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Jody Condit Fagan

James Madison University, faganjc@jmu.edu

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Reflections on “To study the self is to forget the self’: Zen lessons on ego and leadership in higher education”

By Jody Condit Fagan, PhD

January 31, 2021

Stuart Lachs kindly wrote a response to my conference paper, “To study the self is to forget the self’: Zen lessons on ego and leadership in higher education” (Fagan, 2020), which led to a highly fruitful correspondence and an expansion on my thinking related to Zen, ego, and Zen practice in America today. Conversations with fellow practitioners and follow-up readings have also continued to shape my thinking.

Zen practitioners may try to see the world as it really is, but the truth is we all have biases. I became more conscious of one of my biases as a result of dialogue with Stuart and other friends. I often see organizations as a life form. Has an organization buddha-nature? I am not sure, but I often find that conception useful. As organizations grow larger and more powerful, they may seem more menacing as the entity begins to operate with more power, and with increasingly different paradigms from those used by small human groups (Schumacher, 1973). But I do not believe organizations are intrinsically benevolent or malevolent, any more than we individuals are. Furthermore, studying leadership has given me more examples of self-sacrificial, inspirational, and honorable leaders than it has negative examples such as we might see highlighted in popular media. And so I have a bias, one that feels like hope, toward leaders and toward organizations as potentially positive forces for change.

I think Stuart perceived this bias coming through in my paper’s discussion and conclusions. His own perspective is that groups grow because the leader wants them to and knows how to go about executing growth. Leaders may not see the problems that growth brings

to themselves, or they may think they can handle those problems. One problem is the leaders' enjoyment of their position, or at least, belief in the importance of their position and of others' dependence on them. The group may become an extension of themselves, meaning the group's mistakes and shortcomings reflect poorly on the leader and question the centrality or elevation of their position. Furthermore, Tibetan and Zen groups in particular have demonstrated chronic problems arising from their hierarchical structure and history.

Even though I mention some limitations and concerns in the literature review, my paper did not, perhaps, sufficiently critique organized American Zen,¹ especially considering some chronic problems with its leadership. My four interviewees' views on and practice of leadership were inspiring. But, perhaps they should be interpreted as how a Zen-informed leadership could or should be. They are certainly not numerous enough to represent the state of leadership in American Zen, and as Stuart has noted in his essays and as all my interviewees referred to, there are an unfortunate number of leadership failures in American Zen. And so, the question should be asked: Why didn't Zen teachings and Zen practice protect leaders and followers from the abuses suffered in many other religions and contexts? How can a Zen-informed leadership guard against such abuses?

Some problems with American Zen forms and structures

Two of the problems Stuart identifies with American Zen forms are attributing "mostly undeserved authority for the Master/roshi," and idealism concerning the hierarchical structures of Zen (Lachs, 1999). Despite some of the most popular American Zen books urging non-

¹ Throughout this paper, my focus on American Zen is not meant to imply a discrete group, but rather, acknowledge that my personal experience is largely limited to American culture, including Zen practice.

attachment to teachers (Suzuki, 2011), Zen centers in America have a troubled history linked to inordinate veneration of the “Zen master” (Lachs, 1999), even in the center Suzuki himself founded (Downing, 2002; Lachs, 2002). In the worst cases this unquestioning veneration for teachers led to decades of power abuse and sexual misconduct (Butler, 1990; Varvaloucase, 2017; Dharma Treasure Board of Directors, 2019; Lachs, 2019).

The structural form of Zen masters’ enlightenment, which is certified through lineages and hierarchical dharma transmission (e.g., <http://www.hazymoon.com/teachers/>), coupled with the masters’ supposed ability to judge others’ enlightenment by progress through koan study sets up an inherently hierarchical power relationship. Stuart commented that Dōgen’s line, “No trace of realization remains and this no trace continues endlessly” has proven to play into romantic notions people have—propagated by Zen literature—about the Zen master’s attainment of the Dharma becoming beyond understanding. This sets up the Zen master to play a role of a fully enlightened being because this idea is reinforced by tradition and follower expectations, whether or not the Zen master’s current state of enlightenment is authentic. This dynamic, suggests Stuart, undermines the master’s role even as it misleads followers: “The titles and the mythology around them and the lack of clear meaning, along with the general Zen mythology, get people to view the leader as something he/she is not and gets the leader to believe it him/her self. Dharma transmission is usually a big public ceremony that puts pressure on the leader to act a certain way. One may say the leader becomes a role player and in so doing becomes less authentic—not more.”

