

## THE SAGA OF ZEN HISTORY AND THE POWER OF LEGEND

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# The Saga of Zen History and the Power of Legend

JOHN C. MARALDO



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## Foreword

In a prescient and influential 1985 essay, John Maraldo suggested that understanding Zen Buddhism would require extending our inquiry to include the tradition's own form of historical consciousness and that this inquiry would lead modern historians to realize how different their own assumptions about history are from those in the tradition they study. Maraldo was at that time in a unique position to address the complex issues behind that suggestion. Having completed a doctoral dissertation in Germany on the nature and limits of human understanding in contemporary continental philosophy, Maraldo had settled in Japan to teach and to pursue his passion for Zen Buddhism. Following Zen philosophy into the modern Kyoto School of Zen-inspired philosophy and publishing a series of important books over several decades, Maraldo had yet to pursue his own insight about the character of historical understanding in traditional Zen and the ways that it differed from the modern historian who studies this complex tradition. This book takes that longstanding challenge, and the results are a *tour de force* of historical scholarship and reflection.

Maraldo describes his own experience of being disillusioned as he and other modern historians discovered the extent to which traditional Zen history is simply untrue, stories that turn out to be riddled with inaccuracies and misconceptions. The book traces the “saga” of “true Zen history” unfolding through the work of historians of Zen over the last half century as they came to terms with how the account of Zen history that we have inherited was skewed by the sectarian interests of various competing factions within the Zen tradition. Drawing on the iconoclastic instincts at the heart of Zen Buddhism,

Maraldo playfully refers to these modern historians of Zen as the true Zen iconoclasts insofar as they carry out the task of deconstructing the way Zen Buddhists imagined their own origins and history.

One of the outstanding contributions of this book is that it provides the best overview currently available of the work of historians of Zen Buddhism. Maraldo's thorough research, analytical prose descriptions, and meticulous footnotes lay out the range of differences between the various ways that historians have described the Zen tradition, and in doing this, Maraldo shows great respect for the sophisticated work modern historians of Zen have done to correct misconceptions in the historical record. But having been educated in philosophical reflection as much as in historical analysis, Maraldo also notices something significant that few historians are in a position to see—the extent to which historians tend not to examine their own conception of history as they go about their task of re-describing Zen history. Moreover, Maraldo recognizes how this lack of self-scrutiny sets certain limitations on the scope of understanding that current historical scholarship produces.

This realization leads Maraldo to think more creatively about the “true history” of Zen by raising questions about the concepts of “history” and “truth” presupposed in Zen and in the scholarly practices of modern Zen historians. The book works through the insights that these probing questions yield. Among his conclusions is a rejection of the view or assumption that traditional Zen historians conceived of history largely as we do but nonetheless ended up misrepresenting it for self-serving reasons. Instead, he investigates the extent to which these Zen historians' way of understanding their task might have been fundamentally different from our own.

Maraldo's suggestion is that our word “legend” aligns more accurately with what these Zen texts provide than our word “history.” The word “legend” encourages us to proceed on the understanding that although truth can mean accurate representation of the facts it is not reducible to that single dimension of mental and social life. So while

from a modern and distanced point of view, legends may be untrue histories, they are also cultural narratives that give rise to ongoing insights—the powers of truthful disclosure—while at the same time providing the motivating force to build and maintain those rare communities that take truth-seeking as their primary practice. The overall effect of Maraldo's book is two-fold. It suggests new avenues and themes of inquiry in the study of Zen, stimulating our imaginations to see it from different points of view, and it facilitates greater self-awareness in carrying that inquiry forward.

The book is extremely perceptive in pointing out the extent to which these practices of self-scrutiny were already at the heart of Zen culture. The disillusioning force that historical correction provides coincides in ironic ways with the fact that Zen was and is largely about the liberating work of disillusionment. Maraldo shows how a great deal of Zen discourse and practice aims to undermine the tradition's own dogmatic grasping, to break the hold of static mental states that fail to reflect the fluid and open reality in which we live. The account Maraldo gives in brief of his own life and thought shows how this one theme of Zen self-questioning continues to draw him back to Zen for the insight that it yields.

As the author weaves the story of his own engagement with Zen gracefully into the flow of the book, we find both Zen practice and Zen scholarship, a long and distinguished career of inquiry both in Zen and about Zen. As a result, this book exudes a clarity of mind that comes from thoughtful historical and philosophical study propelled by profound existential interests. In setting that example, *The Saga of Zen History and the Power of Legend* constitutes an important challenge to those of us who take Zen seriously in our study and/or our practice—a challenge to deepen the self-understanding that shapes what we do and how we do it.

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## Prologue

Zen Buddhism has long been a two-edged source of disillusionment. Its power to release one from the delusions of self-attachment is legendary. Its potential to disabuse believers who attach to its teachers and traditions is well documented in an ever-growing body of scholarship. Critically-minded historians and practitioners of Zen alike question the truths it propounds as sharply as Zen challenges just about everything that we say and do. The story of my own amusement and disillusionment explains my preoccupation with this double-edged sword between the covers of this book.

