Article

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Being Time: Zen, Modernity, the Contemporary

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> …I do not know what meaning classical studies could have for our time if they were not untimely – that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.
>
> Nietzsche, 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life' (1983 [1874]: 60)

It is a sunny Saturday morning in Berkeley, California, late February 2009. At precisely 10:10 a.m., Sojun Roshi (Mel Weitsman), the avuncular, Jewish-born octogenarian abbot of Berkeley Zen Center (BZC), enters the meditation hall [zendo] where fifty mostly college-educated, middle-aged, and middle-class practitioners are seated cross-legged on circular black cushions. He offers a flower bud to the statue of Buddha, settles onto his cushion on a raised platform by the altar, and clips a wireless microphone to the lapel of his brown robes. His students join their hands in gassho, the posture of gratitude: fingertips together, a few inches in front of the nose. They drone:

> An unsurpassed, penetrating and perfect dharma[1]
> Is rarely met with,
> even in a hundred thousand million kalpas.[2]
> Having it to see and listen to,
> to remember and accept,
> I vow to taste the truth
> of the tathagatha's[3] words.

'Good morning,' Sojun Roshi says, beginning the familiar ritual.

'Good morning,' they reply in unison. A warm silence falls over the room.

'Can you hear me?' His microphone crackles. The volunteer technician – Sojun's student and a computer programmer at the nearby University of California – rushes forward to adjust it. 'Well, I always like to come back to our most basic practice,' Sojun continues. 'So this morning I want to talk about shikantaza. We have to keep reminding ourselves of what our practice actually is. And of how we describe it ...'[4]

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Outside the scream of an ambulance streaks by. The world is humming, coming to restless life. His students sit with hands folded in their laps, waiting for advice.

Zen and modern times

Following Weber's 'pedantic custom' (2003: 129), I begin with the material conditions. Sojun Roshi insists that 'we have to keep reminding ourselves of what our practice actually is' as a response to pervasive anxiety in the BZC community. Savings have dried up and jobs have vanished; practitioners' children stress about finishing college and grandchildren wonder when they'll be able to visit. Retirees worry about affording health care; those who can't afford to retire worry that their health won't hold out. Such concerns have become quite typical of the American middle class as the crisis unfolds. But Sojun is less concerned with these material conditions than with their historical preconditions and spiritual implications. By using Zen's vocabulary to re-describe the economic crisis, his lecture on shikantaza – his Japanese Sōtō sect's ideal mode of seated meditation practice – accomplishes a problematization: 'the transformation of a given into a question' (Foucault 2006: 118). Specifically, Sojun problematizes the modern economy's temporal structure. Whereas this economy is centered in the near future, Zen is centered in the present. Whereas economic experience predicates the subject on expectations of what will be, shikantaza grounds her in awareness of what is. The terms in which Sojun frames this contrast are not unique to Zen. As Reinhart Koselleck argues, future-oriented teleological temporality has long characterized modern historicity itself. This meta-historical problem informs my genealogical reading of Sojun's remarks.[5]

Yet Sojun's contrast of Zen with modern time – 'untimely,' in Nietzsche's sense – does not end his problematization of modernity by categorically opposing it to Zen tradition. Rather, he considers the temporal structure of the modern economy to be always already active within his students' bodies when they practice meditation. For Sojun, the vital rhythms of a breathing body, seated upright on a black cushion, are structured by two temporalities. He calls them 'inhalation' and 'exhalation.' In phenomenological terms, inhalation corresponds to the temporality of 'intention' and exhalation to the temporality of 'attention.' Intention, like the economy, is self-centered, oriented towards the future, and discriminates between the self and its object. In contrast, the temporality of attention is non-teleological. It re-orients to the present, 'lets go' of the future, and brings subject and object into pure and immediate harmony. For Sojun, the body's normal state oscillates between intention and attention. But the modern economy, especially in times of crisis, creates an imbalance – it pushes the body towards intention and shortens its exhalation. Only shikantaza can re-balance mind, breath, and subject. By restoring attention to a world of intention, Zen practice counteracts crisis with mindful awareness of the present moment.

So far, so good. But why, for Sojun, can the Sōtō Zen subject achieve this harmony of shikantaza – this temporary suspension of the ego in time? When he answers this question, his problematization of the economic crisis itself becomes problematic. Rather than simply say that shikantaza naturally results from a calm inner state, he implies that it actualizes a universal and natural normative ideal ('suchness', shinnyo). He then grounds 'suchness' in a contestable interpretation of Buddhist ontology. To Sojun, the subject's 'essence of mind' or 'true self' is the ontological ground which allows her to embody the 'suchness' of shikantaza – free from the mediations of language or concepts. Yet 'essence of mind' in Sōtō Zen is itself a historically contingent term and concept with specific implications. In Japan's recent Critical Buddhist movement, its universalistic, anti-critical, and nihilistic discursive function has been bitterly contested.

Because of other contextual differences, I'll show, Critical Buddhism is not highly salient to the US. But it reveals one problem that American and Japanese Sōtō Zen still share, despite their

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growing differences. This, too, is a problem of temporality. Terms like ‘essence of mind’ refer to a naturalist ontology,[6] grounded in the notion that enlightenment is already contained within the subject. In practice, naturalist metaphors set this self to work on itself in a relation of ‘potential’ to ‘actual.’ The subject realizes himself as the immanent form of a pre-given transcendent ideal. This naturalism tends to marginalize the specifically historical dimensions of modern being. Although historical events – such as the economic crisis – prompt the invocation of norms like ‘suchness’, their ground (the mind’s ‘essence’) is, itself, excluded from historical change. This helps the tradition to reproduce itself but not to live up to its own radical rhetoric – the nonidentity at the heart of all being.

