

# Introduction: Rethinking Ritual Practice in Zen Buddhism

*Dale S. Wright*

## Role of Ritual in Zen

Approaching the grand entrance to Eihei-ji, one of Japan's premier Zen Buddhist temples, I am both excited and intimidated. I understand that once I enter this gate, every moment of my life for the next three days will be subsumed under the disciplinary structures of Zen ritual. Although I have already trained in the ritual procedures of the Sōtō school, this is the head temple of its founder, the renowned master Dōgen, and I realize how exacting and demanding their adherence to proper ritual will be. Upon entrance, along with a handful of other lay people who have accepted the challenge of this brief meditation retreat, I am given specific instructions on how to conduct myself through virtually every moment of my stay. The details seem endless and excruciatingly difficult to master—how, exactly, to enter the meditation hall, to address the teacher, to bow, to hold one's bowl while engaging in mealtime rituals, and on and on. Where best to draw the mental line between actual Zen ritual and other procedural routines of the Zen monastery baffles me. But virtually all life in a Zen monastery is predetermined, scripted, and taken out of the domain of human choice. Some of these routinized life activities stand out from others as explicit religious ritual by virtue of their obvious sanctity, by their relation to the founding myths or stories of the Zen tradition, and more. But all the routines of the Zen setting appear to be treated as essential to the life

of Zen, and all life appears to be ritualized in some sense. Now instructed in proper ritual procedure, my brief immersion in Zen monastic life begins.

That Zen life is overwhelmingly a life of ritual would not always have been so obvious to Westerners interested in Zen. Indeed, early attraction to this tradition focused on the many ways in which irreverent *antiritual* gestures are characteristic of Zen. This side of Zen is not a misrepresentation, exactly, since classical literature from the Ch'an/Zen tradition in China includes some powerful stories and sayings that debunk ritualized forms of reverence. Huang-po's *Dharma Record of Mind Transmission*, for example, dismisses all remnants of Buddhism that focus on "outer form." It says: "When you are attached to outer form, to meritorious practices and performances, this is a deluded understanding that is out of accord with the Way."<sup>1</sup> Following the lead provided by that image, the *Lin-chi lu* directs its strongest condemnation to what it calls "running around seeking outside."<sup>2</sup> Such seeking is deluded and irrelevant because, from Lin-chi's radical Zen point of view, "from the beginning there is nothing to do."<sup>3</sup> "Simply don't strive—just be ordinary."<sup>4</sup> "What are you seeking? Everywhere you're saying, 'There's something to practice, something to prove' . . . As I see it, all this is just making karma."<sup>5</sup> Other now famous stories in classical Zen drive the point home, from Bodhidharma's provocative line to the Emperor that all his pious observances warrant "no merit" to Tan-hsia's sacrilegious act of burning the sacred image of the Buddha.

This critique of ritual piety in early Chinese Ch'an was later understood to be part of a larger criticism of any aspect of Buddhist thought and practice that failed to focus in a single-minded way on the event of awakening. Encompassing formal ritual, textual study, and magical religious practices, a full range of traditional Buddhist practices appear to have been submitted to ridicule—what do any of these have to do with an enlightened life, some Zen masters asked? In this antinomian stream of Zen discourse, ritual was simply one more way that mindful attention could be deflected from the central point of Zen. What the essays in this volume make clear, however, is that although slogans disdainful of ritual can be found in classical texts, the traditions of Chinese Buddhism appear to have proceeded in the same well-established ritual patterns as they had before the critique, even, so far as we can see, in monasteries overseen by these radical Zen masters. Ritual continued to be the guiding norm of everyday monastic life, the standard pattern against which an occasional act of ritual defiance or critique would stand out as remarkable.

The Korean Buddhist film *Mandala* provides a graphic image of this contrast.<sup>6</sup> In it a Zen master "ascends the platform" (see chapter 2 for an analysis of this ritual) in ritual fashion to present a distinctively Zen sermon.

Near the end he challenges the monks to respond to the paradox he has presented—a traditional Zen kōan. At a crucial moment in the ritual, however, filmmaker Im Kwon Taek has a defiant monk charge up to the master, snatch the ritual staff out of his hand, and break it in two. The monk appears to be scornful of this staid ritual pattern in Zen and demonstrates his desire to break out of it. But even this outrageous antiritual gesture is encompassed by the ritual occasion as a whole. Although perhaps shocked by the audacity of the young monk, all in attendance understand how defiance of ritual is almost as traditional a gesture in Zen as the ritual itself—an “anti-ritual ritual” that had been modeled for them in the classic texts of Zen.<sup>7</sup> The image we have of the great Zen masters is that they sought to deepen all Buddhist ritual practices by reminding practitioners that the point of any practice is the transformative effect that it has in awakening mindful presence. While Zen would ideally be about what goes on inside mental space, as a practice that takes place in the “outside” world of coordinated actions and human institutions, ritual is subject to certain risks, such as the danger that preoccupation with “outer form” fails to evoke inner realization.