It is not uncommon for those contemporary historians of Chan who underwent training in Buddhist monasteries to recount their disillusionment with actual monastic practices and their subsequent turn to critical scholarship, in order to correct popular stories and misconceptions. In my case, a double disillusionment (and subsequent re-enchantment) came in the midst of practice and was directed toward historical scholarship as much as popular stories.

I became engaged with the history of Zen soon after moving to Tokyo in 1971, just a year after completing a doctoral dissertation in philosophy, at the University of Munich, on the hermeneutical circle in Heidegger and other German thinkers. In Munich, I had become intrigued with Zen Buddhism when fellow foreign students introduced me to Bashō's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and to the Zen Buddhism of D. T. Suzuki. The depictions of Zen by the two modern authors, of vastly different competence, were soon to become the objects of scathing criticism, but at the time their Zen struck me for its deep connection to embodied

knowing and everyday life—realities I felt were neglected in the cerebral philosophy and theology I had been studying. To say these books intrigued me would be an understatement. They took me to Japan and reoriented the arc of my life. I managed to get a visiting position at Sophia University, teaching philosophy in English and translating books about Buddhism for Heinrich Dumoulin, the renowned historian of Zen whose own comprehensive history came to be eclipsed by the investigations of younger scholars. Dumoulin's work quickly captured my interest in the historical development of a kind of thinking that Suzuki had said transcended history. The discrepancies between Suzuki's viewpoint and Dumoulin's, and later between both their viewpoints and that of later scholars, exposed questions that I still find unresolved in the vast literature on the contested histories and practices of Zen.

The Suzuki I read encapsulated the transcendental truths of Zen in catchy, enigmatic stories of ancient Chinese monks and masters; Dumoulin searched for a transcendental truth in a mystical enlightenment experience documented in current reports as well as historical Zen writings. Then, in the summer of 1972, I participated in a *sesshin* or intensive meditation retreat led by Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle, a Jesuit confrère of Dumoulin and a confirmed “Zen master” in the lineage of Yasutani Hakuun and Yamada Kōun. The *sesshin* followed a rigorous traditional form. The ideal was to sit in a lotus posture without moving for 50 minutes ten times a day for seven days (with short breaks for meals, work in the garden, and daily *dokusan* or private meetings with the master). I knew it would be demanding, but I went with a mind full of promising expectations. Zen stories and snippets of Zen history had paved a way for me. The “truth” of Zen to which I was awakened, both suddenly and gradually, came in the form of throbbing pain and naked anger: anger at the fantasy that Zen meant catching the point of amusing Chinese stories, and pain in a body that felt as if it had been run over by a truck. Obviously, I had been ill-prepared, but the lesson was lasting. Zen in practice was not much about the stories told by D.

T. Suzuki; nor was it captured in historical accounts like Dumoulin's. This was the first disillusionment.

The second occurred in an ironic “deepening” of the first. It may be that, in later bouts of *sesshin*, I painfully learned to let go of what I had read, for the time being at least. But outside the meditation hall I became more and more intrigued with the disputes described by Zen historians and the contests among them. The second disillusionment, then, dawned on me gradually, as I realized I could not depend on current accounts of Zen history to give me a truthful account. It became apparent that current scholarship failed to examine critically its own presuppositions and concepts, particularly the notion of history that it imposed on the texts under study. It seemed that the *history* of the historians came weighted with unclarified assumptions about its difference from stories and its claim to truth. Not only that, but incommensurable approaches to the phenomenon of “Zen” showed up—revealing not so much its many-sided nature but rather a conflict of interpretations regarding the object of inquiry. Was the “object” a historical and cultural artifact, a set of documents, or was it the very “subject” who undertakes the inquiry, in a manner of “self-investigation” (已事究明) that has counterparts in many philosophical traditions? The prospect of a Zen that itself is a method of study re-awakened my interest and has sustained it for half a century.

Breaking down borders between “outsiders” and “insiders” of Zen was characteristic of the work of Yanagida Seizan, the doyen of historical Zen studies at the time, and of the thought of Nishitani Keiji, the renowned philosopher who was Yanagida's sometime coeditor.

Yanagida scrutinized Zen texts with an eye respecting the wisdom they taught as well as the historical circumstances that shaped them. Nishitani clarified notions of time and history from a Buddhist perspective, in contrast to Christian and secular conceptions largely taken for granted today. Reading Zen through these two thinkers encouraged me to inquire into the nature of historical consciousness in Zen, both within the tradition and in historical practices today.

