The Role of History in Chan/Zen Enlightenment

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In his *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, Dale Wright addresses the issue of romanticism in the course of Zen's transmission to the West during the twentieth century, with a focus on the figure of the ninth-century Chinese Buddhist master, Huangbo (Huang Po) 黃檗, and his Western interlocutor John Blofeld. One of the romantic strands of the Western reception of Zen Buddhism is the literal interpretation of Zen's self-proclaimed ahistorical nature of enlightenment, transmitted from mind to mind through the patriarchs down to the modern time. This is clear in D.T. Suzuki's and John Blofeld's interpretations of Zen, especially the former, who was instrumental in the early stage of Zen's transmission to the West. However, such an ahistorical interpretation has been challenged since the early twentieth century, manifestly displayed in the famous debate between HU Shi (HU Shih) 胡適 and Suzuki, with Hu advocating that a proper appreciation of Chan requires a historical, cultural, and political understanding of the environment within which Chan emerged and of the prevailing intellectual movement of which Chan was an integral part. In many ways, this debate set the parameters for the ensuing scholarship on Zen. Recent discourse on Zen has been increasingly tilting toward the direction pioneered by Hu.

Wright's book is a distinctly philosophical approach to Zen set against such a background. In my judgment, Wright's book has gone beyond the parameters set by the debate between Hu and Suzuki in his treatment of history in Zen enlightenment, even though Wright does not address that debate directly in the book. We will take a look at how Wright has accomplished such a task. I will argue that Wright accomplishes this by making history *constitutive*, instead of simply interpretative, of Zen enlightenment. However, we will also see that Wright's hermeneutic approach has an inherent tendency to privilege theory over practice.

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I. HU Shi vs. Suzuki: Reductionism vs. Essentialism

The well-known debate between Hu and Suzuki was carried out in the April 1953 issue of *Philosophy East and West.* It began with Hu's article, "Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in China: Its History and Method," followed by Suzuki's "Zen: A Reply to Hu Shih." The central issue of the debate concerned two approaches to Zen: historicist reductionism and ahistorical essentialism in approaching Zen. At the outset, Hu was very clear about his target, namely Suzuki's interpretation of Chan/Zen as illogical, irrational, and beyond intellectual understanding (Hu: 3). According to Hu,

> The Ch'an (Zen) movement is an integral part of the history of Chinese Buddhism, and the history of Chinese Buddhism is an integral part of the general history of Chinese thought. Ch'an can be properly understood only in its historical setting just as any other Chinese philosophical school must be studied and understood in its historical setting. (Hu: 3)

Hu charges that Suzuki's interpretation of Zen deliberately ignores the historical approach and as such it "can never understand the Zen movement or the teaching of the great Zen masters" (Hu: 4). To make his point, Hu takes two steps: first, he seeks to give a new historical account of the Chan movement; second, he tries to offer a rational explanation of the seemingly irrational methods Chan masters used by situating such methods within the Chan history he just explained. Let us look at both more closely in the following.

First, by relying on new materials discovered in Dunhuang 敦煌, Hu effectively rewrites the history of Chan and dramatically alters the roles played by several core figures in Chan history. According to the traditional account, Hongren (Hung Jen) 弘忍, the Fifth Patriarch, bypassed his most senior student Shenxiu (Shen Hsiu) 神秀 due to the deficiency in the latter's understanding of enlightenment, handed the robe of patriarchy to Huineng 慧能, and made him the Sixth Patriarch of Chan. However, in Hu's reconstruction of Chan history, it is Shenxiu, not Huineng, who inherited the Chan patriarchy and was widely acknowledged and respected as representing the orthodoxy of Chan during his lifetime and immediately after. The situation soon changed dramatically. A charismatic disciple of Huineng, Shenhui 神會, openly challenged such an orthodoxy and single-handedly overthrew it:

> Shenhui was a political genius who understood the signs of the time and knew what to attack and how to do it. So he became the warrior and the statesman of the new movement and fired the first shot of the revolution. His long life, his great eloquence, and, above all, his courage and shrewdness carried the day, and a powerful orthodoxy was crushed. (Hu: 13)

There were two reasons for Shenhui's success in overthrowing the orthodoxy Shenxiu represented. First, his effort was aided by several historical events, including the AN Lushan 安祿山 rebellion and the need of the new emperor's government to raise money for the war. Shenhui's extraordinary skill in preaching and fund-raising gave him the critical leverage to gain the crucial imperial patronage. As a result, Shenhui was declared the Seventh