This kind of critique of ritual struck a chord of appreciation with the first generation of Westerners interested in Zen. What American Beat poets and others began to see in Zen Buddhism was an antidote to the rigidity of post-war Western culture, and their response was to embrace the antinomian character of Zen with passion. For them, Zen stood for a form of spontaneous life that could not be contained within the regularity of ritual. Moreover, a forceful critique of “ritualized religion” had already been firmly established in the Protestant and romantic dimensions of Anglo-American culture that sought to stress inner feeling over outer form. Grounded in this legacy, the Beat poets could see in Zen a spiritual tradition that took enormous pleasure in mocking ritual. From this perspective, they would find most American lives to be “ritualistic” and their religion a dry “going through the motions” without ever encountering the inner soul of its vision. They saw religious ritual as inauthentic, formulaic, repetitive, and incapable of the intense, creative fever of true spiritual experience. At that time, the word “ritualistic” had many of the same dismissive connotations that the word “mantra” does today. To say that what someone has said is “just his mantra” is to say that it is essentially unthoughtful, repetitive, and formulaic, not something that ought to be taken seriously. Similarly, throughout the twentieth century, the Protestant critique of ritual held sway, implying that anything “ritualistic” is shallow, rote, and unconscious.

So, in 1991, when Zen scholar Bernard Faure wrote that “there has been a conspicuous absence of work on Zen ritual,”<sup>8</sup> what he was responding to was

the fact that even three to four decades after the fascination with Zen began in the West, few scholars had gotten beyond the early attraction to Zen antiritualism to take seriously all of the ways that ritual pervades Zen life and experience. By the time Faure's book was published, however, Western intellectual culture was in the midst of a fundamental change of perspective, one that would cast new light on ritual and render it much more interesting than it had been for several centuries. Ritual was once again in an intellectual position to be taken seriously. This book—*Zen Ritual*—constitutes one stage in this resurgence of interest in ritual and attempts to focus the work of contemporary historians of Zen Buddhism on this previously neglected, but now obviously important, dimension of East Asian Zen Buddhism. Its guiding intention is to submit important elements in the history of Zen ritual to contemporary analysis.

The ritual dimension of the Zen tradition in East Asia took the particular shape that it did primarily by means of thorough absorption of two different cultural legacies in China, one—the Confucian—indigenous to China and one entering East Asia from India and Central Asia in the form of the Buddhist tradition. Long before Buddhism arrived in China, ritual practices and theory of ritual were well developed in the native Confucian tradition. The Confucian moral, political, and social orders were grounded in a sophisticated conception of ritual as the basis of civilization. The early Chinese character *li*, often translated as ritual, or ceremonial propriety, stood at the very center of the Confucian conception of a harmonious and civilized society. From this point of view, what regulates the desires, habits, and actions of the members of a social order is ritual activity in the sense of the patterns of proper interaction between all participants in a social hierarchy.<sup>9</sup>

In the Confucian worldview, the Way (Dao/Tao) was a ritual order, constructed by the ancient Sage Kings and modeled after the patterns of Heaven. This order was based on a naturalistic conception of the cosmos and was largely nontheistic. Ritual practice was not primarily intended to praise or influence the gods. Instead, it was understood as the model for both collective political organizing and individual self-fashioning. For Hsün-tzu, the most theoretically sophisticated early Confucian on this issue, ritual was the most effective way for human beings to understand and correct their uncultivated "original nature." Although Hsün-tzu argued for an innately evil tendency in human nature, he also recognized that human beings are inherently social and that natural human intelligence allowed for self-correction through the processes of ritual self-cultivation. Confucian ritualists took the behavior and movements of the sages as the model for ritual practice and sought to

encourage all members of the society to shape themselves to some extent in their image.

No dimension of human activity and culture was thought to be exempt from the impact of ritual; ritual was understood to inform the human mind in every activity from social engagements to private reflection. For the Confucian ritualists, as for later Zen Buddhists, ritual practice ranged in quality and depth from introductory levels to the most profound, and these differences were thought to be evident in the difference between an ordinary human being and the great sages. At the outset, they assumed that ritual practice would entail discipline. It would restrain the wayward inclinations of ordinary, undisciplined minds. In this sense, ritual acted as an external constraint or pressure on the natural desires and uncultivated habits of those who had not yet been shaped by this order. Confucians realized, however, that as ritual practitioners matured, they would internalize these constraints, altering the ways they understood themselves and the ways they lived in the world. For the sages dwelling at the most humane level, Mencius claimed, ritual practice effects a profound joy, one that accords with the deepest nature of human beings. In this sense, ritual was the Confucian means for transformation and enlightenment, both of individuals in a culture and the culture as a whole.

The second cultural source of Zen ritual comes from the broader Buddhist tradition that arrived from India and Central Asia and spread throughout East Asia in the first six centuries of the Common Era. Here we find another tradition of exacting ritual practice, one focused somewhat less on communal interaction and somewhat more on the cultivation of individual interiority. Different schools of Chinese Buddhism inherited traditional Buddhist ritual practices and adapted them to fit the unique social structures of Chinese Buddhist monasticism. By the Sung dynasty when some Buddhist institutions began to be identified as “Ch’an” monasteries, numerous streams of ritual development had already coalesced from such sources as T’ien-t’ai, Hua-yen, Vajrayana, and Pure Land. As several of the essays in this volume will claim, the ritual practices of the Zen tradition are in full continuity with these other forms of East Asian Buddhism, and in many respects their ritual procedures are surprisingly similar, especially in China where “schools” of Buddhism inhabit the same monasteries and practice ritual together.