The *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* published my findings in its Summer/Fall issue of 1985, and the following year my reflections on “Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism” appeared in *The Eastern Buddhist*. But when it came time to consider revising these articles in a volume of essays old and new, a mountain of new research made it obvious that they were hopelessly out of date, as historical summaries go. An attempt to take up the inquiry once again grew into a book of its own—the saga of Zen’s “true history” that comprises the major part of the present volume. A preview of the contrast between modern and classical meanings of *history* in Buddhism opens the volume.

Recent work in Japanese philosophy has required of me a notion of translation beyond the usual exercise of rendering a “source” text into a “target” language. I hyphenate *trans-lation* to convey the transformation of textually embedded problems, methods and terminologies both across and within natural languages. Trans-lation has been a dynamic feature of every approach to Zen studies. Its challenge confronts us in every mention of Zen’s controversial transcendence of language. It lies at the heart of what Zen communicates, whether “mind-to mind” between teacher and disciple who dissolve problems, or between one scholar and another who highlight them. *History* is a concept we read into and trans-late out of old texts. It is a concept I venture to question and clarify, in order to facilitate communication among scholars and between them and those who choose to learn from them. The difficulties of translation I see do not lead to a hidden vault where the meanings of old idioms are forever locked away and unavailable to us today, or where a public translation would seem to betray the original. In one sense, there is often a surplus of translation when readers understand the text only by translating it into their own language. Readers may easily over-translate, that is, impose definitive meanings on multivocal texts. The problems arise when trans-lation goes unnoticed. The meanings of the “source” word or phrase may be duly contemplated, but the senses of words in the “target” language often go without suf-



ficient reflection. “History” is one example; “mind” for 心 and “body” for 身 are others (as are “essence” or “substance” for 體 and “function” for 用). What if we were to take up a translated phrase or passage and translate it back into the source language? When the source language is medieval Chinese, such an exercise might expose untimely lingo, an unseemly native tongue or an unbecoming turn of phrase. The present volume is also intended to invite translators and readers to re-think how we use words and how all of us might be under their spell.

This book advocates the considered use of a term that is often invoked but seldom examined. As a contrast to *history*, I propose the category of *legend*, but my book itself is not meant to be “legendary.” I hope that errors of fact will be pointed out to me. Specialists will also notice a prevalence of English-language scholarship, with few references to Japanese studies and even fewer to modern Chinese and Korean work. For that limitation, too, I stand to be set straight.

I am acutely aware of the fragility of truth in the times and the place in which I write—a milieu in which truth is assailed from all sides for political advantage, in which “fake news” proliferates, accurate news is called fake, and facts are relegated to an arena of an alternative “mine versus yours.” Ultimately, relativism running rampant in a free-for-all “marketplace of ideas” is destructive of the very freedom its proponents want to protect, for it undermines trustworthy communication between you and me. At the same time, were we to confine truth-seeking to the fact-finding that simply tells true data from false, we would ignore dimensions of truth that for eons have inspired poetry, literature, and art, and have motivated religious quests, philosophical investigations and historical inquiries alike. This book is an inquiry into the practices of contemporary historians who have deftly removed layers of masks covering the original faces of the phenomenon we call Zen. If Zen, such as it is, turns out to be more mundane than transcendental, more ordinary than arcane, we may yet discover how its truths are enacted as well as told.

*Editorial conventions*

This book neither offers nor adheres to a singular definition of *Zen*. It does comment on several definitions of the term, but in general it follows the practice of current scholarship that accepts the conventionality of this name for a “school” or a “tradition” of Buddhism—more precisely, a spectrum of texts and practices and institutions. Scholars who, wary of essentializing, splinter this controversial term into myriad references still continue to invoke it in their careful deconstructions, as the title of a recent work betrays: *How Zen Became Zen*. The present volume also follows the infelicitous convention of using three nearly synonymous terms that each conflate geography and history: *Chan* when the accent is on the Chinese tradition, *Zen* when the stress is on the Japanese tradition, and *Chan/Zen* to include both emphases (the Korean name *Sŏn* and the Vietnamese *Thiền* are used when further geographical demarcation is appropriate).

Where Chinese words are transcribed, I have consistently employed the Pinyin system, with the exception of titles of current reference works. Transcriptions that scholars rendered by the Wade-Giles system have been changed to Pinyin for consistency, even within quotations; for example, *Ch’an* becomes *Chan*, the name *Tsung-mi* becomes *Zongmi*, and the *Sung* era becomes the *Song*. Sinographs (Chinese characters) are given for titles of source literature on their first mention, and usually without transcription, on the assumption that scholars who need to know the reference will be able to read its Chinese title. *Kōan* is used for the Chinese *gong’an* as well, since the Japanese word is more familiar to general readers today.

A word about the unusual layout of this book seems in order. The formatting of the main essay was adjusted to accommodate the length of the notes and keep them more readily accessible than they would be if collected at the end of the volume. Accordingly, the body of the text has been set recto on the odd-numbered pages, and the annotations on the facing pages.

### *Acknowledgments*

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