To rectify this conservative tendency, I’ll conclude by reflecting on two practices that are parallel to Zen Buddhism: Nietzsche’s *Betrachtung* and Rabinow’s ‘anthropology of the contemporary’. Both modes of inquiry – adjacent to the ‘potential/actual’ mode – share a temporal sensibility which examines and re-imagines a ‘virtual’ subject of modern problems. How might a virtual subject look at modern time, *in* modern times, for the benefit of a time to come?

‘Experience’ and ‘expectation’: The temporality of modernity

In his essay collection *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time*, Reinhart Koselleck defines ‘experience’ and ‘expectation’ (2004a: 255–275) as ‘purely formal’ and ‘metahistorical’ categories. Together, these categories mark the boundaries of any historical subjectivity. They ‘indicate an anthropological condition without which history is neither possible nor conceivable’. As these categories also ‘embody past and future,’ any historical temporality can be defined by how it relates them. Experience is the space of lived memory, ‘present past’. It is a reservoir of events stored in traditions, institutions, and individuals. Expectation is an empty yet active possibility, ‘the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced’.[7] Koselleck argues that modernity as an epoch [*die Neuzeit*] can be seen as a new temporality [*eine neue Zeit*] in which expectations separate from, and begin to dominate, experience. The past no longer dictates the future; the future acquires a new capacity to absorb and transform the past. Whereas medieval experience was bounded by a static temporality, limited by the ultimate horizon of the eschaton, modernity has fractured this tradition’s time, adding the ‘coefficient’ of ‘acceleration’. A new space of the ‘near-future’ has opened up. In this space, ‘rational prognosis,’ rather than apocalyptic ‘prophecy,’ becomes the dominant mode of making truth-claims.[8] Koselleck attributes such shifts to ‘persistent structures of the modern age which may be seen as elements of a historical anthropology: the sense that we are being sucked into an unknown future, the pace of which has kept us in a constant state of breathlessness …’ (1988: 3) This modern near-future is a self-perpetuating, hegemonic teleology whose prognostications bear a familiar name: progress.

Although this argument is hardly novel for critics of modern meta-history,[9] it may surprise these critics to see Sōtō Zen priests among their ranks. Seated at the BZC altar in lotus position under his long brown robes, Sojun is framed by two faces: Eihei Dōgen (the Sōtō sect’s thirteenth-century founder) and Shunryu Suzuki (Sojun’s famous teacher who, during the Flower Power era, popularized Zen in the Bay Area and beyond). Sojun constantly invokes Suzuki and Dōgen in his teaching. As he reads aloud, Suzuki’s voice blends almost seamlessly with his own:

> So [long pause while Sojun opens a book, wrapped in a silk cover brocaded with Japanese motifs] Suzuki Roshi describes shikantaza in this way. He says, ‘shikantaza, our zazen, is just to be ourselves’.[10] Well, that’s an interesting statement. How do you ‘just be yourself’? [Suzuki:] ‘When we do not expect anything we can be ourselves.’ How do we actually be in this moment, without expecting something in the next

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> moment? I call this 'unassuming mind'. Unassuming mind means that your mind is totally open like a mirror and, whatever crosses in your path is seen, but there's no expectation of grasping, no expectation of 'what's next'. This is called 'calmness of mind'. [Suzuki:] 'This is our way to live fully in each moment of time. And this practice continues forever …'

Here, Sojun and Suzuki define shikantaza as the antithesis of modern 'expectation'. Shikantaza is the practice of being only and entirely whatever one is doing right now. In the case of zazen [seated meditation], this is to remain upright, breathe and watch the flow of mental representations and physical stimuli.[11] Shikantaza, Sojun says, 'means "just-sitting"'.[12] Rather than expect another experience, in shikantaza the subject perceives (or, Sojun might say, 'receives') the present's arising and falling, like the rising and falling of the breath. The ego's demands are briefly released. Rather than grasp for a desired object, the subject is encouraged to hold each moment as lightly as her thumbs in her lap: not pressed together, not separate.

By contrast to modernity's expectant temporality – especially in a historical moment of crisis – shikantaza acquires a new, untimely force. During silent retreats at BZC, as their middle-aged bodies begin to rebel against long hours of attempted shikantaza, Sojun's students might yearn to make conference calls, sell stocks, or at least check e-mail. But in the practice of shikantaza, physically and economically motivated restlessness are placed on the same plane. They are elements of 'expectation' to be subsumed within experience, rather than allowed to overwhelm it. As the English Zen teacher Jiyu-Kennett says, fidgeting during zazen is 'a measure of the ego that remains unconverted' (in Loori 2002: 99). i Phones are banned from retreats. Gainful employment is replaced by mindful labor like cleaning toilets and peeling carrots, restricted to 'the time in which the task can be completed mindfully'. Every other activity – chanting, bowing, walking, cooking, serving food and eating in ritual style [oryoki] – is equally formalized and temporally limited, allowing students to devote themselves to their experience. This rhythm of intense and constrained activity is punctuated by a bell which calls students into private interviews [dokusan] with Sojun in a tiny hut by the zendo. During these interviews, Sojun may ask how they are doing, but their verbal explanations have little bearing on his diagnosis. The dokusan hut allows only the barest interiority; the whole mind is legible on the body. Neither past trauma nor good intentions exempt the subject from being seen in her actuality. Sojun focuses most acutely on the form of the student's activity – her posture, punctuality, fidgeting, etc. With trained sensitivity to how the mover's being manifests in her motion, he takes the 'measure' of the student's ego and interprets its implications for her life outside BZC. Sojun may conclude the dokusan with cryptic remarks: a paradoxical apothegm [kōan] or an aphorism (tengo, 'turning word').[13] By meditating on these enigmas the student is, at the very least, distracted from her habitual expectations, desires, resistances, and doubts.