Discussions with Stuart also raised my awareness of how American Zen has embedded cultural forms from Japanese culture that may or may not have anything to do with authentic Zen practice—much in the same way that Christianity has manifested differently in different cultures

(Johnson, Hill, & Cohen, 2011, p. 139). In America, the flowering of Zen began in large part due to the writings of D. T. Suzuki, and took on a Japanese bent with little understanding of Korean Seon and Chan Buddhism (Joo, p. 18). Dōgen scholar Kim (2006) notes that Suzuki presented Zen as a “privileged perspective which transcends all religions and cultures” and “affirming the uniqueness and supremacy of Japanese culture” (p. 37).

The koans central to American Zen practice are often English translations of modern Japanese translations of 13th century Japanese writings based on Chinese teachings, which employ Chinese metaphors and references to Chinese literature. Batchelor (1990) writes, “Unfortunately, these stylistic and cultural differences have tended to conceal the universal applicability of the Zen approach to truth” (p. 55). Is the mysterious feel and challenge of these koans due to important esoteric qualities of Zen itself? Or, are they simply hard to understand without a scholar’s knowledge of Japanese and Chinese customs, language and literature of the koan’s time?

For example, one famous koan reads: A monk asked Dongshan, “What is ‘Buddha’?” Dongshan replied, “Three pounds of hemp.”² Perhaps this seemingly nonsensical answer is designed to jar the student from analytical thinking and into a different realm. A Tang dynasty scholar, however, knows three pounds of hemp was “the standard allotment of cloth for a set of monk’s robes,” indicating ‘A monk’s robes is all it takes’—a person’s sincere intention may be all that’s necessary to enter enlightenment (McRae, 2013, p. 76). While fully apprehending the meaning of how a beginning monk can also be a Buddha may take Zen practice, the “three pounds of hemp” wasn’t likely meant to be the mysterious part. Some recent Zen teachers have emphasized a koan practice based more on individual exploration than on masters’ certification

² *Emerald Cliff Record*, as cited in McRae (2003).

of answers (Pacific Zen Center, 2021; Upaya Zen Center, 2021), but the tradition of masters' certification exists in others.³

The web sites of several large Zen centers show some continuance of these hierarchical forms as well as some evidence for their unravelling, hopefully indicating some awareness of how they can become traps.

- The [San Francisco Zen Center Lineage page](#) explains how “lineage indicates that the essence of practice is not just carried in the written teachings, but has been transmitted "warm hand to warm hand" in an unbroken succession of teachers to students.” Each teacher’s lineage and dharma transmission details are highlighted.
- The [North Carolina Zen Center’s Leadership page](#) mentions the teacher’s ordination and Dharma Transmission, but it is separate from their [lineage page](#).
- On Rochester Zen Center’s web site, teacher Bodhin Kjolhede (who declined dharma transmission for himself) provides an [extensive explanation](#) of why their founder never received full Dharma transmission, and a forthright review of myths about lineage and transmission. He notes, “in looking for criteria of legitimacy in American Zen, like it or not we find ourselves in a state of transition—even chaos,” and concludes, “the depth of enlightenment of a teacher ... as less important than the chemistry between the teacher and the student,” and points to the ultimately introspective nature of practice.

³ I am in no way suggesting any Zen Center is doing things “right” or “wrong,” only that some have more traditional views of koan practice involving the teacher’s endorsement (which seems risky), and some have taken a more flexible approach de-centering the teacher’s role (which seems less risky, but may come with its own disadvantages).

All the Centers listed also have boards of directors; an interesting future research project could investigate the interrelationship of the teachers and boards of American Zen centers, and the relative accountability that can be provided.

If some Zen forms risk inherent problems when it comes to ego and leadership, what alternatives exist?

Zen, Ego, and Hwadu (Hua Tou) practice

Stuart pointed out to me how contemporary Korean meditation practice features Hwadu or Hua Tou (Lachs, 2012; Joo, n.d.), as made widely known by the Chinese master Ta-hui (1089-1163). Hua Tou is very different from the mainstream American Zen practice, for example, that described by Shunryu Suzuki in the bestseller, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.⁴ Suzuki emphasized “just sitting,” but Lachs notes the admonition to “just sit” may be “one more way in which trust in one's discriminating faculties or any other Buddhist practice are cut off” (2002, p. 11), placing students “in the position of viewing the Zen world only through its own lens” (Lachs, 1999, p. 28).

Ta-hui promoted the “three greats” as the basis of his form of meditation: great determination, great energy, and most importantly, great doubt. By centering self-doubt in an active way (as opposed to emptiness) (Child, 2015), and through the focus on a question pointing to that doubt (as opposed to focusing on koans that only the Zen master can authenticate), the centrality and authority of the Zen master may be reduced. Additionally, the opportunity arises to constantly challenge one's own supposed attainments.