Patriarch and naturally Huineng was now recognized as the Sixth Patriarch (Hu: 11). "In the course of a hundred years, practically all Ch'an schools came to be spiritually and genealogically descended from, or related to, Huineng, 'the Sixth Patriarch of the True School of Ch'an'" (Hu: 12). Secondly, within Buddhism itself, there was a reformation or revolution going on which rebelled against established Buddhist practices such as scriptural studies, scholasticism, and so forth. At the time Chinese Buddhism itself was becoming increasingly iconoclastic or even anti-Buddhistic (see Hu: 16); Shenhui's challenge to orthodoxy fit that trend in Chinese Buddhism.

In fact, the iconoclastic tendency would serve Chan well in the Great Persecution of Buddhism ordered by Emperor Wuzong 武宗 from 845 to 846 which dealt a devastating blow to the development of Buddhism in China. Due to its iconoclasm, Chan weathered the persecution better than any other Buddhist sects.

> The persecution, disastrous and barbaric as it was, probably had the effect of enhancing the prestige of the Ch'an monks, who never had to rely upon the great wealth or the architectural splendor and extravagance of the great temples and monasteries. Indeed, they did not have to rely even upon the scriptures. And at least some of them had been theoretically or even overtly iconoclastic. (Hu: 18)

The persecution intensified the early iconoclastic tendency of Chan and the post-persecution Chan became more iconoclastic. This explains many Chan masters' often whimsical behaviors.

By rewriting the history of Chan and situating it within the general political and intellectual environment of China at the time, Hu is now in a position to tackle the puzzling or at times even crazy methods used by Chan masters to educate their disciples. On the development of Chan method, Hu observes,

> this methodology with all its mad techniques is not so illogical and irrational as it has often been described. A careful and sympathetic examination of the comparatively authentic records of the Ch'an schools and of the testimony of contemporary witnesses and critics has convinced me that beneath all the apparent madness and confusion there is a conscious and rational method which may be described as a method of education by the hard way, by letting the individual find out things through his own effort and through his own ever-widening life-experience. (Hu: 21)

Hu discusses three stages in Chan's pedagogical method: never tell too plainly (*bu shuo po* 不說破), eccentric methods of answering questions (*gong'an* 公案), and traveling on foot (*xingjiao* 行腳). The first points to the fact that Chan masters never made things too easy for the disciples; the second, known as *gong'an* (Jp.: *koan*), refers to the masters' puzzling answers to their disciples' questions in order to push the latter further in their own search for enlightenment; the third is the phase when disciples were sent out to study with different teachers by traveling from mountain to mountain, one school to another, so that they would learn everything firsthand in their own experience of life and teaching (Hu: 21-22). Therefore, Hu concludes that when situated and contextualized within its historical and intellectual

environment, Chan/Zen makes perfect sense.

It is obvious that for Hu history holds the key to understanding Chan. Such a historicist approach to Chan may appear to be reductionist in that Hu regards Chan as a purely historical phenomenon, hence reducing it to its historical context. This historicist/reductionist interpretation of Chan is resolutely rejected by Suzuki in his reply to Hu. Suzuki's refutation of Hu's argument can be summed up by Suzuki's own words at the beginning of his reply: "he [Hu] may know a great deal about history but nothing about the actor behind it" (Suzuki: 25). According to Suzuki, in order to understand Zen, one must "first attain what I call *prajñā*-intuition and then proceed to the study of all its objectified expressions" (Suzuki: 26). Put differently, a proper understanding of Zen should be, first and foremost, an understanding of "Zen in itself" (Suzuki: 26), namely the *prajñā*-intuition. He charges that

> Hu Shih, as a historian, knows Zen in its historical setting, but not Zen in itself. It is likely that he does not recognize that Zen has its own life independent of history. After he has exhausted Zen in its historical setting, he is not at all aware of the fact that Zen is still fully alive, demanding Hu Shih's attention and, if possible, his "unhistorical" treatment. (Suzuki: 26)

According to Suzuki, since Hu regards Zen as a purely historical phenomenon that has no independent life apart from the specific historical context within which it was born, Hu will have a hard time explaining why Zen is still very much alive. In other words, there is something about Zen that is irreducible to its history; otherwise it should have been long gone since that particular historical period is now a distant past.