In the context of this pedagogical practice, perhaps we can better understand why Sojun initially frames his diagnosis of his students' collective condition by creating a meta-historical dichotomy between the modern era ('the dream of expectations') and shikantaza's lucid vision:

> So I think about [shikantaza] a lot because we have a lot of expectations. We build up a kind of dream of expectations and then we buy into our expectations and then when we can't fulfill our expectations we have suffering …

For Sojun, the 'dream of expectations' refers not simply to the economy but to American society writ large (he often laments 'the dream of the pursuit of happiness'[14]). When his students 'buy into' this dream – when they try to ground their experience in expectation – they become attached to the future. However, because the future, by definition, is contingent, this stance inevitably leads to suffering.[15] Only the cataleptic presence of shikantaza can counter-act modernity's proleptic future.

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In summary, it seems that Sojun is arguing for a meta-historical opposition, rather than any mediation, between Zen and modern times. Modernity inscribes the subject in a linear history that is driven towards its imminent end, whereas Zen anchors the ethical efficacy of both past and future in the present. While historicity per se is not necessarily opposed to Zen, modern historicity clearly is. Now, however, Sojun's lecture will shift from this general diagnosis to a specific prescription for Zen's ideal relation to this modern moment of crisis. In the process, he will make possible a mediation between Zen and modern times. For Sojun, they are opposed but not distinct. In fact, their mediation is latent in the very structure of Zen meditation.

'Intention' and 'attention': A phenomenological temporality

Thus far, we have heard Sojun oppose Zen to modernity in meta-historical terms. But the extent of his opposition is not yet clear. We are not sure if the problem is only the temporality of modern historicity or if it is intrinsic to all modes of historical existence. Surprisingly, as Sojun begins to show how Zen responds to the problem of modern 'expectation,' his stark dichotomy starts to fluctuate. Zen and the economy partake of a common denominator: the human body.

> When we have plenty, then we get drawn in through having plenty. And when we don't have plenty anymore, that dream bursts. And then we downsize. Nature downsizes. Nature is always expanding and downsizing, expanding and downsizing. When animals have a lot of range and food and so forth, the herd expands. And when there's a drought, when there are various conditions that don't support the herd, the herd contracts … so we have the dream of expansion, and when the dream of expansion is over we have to contract in order to survive and not be caught by either one. And simply [say to ourselves], 'Now it's time to reduce. Now it's time to conserve. Now it's time to eat one meal a day.' Without. Suffering. Over it.

By describing the economy as a natural process, and his students as embodied, natural beings, Sojun makes possible a mediation between Zen and modernity. His phrase 'nature downsizes' (his emphasis) is an especially crucial in this regard. He knows that many students associate the term 'downsizing' with Bay Area corporations. As some will murmur during tea in the courtyard after his lecture, they have lost their jobs due to corporate downsizing or their real estate investments due to market 'contraction'. For Sojun to insist that they need to downsize and contract (to 'eat one meal a day') is a bold pedagogical move. It can rise above the merely didactic, however, only if he can relate his students to the economic process, rather than oppose them to it. Sojun deepens this medi(t)ation by reminding his students that breathing, like the economy, is a natural rhythm of 'expansion' and 'contraction':

> Shikantaza means 'just-this. just-now. just-here.' Without thinking about the past or thinking about the future. It's simply being totally present, in the present, at this time. It's where time and space meet. The moment where time and space meet. And we can experience that most clearly through breathing. I talk about this all the time [he laughs]. Inhaling is inspiration, or coming to life, which is differentiation. Exhaling is letting go, called expiration, which is 'becoming-one-with'. So in expiration we let go and become one with the universe, without differentiation. And when we inhale, we discriminate and come to life, bringing all the forms to life. Inhaling is differentiated samadhi [concentration]; exhaling is the samadhi of oneness. These are the two sides of our life, which is birth and death. Inhaling we come to life, which is called 'birth'. And exhaling we come to life, which is called 'death' or 'letting-go-and-becoming-one-with'. Dying is 'becoming-one-with'. Birth is called 'differentiation'. These are the two sides of one coin. The two sides of our life … So this pulse of in and out, being born and letting go, is actually our life. Continuous life …

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These pivotal remarks transpose the field of Sojun's problematization of modernity from meta-historical categories to his students' own bodies. His diagnosis of modernity's temporality has undergone a radical shift. No longer is the problem simply the modern near-future's dominance over Zen's pure presence. Rather, zazen practice brings together both temporalities in the subject's body at each singular, yet perpetually reiterated, moment. The logic of shikantaza remains distinct from the logic of modernity but, rather than a mere opposition, the dialectical synthesis of these two logics now constitutes the subject as a whole.

In order to sketch the full scope of this mediation, it may be useful to re-describe the temporal structure of shikantaza in terms borrowed from the Western[16] phenomenological tradition. Indeed, Sojun's relation between 'inhalation' and 'exhalation' closely corresponds to the interplay between what Merleau-Ponty identified as two temporalities which co-operate in the act of perception: 'intention' and 'attention'.[17] These temporalities combine three key ingredients of subjectivity: embodiment (which, in zazen, is circumscribed by posture, eye gaze, and breath), perception, and self-consciousness. Intention and attention lend an integrated, mutually re-enforcing structure to the subject's mind, body, and percepts. Their temporal dialectic synthesizes both Zen and modern temporalities in an emergent sense of self, albeit a self without fixed characteristics.

