
Playing the Patriarch: Representation and Transformation in the Zen Sermon

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In this paper I discuss the characteristics and meaning of the abbot's sermon in the Japanese Rinzai Zen tradition. Using ethnographic data, viewed in light of performance theory, I contend that it is possible to go beyond the boundaries that have characterized previous scholarly understandings of Zen ritual (action/insight, social/mental, and formalism/authenticity). Accordingly, I demonstrate that the sermon serves as an arena for social interaction, and enforces institutional order, but at the same time, it also serves as a transformative medium that changes the participant's state of being. Finally, I contend that performance theory articulates an inherent connection between realization and enactment, as well as awakening and its manifestation; thus, it has the potential to shed new light on our current understanding of Zen practice.

THE ZEN SCHOOL (*Zenshū*; Ch.: *Chanzong* 禪宗) is an indigenous form of Chinese Buddhism that originated in northern China around the sixth century CE. During the Song period (906–1279 CE), Zen began to

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dominate Chinese Buddhist monastic institutions, and had gradually extended its influence to Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.¹ The Zen school is commonly associated with the practice of meditation (*zazen*), from which it derives its name;² however, what distinguishes the Zen tradition is chiefly the rhetorical and pedagogical styles of its masters. Accordingly, one of the most important events in the Zen monastic calendar is the abbot's sermon. In these talks, which were accompanied by an elaborate ritual procedure, the master would typically instruct the assembly by commenting or elaborating on a case from Zen records. These homilies were and indeed still are regarded as profound religious events, and as an essential part of Zen monastic training.

D. T. Suzuki argued that the sermon's importance lies not in its ritual procedure nor even in the content of the master's instructions, but rather, in the ineffable essence it conveys: "The master (*rōshi*) does not explain anything. . . what he tries to do is rather to re-awaken in the minds of his monks the psychology of the ancient masters" (1994, 98–99).³ A similar approach was also expressed by Yanagida Seizan, one of the most important Zen scholars of the twentieth century. Yanagida argues that the sermon (*teishō*):

. . . is not simply a lecture, [since] both speaker and audience, are already residing in Zen's history. Zen writings are never merely records of "old tales" (*mukashibanashi*). They become the reader's own statement in the present moment. *Teishō* is a living proof that the text [being commented upon], the training hall [where it is carried out], the person who conveys it, as well as his audience, are already an inherent part of Zen's history. (1974, 16)⁴

¹This paper focuses on Japanese Buddhism; thus, *Zen* is used rather than *Chan*, *Seon*, or *Thien*. This applies to all other Buddhist terminology, including names among others that follow the Hepburn transcription system. The equivalent Chinese is sometimes provided for clarification.

²*Chan* is an abbreviation of *channa* 禪那, which transliterates the Sanskrit *Dhyāna* or "meditation."

³*Rōshi* (literally: old [老] teacher [shi 師]) is an honorific title for a Zen master. The prefix "old" does not refer so much to the teacher's age, as to his long years of practice and his extensive experience. In this paper the terms master (*zenshi* 禪師), *rōshi*, and abbot (*jūji* 住持 or *kancho* 管長) are used interchangeably according to their context. At this point, it is important to note that, whereas in the West there are quite a few examples of female masters, in Japanese Zen female masters are rare. Thus, this paper applies the masculine form when referring to a Zen master.

⁴Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, another famous modern proponent of Zen, suggests that the sermon is first and foremost a transformative medium, designed to manifest the essence of teaching within its audience (2002, 4–5). The notion that a sermon is not a lecture in the "academic sense" is rather common among scholars and teachers of the Zen tradition. For examples, see Kopleau 1966, 79–80; Miura and Sasaki 1967, 30; and Baroni 2002, 337.

As opposed to Suzuki and Yanagida, who stress the inexpressible essence of the sermon, recent scholarship tends to focus more on its formal and symbolic function. For example, Griffith Foulk portrays the sermon as:

[An] extremely formal ceremony, in which the abbot's entry into the hall, preparation to speak, and departure from the hall were marked by numerous bows and prostrations on the part of the assembly. . . . It was in this setting that the Sung Ch'an masters, playing the role of a living Buddha, recalled and mimicked the sparkling sayings and dramatic actions attributed to renowned T'ang patriarchs in the lineage. (1993, 177)

Mario Poceski further argues that the content of the sermons was as formalistic as the rites that accompanied them: "These carefully scripted and exceedingly stylized performances," claims Poceski, were an important means of establishing the Zen school's legitimacy by reinforcing its teachers' religious authority (2008, 108).⁵

The above-mentioned scholars discuss different historical periods, while relying on different sources;⁶ nonetheless, I believe that the gap in their understandings of the sermon is an ideological one. Both Suzuki and Yanagida had firsthand knowledge of Zen sermons and were very much aware of their liturgical elements, yet they chose to disregard them in favor of the ineffable experience, which they regarded as the essence of the service. Foulk and Poceski, on the other hand, in accordance with the prevailing trend in the field since the 1990s, apply a positivist historical approach to Zen rituals, thus ignoring human agency and the transformative potential of ritual actions.⁷

Consequently, in this paper I will explore the characteristics and meaning of the Zen sermon in an attempt to point towards a new direction in understanding Zen rituals. By applying the grammar and vocabulary of performance theory to ethnographic data, I will demonstrate that

⁵A similar approach was expressed by Robert Buswell, who argues that Zen sermons are highly formalized events that are "as far as one could imagine from the extemporaneous talks that we in the West often associate with Zen" (1992, 183). In fairness, Buswell specifically limits his argument to Zen lectures held in Korea. Nonetheless, his critique represents the general view of the Zen sermon among contemporary scholars (see Sharf 2005).