If we ask, “what kinds of ritual are characteristic of Zen Buddhism?” we must face two qualifications that preface an answer to this question. First, ritual traditions in Zen Buddhism have changed over historical time and differ from sect to sect and from region to region throughout East Asia. There are no overarching structures of orthodoxy that determine for all Zen Buddhists

what ritual procedures are to be followed in a temple or monastery, and that has always been the case. Descriptions of Zen ritual, therefore, are either specific to one region or historical era or text, etc., or generalizations that address tendencies over historical time and geographical space. Second, there are difficult questions about what counts as a ritual. Should any regularly repeated practice performed in a standardized manner be understood as a ritual? If so, then virtually everything done in a Zen monastery is a ritual, including walking, bathing, manual labor, and on and on. Or does a repetitious practice need to make specific allusion to the most basic beliefs or vision of a religion before it becomes a ritual, or is there some other criterion that defines the concept “ritual”?<sup>10</sup>

In her state-of-the-art work on ritual, Catherine Bell cautions us against drawing too firm a line between “authentic ritual” and other “ritual-like” activities.<sup>11</sup> She advises against adherence to a set definition of ritual since this would shape our minds to see what we are studying in one particular light, shutting out other possibly illuminating perspectives. Instead, her approach, which we acknowledge in this book, is to focus on the specific contours of the practice itself and not be concerned about whether the phenomenon should be defined as ritual by adhering to one or another predetermined definition. Bell’s approach is to identify “ritual-like” activities—characterized by “formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacred symbolism, and performance”—and to attempt to understand these activities in their own context of meaning. For the study of Zen Buddhism, this opens many options, and each author in this book adopts his or her own approach. Previewing the phenomenon of Zen ritual, then, what kinds of ritualized activity will we find in Zen monasteries?

The ritual most frequently associated with Zen monastic practice is *zazen*, seated meditation. Indeed, it is from this longstanding Buddhist ritual that Zen (Ch’an/Sŏn) gets its name. Although variations in Zen meditation rituals are substantial, most Zen monks engage in this practice at least two times each day, once in the morning and once in the evening.<sup>12</sup> During my brief stay at Eihei-ji, we engaged in *zazen* ritual for approximately six hours each day divided into sitting periods of roughly forty-five minutes each, but this was an unusual amount of time at the temple in which lay people were invited for introductory training. At the Japanese monastery Zuiō-ji, as described by T. Griffith Foulk, monks meditate between two and three hours per day when they are not in a time of more intense practice.<sup>13</sup> At the Zen Center of Los Angeles, *zazen* is offered twice each day for an hour and a half whenever the community is not engaged in more rigorous *sesshin* practice. In the monastic retreats described by Robert Buswell in Korean Zen monasteries, on the other

hand, “upwards of fourteen hours of sitting daily . . . with between four and six hours of sleep” is typical.<sup>14</sup> Variations between monasteries, sects, and different periods of the calendar year are significant, but no variation undercuts the fact that *zazen* ritual is at the center of contemporary Zen monastic life as it has been for many centuries.

Among the rituals regularly performed in Zen monasteries, we can distinguish between two kinds: those practiced on a daily basis and other periodic rites that are less frequent and in some ways therefore more momentous. *Zazen*, as we have seen, is practiced at least twice each day, always at the same time and in the same carefully prescribed way. What other rituals occur with this frequency? Sutra chanting is one, often performed just prior to *zazen* or immediately thereafter and before both the morning and midday meals. Standing in order based on hierarchical rank, monks or nuns chant sutra passages collectively and from memory, and younger monastics are given specific instructions on how to do this upon entering the monastery. Following the chanting of sutras in the morning and just before noon, all participants engage in a very exacting meal ritual. A simple vegetarian meal is served to monks or nuns in the meditation hall, and at various stages, different dimensions of the ritual are observed, for example, the synchronized bowing, the setting aside of several grains of rice for hungry ghosts, the silence practiced throughout all meals, and the meaningful procedures for cleaning ritual bowls. Also daily, typically early in the morning, it is a widespread ritual custom for the abbot to make incense offerings in several of the halls of the monastery as a way to sanctify the space and the practices of mindfulness and awakening that will occur there. Finally, in some monasteries, the abbot’s “ascending the platform” to present a Zen sermon is a daily practice, although in smaller and less prominent monasteries, this may be a less frequent practice.

There are also rituals that have accrued around *kōan* practices in Zen. No doubt the most significant of these, and the one most frequently discussed, is the ritual of *dokusan* or *sanzen* in which monks go to the abbot for private interviews. These ritual meetings between master and disciple are fraught with anticipation and foreboding and include all the anxiety of face-to-face interviews or examinations. Monks line up outside of the master’s room, and one at a time enter the room with strict formality, beginning with a series of prostrations before the master. Instruction, typically on *kōans* but in principle on any topic at the heart of Zen practice, varies from individual to individual based upon each monk’s practice and capacity.<sup>15</sup> During meditation retreats, this ritual may be required of each monk every day or possibly more than once each day, while during other periods of the monastic calendar they may be practiced much less frequently.

A long list of other rituals are practiced at greater intervals, and many of these are determined in accordance either with the calendrical cycle or with the cycles of a human life span (see chapter 1). Annual rituals fall into the first group. They include a New Year's celebration, often associated with rituals of purity, ritual celebration and remembrance of the Buddha's birthday and his enlightenment, rituals commemorating the founder(s) of the particular sect of Zen and/or the founder of that particular monastery, and rituals of prayer and support for the emperor or the nation (see chapter 3 and chapter 7). Still other rituals function as "rites of passage," rites timed to accord with particular phases of the monks' lives. Initiation ceremonies such as traditional Buddhist tonsure fall into this group, when monks are accepted into the order or the monastery, as do pilgrimage rituals, rites installing a new abbot in a monastery, and funerary rites, including those performed periodically for ancestors.