For Merleau-Ponty, 'intention' is a mode of time which, 'in the certitude of the present … outruns the presentness of the present'. Driven by its will to positive existence, the mind's intentional mode '… posits [the present] in advance as an indubitable 'former present' in the series of recollections'. Like Koselleck's accelerating teleological time of modern historicity, 'intention' defers the present to the future. It thereby strips the present of presence, extracting it from lived time's indeterminate, inherently relational flux (Bergsonian 'duration'). Via the act of perception, intention enables a one-sided sense of 'objectivity' and 'unity of the ego'. Intention fixes the ego in an arbitrary point that is external to experience. Then it creates a temporal continuum around this point, along which rational method and progress can (breathlessly) proceed.[18] To rephrase this process in Sojun's terms, 'inhaling is differentiation': between present and future, subject and object. Drawing a breath in the present implies its future release. Further, it demarcates a form; it separates this ego/organism, in whom this air is contained, from air itself, from the local context, and from other life-forms. As Sojun says, 'when we inhale we discriminate and come to life, bringing all the forms to life'. The human form marks a 'discrimination' – an ego imposed between moments when the breath is (briefly) held, an organism struggling for the gap between spirit and world, inside and outside – the gap where it is still (fleetingly) a discrete individual.[19]

Yet the very structure of this discrimination necessitates and contains its opposite. As BZC students say when they chant the Heart Sutra twice daily in the zendo: 'form is emptiness, emptiness is form'. After inhalation, the ego's tense and objective self-determination slackens. The body comes to rest at a still point: 'oneness'. This 'expanding and downsizing' motion of the breath is what Sojun often calls 'the life and death of each moment.' Between life and death 'is actually our life. Continuous life …'[20] Inhalation dissolves into exhalation as intention unfolds into 'attention'.

Merleau-Ponty defines 'attention' as a 'still "empty" but already determinate intention'. Like intention, attention is 'determinate' insofar as it is an active rather than a passive state. Yet it is empty because, unlike intention, it does not presume a future to which the present already refers and hence can be deferred. Attention functions as a determinate factor in perception via three moments. First, it reverses the vector of intention's temporality. Rather than fix a discrete ego, an ego which can itself perceive other objects in a linear sequence of before/after, 'the first operation of attention is to create for itself a field … which can be "surveyed"'. In this field, the body

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functions as the subject's corporeal schema. Rather than simply posit her 'self' at a non-existent point, from which time and experience proceed, the subject's corporeal schema acts both as her filtration system for sensory data or 'givens' [*données*] and as her mechanism for interpreting these data in the form of perceptions. Second, by mapping the world onto her corporeal schema, the subject's attention transforms her perceptual space. From an indistinct 'horizon,' objects of perception become 'figures' in a field. Each figure is a distinct event in consciousness which relates the so-called given elements of perception according to an 'original structure'.[21] Third, attention strings together serial figurations of the given; each new figure erases old data and passes into the next. Just as a film's rapid-fire images create an illusion of movement, this 'transition-synthesis'[22] results in the primacy not only of perception but also of 'consciousness' as an integral whole.[23] The result of attention, in addition to more acute perception, is a paradoxical inner unity on the level of the subject – a unity which can determine things without determining itself. The subject arises as a tacit continuity suspended between moments as one passes into the next. Not a particular state of mind but this fluid movement between states, 'this passage from the indeterminate to the determinate, this recasting at every moment of its own history in the unity of a new meaning, is thought itself'. Thus, in remarkably Hegelian fashion, Merleau-Ponty depicts a dialectical evolution from a vague horizon to a corporeal field, which makes it possible to figure sensory data as perceptual objects, leading to the ultimate sublation of these discrete objects in their integral (albeit unspecified or 'empty') ground of self-consciousness.

One instance of how this 'transition-synthesis' functions in practice is quite comparable to Sojun's understanding of shikantaza. When a spot on the body is touched, Merleau-Ponty says, consciousness must be able to focus on the spot's exact location without, so to speak, forgetting itself along the way. Consciousness can do so by taking all of its perceptions of that spot, except for its location, as a merely contingent 'appearance'. Thus the location of the spot (as opposed to the perception of it) becomes the sole 'invariant' of a subject who represents it to himself in varying forms. 'The act of attention can localize this invariable factor because the subject has stepped back from the changes of appearance'. We could even say that this precise determination, enacted by attention, creates the spot. It isolates a single figure in the, so to speak, willfully indeterminate corporeal field. In Hegelian terms, the spot becomes a figure in itself only when it emerges for consciousness. Consciousness, in turn, appears as a bounded yet flexibly underspecified whole.

Similarly, during zazen instruction at BZC, subjects are trained to attend to five spots on their corporeal schema: their 'sit-bones,' firmly supporting them on the cushion; their hands, folded softly in 'the cosmic mudra'; their spine, held straight to allow the breath to flow freely; the base of their diaphragm [hara] where air is circulated; their nostrils, where the sensation of breath flows in and out. Students often talk about 'putting more energy into my mudra' when they get distracted, or straightening their spines when they get tired, or 'coming into my hara' when they feel the breath grow short and frantic. Most often, they talk about 'returning to the breath,' which gradually becomes synonymous with (as Sojun says) 'being totally present, in the present, at this time'. As they settle into shikantaza, they may experience moments when their horizon contracts to a single spot: their nostrils, first Biblical figure of human life. The sensation of each inhalation and exhalation, as well as the slight pauses between them, are vividly foregrounded against an otherwise indifferent field – their still bodies. They enter into a state that Dōgen called 'dropping off of body and mind' [shinjin-datsuraku], a state that evokes a vivid sense of themselves as alive. In shikantaza, an embodied rhythm becomes the medium through which the mind perceives the world. By actively perceiving the breath not as a sensory datum but as the single figure holding it in an integrated whole, consciousness becomes, so to speak, guaranteed by its own life. As Sojun writes of

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shikantaza, 'If you put yourself totally into an activity, the universe meets you and confirms you and there's no gap between you and the universe' (in Loori 2002: 148). A tautological subject/object bond has been sealed; in Hegelian terms, the identity of identity and non-identity or, in Sōtō Zen terms, the 'harmony of sameness and difference' [sandokai].[24]