Suzuki rejects Hu's interpretation of Zen as an outsider's understanding, and then proceeds to give what Suzuki takes as an insider's view. In arguing for his case, Suzuki takes on Hu on several issues. First, he rejects Hu's reconstruction of Chan history that elevates the role played by Shenhui who, according to Hu, highlighted the crucial teaching of sudden enlightenment that would become a trademark of Chan associated with Huineng. In Suzuki's view, the most significant contribution of Huineng's teaching to Chan Buddhism is not the sudden enlightenment as emphasized by Shenhui; rather it is the doctrine of the identity of *dhyāna* and *prajñā*, the former referring to meditation and the latter to wisdom or Chan intuition:

> His message was: *dhyāna* and *prajñā* are one; where *dhyāna* is, there is *prajñā*; these are not to be separated one from the other. Before Hui-nêng the two were regarded as separate; otherwise, their identity was not clearly affirmed, which resulted in the practice of more or less emphasizing *dhyāna* at the expense of *prajñā*. Buddha's all-important enlightenment-experience came to be interpreted statically and not dynamically, and the doctrine of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), which is really the cornerstone of Buddhist thought-structure, became a dead thing. Hui-nêng revived the enlightenment-experience. (Suzuki: 27)

According to Suzuki, this doctrine of *dhyāna-prajñā* identity taught by Huineng was "really revolutionary in the history of Buddhist thought in China" (Suzuki: 28), and it cannot be grasped by the historical approach to

Zen that tries to understand Zen from without instead of from within (31).

The second issue in Suzuki's disputation with Hu is the nature of Zen knowledge: "Hu Shih translates *chih* 知 as 'knowledge' and takes it as best characterizing Shên-hui's intellectualistic approach. This statement most decidedly proves that Hu Shih does not understand Zen as it is in itself, apart from its 'historical setting'" (Suzuki: 31-2). Suzuki points out the crucial difference between ordinary knowledge and *prajñā*-intuition: whereas the former is intrinsically discriminatory and dualistic in that it presupposes the subject-object structure of knowledge, the latter is non-dual in that it transcends subject-object dualism and is the pure self-consciousness that grounds all our experience and knowledge (Suzuki: 32).[1]

When it comes to the issue regarding the role of history in Zen, Suzuki makes a distinction between history and Zen in their dealings with time: "While history knows nothing of timelessness, perhaps disposing of it as 'fabrication,' Zen takes time along with timelessness, that is to say, time in timelessness and timelessness in time. Zen lives in this contradiction" (Suzuki: 38). For Suzuki, it is not so much history as the Chinese character that brings about Zen. The practical, earth-bound character of the Chinese is essential in the birth of Zen: "If Zen had developed along the intellectual line of speculation, this would never have happened. But Zen moves on *prajñā*-intuition and is concerned with an absolute present in which the work goes on and life is lived" (Suzuki: 41).

Lastly, Suzuki rejects Hu's interpretation of the Chan method of *bushuopo* 不說破 as merely not to speak plainly.

> I wish he [Hu] would remember that there is something in the nature of *prajñā*-intuition which eludes every attempt at intellectualization and rejects all plain speaking so called. It is not purposely shunning this way of expression. As *prajñā*-intuition goes beyond the two horns of a dilemma, it begrudges committing itself to either side.... *Pu shuo po* is not a pedagogical method; it is inherent in the constitution of the experience, and even the Zen master cannot do anything with it. (Suzuki: 43)

According to Suzuki, since as a historian of Chan Hu does not have the *prajñā*-intuition, it is no surprise that the above point is beyond the latter's grasp in his understanding of Zen.

It is obvious that, compared with Hu's historical/reductionist approach to Zen, Suzuki embraces a form of essentialism in his interpretation

[1] Suzuki explains that "for a general characterization of *prajñā*-intuition we can state something like this: *Prajñā*-intuition is not derivative but primitive; not inferential, nor rationalistic, nor mediational, but direct, immediate; not analytical but synthetic; not cognitive, but symbolical; not intending but merely expressive; not abstract, but concrete; not processional, not purposive, but factual and ultimate, final and irreducible; not eternally receding, but infinitely inclusive; etc. If we go on like this, there may be many more predicates which could be ascribed to *prajñā*-intuition as its characteristics. But there is one quality we must not forget to mention in this connection: the uniqueness of *prajñā*-intuition consists in its authoritativeness, utterly convincing and contributing to the feeling that 'I am the ultimate reality itself,' that 'I am absolute knower,' that 'I am free and know no fear of any kind'" (Suzuki 34).