⁶Suzuki and Yanagida refer to sermons as currently conducted in Japanese Rinzai temples, whereas Foulk and Poceski rely on monastic regulations to describe sermons performed in Song China.

⁷Apparently, the controversy concerning the sermon is merely a private case of a wider debate between what Steven Heine defines as Traditional Zen Narrative and Historical Cultural Criticism. According to Heine, whereas the first stresses the ineffable and psychological qualities of Zen experience, the latter disregards experience in favor of the historical and social context (2008, 6–7). It is not my intention to delve here into the details of this controversy, since it has been discussed at length by several scholars (for examples, see Børup 2008, Sharf 1995, and Stephenson 2005).

it is possible to understand the sermon as both a symbolic representation of authority, as well as an arena for personal transformation. The first part of the paper presents a historical overview of the development of the sermon. Relying on monastic regulations and ritual manuals, this part describes the origins of the ritual and sheds new light on its development in the Japanese Rinzai tradition. The second part of the paper relies on ethnographic data to provide a detailed account of the sermon as it is currently delivered in Japanese monasteries. In the third part, I apply performance theory as an analytic framework that integrates the textual and ethnographic data. Viewed in light of performance theory, the sermon demonstrates that ritualized actions and religious insight are not contradictory, but rather are interrelated and complementary, and that awakening might be best understood as a mode of activity, a form of bodily knowledge acquired, realized, and displayed through ritual performance.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Zen tradition interprets its history as a series of mind-to-mind transmissions between master and disciple, which goes back to the historical Buddha. Thus, it considers itself as the only legitimate heir of Śākyamuni's enlightenment experience, which was maintained and passed on by Zen masters throughout the centuries. Accordingly, one of the formative narratives of the tradition describes the Buddha, Śākyamuni, addressing an assembly of monks on Vulture Peak. Instead of preaching, as he usually does, he merely presents his audience with a flower. Somewhat puzzled by the act, all the members of the assembly remained still, except for Mahākāśyapa, who could not suppress his smile. To this, Śākyamuni responded: "I hold the treasury of the true dharma eye, the marvelous mind of nirvana, the form of formless. This subtle teaching, of [a] special transmission outside the doctrine, which is not founded on words and letters, I hereby entrust with Mahākāśyapa."⁸

This story, known as the Flower Sermon,⁹ is commonly used to portray Zen as an esoteric means of transmission, an intuitive instruction that challenges the privileged authority of conventional Buddhist doctrine. However, a somewhat less noticed aspect of this story is that it

⁸This translation is based on a version found in the *Mumonkan* (無門關, T 2005, 48, 293c12–16). Its first appearance seems to be in *Tenshō kōto rōku* (天聖廣燈錄, X 1553, 428c02–05); see Miura and Sasaki 1967, 152. However, the actual origin of the story is unclear, and most scholars believe it to be an apocryphal attempt to establish Zen legitimacy (Dumoulin 1988, 8–10; Suzuki 1961, 165–68; Welter 2000).

⁹*Sezonenge* 世尊拈華, literally: "World Honored One holding a flower."

presents a mythical prototype of a Zen sermon. It is important to note that although dramatic gestures—such as holding a flower and smiling—replace doctrinal discourse, these gestures are firmly rooted in a homiletic structure. In other words, without the context provided by the stage, actors, and script, the entire exchange would have been meaningless.

In accordance with its formative narrative, the Zen tradition has long regarded the sermon as an important medium of religious instruction. Many of the scriptures attributed to the great masters of Tang China (618–907 CE), such as the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Rokuso dangyō* 六祖壇經) and the *Record of Linji* (*Rinzai roku* 臨濟錄), were originally delivered as sermons or, at least, presented as such. During the Song period, sermons progressed into a complex ritual known as *Ascending the Hall* (*jōdō* 上堂). According to the *Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries* (*Zennen shingi* 禪苑清規), about every five days, following an elaborate choreography of rites, the abbot would ascend the altar in the dharma hall (*hōdō* 法堂) and reveal the Zen teaching to both monastic and lay adherents (Yifa 2002, 135–36; X 1245, 572a18).¹⁰ As several scholars have indicated, these sermons were a major source of attraction for the social and intellectual elite, and thus helped establish the Zen school's dominance over other Buddhist schools in the period (Foulk 1993, 177; Poceski 2008, 83–112).

Since the thirteenth century, sermons have also played an important role in Japanese Zen, as can be ascertained from numerous Japanese Zen records. Unfortunately, however, we know very little about the historical development of the Japanese Zen sermon from its Chinese origins. One of the earliest references to the sermon in the writings of the Japanese Rinzai school is found in the *Record of the National Teacher Enzū Daiō* (*Enzū Daiō Kokushi goroku* 圓通大應國師語錄), a work by an eminent Zen monk of the Kamakura period, Nanpo Jōmyō 南浦紹明 (1235–1309 CE), published in 1372 CE:

On the first day of the New-Year [the master] ascended the hall (*jōdō*). Thereupon a monk asked him: the flowers' five petals are now open with exquisite new colors, reminiscent of spring in the age-old Shaolin [temple].¹¹ Is this [not] an appropriate time to ask the master to reveal the

¹⁰The earliest description of this ritual appears in the *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Keitoku Dentoroku* 景德傳燈錄, T 2076, 51, 251a15–17).