In summary, this dialectical temporality of intention/attention or inhalation/exhalation counteracts Koselleck's modern dialectic of expectation and experience. It does so in three ways, none of which require Sojun to meta-historically oppose Zen to modernity. On the contrary, all three dialectical counter-actions incorporate the temporality of modernity within the meditative body, making possible a mediation between these two temporal ontologies. First, shikantaza absorbs 'expectation' by re-defining it as a natural but one-sided 'expansion' of the breath. The moment of expansion or inhalation, at which expectation arises, becomes a natural, albeit temporary, phase of the body's normal functioning. Second, shikantaza tempers inhalation's ego-centric edge by exhalation's release – in other words, by death. Intention's discontinuous continuum – the timeline along which investments, projects, and expectations are plotted – is smoothed over by attention's constant contraction. Third, these two temporalities do not simply co-exist side by side. They entail a common ground, which is, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, 'consciousness,' in Sojun's terms, 'essence of mind,' or, in everyday terms, the 'self'. Like the breathing body as it inhales and exhales air, this empty set of particular perceptions is an indeterminate yet bounded vital whole. It mediates intention and attention without identifying them. Its circular temporality preserves phenomena in their difference, negates them, synthesizes their transitions, and sublates them as figures of its own unity. In each inhalation, the subject's drive to do arises; in each exhalation, the object of this doing ebbs back into subtle awareness of what is. Between the mind's systolic and diastolic movements pulses a faint sense of itself.

'Suchness' and 'essence of mind': The troubled ground of Sōtō Zen ontology

In the above phenomenological account of shikantaza, we have seen how Sojun mediates Zen and modernity by reducing both of their temporalities to a common term: the body. In the body, these two temporalities' apparent contradictions actually re-enforce each other. Nor does their dialectic simply cancel itself out. Rather, it confirms the encircling totality of a mind which senses itself to be the ground against which embodiment and percepts are figured, without knowing its own topography or even its exact locale. Yet as we witness this ground (what Sojun has evocatively called the self's 'total confirmation by the universe') arising from shikantaza, anyone who is familiar with Buddhist doctrine may grow justifiably suspicious. How can a tradition which arose as a radical defense of selflessness and a critique of intrinsic nature [atman] yield a 'consciousness' or 'self'? Why is it necessary to ground the experience of shikantaza in any ontology – let alone in the Being of a self that pertains to the individual subject as such?

It would be too easy to resolve this contradiction by falling back on Sartre's doctrine, 'existence precedes essence,' or Heidegger's, 'phenomenology is prior to ontology,' thereby implying that the truth of Being can be deduced from the structure of experience. It is even more tempting to treat Zen as a pure phenomenology and to forego its consequences for Being as such, if only because (following the Zen tradition's anti-intellectual rhetoric) we may suspect that these consequences arise solely from our ex post facto rationalization of a meditative experience that requires no defense or critique. Sojun himself, like many Zen authorities, might even endorse this view. As he often says, 'being and time are the same.' Phenomenology and ontology are co-extensive and overlapping domains, so the lived immediacy of the former renders abstract theories about the latter

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irrelevant.[25] Along the same lines, though Sojun does give a definition of shikantaza to his students, he insists in the same breath that this definition should not be taken to reify the relation to which this ideal refers or limit the scope of experience that it can encompass. 'Shikantaza is described in various ways. But it's elusive as a description because it's not a thing. It's our total presence. Shikantaza is our total presence, moment to moment'. True shikantaza can even contain what might appear to be its absolute Other: conceptual, rational, teleological, or sequential thought.[26] However, despite this clear preference for what Faure has called the 'rhetoric of immediacy,' phenomenology has no more priority in Zen than it does in Western philosophy. Just as the insights of the historical Buddha are said to have arisen from his meditative experience, scholars have also located these insights within partially reconstructed ontological debates in his own historical moment. A fortiori, any account of zazen practice which draws consequences about Being from the experience of meditation will also reflect a historical position in such debates, rather than a pure description of what occurs in the practice itself. Thus, ontology, historically defined, is prior to phenomenology.[27]

The fact that we can resolve this problem both ways suggests it has been wrongly posed. If we return to the field of social practice wherein these conceptual oppositions are effective, we see that Sojun (perhaps aiming to overcome their contradiction) is himself dissatisfied with a merely phenomenological Zen, with only telling his students how 'total presence' is possible and how it functions. He goes on to say why. In so doing, he assigns an ontological ground to his students' experience of zazen where their vague 'self' acquires a local habitation and a name.

"Shikantaza is our total presence, moment to moment. This is why it is the essence of zazen. And it's simply to be at one with our essence of mind. As the Sixth Ancestor Hui-neng says, 'We should never stray from our essence of mind'. Our practice is not straying from our essence of mind. Dōgen calls this shikantaza …"

Remarkably, it seems that, for Sojun, his students' capacity to experience shikantaza is not grounded in the central Mahayana Buddhist concept, emptiness [śūnyatā]. Rather, it is grounded in 'essence of mind,' an essence that he also calls the 'true self' and in Sōtō Zen is often called 'Buddha-nature' or 'original enlightenment'. Despite their various connotations, in Sōtō Zen discourse, all of these terms have the same function. They predicate the subject's experience on an unchanging and pure substratum. Below is the absolute and atemporal reality; above is the relative reality of the subjective and phenomenal realm.[28] This is the structure of the doctrine of tathāgata-garbha: the 'seed,' 'matrix,' 'womb,' or 'embryo' of Buddha-hood. Often in Sōtō Zen, by mobilizing this doctrine, the lived experience of meditation – in which perceived phenomena acquire a clarity that seems to confirm the self in the image of the universe – is cited as proof of the essential 'suchness' [tathātā] at the root of all contingent things.[29] Even when this ground/essence is then proclaimed to be 'empty,' it retains a trace of positivity when we observe how it functions in relation to other ontological claims. Some Buddhist emptinesses, it seems, are less empty than others.[30]

