IS AN ETHICAL THEORY POSSIBLE WITHIN ZEN BUDDHISM?

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This paper will attempt to examine the question of whether Zen Buddhism is such that an ethical theory cannot, in principle, form a part of its structure. This is clearly a different question from that of whether Zen, in matter of fact, does have an ethical theory. Many religions do not have an ethical component even though there is nothing in their theoretical structure that forbids ethics, and a religion might claim to have an ethical position even though such would not be consistent with other parts of its doctrine.

In order to decide whether Zen could have an ethical aspect, we must first determine what is meant by "ethical theory" (or "ethics"). This is a notoriously difficult undertaking and this paper will certainly not attempt to develop a new definition of the term. Rather, I will make use of generally accepted definitions and attempt to find the simplest characteristic that something must have in order to be an ethic.

Ethics has been variously described as: the study of good and evil,[1] guidance about what to do and seek and how to treat others,[2] a systematic account of moral knowledge,[3] and prescriptive discourse.[4] All of these definitions seem to have in common the notion of one action being morally required over another. Even a situational or subjectivist ethic nevertheless assumes that, given a particular situation or person, one choice of action is preferred to another. Making a discrimination between alternatives based on some moral criteria seems to be the minimal quality something must have in order to be an ethic.

It is precisely this discrimination that Zen cannot make. One of the primary dictums of Zen is not to discriminate. This principle of nondiscrimination is applied to virtually all matters other than those of immediate experience. Thus, only preference is not affected by this doctrine. Ethical judgments are certainly included.

For example, in the *Mumonkan*, the koan "Think Neither Good nor Evil,"[5] explicitly tells the student not to consider good or evil. Likewise, in Shibayama's commentary on the koan

"Nansen Kills a Cat,"[6] the unethical action of Nansen of killing a cat for no particular reason at all is ignored and ethics is termed a cause of "suffering and restraints," just those things that Buddhism in general seeks to avoid. Further, Huang Po advises the student to "rise beyond the dualism of good and evil."[7] Further, in the answer to the koan "Discuss Buddhist Law" in the *Gendai Sojizen Hyoron* is the phrase, "I cut out all the rights and wrongs of the human world."[8]

The examples of exhortations not to discriminate in contexts in which ethical choices are involved could be multiplied, but this is such a primary position of Zen that it hardly seems necessary to belabor the point. Zen has as a major doctrine the principle of nondiscrimination, and this principle is meant to include the discrimination inherent in ethical choices.

Three arguments might be presented to counter this position. The first, while the most commonly offered in defense of an ethic in Zen,[9] is also the most easily countered. It is asserted that, as compassion for all sentient beings is a major doctrine of Buddhism in general, it must be a doctrine of Zen. This idea leads to an ethical principle as one of its major doctrines.

In opposition to this, we first note that Zen is explicitly nonmetaphysical and feels no compulsion to adhere to principles merely because they are found in other Buddhist sects. Zen has, indeed, explicitly rejected much of the complex metaphysical theory of Buddhism.[10] Furthermore, while it is true that a sort of lipservice is payed to compassion by Zen practitioners, the position occupied by compassion in Zen has a more experiential than ethical character. Thus, Seung Sahn in advising his students to practice compassion refers not to ethical considerations but to the experiences that the students will have.[11] The benefit to the recipient seems quite secondary. The same view is expressed by Ikkyu in the *Bukkigun*.[12] Unless one adopts an extreme egoism, this is not the sort of justification that we look for in an ethical position.

A second argument in favor of an ethical postion in Zen is countered by much the same sort of observation. The practice of Zen, especially in Japan, has been marked by a considerable amount of what appears to the outsider to be discrimination.

There is thus one and only one correct way to sit in zazen, one and only one way to breathe, etc. Only certain forms of architecture, decoration, dress, etc., are deemed appropriate for the practice of Zen. While these are not matters of ethics, they are clearly cases where one option is preferred over another based on some apparently external, universal criteria. It might be argued that if such aesthetic judgments are made as a part of Zen, then ethical judgments may well be lurking in many of the prescribed behaviors.

However, this argument fails when the justification for such practices is examined. The reason given is always that such practices "lead to enlightenment."[13] Thus, one sits in a particular posture not for reasons of aesthetics, but merely because it is prudent. To do so will further the individual's move toward satori. We thus find again that these matters are not governed by value judgments, but pragmatically by principles of utility.

This brings us to the strongest objection that can be made to the notion that Zen is inherently unethical. Like the previous argument, it attacks not only Zen's ethical character but the entire nonmetaphysical bent of Zen doctrine. If Zen does not discriminate or make value judgments, how can it value satori over non-satori? Why would a consistent student practice zazen if, in principle, any behavior would be of equal value? Given this logical recursion, Zen appears to be unable to maintain its nonmetaphysical stance and thus could have an ethical position.

The classical answer to this tends to impress most Western philosophers as a logical slight-of-hand trick. The answer given is: one does not value satori over non-satori, and indeed there is no difference between the two, but one must experience satori to understand this.[14]

This can seem to be a clear "cop-out" if the essentially experiential nature of Zen is not appreciated. The experience of satori is said to be no different from "ordinary-mind," that is, not different from non-satori, regardless of its logical nature. One does not seek satori or compare it to non-satori. One undertakes certain practices as present experiences and may thereby experience satori. However, no valuing beyond immediate preference is occurring.

Zen may be philosophically peculiar, but it is not internally inconsistent. However, this denial of metaphysical principles and refusal to discriminate beyond the experience of the present moment produces a system which cannot admit any universal value system such as Western ethics.

NOTES

[1]Plato, *Republic*, trans. and ed. F. M. Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941); Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. M. McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

[2]P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (London: Blackwell, 1954).

[3]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. and trans. L. W. Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

[4]R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952).

[5]Zenkei Shibayama, "Think Neither Good nor Evil," in *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 12.

[6]"Nansen Kills a Cat," in Shibayama, 110.

[7]Huang Po, *Huang Po Ch'uan Hsin Fa Yao*, translated as *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po on the Transmission of the Mind*, trans. John Blofeld (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 86.

[8]"Discuss Buddhist Law," in *Gendai Sojizen Hyoron*, translated as *The Sound of One Hand*, trans. Yoel Hoffman (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 148.

[9]These arguments were presented in the discussion period of the 1987 meeting of the Western Division of the American Schools of Oriental Research.

[10]Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1972), 361.

[11]Seung Sahn, *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 5-6.

[12]Ikkyu, *Bukkigun in Zen-Man Ikkyu*, trans. J. H. Sanford (Boston: Scholars Press, 1981), 236-37.

[13]Hakuin, "Letter to a Retainer of Lord Nabeshima," in *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, ed. W. T. de Bary (New York: Random House, 1972), 388-93.

[14]Ch'en, 358; and *Shonan Kattoroku*, translated as *The Warrior Koans: Early Zen in Japan*, trans. Trevor Leggett (London: Arkana, 1985), 58-61, 102-3.