



Van der Braak, André, *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Zen Buddhism in the West*

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The author, André van der Braak, is both a scholar and practitioner/teacher of Zen Buddhism. The work is a deeply felt examination of the possibilities of understanding the experience of Zen in the West during the “Secular Age,” the expression made famous by the philosopher Charles Taylor’s 2007 book of the same title. Indeed, as Van der Braak’s own title indicates, the entire work is explored through the framework of Taylor’s conception of the Immanent Frame.

At the same time, the book is a full-fledged review of the vast scholarship on Zen, written mostly in the West. For a reviewer such as myself, with a broad interest in religion and no expertise in the field of Zen studies, the survey of this scholarship came as something of a surprise, as well, to be sure, an education. I was enticed to review this work by the thought that it would be about the varieties of the contemporary practice of Zen. While there is indeed some of that in the book, it is rather more of an intellectual history and philosophical analysis of how Zen has been understood in Western scholarship over at least a century and a half. In concluding these reflections, the author seeks to show that the Dogen 道元 tradition of Zen is the best suited expression of spiritual transcendence in the Secular Age.

Taylor’s conception of the “immanent frame” represents the basic preunderstanding of the modern West, a frame in which religion and belief have become options rather than a necessary precondition of life. The “immanent frame” has often been critiqued. Perhaps the majority of people in the world, and many in the Americas as well, continue to believe or practice religious activities through ascriptive or nonchosen roles, such as belonging to churches or temples or other faith groups. Much of society remains porous to supersensible phenomena. Van der Braak is very aware of this situation, but still finds the immanent frame to be valuable to pursue his project.

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The frame appears to be particularly useful to examine his subjects, modern Western scholars, intellectuals, and spiritual seekers, most of whom do probably function within the immanent frame. To what extent is Zen in the West (and presumably to modern seekers across the world, including Japan) shaped by the “cross pressures” in the immanent frame? How do they maintain belief and faith in a religion which, in the frame, cannot readily subscribe to anachronistic ideas of rebirth, karma, hierarchy, and not least, ritual? Two kinds of questions emerge from this inquiry. The first is to determine what parts of Buddhism are acceptable to the modern age; the second related question is to determine the transcendent truths of the faith that remain relevant to this or any age.

Before turning to his responses, we need to consider another pair of Taylor’s concepts. Taylor’s idea of “fullness of human flourishing” is qualified by an open and closed reading of fullness. The closed reading of fullness for Taylor is represented by humanists who feel this fullness can be found within the framework of self-sufficiency of what Taylor calls the buffered self in the immanent frame; the open reading is open to self-transcendence. Transcendence in Van der Braak’s Zen refers to *sunyata* or *nirvana* or *wu/mu* 無. This does not necessarily have to be an ontological transcendence, but can be an epistemic experience “in which the world appears in a radical new light (such as seeing one’s Buddha nature and realizing enlightenment)” (50). This kind of opening to fullness beyond human flourishing—which could test the limits of the immanent frame—is how Van der Braak seeks to characterize the Dogen school of Buddhism. Taylor also offers a third reading of fullness which is anti-humanist and tends to be deconstructive without offering an alternative to a life of human flourishing.

Van der Braak considers several ways to satisfy the criteria for the continuing truth and relevance of Zen today. He considers Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach where the call is not to quest for objective truth in a tradition, but to engage in a constructive dialogue and an understanding that every truth is historically and contextually conditioned. Van der Braak appears not to be fully satisfied by this approach. Even less is he persuaded by those such as Stephen Batchelor, who seeks to create a fully secular Buddhism and deny any Buddhist notion of fullness as ontological transcendence. He is also opposed to the trend toward the psychologizing and medicalizing of Zen as only mindfulness. While recognizing that a certain therapeutic healing has been a core part of many religions, including Buddhism, he opposes the move toward the closed reading of a self-sufficient world and away from a seeking of self-transcendence.

Dogen’s teachings and practice of Zen retain truths and practices that can remain relevant to the quest for self-transcendence in the Secular Age. For a deeper understanding of Dogen’s teachings, Van der Braak also explores the ideas of modern Japanese thinkers such as NISHIDA Kitaro 西田幾多郎 and NISHITANI Keiji 西谷啓治 who sought not only to adapt to Western ideas but also to integrate the idea of *sunyata* or emptiness into Western thought. Nishitani introduced the concept of “transcendence,” or the return to the world from the awakening to transcendent emptiness, as a transformative form of alterity or radical otherness. As such, enlightenment may be experienced both within human flourishing and beyond it.

Following these ideas Van der Braak seeks to reimagine Zen as continuous with the expression, embodiment, and performance of original enlightenment. He wants to reimagine Zen practice not simply as individual meditation or sudden awakening, but as collective bodhisattva work. The Mahayana Buddhist vow to save all sentient beings, which arises from awakening by the continuous bodily and spiritual, individual and collective practice of enlightenment, is a crucial element for Van der Braak.

Van der Braak's argument will be persuasive to many moderns, including myself. We can also find resonance in his vision of Zen with the ideas of other modern thinkers and scientists who seek self-transcendence, such as A. N. Whitehead or Paul Ricoeur. At the same time, I believe his and Taylor's apparently utter rejection of anti-humanist, deconstructive thought seems rather one-sided. The ability to deconstruct enables critique, but does not necessarily disable a reconstruction. Indeed, the view of Dogen's philosophy he presents implies precisely this kind of double movement from negation to affirmation as a continuous process. The ethics of justice today calls still more loudly for the salvation of the planet and its beings. Without a critique of the grievous injustices to the planet, a philosophy of self-transcendence will be woefully inadequate.

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