⁴ Currently ranked #6,548 on Amazon.com and found in over 1,300 American libraries (Worldcat.org).

The trap of identifying with the Buddha in an egotistical way may be reduced if one maintains Great Doubt about achieving insight into such concepts as nonduality, keeping in mind the dualities of conventional reality are still present. Kim (2006) notes the experience of nonduality is “inevitably enmeshed with religious and institutional factors, as well as historical and social conditions” (p. 36). While Zen practitioners tend to consider duality as intrinsically bad, nonduality is “necessarily mediated by duality, in the “mystery and paradox of clarity and ambiguity, of emptiness and dis-sightedness, and of delusion and enlightenment” (p. 36).

Similarly, a Zen practice centered on achieving a state of emptiness may reduce the practitioner’s willingness to think critically, even to endorse the extreme idea that anything one does from a place of emptiness is ‘good’ (Taft, 2018, 59:30). Stuart wrote, “Looking at past events in modern Zen history seems to imply that realizing emptiness, which from some Zen views, is when practice begins, is when things can get difficult.” Kim (2006) agrees, writing that this devalues critical thinking in the ethical, political, and social spheres. “As a result, Zen has more often than not been vulnerable to a culture religion or a situation ethic by all too facilely and uncritically acceding to power and the status quo,” used to support anarchism, fascism, “or any political or economic dogmatism” (p. 39). Constantly questioning one’s experience brings critical thinking back into the meditative moment.

Another important aspect of Korean meditation is that of *gradual* enlightenment. Joo (n.d.) writes that contemporary Seon masters teach that enlightenment is not “an instant intuitive jump to transcendental wisdom, but a step-by-step gradual process of maturation that requires both cognitive and somatic transformation” (p. 19). Contrast this with the idea of enlightenment

as a transformative, permanent attainment, a concept that has been used to defend Zen masters with histories of chronic abuses.⁵

Paths forward

As a new practitioner and beginning scholar I am not an authority on any form of Zen. But I have begun to see how authentic Zen practice takes different forms and is guided through different teaching structures, and how these forms and structures can affect spiritual and earthly outcomes. These outcomes may be healthy or unhealthy, and practitioners and teachers would do well to ensure critical thinking and historical study are part of their journeys.

At the end of my conference paper, I listed several actions I planned to take to further my practice of Zen and leadership. Based on the continued dialogue, and with a feeling of marked humility, I offer some suggestions for American Zen practitioners, groups, and their leaders, myself included. I feel certain that some individuals and centers are already pursuing these paths with fervency.

1. Study the history of Zen and Buddhism—preferably from a disinterested observer’s perspective—to understand how these have been used, like other religions and practices, to justify acts of war and sociopolitical maneuverings. Be forthright about the patterns of the past.

⁵ “At one center in this country, the teacher urged his disciples, “Just get Dharma transmission; once you get that, no one will be able to touch you.” This worship of formalized legitimacy invites abuses; once a teacher believes that “no one can touch you,” he has all but granted himself moral license – with consequences that have proven damaging to Zen and Buddhism in general” (Kjølhed, 1995).

2. Become familiar with American Zen history and cultural development. Consider what, why, and how distinctive characteristics of American Zen have developed, and think critically about how these affect practice. Take responsibility for further development.
3. Study and take action to correct ways in which American Zen participates in the systemic racism inherent in the United States's sociopolitical systems (Dharma.org, 2000; SZBA, 2018; SZBA, 2020).
4. Especially for those situated in or considering leadership roles, studying leadership dynamics. While I went into this research thinking Zen was a wellspring of wisdom to inform contemporary leadership practice, I am now seeing how secular studies of leadership have much to offer Zen! In the same way that Buddhism embraces neuroscience and quantum physics, I can envision it exploring and integrating leadership and organizational behavior theories and research.
5. For practitioners, considering how one's practice may affect the follower/leader dynamic (Crossman & Crossman, 2011), including balance between a mind of emptiness and a mind of critical thinking, and an awareness of how one's identity relates to identification with one's Zen group or Zen teacher.

Conclusion

I remain convinced that Buddhist thinking and Zen practice have much to offer the field of leadership studies, including approaches to non-dual thinking and critical examination of one's ego. Surprisingly, however, I have yet to see a systematic examination of this intersection beyond an individual's case study or the popular press (e.g. Lesser, 2019), valuable though those may be. Based on the responses to my paper, I am becoming increasingly convinced that in

return, leadership studies' rich empirical research into the behavior of groups has much to offer Zen groups, leaders, and followers.

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