In recent years, tathāgata-garbha doctrine has come under attack from two respected textual historians at Tokyo's Komazawa University, the national center for Buddhist education and research. Hakamaya Noriaki (a former Sōtō priest) and Matsumoto Shirō maintain that 'tathāgata-garbha is not Buddhist'.[31] They go so far as to argue that, insofar as it is based on tathāgata-garbha, Zen is 'not Buddhism'.[32] For Matsumoto, tathāgata-garbha notions like 'essence of mind' are dhātu-vāda: 'a singular, real locus that gives rise to a plurality of phenomena'.[33] Matsumoto translates dhātu-vāda (his own Sanskrit neologism) as topos, in Vico's sense of a foundational locus for the predication of truth. Hakamaya follows him in this critique of topos, opposing 'critical Buddhism' to 'topical philosophy'.[34] Hakamaya affirms his faith in reflexive critique rather than reified topoi. He even redefines 'enlightenment' as 'thinking'. The cultural stakes of this

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confrontation between Critical Buddhism and mainstream Sōtō Zen are more evident in their Japanese context. Hakamaya and Matsumoto argue that dhātu-vāda notions have been abused with dramatic consequences. They draw strong links between tathāgata-garbha doctrine, ethnic discrimination,[35] and the ideology of 'Japanism' [nihonshugi].[36] Other scholars have supported these claims, linking dhātu-vāda ideas – both in Sōtō Zen (Sharf 1993; Victoria 1997) and in Kyoto School philosophy (Kōjin 2005)[37] – to Japanese imperialism.

Of course, however important these debates may be in Japan, they entail nothing about the social stakes of Sojun's remarks on the economic crisis in Berkeley today. American Zen has evolved through a distinct 'history of ethical problematizations' (Foucault 1990: 13). As in Sojun's dharma talk about the economic crisis, American Buddhists have often used tathāgata-garbha doctrine in order to respond to Western social problems, rather than to veil them.[38] Nevertheless, insofar as both Sojun and his Japanese counterparts assert that the mind does contain an inner essence, they both continue to rely on the foundational ontology that Dōgen critiqued in his time as 'naturalism ... the idea that ... enlightenment is inherent in the mind and reality is all-inclusive in any case ...' (Cleary 1993: 27). As Cleary continues, for Dōgen, 'naturalism' in medieval Japan posed a problem because it offered an excuse to avoid 'cultivation and realization.'[39] Still in Japan today, Matsumoto contends, '"naturalism" leads nowhere but to the natural state of doing nothing' (1997: 403). Yet, as above, when we extend the comparison to the US a key difference in social context becomes apparent. Despite his apparently naturalistic ontology, Sojun does not deny the need for self-cultivation. He often makes the paradoxical claim that enlightenment is 'original' yet only realizable in practice.[40]

Let us summarize our comparison of the foundational, naturalist doctrine of *tathāgata-garbha* in Japanese and American Sōtō Zen. Given that this doctrine is shared by both traditions, yet plays different and even divergent social roles, we should pursue our critique of its ontological implications not by conflating these social roles of each but by characterizing philosophically the problem that it poses. In order to reinscribe this characterization in the broader arc of our argument, we should assess the specifically historical mode of being that a subject who dedicates herself to this specific Zen ontology will be able, or unable, to inhabit.

Recall that, in Sojun's meta-historical critique of modern historicity's 'expectant' temporality, it was unclear whether he was arguing against historical ontology in general or against the linear teleology of modern historicity in particular. At this juncture – although he does not say so – it seems that Sojun has taken the former, stronger position. 'Essence of mind' assumes the absolute temporality of a transcendental, hence ahistorical, ideal. As in English, the sense of 'original' in 'original enlightenment' [hongaku shiso] is both temporally prior and ontologically a priori. Through the practice shikantaza, the Zen subject is seen to evolve from essence to 'actualization' [shigaku]. It seems that for Sojun, just as for the Awakening of Mahayana Faith (the earliest text in which this sense of 'original' is attested),

> 'original enlightenment' indicates [the essence of Mind (*a priori*)] in contradistinction to [the essence of Mind in] the process of actualization of enlightenment; the process of actualization of enlightenment is none other than [the process of integrating] the identity with the original enlightenment. (Hakeda, 1967: 37)

Hence, Zen 'enlightenment' is represented as (in Foucault's terms) the subject's experience of 'recollection'.[41] The self recalls itself to itself; by actualizing its innate potential, their relation, already original, becomes originary. This apotheosis of enlightenment posits the subject as an object; it retrieves the positive kernel, or 'essence of mind', at the core of her being.

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We have found the relevant philosophical problem. If enlightenment is an essence located within the individual, whither her historicity? It seems difficult to reconcile this naturalist ontology of *tathāgata-garbha* with any historical ontology. Clearly, *qua* essence, the Mind is unavailable to conditioning by contingent factors, such as the structure of its historical epoch's temporality. Temporality is no longer linked to the natural rhythm of phenomenological existence but to a (merely) relative level of ontology, as opposed to a more fundamental atemporal essence. Thus, the subject's experience of shikantaza testifies not so much to the present moment as to pure, ahistorical immediacy.

While we may be loath to assert the primacy of any historicity (let alone modernity's), one can imagine that various ethical problems might stem from an ontology which is so devoutly antihistorical. How can a naturalized subject such as the Sōtō Zen student accommodate transformative differences into the structure of her being – whether these differences come from social Others, collective values, or historical 'events'?[42] Lacking such differences, how can her Being change? By thus equating the 'historical' and the 'relative,' Sōtō Zen seems to have transformed its 'essence of mind' into a topos both prior to and outside of time.