¹¹The Shaolin temple is where Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of the Zen tradition in China, is thought to have resided. The five petals are a reference to a famous verse attributed to Bodhidharma in which the five petals are an allusion to the five generations of patriarchs that followed the founder, or according to other interpretations, the five major streams of Zen in late Tang China. Accordingly, the disciple's question should not be regarded as an offhand comment about the weather, but rather

teaching (*teishō*)?” The master replied: “The clouds have cleared [away] and the time is right; the snow has melted and spring is in the world.” (T 2548, 80, 98b1–4)¹²

However, this serene atmosphere does not last long, since the monk quickly tests the master with a series of penetrating questions regarding the meaning of Zen teaching, and the conversation soon turns into an actual dharma combat, of the sort found in *kōan* collections or Lamp Records.¹³ As the above example and others clearly indicate, in Japan, as in China, the abbot’s sermon was originally a public discussion, where masters would expound their teaching in an open confrontation with their students.¹⁴

The *Abbreviated Rules of Purity for Small Monasteries* (*Shōsōrin ryakushingi* 小叢林略清規), written by Mujaku Dōchū 無著道忠 (1653–1744 CE), provides a very detailed description of the sermon procedures (T 2579, 81, 707a09–28).¹⁵ According to this description, the monks would approach the master’s seat, one by one, in line of rank to ask for guidance (T 2579, 81, 707a19–21). Thus, we know for certain that in the late seventeenth century the sermon still maintained its format as a semipublic Q&A (*mondō* 問答).¹⁶ This format, in which monks take turns approaching the abbot’s seat, where they may “raise” (*nentei* 拈定) a *kōan* as a topic of discussion, is probably based, or at least inspired by the rules of purity of the Ōbaku school (*Ōbaku shingi* 黃檗清規, T 2607, 82, 768b04–16).¹⁷

Further research is needed to determine exactly how and when the sermon actually assumed its contemporary format as a lecture received in

as the first move in a well-conceived attack plan. See: T 2008, 48, 361a25; and *Zengaku Daijiten Hensanjo*, 1978 [abbreviated hereafter as ZGDJ], 40a.

¹²新句:明口來歲日上堂僧問:五葉花開瑞色新。挽回千古少林春。正與
麼時願聽提唱。師云:雲淨口刀正。雪消天地春。

¹³Traditionally the history of Zen was told as a sequence of transmissions from an enlightened master to his successor; this literary genre is known as Lamp Records (*tōroku* 燈錄) or Lamp History (*tōshi* 燈史). Dharma combat (*hōsen* 法戰) is a metaphor used to describe the exchange of questions and answers between a Zen master and a rival who challenges his/her understanding of Zen teaching. See ZGDJ 1156c.

¹⁴We find similar patterns in other texts from the Kamakura period (1185–1333 CE), such as *Bukkōkōkushi goroku* (佛光國師語錄, T 2549, 80, 141a06) and *Musōkōkushi goroku* (夢窓國師語錄, T 2555, 80, 452a06).

¹⁵Published in 1684, this text is still considered one of the main ritual manuals for Rinzaï temples.

¹⁶It is interesting to note that, as opposed to earlier accounts, the debate, as presented here, seems somewhat less “aggressive” and more formal.

¹⁷*Ōbaku shingi* is a set of regulations for monastic life compiled by the Chinese émigré Yinyuan Longqi 隱元隆琦 (1592–1673) and his successor, Muan Xingtong 木菴性躋 (1611–1684), in 1672, as the rules governing Manpukuji 滿福寺, the head temple of the Ōbaku 黃檗 School in Uji (Kyoto prefecture). These rules were a source of inspiration for other monastic regulations published in the seventeenth century (see Foulk 2008, 62–63).

silence. However, it seems reasonable to assume that this development is closely related to the Rinzai reform movement during the eighteenth century, led by Hakuin Ekaku (白隠慧鶴, 1686–1769 CE) and his heirs.¹⁸ Apparently, as a part of the movement standardization of *kōan* instruction, private interviews (*sanzen* 参禅) gradually replaced the sermon as the main arena for dharma combats.¹⁹ In other words, *kōan* instruction was gradually classified into two separate, though complementary functions—*public*, in which the master would preach without interruption, and *private*, in the form of an interactive confrontation between the master and his student (Mohr 2008, 217).²⁰

Two points that emerge from the brief historical survey presented above are of particular importance to our discussion. First is the fact that although the formal procedure accompanying the abbot sermon is described in great detail, the actual content of the talk remains without references. I will return to this point in the last section of this paper. The second point is the fact that originally the abbot's sermon seemed to have an interactive nature. Although it is not my intention to argue that every sermon necessarily turned into a debate, there is no doubt that it was an essential quality of the service. As will be shown in the next section, this aspect is no longer represented in sermons conducted in contemporary Japanese Rinzaï monasteries.

¹⁸One piece of evidence that seems to support this claim is the writings of Tōrei Enji (東嶺圓慈, 1721–1792), one of Hakuin's main heirs, and a major figure in the Rinzaï revival of the eighteenth century—in which the sermon is no longer presented in the form of a debate. For examples, see T 2576, 81, 611a25 and the *Rōhatsu jishu* 臘八示衆, a series of Hakuin's sermons transcribed by Tōrei (see T 2576, 81, 615a20–0617b09).

¹⁹Private appointments between students and their master were a common practice for Zen monks in China, as can be discerned from many monastic regulations where they are referred to as the Entering the Room (*nyushitsu*, Ch. *rushi* 入室) service. However, although the elaborate protocol governing these appointments is described in detail, for example, in the first section of *Zenen shingi* (X 1245, 526c11–527a09), their content was not determined, and their primary function was not, or at least not primarily, to test the student's understanding of a *kōan*. In fact, the only Chinese monastic regulation that even mentions *kōan* practice explicitly is *Chokushū Hyakujō shingi* (Ch. *Chixiu Baizhang qinggui*, 敕修百丈清規), and even there it is in the context of a sermon rather than a private interview (T 2025, 48, 1154a06).

