully observe the Bodhisattva precepts for the entire course of their life, the contemporary British-American Zen Master, Jiyu Kennett, has written:

This is the most important set of ceremonies in the life of a [Zen Buddhist] layman, and no person may become a [monastic] trainee unless he has undergone the week of training that these ceremonies occupy, either before his ordination or within a year of entering a training temple.⁷

The *Jukai* ceremony, as described by Kennett, includes both the taking of general vows to refrain from evil and to do good for others, and the formal acceptance of ten more specific precepts, each offering guidance in a different area of conduct.⁸ Thus the practice of *zazen*, when viewed in the context of Buddhist tradition, is a practice based virtually from the beginning on vows to conscientiously observe both general and specific precepts of morality. And, given that the third of the ten specific precepts teaches restraint or detachment in respect to the promptings of sexual desire,⁹ any Zen teacher “swept off his feet” by sexual desire for one or more of his students can hardly be said—from the viewpoint of such traditional accounts of Zen practice—to have mastered or even rightly understood a meditation discipline whose guiding precepts specifically entail the practice of detachment from such desire.

For Americans who question whether the practice of Zen meditation is meaningfully related to the observance of moral precepts, Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* provides strong support for the traditional Buddhist view. For Kant’s thesis that the requirements of moral law both “lead to” and provide the true foundation for religious practice seems close in spirit to Dōgen’s statement, quoted above, that “the words ‘receive the precepts first of all’ already truly express the highest supreme [religious] Law.” As Dōgen, in this same passage, goes on to say:

People who have become Buddhas and patriarchs have done so through having never failed to receive and observe this highest supreme Law. The Buddhas and patriarchs who correctly transmitted the highest supreme Law have unfailingly received and observed the precepts, for otherwise, it would have been impossible for them to become Buddhas or patriarchs. They received the precepts either directly from the

Buddha himself or from one of his disciples. In either case they have all inherited the essence of the Way.¹⁰

For Dōgen, who founded the school of Zen Buddhism to which Shunryu Suzuki belongs, to receive and observe moral precepts is to inherit and practice “the essence of the Way” of Zen. Thus it may not seem too far out of the line of Buddhist tradition to propose in this essay the following outline of a Kantian interpretation of Zen practice:

- (K0) *A true religious practice in the Kantian sense is one based upon the requirements of moral law, as Kant understands these requirements.*
[proposed definition]
- (K1) *A religious practice based upon the requirements of moral law is one completely subordinated to those requirements.*
[suggested interpretation of K0]
- (K2) *A religious practice completely subordinated to the requirements of moral law is one performed solely as a means to the end of realizing those requirements.*
[suggested interpretation of K1]
- (K3) *A religious practice performed solely as a means to the end of realizing the requirements of moral law is “a true religious practice in the Kantian sense.”*
[K0-K2]
- (K4) *The practice of zazen, when correctly performed in accordance with Shunryu Suzuki’s account of this practice, is performed solely as a means to the end of realizing the requirements of moral law, as Kant understands these requirements.*
[thesis, the truth of which this study attempts to demonstrate]
- (K5) *The practice of zazen, when performed in accordance with Shunryu Suzuki’s account of this practice, is a true religious practice in the Kantian sense.*
[K0-K4]

It is my intent in this study to demonstrate the truth of thesis K4 by presenting and defending an interpretation of Shunryu Suzuki's account of *zazen* in which its practice is understood exclusively as a means to the end of fulfilling the requirements of moral law, and thus as "a true religious practice in the Kantian sense."

ii: Structure of the Study

In his prologue to *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Suzuki makes a statement that partially supports thesis K4, above:

If we lose our original self-sufficient mind, we will lose all precepts. When your mind becomes demanding, when you long for something, you will end up violating your own precepts: not to tell lies, not to steal, not to kill, not to be immoral, and so forth. If you keep your original mind, the precepts will keep themselves. [ZM, 22]

The purpose of Zen practice, Suzuki says, is always to keep our "original mind"—our "beginner's mind" (ZM, 21). This mind is "the secret of Zen practice" (ZM, 22). And because he believes that "if we lose our original self-sufficient mind, we will lose all precepts," Suzuki clearly views the practice of *zazen*—the practice, that is, of keeping our "original mind"—as a necessary means for realizing the requirements of moral precepts. However, it would not be a sufficient demonstration of the truth of thesis K4 simply to present evidence that Suzuki views the practice of *zazen* as a necessary means to the end of realizing the requirements of moral law. For such a view is by no means identical to the view that *zazen*, as "a true religious practice in the Kantian sense," is practiced correctly only when it is performed *solely* as a means to the end of realizing the requirements of moral law. In refutation of this latter view, it is conceivable that Suzuki might say: "Yes, it is true that *zazen* practice is necessary for realization of the requirements of our moral precepts, but it is not *solely* in order to realize these requirements that we practice *zazen*."

Thus it will be necessary to construct two main arguments in order to fully support the interpretation of Suzuki's account of Zen

practice expressed by thesis K4. Certainly, support must be found in Suzuki for the claim that my practice of *zazen* is a necessary means for keeping those moral precepts that govern my life as a Buddhist, and thus truly is “a means to the end of realizing the requirements of moral law.” But in addition, evidence must be found in Suzuki’s texts to support the claim that in order to practice *zazen* correctly, I should make realization of the requirements of moral precepts my sole incentive in performing that practice.

In summation then, the Kantian interpretation of Suzuki’s account of *zazen* practice that is advanced in this study is expressed by thesis K4:

K4 *The practice of zazen, when correctly performed in accordance with Shunryu Suzuki’s account of this practice, is performed solely as a means to the end of realizing the requirements of moral law, as Kant understands these requirements.*

And the two theses that, if shown to be true, will support K4 are expressed as follows:

Z1 *The practice of zazen, according to Suzuki, is a necessary means to the end of realizing the requirements of moral law, as Kant understands these requirements.*

Z2 *In order to practice zazen correctly, according to Suzuki, my sole intention in performing that practice should be that of realizing the requirements of moral law, as Kant understands these requirements.*

Chapters 3 and 4 attempt to show that theses Z1 and Z2 are plausible interpretations of Suzuki’s account of *zazen* practice. But first, in preparation for the arguments in these later chapters, an attempt is made in chapter 2 to develop a Kantian interpretation of the central term of theses Z1 and Z2—the term *zazen* itself.