of Zen which advocates that Zen enlightenment itself, or what Suzuki calls *prajñā*-intuition, is beyond history. In some important ways, the pendulum of recent scholarship on Zen is swinging in the direction that emphasizes historical, cultural, and political studies as opposed to the philosophical and often essentialist approach, even though essentialism and historicism no longer encapsulate the complexity of current scholarship on Zen. This swing towards the historical and cultural studies of Zen is aided by an increasing realization that the historical approach to Zen does not need to be reductionistic, as Bernard Faure rightly points out:

> Far from being always reductionistic, the historical approach can show precisely that the meaning of a given symbolic system, whether that of Western philosophy or Chan Buddhism, cannot be reduced to the circumstances of its emergence and how, despite its historical nature, it "transmutes its situation of departure into a means to understand itself and to understand others." (Faure: 90)

That is, while attending to the historical nature of Zen Buddhism, we do not have to reduce it simply to its historical circumstances. Rather, we can appreciate how it transcended such circumstances in creatively responding to them and subsequently shaped them.

If the historical approach to Zen does not have to be reductionist, the challenge that confronts the philosophical approach to Zen discourse is how to avoid its essentialist tendency.[2] That is, the philosophical approach to Zen needs to deal with the unmistakably historical nature of Zen discourse and avoid being essentialistic in order to defend the validity and the relevance of such an approach. Wright's book can be regarded as an attempt in that direction. Let us turn to it in the following.

II. Dale Wright on Zen Enlightenment: History and Its Transcendence

What makes Wright's approach unique is that he tackles the issue of historicity in his philosophical analysis of Zen enlightenment head on and eventually incorporates historical analysis *within* his philosophical analysis. To be more specific, history in Wright's work is no longer limited to the role of providing some background knowledge for the readers to have a better understanding of the central figure of Huangbo and his Western interlocutor John Blofeld. Rather, Wright is making a much stronger case for the role of history in the Zen discourse on enlightenment. According to Wright, history is *intrinsic* to Zen enlightenment. This means that history does not simply play an interpretative role in our understanding of Zen, but is rather *constitutive* of the very enlightenment itself without which no enlighten-

[2] Faure cites Thomas Kasulis's works as an example of the philosophical/essentialist approach to Zen: Dōgen is regarded by Kasulis as an imcomparable philosopher due to Kasulis's attribution to Dōgen what is essentially Kasulis's own reading–what Faure calls the intentional fallacy (Faure: 139)–and the essentialist leaning in such a philosophical interpretation of Dōgen (Faure: 143).

ment is even conceivable. This point is very clearly laid out in Chapter Six of the book, "History: The Genealogy of Mind." To use Wright's words:

> Enlightenment is not figured as an isolated and unrelated event, nor simply as an experience of eternity in the present moment. In each case enlightenment is a historical event located in a particular temporal, spatial context...the classical Zen interest in history is more central to their concerns than we have taken it to be, and...beyond the Zen rhetoric of timelessness, we find historical contextualization to be central to their self-understanding. (Wright: 106; references to this book will be indicated by page numbers only thereafter in this article)

Wright makes his case by pointing out the clan-like institution (*zong/tsung* 宗) of Zen and the transmission of the *dharma* through an appropriate heir (*qi/ch'i* 器), a patriarch who is in a crucial relationship with the past and the future of Zen tradition: "To practice Zen was to repeat the ancient, ancestral Buddha pattern, and in turn to have its stamp placed upon one's character and comportment" (108). This is what he calls the historical unity of Zen lineage.

The historical unity is one of the five senses of unity and wholeness that Wright examines in Huangbo. These senses of unity and wholeness are fundamental to the doctrine of enlightenment in the Huangbo texts. They are: the unity of the self, the unity of the monastic community, the historical unity of lineage, the whole as a totality beyond the human realm, and the whole as the ground of all beings (187-89). These senses of unity and wholeness in Zen enlightenment point to an often ignored aspect in Zen. That is, enlightenment, far from being an isolated momentary experience of atemporal/ahistorical suddenness as has been commonly portrayed, is always situated within a given social, cultural, and historical context. As such, it is a continuing process of the unfolding of the mind, which is gradual rather than sudden. In other words, "enlightenment is not something definite at all, but rather the ongoing opening of awareness and the continual perfecting of responsiveness without end" (195).