²⁰Miura and Sasaki contend that the practice of *kōan* instruction in the form of a private interview was originally developed in China as a result of the language barrier that existed between the Chinese masters and their Japanese disciples, which forced the former to instruct the latter in the privacy of their rooms, by using written exchanges (1967, 21–22). However, it is difficult to understand why Japanese monks would maintain this practice after returning to their homeland, where a language barrier had no longer existed. Moreover, this assumption does not seem to be supported by the fact that public debating was also the custom in early Japanese Zen. Bernard Faure suggests that the private interviews were developed under the influence of the Tendai School's oral tradition (1994, 292–93). I will return to the connection between *teishō* and the private interview later. Now I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that sermons are also known as *daisan* 大参 (literally “a big assembly”), whereas the private interview is known as *dokusan* 独参 (literally “a private assembly”).

RAISING THE CURTAIN

Presently, only forty-one of the temples in the Japanese Rinzai tradition (Ōbaku included) actually train monks. These training temples are called Special Training Halls (*senmondojō* 専門道場), and are commonly referred to as *sōdō* (僧堂, literally “monks’ hall”). The training periods in the Special Training Halls are divided into ten-day periods: the second, fifth, seventh, and tenth days are traditionally the days in which sermons (*teishō*) are held (Katō 1974, 97).²¹ The frequency of *teishō* varies between different training halls and according to the time of year. Thus, during times of intensive practice, such as, for example, the *rōhatsu seshin* 臘八攝心, *teishō* might be delivered as often as twice a day. Sermons might also be held on special occasions, such as New Year’s Eve (Rinzaishū Shūmuchō, 1941, 5–6). The description below follows the custom of public *teishō* as conducted in the Engakuji Line (*Engakuji ha* 圓覺寺派) of the Rinzai sect (*Rinzai shū* 臨濟宗). However, when minor variations in chants and bells, among others, are excluded, the format is rather similar to other Rinzai Zen denominations.

Participation in *teishō* is mandatory for the entire monastic community, and the public *teishō* is often attended by lay-devotees.²² My impression of the general atmosphere before the sermon is perhaps best described as a mixture of stress and reverence.²³ The service is preceded by a set of meticulous preparations; the fact that the master is about to make a public appearance seems to raise the level of tension in the community. One elderly monk remarked: “the sermon is an opportunity to directly learn from the Buddha; how can one not be anxious (*kinchō*)?” The sanctity of the sermon is further stressed by the strict decorum, observed even during the preparations. The main hall²⁴ is fastidiously cleaned and arranged around a central axis that runs from the altar, on the north end

²¹*Teishō* literally means *bring forward* or *deliver* (*tei* 提) and *preach* (*shō* 叫). The term *teishō* is commonly used in classical Zen records to indicate an exposition of an essential aspect of the (Zen) teaching; see *Blue Cliff Record* (*Hekiganroku* 碧巖錄, T 2003, 48, 160b3–161c12) and *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (T 2076, 51, 359a4–359a13). Alternative terms include *teiyō* 提要 and *teikō* 提綱. See ZGDJ 879a.

²² Although both the *teishō* given only to the monks in training (*unsui* 雲水) and the ones open to the public contain similar performative qualities, these seem more prominent in the latter.

²³The following account of the sermon is based on fieldwork I conducted in Rinzai temples and training centers in Japan during the years 2008–2012. Gaining access to monastic practice was contingent on not causing distractions, which might disturb the training routine. Thus, the main methodology applied in this study is participant observation, accompanied by interviews conducted as informal talks. In addition, I conducted formal interviews with several Zen masters regarding *teishō*.

²⁴In China the sermons were traditionally given in the dharma hall (*hattō* 法堂); however, because most of the Japanese Zen temples do not have Chinese-style dharma halls, the sermon is usually held in the main hall (*hondō* 本堂). In some temples, such as for example, Engakuji in Kamakura, the sermon is actually held in the abbot’s quarters (*hōjō* 方丈), which are used for the same purposes as the main hall. See Foulk 2008, 50–51.

of the hall, to the dharma seat (*hōza* 法座) on the south end.²⁵ Ceremonial objects such as candles, flowers, and incense are carefully prepared and placed with a high level of attentiveness, even for a Zen temple.

When the hour of the service approaches, the wooden plaque (*kaihan* 開板) hanging at the front entrance to the monks' hall (*zendō* 禪堂)²⁶ is struck, and the monks cease all their activities and change into their sacerdotal robes and aprons (*hōe* 法衣 and *kesa* 袈裟). Next, the hall's bell (*denshō* 殿鐘) is rung, signaling the monks to line up and proceed in an orderly fashion to the main hall. Upon entering the hall, the line splits into two groups (according to their position—either “administrators” [*jōjū* 常作] or “trainees” [*dōnai* 堂内]), and the monks sit facing each other along the sides of the hall's central axis, perpendicular to the altar. After the preparations have been completed, the Chief Administrator (*shika* 知客) informs the *rōshi* and accepts his permission to begin the ceremony, while the assembly waits solemnly.