### Participatory and Performative Functions

Instructions provided by the tradition on how to enact ritual movement and procedure often fail to communicate any sense of how these rituals function internally for practitioners. That, clearly, is one reason that the ritual practice of others is so easy to belittle. From an outsider's perspective, the rites performed by others will always seem hollow and devoid of meaning just by virtue of one's distance from them. No doubt, the best way to come to understand the point or power of a ritual is to engage in it oneself, even if only empathically.<sup>16</sup> At least, that is all I could really say to anyone following my few days of engagement at Eihei-ji. In the act of participation, we sense and understand something that we will otherwise miss altogether. In order to appreciate the ritual dimension of Zen practice, therefore, we must move beyond describing these ceremonies in order to consider what they are and why Zen Buddhists might engage in them. This requires that in addition to asking ourselves what Zen Buddhists do, we also consider what effect their ritual actions might have in creating the kind of life that they envision. In thinking seriously about Zen ritual, we need to reflect on both the goal or the point of these continual ceremonies and how it might be possible that such a goal could be achieved through these particular ritual activities.

An ideal that runs all the way through the Zen tradition is that the goal of Zen ritual is enlightenment—the goal of awakening for individuals and for human beings collectively—however enlightenment is understood to occur in a given time and place. But it doesn't take much study to see that this ideal is not always or everywhere affirmed. Some practitioners, including even



monastery abbots, do not demonstrate in their actions or speech that this is the case. And even where the goal of enlightenment is affirmed, conceptions of it vary in many ways, including the variation between mature and immature or enlightened and unenlightened conceptions. Ambiguities abound in both institutions and individual minds, and there is no such thing as a perfectly pure form of either one. Nevertheless, in the midst of all the complexities of human life and behind all of its failures, buried back behind other pressing motives, in its ideal form the overarching goal of the life of Zen—its very reason for being—is enlightenment.

So how does anything as mundane as ritual give rise to anything as exalted as enlightenment? The prejudice contained in this question still haunts our ability to understand the powers of ritual practice in Zen or in any other religious tradition. Reducing ritual to mechanistic habit, we fail to understand how a practice of ritual can bring about a disciplined transformation of the practitioner, in this case how Zen ritual can give rise to Zen mind. The key, of course, is the gradual, even imperceptible, scripting of character through mental and physical exercise. In the Zen tradition, ritual is a thoroughgoing disciplinary program, imposed at first upon the practitioner until such time as the discipline is internalized as a self-disciplinary, self-conscious formation of mind and character.

Early anthropological and sociological efforts to understand ritual practices sensed some of this capacity in ritual. Emile Durkheim's notion that ritual is the communal means through which a culture's beliefs and ideals are communicated to individual members of the society captures part of what we would want to say today about ritual in Zen. Zen ritual does communicate the vision of Zen to its practitioners. One shortcoming of this understanding, as we can see it today, is that its construal of the goal of ritual is far too conceptual. Zen ritual does much more than communicate "beliefs and ideals." Beyond communicating meanings, Zen ritual actually does something to practitioners. It shapes them into certain kinds of subjects, who not only think certain thoughts but also perceive the world and understand themselves through the patterns impressed upon them by the repeated action of ritual upon their body and mind.

Ritual establishes a context of experience in which certain moods dominate and desires, emotions, states of mind, and actions come to the fore. Zen ritual need not be understood as aimed at one specific goal; several may be operating at the same time. Even if we take "enlightenment" to be the ultimate goal of Zen ritual practice, it is still important to see that these rituals serve multiple characteristics of "enlightenment" simultaneously. A particular Zen ritual may foster a sense of humility and selflessness while simultaneously

giving rise to mindfulness, self-control, courage, or wisdom. If enlightenment is profound in its consequences, the ways of understanding its multiple features and characteristics must be sophisticated. It is also true that the effects of a single Zen ritual may be one thing for a novice practitioner while quite another for someone more advanced in the practice. Character differences also mean that what one practitioner might glean from a ritual to shape his or her character will be lost on another.

In contemporary ritual studies, the view that ritual goes beyond the task of expressing or communicating cultural values to actually effecting fundamental change in a person's perception of self and world is called the "performative" approach. Rituals have an effect on practitioners; they perform a transformative function that is not captured in either reductive interpretations or interpretations that remain at the level of belief or conception. In a persuasive effort to form a theory of Buddhist ritual, Robert Sharf draws upon the performative theories of Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman that liken ritual to play.<sup>17</sup> Ritual, he concludes, makes effective use of imagination to foster change in practitioners. Ritual practitioners proceed in the ritual "as if" things were different than they seemed before entering the ritual. They imagine a state of affairs other than common sense would dictate and proceed as if something other than that were true. Zen practitioners engage in *zazen* as if they were enlightened buddhas, and in that act of imagination, something really changes.

As Taigen Dan Leighton (chapter 5) puts it, *zazen* practitioners understand this ritual as one that "enacts" the enlightenment of the Buddha already resident within the practitioner.<sup>18</sup> When you "enact" something, you act it out, acting *as if* it were already the case. If you act out that pattern attentively and long enough, then, to some extent at least, it becomes true of your mind through the patterning powers of repeated activity and mental focus. Thinking affects acting in some way, and acting helps shape who you become. This is a pattern we can see clearly in Stanley Tambiah's sophisticated work on Buddhist ritual.<sup>19</sup> There, thought and action are brought together in the realization that thinking is itself an act, one that, like all other acts, has consequences. Tambiah's performative theory of Buddhist ritual seeks to avoid the modern tendency to privilege thought over action in order to understand how in ritual these two forms of action are inherently coordinated.