If so, what, then, gave rise to the Zen rhetoric of timelessness? At least two reasons concern us in this connection. First, according to Wright, it has a great deal to do with the way Zen history has been written in the traditional account. This point becomes especially clear if we compare and contrast Zen's traditional account of its history constructed by Zen historians in the "Lamp Histories" with the critical approach of modern historians to Zen history. Wright lists several critical differences between the two. In the case of Zen historians, they "see themselves and their own texts as standing in continuity to the tradition," "act as participants, fully engaged by the stories they transmit," "hope to be freely and thoroughly influenced by the tradition they write about," and "assume the overriding truth of the Buddhist tradition and take themselves to be fully accountable for the recapitulation of that truth" (111-13). Modern historians, by contrast, "draw a line of separation between the object of study and their own text about that object," try to understand the text "not in relation to the historian in his or her context, but in relation to its original context in another time and

place," make a commitment to avoid the influence by the tradition they write about, and understand truth "primarily as representational accuracy" (111-113). As Wright points out, "while the Buddhist historian strives to learn *from* the text, the modern historian is content to learn *about* it" (113; italics original).

The way Zen historians write Zen history has a profound impact on the creation of the Zen myth of timelessness:

> Thus the ancestors always represent what the current practitioner could conceivably become, even though that conception changes over time, and the height of the ideal as projected makes its actualization virtually impossible. Lacking a way to represent the "otherness" of the tradition to itself (other than through a concept of "fall" which was common in Chinese Buddhism), the Zen historian has no perspective from which the present understanding can be seen as an alteration of the past. One consequence of this is that there is no perspective from which the present can be criticized, other than that of the present itself, which can only take the form of chastisement for a failure to live up to current ideals. (114-15)

Here, Wright observes that Zen historians resort to a constant recreation of Zen history in order to maintain its relevance to the current practice as well as to seek continuously for the source of inspiration for their practice. The disadvantage in so doing is that the Zen historian lacks the historical perspective to criticize the present since no effective distinction is made between the past and the present due to the constant recreation of the past in their hands. To be more specific, the Zen historian would not have realized that "[t]he meaning of enlightenment had changed" (203). Instead, he has tried to preserve the unity of the tradition through the constant recreation of the past. This practice makes it possible that "[i]nnovations in Zen... are not seen *as* innovations; they are recapitulations of a timeless identity" (112). This has significantly contributed to the Zen rhetoric of the transmission of a timeless enlightened mind.

From the perspective of scientific historiography that is the dominant approach to history now, Zen history as compiled by Zen historians lacks accuracy; from the perspective of post-modern historiography, "what is lost is complexity, 'difference,' and disjuncture, all hidden from view by the dominant desire for unity and identity in Zen" (115). On the other hand, from the perspective of Zen, the modern approach to history lacks a sense of belonging to any tradition which has given rise to the deception of neutrality and objectivity; modern historiography is also weak in the extent of self-awareness that modern historians bring to their study (see 116). In Wright's view, "in both traditions, however, one dimension of time stands exempt from the negativity of historical finitude" (117). That is, in the case of Zen, it is the enlightened mind transmitted through history that transcends the historical finitude whereas in the case of modern historians it is the present upon which they stand that is presumed to be exempt from historical finitude in their writing on history. The former leads to the rhetoric of timelessness of enlightenment, while the latter to the self-proclaimed

objectivity and neutrality in approaching history.

The second reason behind the Zen rhetoric of timelessness is the radical nature of its discourse at the time it was emerging. According to Wright, "[w]hen a newly emerging ideal is radically new, that is, when the change is as dramatic as a paradigm shift rather than a revision that stands more clearly within a traditional lineage, claims to finality and certainty tend to be heightened" (203). In other words, a paradigm shift as was brought about by the birth of Zen heightened the sense of ultimacy in Zen's claim of liberation. This sense of ultimacy substantializes liberation into a timeless enlightened mind transmitted through the lineage, despite the orthodox Buddhist teaching of emptiness and impermanence. "Yet, in each case, historically conscious spectators can see that each claim to timeless truth is itself time-bound, a function of a specific set of historical convergence" (203).

Interestingly, however, despite its self-proclaimed timelessness, the Zen discourse on enlightenment does contain references that would contradict such rhetoric. This is the theme of transcendence in the Zen discourse, and Wright takes it up in Chapter Eight, "Transcendence: 'Going beyond' Huang Po." He observes that in certain Zen narratives it is taught that the authentication of a disciple's enlightenment lies in his ability to go beyond his teacher. He quotes Baizhang's (Pai-chang) 百丈 instruction to Huangbo: "If your 'awakening' is identical to that of your teacher, your power will be merely half of his. Only when you are capable of 'going beyond' your teacher will you have truly received the transmission" (139). As Wright points out, "if each 'enlightened mind' goes beyond its predecessor, then each would be more than the replication of a pre-given identity" (139). Therefore the natural question is: "how can you 'go beyond' someone with whom an identity has been established? Any 'going beyond' identity is a movement out of identity and into differentiation" (142).