The sermon is a complex ritual accompanied by various musical instruments, chanting, bowing, and prostrations. The first act begins with the *rōshi* making his way from his private chambers (*inryō* 隱寮) into the main hall. He is escorted by two attendants (*jisha* 侍者): one leads the way, while the other walks in the rear carrying the text to be commented upon wrapped in a silk cloth.²⁷ Members of the assembly place their palms in front of their chests and bow as the *rōshi*, dressed in a sacerdotal robe and holding a ceremonial fly whisk (*hossu* 拂子), walks in to the sound of a large drum called the *Dharma-drum* (*hōko* 法鼓). Arriving at the altar, the *rōshi* offers incense to the Buddha, founder of the temple, past masters, and the author of the text on which he is about to expound. The Chief Administrator, who is in charge of the ceremony, rings a small bell (*inkin* 引磬) as the *rōshi* prostrates (*raihai* 禮拜) three times on a ceremonial mat (*zagu* 坐具). Next, the *rōshi* is helped up to the dharma seat, and assumes the lotus position facing the altar.²⁸ Meanwhile,

²⁵The Dharma seat is a tall chair used by the abbot during the sermon. In the *Zenen shingi* we find the terms *hōza* and *zeni* (禪椅, literally “Chan/Zen chair”) used interchangeably; apparently the first term refers to the place, whereas the latter refers to the furniture (see X 1245, 63.527b05; Yifa 2002, 268n12; ZGDJ 671c, 1129c). Although the general custom is to situate the main hall so that the altar is to the north, it should be noted that there are many exceptions. Very often the orientation of the *hondō* is determined by the geographical location of the *senmon dōjō*.

²⁶For a description of the different halls in a Zen monastery, see Colcutt 1981, 171–220 and Foulk 2008.

²⁷As previously mentioned, the sermon typically carries the format of a commentary on a case from the Zen records. Zen masters ascribe written comments (usually in red ink) to the original text and use it as a kind of “script” in their sermons.

²⁸The lotus position is the body posture most commonly used for Zen meditation. In the full lotus position (*kekka fuza* 結跏趺坐), one sits cross-legged, placing the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh. It is traditionally considered to be the Buddha's sitting posture, and

members of the assembly chant Hakuin's *zazen wasan* to the beat of the wooden-fish (*mokugyo* 木魚) drum.²⁹

The second act, consisting of the *rōshi*'s dharma talk, is the climax of the ceremony.

After the *rōshi* reads the selected text aloud, he is served tea from a special tea set.³⁰ Then, the Chief Administrator rings the *inkin* three times to signal that the *rōshi* is about to expound on the text. The *rōshi* preaches in a low tone accompanied by sudden gestures and the waving of the flywhisk. Although the principal format of the sermon is that of a commentary, its actual content is largely associative, consisting of citations from the Zen canon, embedded with stories, poems, and anecdotes. Indeed, the text's literal meaning appears largely secondary to its enactment.

The third and final act of the service commences after the *rōshi* has completed his talk. The Chief Administrator rings the *inkin* once and recites the first stanza of the Verse of the Four Bodhisattva Vows, and the entire assembly joins him in reciting the verse three times, while holding their palms together.³¹ The hall manager prostrates himself before the *rōshi* and prepares for the latter's departure from the hall. Upon the third recitation, the *rōshi* climbs down from the dharma seat, bows towards the altar, and exits the hall accompanied by his attendants. After receiving the Chief Administrator's permission, the monks bow to each other and the ceremony is officially adjourned.

thus it is the most correct and stable posture for meditation. This posture symbolizes the Buddha's ultimate achievement in subduing the demons of desire and attaining nirvana.

²⁹*Hakuin Zenji Zazenwasan* 白隠禪師坐禪和讚 is a short poem in praise of meditation. It is one of the most popular works by Hakuin and it is in use in most Rinzai temples today. (The original text with a translation into English can be found at <http://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/hakuin.html>. For a more scholarly source, see Hakuin 1967, vol. 6, 283–84.) However, different Rinzai training halls recite different texts before *teishō*, usually one associated with the founder of their lineage. For example, the Myōshinji line (*Myōshinji ha* 妙心寺派) monasteries usually read *Kozen Daitoku Kokushi Yuikai* 興禪大燈國師遺誠, whereas the Kenchōji line (*Kenchōji ha* 建長寺派) monasteries read *Rankai Doryū's Daikaku Zenji Zazenron* 大覺禪師坐禪論.

³⁰These tea sets are handmade pottery, typically iron-glazed bowls (*tenmokuchawan* 天目茶碗) having both aesthetic and historical value, and are used only on special occasions.

³¹The four Bodhisattva vows (*Shigu seigan mon* 四弘誓願文) are considered the foundation of East Asian Mahayana ethics. Although the exact wording sometimes varies, the standard version used in the Engakuji Line is: (1) I vow to save all beings without limit 衆生無邊誓願度; (2) I vow to put an end to all afflictions, no matter how numerous 煩惱無救誓願斷; (3) I vow to study the endless Buddhist teachings 法門無盡誓願學; (4) I vow to accomplish the supreme Buddhist path 佛道無上誓願成.

PERFORMING BUDDHAHOOD

Despite growing interest in rituals among Zen scholars in the last couple of decades, very few scholars have attempted to unshackle themselves from the field's long philological tradition and apply ritual and performance theory in their work.³² One notable exception is the work of Barry Stephenson (2005), who draws on ritual and performance theory in an attempt to "reorient" the current understanding of *kōan* practice.

In my analysis of the *teishō* service I attempt to follow Stephenson's footsteps in applying performance theories to Zen studies. However, whereas Stephenson's argument is largely theoretical, the present study argues that ethnographic data are essential for understanding Zen ritual as a form of human behavior. Accordingly, I attempt to provide the standpoint of those actors who actually perform the ritual, including their perspective and motivation for religious behavior.³³

Since the 1960s, scholars such as Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, and Richard Schechner have called attention to the performative aspects of various human activities, ranging from politics and business to religion, popular entertainment, performing arts, and everyday life (Goffman 1959; Turner 1982, 1986; Schechner and Turner 1985, Schechner 1988; Schechner and Appel 1990).