This new development in contemporary thinking—sometimes called "post-Cartesian"—moves away from a predominantly mental orientation in analyzing human culture by recognizing the extent to which the mental and physical are intertwined or "nondual." Taking this perspective in thinking

about Zen draws our attention to the ways in which Zen practice is a very physical, embodied practice, and to the ways in which Zen mind is a manifestation or extension of something even more basic—Zen ritual. One way to understand this transformation in our appreciation of Zen is to see it in terms of a difference between Western Cartesian and post-Cartesian interpretations of Zen. From an earlier perspective, an immersion in modern, Cartesian ways of thinking leads us to understand Zen as a highly refined discipline of the mind. In some sense at least, it obviously is a mental discipline of this sort. But from the point of view of post-Cartesian thought, Zen is not reducible to this mental discipline because every mental exercise practiced in Zen is set in a larger context of ritual that is fully embodied and profoundly physical (on this dimension of Zen ritual, see chapter 6). Zen rituals involve postures, gestures, and patterns of movement. To make sense of this basic dimension of Zen, we need to engage its fundamental corporeality by understanding Zen as a specifically *embodied* practice.<sup>20</sup>

As I sit practicing *zazen* in Eihei-ji, no one has to remind me of this fact. What the senior monks at the temple are teaching me, and what I am mastering, is how to move and hold my body in positions appropriate to the ritual. Although a few suggestions are made about what to do with my mind, the instructions are overwhelmingly about the comportment of my physical existence. My teachers assume that, in time, the mind follows the body and that getting novices into the appropriate postures and movements makes possible the acquisition of appropriately “Zen” states of mind. Moreover, what I feel as I sit in meditation is primarily my body—and not just feelings more generally. At one moment I am completely focused on the patterns of my breathing, and at another moment, just my knees. Then my buttocks, then my back, and at some point, I return to conscious respiration. Whatever learning of Zen I accomplish takes place in and through my physical existence. Zen is embodied understanding, and the mental states that practitioners achieve through it are not separate from this physical framework.

Wittgenstein and Heidegger, two designers of post-Cartesian thought in the West, claim that our most basic grasp of the world—our most fundamental way of understanding it—is the practical mastery that we have of our physical, embodied world. Fundamental knowledge, they assert, is “know-how,” the deep knowledge we have through routines and rituals that have long since taught us how to get around in the concrete dimensions of our world. To have a Zen understanding, in this sense, is to be able to do it in the most concrete and not necessarily conscious way. Molding physical habits and practices within the highly structured environment of the monastery trains

the body to move and sense and feel in certain specifically Zen ways. The practices of Zen ritual are forms of practical understanding and knowledge. They constitute a particular way of acting and being in the world that defines Zen. It is the ritual dimension of Zen that most directly opens the vision of Zen to its well-honed practitioners. Sensing my own awkwardness at Eiheiiji as I attempt to imitate authentic Zen movements, I am in awe of those who have so clearly mastered these rituals and who therefore have been initiated into the kinds of mindfulness that correspond to them.

When modern Protestants formulated their devastating critique of ritual as a way of engaging in religious practice, their intention, primarily, was to challenge the link between ritual and magic—the view that if you do the ritual then, magically or in recompense, the gods or angels will do something favorable for you. In formulating this now obvious critique, however, they failed to see all the ways in which ritual action is linked to understanding—how bodily movement and mental state are tied together. This perspective now provides ample ground for appreciating ritual, once it has been decoupled from magic, and for understanding the importance and power of ritual in Zen.

Zen masters have often stressed the idea that the state of mind through which ritual or any other practice ought to be performed is a state of “no mind” or “no thought.” At first glance, you may sense irony here, since the most common criticism of religious ritual is that ritual tends to be “mindless” or “thoughtless,” a pointless activity of “going through the motions” as though the appropriate results will emerge magically. But Zen Buddhists mean something very specific by “no mind” since it is commonly identified with the goal of awakening. For Lin-chi, for example, “no mind” is the condition of someone “who has nothing to do,” that is, someone who has transcended all purposes and all striving in a joyful and powerful life of the spirit.

Some Zen rituals, performed in the spirit of meditation or mindfulness, are intended to help practitioners step up out of ordinary thought processes—everything from rational analysis to daydreaming and mental wandering—in order to engage in a discipline of attention that is nonconceptual and focused on the present moment. We might say that these forms of Zen meditation ritual are essentially the exercise or practice of attention in which abstracted states of mind, including important states like purposes, are set aside. In order to stress this goal in meditation, some Zen masters claim that meditative rituals are “nonpurposive,” that is, they are not done for any reason beyond the act of doing them. Therefore, when asked what they are doing or what they hope to accomplish when they are sitting in *zazen*, Sōtō masters will often say that they are “just sitting” (*shikantaza*), and nothing more.

Nevertheless, in spite of the mental intention and attitude of “just sitting” in a purposeless manner, it is not difficult to see that the purpose remains in spite of their disclaimers. Indeed, if you lack the purposes of Zen, you will also lack everything else about Zen, including *zazen*. This is so because the purpose of casting off all purposes in an exalted state of no mind still stands there behind the scenes as the purpose that structures the entire practice, enabling it to make sense and be worth doing from beginning to end. From the point of view of our analysis, the Zen practice of ritual must be mindful, meaningful, and purposive at the same time that practitioners seek to transcend these mental states in an embodied state of no mind. It is also important to remember that *zazen*—the Zen ritual of meditation—is a communal activity. Every practitioner engages in it with a somewhat different purpose in mind, with a slightly different conception of what it means to do Zen, as well as with a wide range of maturity levels between participants. Although all practitioners receive instruction that brings them together as a community or as members of a larger tradition, ways of understanding and going about practice still vary to the extent that individuals vary.