A contradiction clearly exists between these two themes in the traditional Zen Buddhist discourse with regard to enlightenment: one advocates that the enlightened mind is an atemporal identity transmitted through patriarchs and the other that enlightenment is a continuous process of going beyond the given tradition. How does the Zen tradition resolve such a conflict?

> The tension between the identity of transmitted mind and the call to "go beyond" the tradition by differentiating oneself could be relieved by calling upon a distinction between the "substance" (*t'i*) of mind and its "functional appearance" (*yung*). While the substance or essence of mind could be said to be identical between equally enlightened masters, the way this 'awakening' functions in the world might differ significantly.... Indeed, the character *yung* ("function") soon came to be used to refer more broadly to awakened behavior—in true Zen comportment, one sees the functional manifestation of enlightened mind, a sign of its very essence. Although these signs may change over time, it was thought that what they signify did not. (142-43)

Apparently the Zen tradition recognizes the existence of such a tension within itself and it tries to reconcile the apparent contradiction between identity and change in its discussion of enlightenment by resorting to the

distinction between substance (*ti/t'i* 體) and function (*yong/yung* 用), the former referring to the enlightened mind and the latter the awakened behavior, with the latter being the manifestation of the former and the former being the source of the latter.

However, as Wright observes, the solution does not go along well with either the orthodox Buddhist tradition or the current postmodern mentality. Mahāyāna Buddhism, given the centrality of the notion of emptiness, would reject the substantialization of an enlightened mind. Moreover, separating the enlightened mind from its manifestation vis-à-vis the enlightened behavior renders the former unintelligible and this is a hard sell in the current intellectual discourse. It is worth pointing out that Wright is not claiming that there are no instances of substantialization within the Zen discourse of enlightenment, since there clearly are such cases. Rather, what he is attempting to do here is to work out a more philosophically desirable position for Zen to reconcile various contradictory teachings within itself. In other words, here he is not addressing a historical question, but a philosophical issue.

Wright concludes that "this reconciliation cannot easily be made, and, more importantly, it need not and should not be made" (151). That is, if we stick to the literalist interpretation of the two conflicting themes in the Zen discourse on enlightenment, the reconciliation, which has to both remain faithful to the tradition and be acceptable to the modern intellectual discourse, is difficult. However, if we accept the validity of Wright's analysis of the historical nature of Zen enlightenment, this contradiction will be nullified. In fact such a contradiction is not even necessary because enlightenment can be and has been conceived through figures of "impermanence" and "emptiness" without obstructing its transcendent character: "'transcendence' can be redefined in historical, and therefore, finite terms" (152).

This prompts the author to redefine the Zen tradition of transcendence:

> The "tradition," therefore, is not best conceived as an inert deposit, a sealed package passed on from one generation to the next. Such a unilateral conception of history fails to recognize its reciprocal character. The tradition does provide the "pretext," the point of departure from which the text of the tradition of "transcendence" is to be rewritten, but the operation only makes sense "dialectically" as an exchange between the interpreted past and the interpreting present, the old and the new. (153)

The reciprocal understanding of the Zen tradition of transcendence opens up the possibility for a reconciliation of the conflict between identity and difference in the Zen discourse on enlightenment. Accordingly, enlightenment vis-à-vis the historical transcendence in the Zen discourse should not be understood unilaterally as "a sealed package" handed down through history. Rather, it should be interpreted as a creative reconstitution of the inherited tradition in the hands of a patriarch for whom enlightenment is that very creativity in reconstituting the heritage. In this way, true enlightenment always has to be original, which is premised upon a transformation of the tradition, not its rejection. Or as Wright puts it: "Enlightenment... is a reestablishment of contact with that to which we already belong, and apart

from which we could not exist" (191). Therefore, the past is continuously transformed by enlightened minds. What is handed down from one generation to the next is this very creativity in transforming a given tradition, instead of simply a timeless enlightened mind.