What distinguishes this paradigmatic shift, also known as the "performative turn," is that instead of focusing solely on symbolic structures and texts, scholars stress the active, social construction of reality. As the late Catherine Bell notes:

Performance approaches seek to explore how activities create culture, authority, transcendence, and whatever forms of holistic ordering are required for people to act in meaningful and effective ways. Hence, by virtue of this underlying concern, performance terminology analyzes both religious and secular rituals as orchestrated events that construct people's perceptions and interpretations. (2008, 208)

Performance functions both as a metaphor and as an analytical tool: thus, it provides a perspective for framing and analyzing social and cultural phenomena. Accordingly, performance theory might serve as a

³²For example, of nine papers published in the edited volume *Zen Ritual* (Heine and Wright 2008), only one paper (an article by Paula Arai titled "Women and Dōgen: Rituals Actualizing Empowerment and Healing") actually attempts to incorporate ethnography and ritual performance theory.

³³See Michael Mohr's critique of Stephenson's paper (in Heine and Wright 2008, 207).

multi-dimensional and dynamic interpretive tool for understanding Zen practice in general, and the sermon in particular. As seen from the description presented above, *teishō* is inherently theatrical: it is prepared, staged, enacted, watched, and assessed. More than just a text and symbolic structure, it communicates religious knowledge through enactment, an interaction that shapes consciousness and behavior.

Schechner suggests that performance should be understood as “restored behavior,” which he defines as “the organized re-enactment of mythic or actual events as well as the role-playing of religious, political, professional, familial, and social life” (2005, 7042).

Thus, let us first consider the representational and imitative functions of the *teishō* service. In a typical Rinzai special training hall, the *rōshi* resides in designated quarters, where he eats, sleeps, and meets with students for private interviews. The *teishō* is one of the few occasions in which the *rōshi* appears in public. Thus, the *teishō* serves as an opportunity to demonstrate both ritual proficiency and personal charisma. Moreover, the dharma seat, robe, and flywhisk are all traditional symbols of Zen patriarchy, which reaffirm the *rōshi*'s position in the line of masters, tracing back to the historical Buddha, signifying his authority towards members of the community, as well as towards outsiders. To cite one *rōshi*'s response to my request to explain in simple words the meaning of *teishō*: “It is to preach (*shō*) Shakyamuni's awakening, as it was handed (*tei*) down and maintained.” As seen from this statement, Zen masters regard their performance as a channel capable of transmitting the Buddha's awakening experience.

Although the *rōshi* does play the main role in the *teishō*, it is by no means a one-man show. Whether as moderators, attendees, instrumentalists, or members of the audience, the monks also play various roles in what is a carefully orchestrated event. The entire ceremony is choreographed to express the power relations within the monastic community. The monks line up and enter the hall in the order of their ranks, and sit according to their roles and seniority. The position closest to the dharma seat is deemed the most senior, whereas novices and laypeople usually sit in the back of the hall. Hierarchy is also manifested by the different colors of the monks' robes and aprons, which identify their ranks. The sermon could therefore be considered a means of regulating authority in a way that perpetuates the strict monastic order and especially the *rōshi*'s superiority over his followers and disciples.

At the same time, like many other communal events, the *teishō* also carries with it an egalitarian dimension, since it offers a special opportunity for novices and seniors to share the same teaching. This is rather

exceptional in a Zen monastery, where monks are usually instructed according to their individual progress in the privacy of the master's quarters. Thus, the *teishō* seems to function like the tea ceremony or the communal labor (*samu* 作務) in reinforcing the feeling of belonging to a monastic family (Satō 2006, 64).³⁴

However, as previously argued, the *teishō* is more than just a formal ritual designed to enforce authority and regulate communal relations. The entire service may also be regarded as a re-creation of Zen mythology. Rather than being an object for analytic consideration, the text and the master's comments become a script for a ritual performance—a Zen play. Sitting on his high throne, the *rōshi* delivers his talk in a dramatic voice, which is quite different from his normal way of speaking. My informants tend to associate the *rōshi*'s deep tone, which is usually accompanied by coughs and groans, with the venerable authority of wisdom and seniority. Using gestures and facial expressions, occasionally making a sudden “Katz!” shout, the *rōshi* appears wild and formidable. These sorts of gestures evoke in the audience a feeling of witnessing an ancient patriarch. In that sense, the *rōshi* can be considered to live up to his title (see footnote 3). In effect, the *rōshi* functions as a medium through which the entire community can relive the scriptures. This impression seems to be supported by the study of Foulk (1993), who argues that during Song China the master has replaced the Buddha image as the main object of worship in the hall. Thus, the entire service, which includes chanting and other liturgies, might be viewed as a ritual performance of a religious text rather than its elaboration.

The strong similarities in style of the sermons, even when given by different *rōshi*, has often led scholars to conclude that the sermon stands in direct contrast to the ideals it pretends to manifest. In other words, rather than a manifestation of the “spontaneous” Zen spirit, the sermon is merely a contrived ritual (Sharf 2007, 232). Or as Poceski argues, “these types of public performances involved surface transgressing of established ritual forms associated with formal preaching; but in the end they were variations on the theme of the ritual antiritualism, which is emblematic of the Chan tradition as a whole” (2008, 98–99).³⁵

³⁴Zen monks and nuns engage in manual labor as a regular part of their monastic training. Activities such as cleaning, raking the yard, and cooking are considered as active forms of meditation, which contribute to integrating one's practice into daily life. In principle, these activities are considered mandatory (*fushin* 普請, literally “all invited”) for the entire monastic community; thus, they express the egalitarian nature of Zen practice. Regarding the major place of different tea ceremonies in the social life of a Zen monastery, see Yifa 2002, 90–94.

