

In Praise of Fearless Speech

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The streets protest of 2008 in the Burmese cities of Rangoon and Mandalay were initiated and led by Buddhist monks. Their courageous stance against an unjust and corrupt regime is as remarkable an example of Buddhist social action as it is rare. To stand out courageously against inequality and prejudice, to speak up against the stupidity and cruelty of self-aggrandizing rulers has not been a defining feature of Buddhism down the ages. Quite the contrary: Buddhism has supported dictators, colluded with unjust regimes, and encouraged quietism and uncritical submission.

It might be worth reflecting as to why the extraordinarily radical teachings of the Buddha, and a practice as thoroughgoing in its unflinching look at the human condition, would express itself through social conformity and acceptance of the status quo. Do Buddhist sanghas encourage conformity? Is there a difference between the ‘surrender’ of egoistic drives and blind obedience?

One of the key elements I have identified within the various Buddhist and spiritual communities I have been part of over the last twenty-seven years is the lack of genuine *dialogue*. Authentic dialogue is a *horizontal* dimension, where the parties involved are learning from each other. Dialogue is *encounter*: it impacts and transforms the people involved. Dialogue is an *experience*, i.e. allowing the unfamiliarity of the other to alter us.

What we have in Zen and other Buddhist settings is often not a dialogue but instead a one-sided, *vertical* discourse or *monologue* where the teacher, much like a feudal lord – instructs and gives orders. Rather than a trusted friend, the teacher becomes a guru, and what is encouraged often in the student is infantilism and dependency.

It was because Zen was long dead (i.e. had become institutionalized) in Japan that many outstanding Japanese teachers left their country for the shores of North America and Europe.

Now that more than fifty years have passed, it is perhaps time to ask the following question: “Has Zen gone dead (i.e. become institutionalized) in the West?”

The Zen tradition down the ages – particularly C’han – testifies of a fearless disregard for the trappings of wealth, power, and prestige. You will also find a wild, fierce and affectionate challenge of teachers and dogma from within the tradition. I have, however, never come across anyone challenging a contemporary Zen teacher in any of the sanghas I’ve been involved with. It seems that doubt and original thinking are discouraged within contemporary Buddhist communities. Granted, a good deal of ego is necessary in order to live out one’s passion for doubt, controversy, and inquisitiveness. This has been the case with me, and I own the fact that my expression of it has been at times less than skilful. An equal amount of ego is however needed in creating and maintaining groups whose survival rests not on the actual teachings but on a personality cult.

In a genuinely communal Zen setting there is only one authority: the authority of zazen, and the authority of shared experience. Love and respect for those with more experience comes natural, outside the

trappings of power when structure and form are conducive to the horizontal dimension. Sensitivity to this “equal ground” is what would truly marry Zen to western culture and psychology. Many have attempted such fusion of Zen wisdom and western psychotherapy but have forgotten the crucial element that characterizes contemporary psychology. Such ingredient is *relatedness*. Not unlike our Buddhist idea of “interdependence”, but with the stress on *co-creation*. In short, I come into being by relating – openly, with uncertainty – to you, the ‘other’. The dimension is horizontal. To relate to you – truly, authentically – I must give up my fantasy of power, of expertise, of spiritual accomplishment and even of my so-called Zen wisdom, and enter the horizontal dimension where every sentient being becomes my teacher.

Thus there cannot be a fusion of Zen and ‘western psychology’ unless we misunderstand the latter to have somehow remained stuck to 1905, before the birth of psychoanalysis. And there cannot be a creative adaptation of Zen to the modern world if the form maintains a self-serving hierarchical structure.

Moreover, a structure that is hierarchical on the inside cannot be egalitarian on the outside. That is why perhaps you will not find many Zen practitioners taking onto the streets in times of war, crisis, and social change.

I see Zen practice as a way to deconstruct and undo the self and thus destabilize the very foundations of an unequal society, and the delusional foundations of power. Suppose a head of a powerful nation whose supremacy was founded on illegal wars, contract killings masked as ‘defence operations’ and ‘intelligence’, as well as ruthless exploitation of the resources of poor countries were to be influenced by Zen

teachings. Do you think he'd keep his job? Have you ever heard a ruler speaking the truth, or admitting his failings? A political ruler and a religious leader cannot by definition engage in fearless speech – his whole stance will be instead of defending a position arrived at through years of scheming and double dealings. Thinking, as some spiritual practitioners do, that we can change the world by changing the mind of the rulers is a Machiavellian idea. I prefer to believe, rightly or wrongly, that a change of heart in a ruler will prompt him to forfeit his childish need for power.

Fearless speech has a long and venerable history not only in the Zen tradition but also in Greece. Ancient Greeks called it *parrhesia*: a quality of sincerity and courage; above all, the ability to address oneself to a sovereign and a tyrant and tell him in his face that his tyranny is incompatible with justice. A philosopher criticizing a despot, a citizen deviating from the majority, a student disagreeing with the teacher – all of these exercise *parrhesia*.

It is a rare to find a leader who is able to play the *parrhesiastic* game. In order to play that game with good grace, he must have gone past the pull of narcissism. A good leader is not threatened by criticism and can openly accept doubt. A good leader is open to authentic dialogue. And a good teacher *learns* from his students.

We find *parrhesia* – fearless speech in Euripides's play *The Phoenician Women*. In a dialogue between Jocasta and her exiled son Polyneice, she asks him about his suffering during exile. The hardest thing, he says, is that I cannot speak freely. The greatest indignity is that of “enduring the idiocy of those who rule”.

We find fearless speech expressed by Cassandra in Euripides's *The Women of Troy*, when she mocks the herald of the king: "What are heralds then - she asks - but lackeys?" Does the king's ambassador embody the essence of kingship, or has the position being achieved through political shrewdness? What purpose does the transmission of a lineage serve? Does it serve the purpose of keeping the radical teachings of the Buddha alive? Or does it serve instead self-aggrandizement, the preservation of a group, or the punters' increasing demand for consolation and God's substitutes?

Against the new Zen conformity sweeping through the West, I want to conjure up the ghost of Joshu, who walked out of the teacher's room wearing sandals on his head. And the spirit of Diogenes, the ancient Greek philosopher who ordered Alexander the Great to step out of his light so that he could continue basking in the sun.

And I'd like to praise the courage of the Buddhist monks in Burma, in the hope that we can muster the same courage in emulating their daring and stand our ground with dignity against injustice and for the welfare of all beings.