As in other religious traditions, practitioners of Zen Buddhism take great pride and comfort in the ancient origins and genealogy of their rituals. The claim is typically made that their primary ritual practices descended from the early founders of Zen and have not changed substantially over the many centuries since then (see chapters 4 and 8). Monks understand themselves to be practicing the “Pure Rules” of the master Pai-chang, who is credited with establishing the order and procedures for Zen monastic life. The constancy of ritual in daily life—the fact that it always *seems* the same, day after day and year after year—is a source of great comfort and conviction, not just in Zen but in all religions. But that constancy of ritual in daily practice serves to help disguise the reality of change over time (see chapter 9). Although extremely difficult to see from the perspectives of practitioners, historians today have the tools to see how, in fact, Zen ritual has undergone continual transformation over its many centuries of time and in its movement from one culture to another. Studying the history of Zen practice and conception through its substantial archives, historians have begun to document how ritual evolved to suit new historical situations, even when the changes occurring were not noticeable to contemporary practitioners because the ritual order always appeared to maintain the solidity of timeless tradition.<sup>21</sup> Zen practitioners today, however, are beginning to realize that this historical truth about Zen ritual—that it is not timeless and changeless—verifies and upholds the basic Buddhist principle, which is that everything is subject to change, even those things that give the appearance of permanence.<sup>22</sup>

## Chapter Summaries

In order to begin the process of understanding Zen ritual in the long and complex history of its unfolding, essays in this volume hone in on ways that ritual was understood and practiced in particular periods, particular schools, and particular texts. The following is a summary of the essays:

Chapter 1: T. Griffith Foulk's essay, "Ritual in Japanese Zen Buddhism," summarizes the modern scholarly opinion that throughout its history, the Zen tradition rejected religious ritual as a legitimate means of carrying out its unique Buddhist mission and subjects this view to a contemporary historical critique. The author's thesis is that modern Japanese Zen scholars constructed the antiritual theme in Zen in order to make Zen more relevant to the modern age in the eyes of both the ruling elite in Meiji/Taisho Japan and Western intellectuals who tended to be dismissive of religious ritual. Pushed in this direction by their own historical circumstances, modern Zen scholars portrayed the entire Zen tradition as antiritual in basic intent and practice in spite of the historical record that belies this view. Foulk proceeds to describe the history of Zen ritual and presents a catalog description of ritual activities that are practiced in contemporary Sōtō Zen.

Chapter 2: Mario Poceski's essay, "Chan Rituals of the Abbots' Ascending the Dharma Hall to Preach," describes a ritual tradition that clearly goes back to the very beginnings of Zen. These ritual occasions, sometimes daily and at other times less frequent, brought the entire assembly of monks together in a formal ceremony in which the abbot of the monastery would present a sermon on Zen doctrine or practice. One of Poceski's themes is that although these were the occasions most often valorized as expressions of the Zen master's spontaneity, in fact these sermons followed highly stylized and scripted patterns of Zen thought. Only certain doctrines and formats of delivery were appropriate for these sermons, and even the greatest of the early Zen masters rarely diverged from the "pre-existing templates" that were bequeathed to them by their predecessors. Although the talks would sometimes involve transgressions or critiques of the ritual order, in fact they validated and maintained that order by carefully setting their remarks within the all-encompassing sphere of Zen ritual. Poceski's essay carefully describes this ritual context, providing insight into the significance of Zen sermons.

Chapter 3: Albert Welter's essay, "Buddhist Rituals for Protecting the Country in Medieval Japan: Myōan Eisai's 'Regulations of the Zen School,'" provides a concrete analysis of Zen ritual in the earliest stages of Japanese Zen, including an important discussion of the reasons given for the practice

of Zen ritual. Welter's thesis, although it is difficult for us to see this from the perspective of modern Zen, is that the function of ritual in Eisai's account of Zen is to serve the communal needs of the society as a whole and is not primarily a tool in the quest for individual enlightenment. Looking closely at Eisai's seminal text, "Promoting Zen for Protecting the Country," Welter shows the extent to which Zen monasteries were collective enterprises in the service of the moral and social order to the nation. Existing at the will of the Kamakura *bakufu* leaders, Zen institutions sought to fulfill their social/political roles, and one of the most important of these was to conduct rituals for protecting the country. As Welter describes them, Eisai's "sixteen types of ceremonies" show clearly all of the ways in which Eisai sought to fulfill his obligation as a Zen master to the government and to Japanese society as a whole.

Chapter 4: Steven Heine's essay, "Is Dōgen's Eihei Temple 'Mt. T'ien-t'ung East'? Geo-Ritual Perspectives on the Transition from Chinese Ch'an to Japanese Zen," approaches the formative period of the establishment of Zen ritual in Japan based on sources from China by way of the sacred space within which it is conducted. Heine's thesis is that, although it has long been thought that Dōgen sought to design his new Eihei temple after the Sung dynasty Chinese model of Mt. T'ien-t'ung, a study of the ritual layout of both plans reveals more differences than similarities. The "geo-ritual" perspective taken in this study compares how the geographical settings and social environments of the two temple sites affect the way in which they implement Zen ritual. The author's conclusion is that Dōgen did not attempt to duplicate the Chinese model in rural Japan but instead "adjusted it to the Japanese context" by taking local social, political, and economic conditions into account. These differences in the structural layout of the monasteries underscore the conclusion drawn elsewhere that Japanese Zen ritual diverged in a variety of significant ways from the models available in medieval China, even though Zen leaders in Japan typically proclaimed otherwise for the purpose of legitimation.