Wright sees the tension between identity and difference in the Zen discourse on enlightenment as a source of creativity and vitality of the tradition (215). The apparent conflict between the two is reconciled through the historical transcendence within the Zen teaching itself. In this way, Wright reshapes the Hu-Suzuki debate of reductionism vs. essentialism with regard to enlightenment into the creative tension between history and its transcendence, both of which are constitutive of Zen enlightenment. Therefore, Wright has succeeded in making a compelling case for the historicity of enlightenment that argues for the constitutive role, as opposed to a mere interpretative role, of history in Zen enlightenment. Moreover, in making such an argument, he can effectively free himself from being dragged into the vast ocean of historical data, even though the book contains many critically important historical references. The point is, rather, that his treatment of the historicity of Zen enlightenment is philosophical, not historical.

In order to appreciate the merit of Wright's philosophical approach to Zen, let us compare his methodology, briefly, with Bernard Faure's, both attempting to accommodate other approaches to Zen. Faure is a crucial voice in advocating the cultural, historical, and political approaches to Zen. In his *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition*, he examines four approaches to Zen, namely, the historical approach, philosophical hermeneutics, structural criticism, and performative scholarship. Faure proposes performative scholarship as a way to accommodate the historical approach, philosophical hermeneutics, and structural criticism. The performative analysis reintroduces the oft-ignored dialogical dimension of the Chan/Zen *kōan* in order to appreciate its significance, instead of its superficial or deep meaning like philosophical hermeneutics (Faure: 145). In this light, Faure argues that Chan texts imply a distinction between the performative and the communicative functions of language, hence pulling themselves away from being strictly approached by hermeneutics (Faure: 147). This in turn points to a performative conception of truth, expressed in the encounter between master and disciple (Faure: 147). Therefore,

> instead of leading to some neutralized neutrality, the historical, structural, and hermeneutical approaches may provide a convenient arsenal for a performative scholarship that remains sensitive to the various contexts of the tradition considered. Thus, one may choose to use either history against philosophy when confronted with essentialist theory such as the "philosophical" interpretation of Dōgen or philosophy against history when confronted with historicism. These methodological choices call to mind the Buddhist "skillful means" (*upāya*). (Faure: 143-44)

Put simply, the methodological choices between philosophical/essentialist and historical/reductionist approaches to Zen should aim at achieving a balance between the two, one serving as the corrective of the other. What

Faure proposes here is that such a balance should be accomplished in lieu of the perceived one-sidedness when either one prevails over the other in dictating the scholarship on Zen. In a sense, Faure tries to make Zen scholars Zen masters of scholarship.

As attractive as it may appear, Faure's advocacy of performative scholarship does not really incorporate philosophical and historical approaches to the study of Zen into one coherent methodology, but rather plays the role of balancing one against the other. As such, performative scholarship will not be able to open itself up to scholarly critique since it itself is not really a methodology, but rather a strategy. By contrast, Wright has tried to integrate history into his philosophical approach to Zen. In this consideration, Wright's attempt is more desirable, since by effectively incorporating history into his philosophical meditation on Zen, he has preserved a place for the philosophical approach that is no longer haunted by essentialism as it has often been accused of.

As appealing as Wright's hermeneutic approach to Zen enlightenment is, there are also important limitations in such a methodology. I will bring our discussion of Wright's approach to a conclusion through an examination of one such limitation, namely the tendency in Wright's interpretation of Zen to subsume practice under theory, if not outright reducing the former to the latter.

III. Theory vs. Practice in Wright's Interpretation of Zen

Wright's approach to the historicity of Zen enlightenment can be recast in terms of theory vs. practice in Zen discourse. In fact, the issue of theory vs. practice is the underlying theme that Wright addresses in his book. By bringing out the historical *dimension*, not just the historical *background*, of Zen enlightenment, Wright effectively makes the theoretical discourse of enlightenment and its historical evolution part and parcel of Zen enlightenment, from which it cannot be separated out. However, Zen enlightenment interpreted by Wright is decidedly intellectual, instead of experiential, as it puts theory above practice in making Zen practice a "theoretical practice" (208). In many ways, such a stance is embedded in the very hermeneutic approach he adopts. That is, a hermeneutic approach to Zen enlightenment tends to privilege theory over practice—especially when it is compared with a phenomenological approach—even though it does not have to be so, as long as it is aware of its own limitations as a methodology to approach Zen and is able to be critically reflective of such limitations.