³⁵Schechner and Appel suggest that ritual performance achieves a distinctive type of psychological

The fundamental assumption underlying the approach expressed above is that formalism and imitation inevitably stand in contrast to creativity and spontaneity. Thus, the *rōshi's* performance is regarded as a mimicking attempt of an archetypical Zen master, rather than an expression of any authentic realization. Nevertheless, the proponents of this approach seem to ignore the fact that even the most highly structured performance always leaves some room for interpretation and improvisation. This is also true in the case of *teishō*.

First, although there are some restrictions regarding the scope of subjects for *teishō*, the Zen masters I have interviewed seemed rather free in their choice of theme.³⁶ Second, the detailed procedure of the sermon, as provided by monastic regulations, stands in stark contrast to the lack of any information concerning its actual content. For example, the only reference to the content of the *teishō* service in the training hall regulation of the Rinzai sect (*dōnai no kitei* 堂内の規定), said to have been formalized by Hakuin, states the following: “When the *rōshi* lectures on the scripture this is called [a] sermon (*kōdo* 講度) or *teishō*. The meaning of *teishō* is to present and preach the essence of the teaching in front of the students” (Katō 1974, 91).³⁷ The same is also true for other monastic regulations, including the above-mentioned *Zenen shingi*.

Consequently, whereas the setting of the *teishō* is highly regulated, the talk itself is unspecified and relies largely on somatic tradition; therefore, it allows ample room for individual creativity and interpersonal development.

Like any performance, *teishō* seems to contain formal and repetitive aspects along with improvisational and playful qualities. It is—to paraphrase Turner—a “flow” where ideas, action, and awareness become one (Schechner and Appel 1990, 1). Thus, we should recognize these qualities of the sermon, which enable it to transform both the actor and the audience. The *rōshi's* performance should not be regarded as a mere appearance or imitation.³⁸ Instead of an explanation, it is an attempt to

transformation, sometimes described as an intensity of “flow” or “concentration” (1990, 4).

³⁶According to the sect's regulations, the text that is commented upon should be either one of the eleven sacred texts of the Rinzai School, or a text written by past masters (Katō 1974, 91). However, among these texts are included some of the most extensive Buddhist sutras, such as *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* 楞伽經, *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* 維摩經, *Lotus Sutra* 法華經, and *koan* collections such as *Rinzai roku*, *Hekigan roku*, and *Mumonkan*, as well as voluminous works written by Rinzai monks throughout the centuries (Rinzaishū Shūmūchōhūmūchō, 1941, 2–3). Indeed, Zen masters attribute their choice of topic to factors such as audience, occasion, and personal preferences, rather than sect's regulations.

³⁷For another example, see Ito 1966, 11.

³⁸This is not to imply that the *rōshi's* performance does not contain these elements, as every other performance does. Rather, it indicates that it does not stand in contrast with any “genuine” knowledge. I will expound on this point more in the epilogue.

dramatize the teaching. Through actions, postures, and gestures, the *rōshi* embodies the Zen ideal, and displays it as bodily knowing (Grimes 1990, 148). Like any good actor, the *rōshi* is required to completely identify with his part in order to convince the audience of its authenticity. Indeed, in the Japanese Zen *milieu* one often hears sayings such as: “Master X’s sermon is truly remarkable,” or “If you have a chance you should definitely go and listen to master Y’s sermon.” This is by no means a new thing, since many Zen hagiographies describe Zen monks traveling great distances to hear a master expound Buddhist teaching.

Roy Rappaport—one of the most distinguished scholars of ritual studies—has pointed out that performance carries the most meaning, not for the observers, but rather for those who execute it (1999, 103). An efficacious performance embodies an actual transformation from one status, identity, or situation to another (Schechner 1977, 71).

Through performance the *rōshis* first and foremost transform themselves; they actually become that which they manifest, and in that sense, their awakening becomes a reality. This is not to say that every Zen master giving a sermon is actually a living Buddha, as the tradition would have its adherents believe.³⁹ Like other performances, sermons differ according to actors, location, and audience, among other factors. Nevertheless, when properly performed, they can provide a temporal space where Buddhahood is manifested and observed.

Griffith Foulk suggests viewing a sermon in light of Turner’s (1969) and Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960) theory of liminality and reintegration. When ascending the high seat to preach, the master separates himself from his everyday existence and *becomes* an ancestor or a Buddha. According to Foulk, in this “liminal” state, masters are not bound by conventional roles of language or behavior; thus, they can appear wild and formidable. In fact, this sort of behavior is expected of them. However, when the sermon is finished, the masters revert to their ordinary state and resume their institutional role and mundane existence (1993, 178–79).

Referring to the transformative aspects of performance, Schechner and Appel notes, “In good acting the doing of the action of a feeling is enough to arouse the feeling both in the doer and in the receiver” (1990, 41). Consequently, and in accordance with the story of Mahākāśyapa, the sermon has at least the potential to transform one into a Buddha or a

³⁹According to the lineage-based ideology adopted during the Song period, Zen masters have been regarded as direct heirs of the Buddha’s awakening experience; thus, they were officially acknowledged as living Buddhas. However, as recent scandals in the North American Zen community have clearly demonstrated, Zen masters may be overly impressed with themselves regarding power, authority, and adoration. See Lachs 2006.

patriarch. On a more conventional level, however, it can provide new insights into Zen teaching. Marukawa Shuntan Rōshi, a Zen master of the Engakuji line of Rinzai Zen, explains:

Teishō delivers a message in accordance with the commented text, regardless of the listener. However, in many cases some parts of the talk include messages that are designated specifically to certain individuals. And often an individual listener suddenly realizes that a certain part is addressed to him personally. (private interview, May 27, 2015)

Although it is difficult to determine whether a certain individual actually “gets” the message or not, several of my informants did state that they had realized (*satotta* 悟った) their *kōan* upon hearing a sermon and grasping (*tsukamae* 掴まえ) its inner meaning.