Untimely meditations: Towards a virtual subject

I have not taken up Sōtō Zen in order to critique it in the only terms in which it should be – its own. This would require me to account for further contradictory variables and to arbitrate debates in a tradition that, following its own tenets and Groucho Marx's famous aphorism regarding a club and its members, I respect too much to identify with my self. Instead, in closing, let us try to reimagine Zen's naturalist doctrine, not as an irrevocably timeless and ahistorical ideal of Being, but as an untimely reflection of the fundamental problem of modern historicity with which we began. Like *tathāgata-garbha*, the potential-actual axis – a search for origins and hidden meanings, an evolutionary or progressive teleology – has long characterized modern narratives of self-knowledge. Today, how can a new mode of inquiry in the human sciences reflect this abuse of history? In what form of time could thinking through a tradition such as Zen help to reimagine a historical subject who does not actualize a natural potential, realize an essence, or reveal an origin?

Nietzsche offers one approach in the very title of his *Untimely Meditations* [*Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*]. Whereas Betrachtung is often translated as 'observation', according to Duden its root trachten meant 'to consider, mull over, strive after'. In Middle High German, this root acquired a reflective connotation (similar to *nachdenken* but more active). In the nineteenth century, according to the Grimms, the word retained both senses. 'To consider, to contemplate,' rendered reflexive, became 'to consider oneself or think of oneself as …' Lest it be confused with passive 'meditation' – a common misunderstanding of meditation – Betrachtung is perhaps better translated as 'purposively oxymoronic "vigorous contemplation"' with a 'refractory intent' (Redfield in Rabinow 2009: 27). For Nietzsche, the temporality of Betrachtung was 'an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one' (1983 [1874]: 61). Like life itself, human being moves in time; it requires not identification with a position but quick adaptation to the actual. This sense of 'history' – striving after oneself through thought, shifting posture and focus as things change – is central to Nietzsche's 'critical history' for the sake of 'life'. Unlike the pomp of 'monumental' origins or the 'antiquarian' reverence for cultural relics, 'history' in the critical mode is a measure not of ego but of

> the plastic power of a man, a people, a culture … the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to replace broken moulds. (1983 [1874]: 62)

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Unlike the strictly negative work of criticism-as-denunciation – usually in the service of an abstract, idealized telos – Betrachtung embodies a mode of time which could mediate Zen tradition with modernity. It reflects on today's problems from untimely angles in order to refract them in a new direction.

Similarly, just down the street from Sojun's untimely meditations, at the University of California Berkeley, a fieldwork-based mode of Betrachtung is under construction – Paul Rabinow's collaborative 'anthropology of the contemporary'.[43] The temporality of this post-methodological inquiry has been described as a 'mode of virtual untimeliness' (Rabinow 2008: 49). For Rabinow (following Deleuze) a mode of virtuality is 'adjacent' to a mode of potentiality.[44] Its mode of thought inverts the potential-actual temporality, aiming 'not to look within but to be constantly working out' (2008: 50). In a virtual space adjacent to history – the 'contemporary' or 'the recent past becoming the near future' – an untimely inquiry refracts both traditional and modern times. It does so, not in order to confront modernity-as-epoch with the past's diversity (a classic anthropological move) but in order to fracture modernity's seamlessly linear and progressive expectations. In the process, the contemporary reveals diverse strata of traditional temporality still circulating within so-called modern times. The same present elements ('facts'), it shows, could be assembled according to different principles. Taken up from this new angle, 'tradition' and 'modernity' re-appear as 'moving ratios of the past' rather than as distinct epochs (Rabinow 2008: 2). Like anthropologist and informant, they remain of different times, in the same moment: the co-presence of an eternally imperfect tense. Just as Sojun Roshi says of shikantaza, 'If we say, there's no self, that's not quite right. If we say, there's a self, that's not quite right. So it's neither one nor the other nor in between'. Not the closure of any particular historical identity but this disciplined adjacency to a series of its fluctuating figures will keep our thinking, inspired by time, both present and in motion.

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Notes

1. This term has at least two dominant senses: 'phenomenon'; 'law' or 'teaching.'
2. A Vedic eon.
3. An appellation of the Buddha; cf. n. 29 below.
4. After I wrote this essay from shorthand field-notes, the students posted Sojun's lecture on their website (28.02.2009): berkeleyzencenter.org. Ellipses indicate my edits; his remarks are cited with his permission.
5. Like Foucault and Nietzsche, I see 'genealogy' as a para-history: a practice of diachronic inquiry opposed not to history but to the 'ideal deployment of meta-historical significations and indefinite teleologies' (Foucault 1977: 140).
6. I am not referring to the diverse connotations of the term 'naturalism' in Western thought. For the purposes of this essay, 'naturalism' should be understood only in the sense of the Zen thinkers discussed below.
7. In a more strictly semantic approach, Koselleck develops his concept of the 'space of experience' [Erfahrungsraum] through a genealogy of the term 'Geschichte' (Koselleck, Conze et al. 2004b: 647–658). Also note Ricoeur's use of these two categories (1985: 308–309).
8. To be exact, it is a 'future that is not exactly controllable, not precisely measured or measurable.' The management of this open future 'is pretty much the essential characteristic of the mechanism of security' (Foucault 2007: 20).
9. e.g. Rancière (1994); de Certeau (1988).