The privileging of theory over practice in Wright's hermeneutic approach to Zen enlightenment is accomplished through what I call his "selective problematization" of Zen rhetoric. To be more specific, he problematizes the claim of timelessness of enlightenment in Zen rhetoric by pointing out, persuasively as I have argued, the changing nature of Zen enlightenment. However, when he deals with the issue of meditation practice in Huangbo's teachings or lack thereof, instead of problematizing such

a lack in terms of its assumed importance in Zen, Wright decides to accept it at its face value:

> If the origins and early centuries of the Zen tradition were heavily focused on seated meditation, why do we find in Huang Po and in the avant-garde Zen tradition of his time a relative disinterest in meditation? Why do we find the practice of meditation being so frequently criticized in the Zen monastic discourse of that period? (208)

Here the questions Wright poses to Zen have changed from those directed towards the Zen rhetoric of the timelessness of enlightenment. In the case of the latter, he questions the very validity of such a rhetoric by pointing out the conflicting statements made by Zen masters at different occasions. In the case of the former, however, he decides to let the rhetoric stand and instead tries to explain what the significance of such a rhetoric is. Put in another way, in light of his problematization of the Zen rhetoric of timelessness of enlightenment, Wright could have easily made the case that Huangbo's relative disinterest in meditation was because he simply took such a practice for granted, a point Blofeld has made and Wright acknowledges (208). Instead, Wright has tried to see such a lack of interest in terms of Zen's effort to rethink the entire domain of meditation as a "theoretical practice" (208):

> One form that this reconceptualization seems to have taken is a critique of the idea that meditation practice is a special activity located outside the domain of ordinary life. Meditation was thought to be more effectively practiced when it was not considered a separate and sacred dimension of life, but rather as the conscious awareness present in all human activity.... One of the many forms that meditation could take was theoretical or philosophical reflection. Thus, "theory" could be reconfigured in the mind as "practice." (209)

We can clearly see how practice is subsumed under theory in such a hermeneutic approach to Zen. To be fair, Wright's observation is justified by much of the Zen rhetoric ridiculing seated meditation and by his effort to recontextualize such a rhetoric within the backdrop of Zen's effort to break the barrier between meditation and other domains of everyday life. However, the fact that Wright does not take the opposite direction, namely, to subsume theory under practice, is clearly indicative of his hermeneutic take on Zen.

Wright's hermeneutic approach to Zen through selective problematization and recontextualization is effective in providing fresh insights into the oft-ignored aspects of Zen. However, it is also important to recognize its inherent limitation that tends to privilege theory over meditation practice. The larger context he provides in his approach to Zen is the theoretical/intellectual background, instead of the background of Zen practice. In this regard, he is clearly leaning towards HU Shi's approach, even though he has avoided the reductionist tendency in Hu, as we have seen previously. In this sense, Wright's Zen is an intellectual Zen and the practice of the intellectual Zen is no other than the philosophical meditation, the title of his book.

In many ways, the problematic concerning theory vs. practice is a tricky one. We usually find ourselves ending up with where we start. That is,

if we start our inquiry of Zen enlightenment by focusing on its theoretical dimension, our conclusion will tend to be that it is theoretical; if, on the other hand, our focal point is its experiential dimension, as demonstrated by some phenomenological approaches, it is likely we will wind up seeing it more in light of practice and experience. There is clearly room for both approaches and more. Every approach reveals certain aspects of Zen but conceals others at the same time. Therefore, my critique of Wright's approach is *not* based on an approach that is necessarily better. Instead, I am suggesting that we should be aware of certain inherent limitations of any methodology we adopt so as to overcome such limitations.

Importantly, however, the overcoming of such limitations is not accomplished through a discovery of *the* right approach to Zen, whatever it may mean. It should be achieved through a realization of the limitations of any methodology. To use the famous Gestalt picture of a young/old woman as an example, when we see the young woman, the old woman becomes invisible and vice versa. It is pointless to talk about certain features of *the* woman since there is no *the* woman to begin with in that picture. Consequently, some features of the young woman become invisible when the old woman is seen and vice versa. If we want to see both women at the same time, we may end up seeing no woman at all! The point I am trying to make here is that we may have to live with the fact that sometimes certain methodologies are not really compatible. In other words, we should not try to seek the balance among different approaches to Zen through a balancing strategy—like Faure's performative scholarship, which does not open itself for criticism since it is not a methodology to begin with and attempts to stand outside of all methodologies in trying to balance them. As such, it does not further fruitful scholarly exchanges. A balanced picture of the subject matter, Zen enlightenment in this case, is to be achieved through fruitful scholarly challenges between different approaches. These mutual challenges will provide the motivating force that continues to move scholarship on Zen into exciting new territories.

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