Chapter 5: Taigen Dan Leighton's essay, "Zazen as an Enactment Ritual," addresses what many today would consider the central ritual of Zen—*zazen*, or seated meditation. Although *zazen* is commonly understood by way of instrumental logic as a means or method for attaining enlightenment, from the Sōtō Zen perspective initiated by Dōgen and featured in this essay, the order of cause and effect is reversed—*zazen* is "the practice-realization of totally culminated awakening." In developing this approach to meditation, Leighton traces its roots to Vajrayana teachings that were influential not simply in Japanese Shingon, but also in Nichiren, Tendai, Jōdo, and Zen.

Upon that Buddhist foundation, the essay develops the “unity of practice and realization” by showing how this theme appears in Dōgen’s instructions for meditation ritual (*Eihei shingi*), in his extended essays (*Shōbōgenzō*), and in direct teachings to his monks (*Eihei kōroku*). The essay claims that when meditation is taken as “the expression or function of buddhas,” rather than as a technique of spiritual acquisition, an emphasis on meditative awareness in everyday life is made possible.

Chapter 6: Paula K. R. Arai’s essay, “Women and Dōgen: Rituals Actualizing Empowerment and Healing,” engages in ethnographic study of rituals practiced by nuns in the contemporary Sōtō sect of Zen. Through surveys and interviews conducted among Sōtō nuns in the Nagoya area of Japan, Arai has articulated the ways in which two quite different rituals “shape, stretch, and define” the identity of participants. Both rituals—*Anan Kōshiki* and *Jizō Nagashi*—seek to evoke in participants an awareness of their own Buddha nature and, along with that, a strong sense of their own free agency and power. Arai finds that the central themes of these two rituals are gratitude and interrelatedness and shows how elements in these sacred ceremonies bring these qualities out in the experience of the women who participate in them. In addition, these themes are linked to Dōgen’s own Zen teachings as a natural expression of his claims about the Buddha nature in all beings.

Chapter 7: Michel Mohr’s essay, “Invocation of the Sage: The Ritual to Glorify the Emperor,” describes the history and contemporary standing of a political ritual practiced in most Japanese Zen monasteries and temples today. This hour-long ritual—*Shukushin* (Invoking the Sage)—is performed at least twenty-six times each year throughout Japan. Mohr’s meticulous research takes us into the distant historical sources of this ritual in China and into the lives of current Japanese Zen ritualists whom the author has interviewed and filmed. Mohr traces the concept of the sage into classical Daoist sources and the practice of rituals on behalf of the well-being and long life of the Emperor through early Chinese Buddhist sources up through the Sung dynasty Ch’an school. Describing the ritual as it is performed today in Japan, the essay shows how continuity of ritual tradition is maintained in Zen even into the postwar era in which the Emperor’s role in maintaining the prosperity and well-being of the nation is minimal.

Chapter 8: David E. Riggs’s essay, “Meditation in Motion: Textual Exegesis in the Creation of Ritual,” seeks to uncover the historical origins of *kinhin*, the ritual of walking meditation as it has been practiced in the Sōtō school of Japanese Zen. Practiced today between periods of *zazen*, the Sōtō style of *kinhin* entails an exceptionally slow pace of walking in order to coordinate each step with a full cycle of respiration. Although Sōtō monks typically attribute this



practice to the founding figure, Dōgen and his teacher in China, Riggs finds the origins of the practice considerably later than this in the eighteenth-century Sōtō leader Menzan Zuihō's writings, the *Kinhinki*, a brief text describing the practice of *kinhin*, and the *Kinhinkimonge*, a commentary connecting this practice to traditional Buddhist texts. Riggs maintains that these two texts are the appropriate historical origins of the now widespread ritual of walking meditation. The essay provides a translation of both texts, as well as a discussion of their contents and implications.

Chapter 9: William M. Bodiford's essay, "Dharma Transmission in Theory and Practice," provides our best example of ritual transformation in the movement of Zen from one culture to another. After describing dharma transmission in East Asia by highlighting the theme of the family explicit in it and then focusing on transmission in the Sōtō school of Japanese Zen, Bodiford describes a newly created ritual for the confirmation of dharma transmission in the Sōtō sect of North America. This ritual—called the Dharma Heritage Ceremony—was constructed by and for Sōtō Zen priests active in North America at the first national conference of the Sōtō Zen Buddhist Association, which was held in 2004 in Oregon. The ritual was created in the recognition of participants that an "accessible Western ceremony" to recognize and confirm dharma transmission was essential to the ongoing success of their Zen practice in North America. In this essay, Bodiford asks, "What issues arise when Zen teachers attempt to transplant these various aspects of dharma transmission into twenty-first-century North America?"

# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

1. T 48.397c.
2. T 47.497b; Ruth Fuller Sasaki, trans., *The Recorded Sayings of the Ch'an Master Lin-chi Hui-chao of Chen Prefecture* (Kyoto: The Institute for Zen Studies, 1975), p. 8.
3. T 47.498b; Sasaki, p. 13.
4. T 47.497c; Sasaki, p. 10.
5. T 47.499b; Sasaki, p. 18.
6. For interpretation and analysis of this film, see Dale S. Wright, "Human Responsibility and the Awakening of Character in the Buddhist Film *Mandala*," *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory, and Culture* 18/3 (2004); and David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim, *Im Kwon-taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002).
7. This phrase is from Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), in chapter 13, appropriately entitled "Ritual Antiritualism." It is worth noting, however, that beyond the stylized narratives in Sung dynasty Chan texts, very few cases or examples of antiritual gestures are known in the historical records. Adherence to proper ritual form was clearly the norm of the period. It is perhaps ironic that this was nowhere more true than in modern Japanese Zen, where the image of the radical Zen iconoclast was so thoroughly valorized.
8. Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, p. 286.
9. On Confucian ritual there are numerous excellent sources, but see especially: Philip J. Ivanhoe and T. C. Kline, eds., *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publications, 2000);

Antonio Cua, *Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); and Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

10. It is worth noting that there is no word in Buddhist languages that corresponds precisely to our word “ritual.” The Japanese *gyōji*, observances, is perhaps closest in connotations.

11. See Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Among other outstanding contemporary work on ritual, see the works of Roy Rappaport and Talal Asad.

12. While this is true of most Zen monasteries, it is not true of the much more numerous Zen temples in Japan today. Although trained in *zazen* in Zen monastic settings, the priests who oversee these temples serve primarily as ritualists for local communities. The connection drawn between these two—monastic meditation training and rituals such as funerals—is that the character and presence of mind developed in meditation provides the sanctity of character required to engage people in their matters of life and death.

13. T. Griffith Foulk, “The Zen Institution in Modern Japan,” in Kenneth Kraft, ed., *Zen: Tradition and Transition* (New York: Grove Press, 1988).

14. Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 168.

15. It is within this context of *kōan* study that we can consider Zen discourse as a ritualized activity. John McRae has shown how early Zen “discussions” between masters or between masters and disciples quickly took on the appearance of ritual. Although “encounter dialogue” was presumed to be the place in Zen where “spontaneity” was most pronounced, McRae shows how these “ritualized exchanges” followed a heavily “scripted recitation-and-response pattern.” See John McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 92–93.

16. On understanding gleaned from empathetic participation in traditions belonging to someone else, see Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

17. Robert H. Sharf, “Ritual,” in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 245–70.

18. On innate enlightenment, see Jacqueline I. Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

19. Stanley Tambiah, *Magic, Science, and Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Stanley Tambiah, “A Performative Approach to Ritual,” in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

20. For example, notice how acts of ritual bowing in Zen embody various forms of understanding. My prostrations before the Zen master embody the deference that

I am learning through the act; they embody a respect for the enlightenment that he has achieved and the humility appropriate to my status. In every act of bowing I understand this in a very physical way, more deeply on each occasion. Similarly, in *zazen*, every time I sit as the Buddha once sat in enlightenment, I practice that state of existence, I perform enlightenment myself, in whatever preliminary and underdeveloped form I am now capable of.

21. On ritual change and the appearance of “invariance,” see Bell, “Invariance,” in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, p. 150.

22. The subject of ritual change is taken up in chapter 9 of this volume, “Dharma Transmission in Theory and Practice.”

## CHAPTER I

1. T. Griffith Foulk, “Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice in Sung Ch’an Buddhism,” in Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, eds., *Religion and Society in T’ang and Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), pp. 147–208; T. Griffith Foulk, “Sung Controversies Concerning the ‘Separate Transmission’ of Ch’an,” in Peter N. Gregory and Daniel Getz, eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), pp. 220–94; and T. Griffith Foulk, “*Chanyuan qinggui* and Other ‘Rules of Purity’ in Chinese Buddhism,” in Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, eds., *The Zen Canon: Understanding the Classic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 275–315.

2. T. Griffith Foulk, “‘Rules of Purity’ in Japanese Zen,” in Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, eds., *Zen Classics: Formative Texts in the History of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 137–49.

3. In the Meiji period, scholars generally accepted the historicity of the traditional (i.e., Song) account of the Chan lineage (*chanzong*), with its list of twenty-eight generations of Indian patriarchs who formed the trunk, as it were, of a Chan family tree that eventually produced five main branches in the late Tang. It was only in the 1930s, with the comparative study of various Dunhuang manuscripts that contained very different versions of the early lineage, that scholars began to realize that the “Zen lineage in India” was a myth invented by the Chinese.

4. The pioneers of the field were scholars such as Sakaino Satoshi (1861–1933), Nukariya Kaiten (1867–1934), Matsumoto Bunzaburō (1869–1944), Suzuki Daisetsu (1870–1966), Yabuki Keiki (1879–1939), Okada Gihō (1882–1961), and Ui Hakuju (1882–1963).

5. Martin Collcutt, “Buddhism: The Threat of Eradication,” in Marius B. Jansen and Gilbert Rozman, eds., *Japan in Transition: From Tokugawa to Meiji* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 143–67.

6. T 51.250c28–251b3. The provenance of the *Regulations of the Chan School* (*Chanmen guishi*) is uncertain, but the earliest evidence for its existence is found in the *Song Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Song gaoseng zhuan*), compiled in 988 (T 50.770c–771a). For an English translation, see T. Griffith Foulk, “The Legend of Baizhang, ‘Founder’ of Chan Monastic Discipline,” in Wm. Theodore de Bary and