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10. Sojun is citing Suzuki's dharma talk, 'Calmness of Mind' (in Suzuki 2002: 5–7).
11. The second-century Mahayana Buddhist Nāgārjuna made this point in his account of causality when he insisted that the being of a 'mover' is not distinct from her 'moving' (cf. Garfield 1995: 124–135).
12. The literal meaning is 'just-hit-sitting,' as in an arrow hitting the bull's-eye (Katagiri in Loori 2002: 103).
13. The kōan are often aporias ('What is the sound of one hand clapping?'). Often, however, they are intellectually motivated and structured (Sharf 2007). In contrast, tengo (see Wright 2000: 85) are pedagogical phrases ('Don't ignore cause and effect'). Different sects practice differently with both. For histories of the kōan in Sōtō Zen, cf. Heine 1993, 1999. For a sociological account of the kōan, see Luhmann & Fuchs (1989).
14. As Sahlins quips, 'a people who conceive life to be the pursuit of happiness must be chronically unhappy' (2002: 17). He might agree that Sojun advocates for Stone Age Economics, the 'Zen road to affluence' (Sahlins 1974: 2).
15. Luhmann, among others, has diagnosed modern time as particularly contingent (1998).
16. And perhaps not only 'Western'! Lusthaus (2002: 1–29) and Ziporyn (2004: 79–81) represent some of the more creative recent attempts to reckon with Merleau-Ponty in the context of Buddhist phenomenology.
17. In the remainder of this section, all citations of Merleau-Ponty are from his *Phenomenology of Perception*, specifically the section on 'Attention and Judgment' (1962 [1945]: 30–60).
18. For Merleau-Ponty (1962 chap. 1), the Cartesian cogito is clearly the paradigm for 'intentional' consciousness.
19. As a visiting Sōtō Zen priest wryly observed to this effect, during a lecture at BZC just a few weeks before Sojun's, 'Americans know how to inhale but they're not so good at exhaling.'
20. For Canguilhem, life is opposed to death insofar as life resists 'an indifferent relation with its milieu' (1989: 549). Life is 'the active opposition of inertia and indifference' (1966: 173).
21. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of an equation: the figure [x = y] places quantities in a determinate relation, regardless of magnitude. Cf. Husserl on 'ideal objectivities' (1999: 127), which, he says, have just such a structure.
22. See Wolfson's evocative exposition of this 'synthesis of retention, impression and protention in the present' (2005: xxix).
23. As Daniel Heller-Roazen has argued (2007: 32–34), the unity of 'consciousness' is a fairly recent notion. Aristotle imagined but never located a 'common sense' where the particulars of perception all converged.
24. See Suzuki's dharma talks on this Zen liturgical poem, edited by Sojun Mel Weitsman Roshi (1999).
25. Dōgen suggests this co-extensive schema in his text 'being-time' [Uji] (in Nishijima & Cross 1994: 109–119), but the Critical Buddhists dispute this part of his canon's authenticity (Heine in Hubbard & Swanson 1997: 251–285).
26. A recent work on Dōgen which grapples elegantly with this point is Kim (2007).
27. This problem has been central to recent innovations in Buddhist studies (Faure 1991, 1993; McRae 2003; Wright 2000: 104–119).
28. Tathāgata-garbha is often conflated with Nāgārjuna's foundational Mahayana doctrine of the 'two truths' (see Garfield's commentary on this doctrine, 296–299). However, because tathāgata-garbha (a) creates a strong hierarchy between ontological levels and (b) posits a temporal deferral between these levels, whereas Nāgārjuna's doctrine does neither (see Wood (1994) for this nihilist interpretation of Nāgārjuna), in fact, the two positions are opposed.
29. This term is central to the Zen tradition. It refers to the vision of a thing 'as it is'. Like Sojun at the beginning of his lecture, the Buddha is called a tathāgata. As Richard Baker – a dharma heir of Suzuki Roshi – writes, a tathāgata is '"he who has followed the path, has returned from suchness, or is suchness, thusness, is-ness, emptiness, the fully completed one"' (in Suzuki 1970: 13). Most scholars derive both tathāta and tathāgata from the Sanskrit deictic, tathā, which some (e.g. Watts 1957: 67) interpret as the onomatopoeic gesture of a child indicating an object: 'that!' Similarly, 'suchness' indexes a pure, essential, transcendental experience of immediacy. For a powerful comparison of this term to the kabbalistic Ein Sof, see Wolfson (2009: 109–111).
30. Although I am of course alluding to Orwell, the relevant citation on this point is Griffiths' monograph (1986).

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31. Matsumoto in Hubbard and Swanson (1997: 165–173).
32. See Swanson's discussion in Hubbard & Swanson (1997: 3).
33. In Hubbard & Swanson (1997: 171).
34. Ibid.: 56–80.
35. Ibid.: 339–356.
36. Matsumoto in ibid.: 356–374.
37. Kōjin's critique of the Kyoto School 'aesthetic' brings to light its dhātu-vāda vision: a reified nihilism, one which looks at the world through 'dying eyes' (2005: 117). This aesthetic is evident in the Kyoto School's Keiji Nishitani, who, identifying Japanese thought with Zen, conflates Dōgen with the notion of an 'original self' (1982: 108, 164).
38. For instance, the vice-abbot of BZC, also a Jewish-American Sōtō Zen priest, has mobilized many apparently tathāgata-garbha notions in his human rights activism (see his new book, Senauke 2010).
39. Arguing philologically, Hakamaya denies any identification of Dōgen with naturalism (in Hubbard & Swanson 1997: 121–122).
40. He frequently cites Dōgen's early text 'Fukanzazengi' to this effect: 'The way is basically perfect and all-pervading. How could it be contingent upon practice and realization?' (refer to the BZC website for the translations of this and other Dōgen texts which are most strongly in play within the BZC community). Dōgen's question, Sojun insists, is not rhetorical. Enlightenment is 'original' but nevertheless must be realized in practice. Sojun calls this rationale for Zen practice a 'koan' in the (distinctly American Zen?) sense of 'meaningful paradox.'
41. This mode of Platonic reflexivity 'founds access to the truth (the essential truth) on the reflexive discovery of what the soul is in its reality' (Foucault, 2005: 460).
42. Sahlins (1985).
43. Stavrianakis (2009). Related interpretations of this emergent temporality include Augé's (1994) and the 'contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous' from Hegel through Ernst Bloch (see Jameson 1991: 307) and Koselleck (2004a: 90, 95, 99).
44. On 'adjacency' see Rabinow (2008: 35–54). For Deleuze's early definition of 'virtuality,' which, in his reading of Bergson, corresponds to the absolute past of 'pure memory,' see 1968: 49–50, 55–56.

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