Nevertheless, it appears that the verbal meaning of the sermon is secondary to “becoming one with” (*narikiru* 成り切る) and embodying (*miniukeru* 身に付ける) the qualities displayed by the master.⁴⁰ Indeed, quite a few of the monks and laypeople I interviewed reported that by merely witnessing the sermon they got new insight into their *kōan*, regardless of whether the *rōshi* had actually commented on it or not.

As noted above, in addition to the master’s talk, the sermon also includes music, chanting, and movement. The performance of these ritual actions enables practitioners to open themselves more resolutely and authentically to the teaching expounded in the master’s talk. Marukawa *rōshi* argues that “*teishō* should not be received by the intellect; instead, it should be received by the senses; therefore, without concentration and *samādhi* (*zanmai*) it cannot be grasped. During *teishō* the etiquette and rituals enable the listeners to concentrate, thus it makes the effort of hearing *samādhi* easier.”⁴¹ Perhaps similar to a mantra or a *dhāraṇī*, the sermon’s effect does not necessarily require literal or metaphorical understanding (see Wright 2000, 204). The sounds, actions, and drama evoke a different kind of insight—a somatic knowledge gained through displaying and observing ritual performance. Even in the case of laypeople, who

⁴⁰The term *narikiru* is a Japanese compound word composed of the verb *naru* 成る “to become” and *kiru* 切る “to cut.” The mundane meaning of the term is “thoroughly becoming the thing.” In the Zen context, however, it usually refers to unifying with the *kōan*. See Hori 2000, 288–89. *Miniukeru* literally means to attach (*tsukeru* 付ける) to the body (*mini* 身に). It means truly making some knowledge or art your own (Matsumura 1988).

⁴¹*Samādhi* (*zanmai* 三昧) is originally a Sanskrit term that means “putting together,” “composing the mind,” “intent contemplation,” “perfect absorption.” It refers to a high level of meditative concentration, derived from attention perfectly focused on its object. However, I suspect that Marukawa’s intention is closer to the modern translations of the term *zanmai*, which simply means to be absorbed in whatever one is currently doing. See Muller 2016 and Matsumura 1988.

typically lack the training needed to understand the Buddhist terminology in the *rōshi*'s talk, the sermon's effect cannot be simply reduced, as some scholars indeed argue, to the accumulation of merit.⁴² Horinouchi Sōshin, a writer and a lay Zen practitioner, stated:

In *teishō* some parts are comprehensible and some aren't, [however] merely adhering the master on his high seat is refreshing for both body and mind, it feels like it must have some value. Not only that but, by simply being in the presence of the master . . . observing him act, and talk right beside you, gives the feeling that something [of his talk] is naturally absorbed (*minitsukeru*) (2015).

Many of my informants reported that even when they cannot fully comprehend its content, the sermon stimulates in them a sense of exaltation, and that at times it helps them to grasp (*tsukamaeru*) the true meaning of the teaching. Indeed, a similar feeling was also expressed by Marukawa *rōshi*, who states that during his sermon he makes a special "effort to maintain equanimity, since [the event has an] uplifting/enchanting (*kōyō* 高揚) effect [on him]" (private interview May 27, 2015).

Teishō and the *kōan* interview (*sanzen*) are very much interrelated. As suggested by Sharf, the private interview prepares potential masters to play the leading role in *teishō* (2007, 233). In fact, the *sanzen* can be seen as a long process of rehearsals in which the disciples perfect their ability to manifest insight and wisdom. Thus, when the time comes, they are prepared to go on stage and deliver a sermon themselves.⁴³ However, I believe that this dynamic attitude also works the other way around, when master and disciples switch roles during *teishō*. Even if present-day sermons are no longer structured as dharma combats, still the *rōshi* is implicitly challenged by his disciples to demonstrate awakening—to show them *how it is done*. The *rōshi* materializes awakening through actions, gestures, and speech; he displays the same qualities he requires of his trainees in their private interviews. Through observing the public performance of the master, the disciple learns the qualities required for manifesting awakening. The fact is that the sermon was and is still considered an important part of *kōan* training.

⁴²Merit is one of the major concepts in the life and practice of Buddhists. Merit is accumulated through good deeds, acts, or thoughts that benefit one's present and future existence. Merit can be gained in a number of ways, most notably by Buddhist practice and by supporting the Buddhist community. According to tradition, listening to a teacher expound the dharma is considered a meritorious act. Thus, some scholars identify merit as the sole motivation behind laypeople's participation in Zen sermons. For examples, see Reader and Tanabe 1998, 30–31 and Poceski 2008, 89.

⁴³This seems to be supported by talks I had with several Zen masters, all of whom stated that they do not rehearse before *teishō*.

EPILOGUE

Some scholars might contend that *teishō* cannot be treated as conventional performance by maintaining that surely the manifestation of awakening is secondary to the state of mind it represents. Indeed, if we follow the performance analogy, a talented actor can impersonate awakening without actually experiencing it. However, I consider these objections to stem from a pragmatic, positivist, and essentially protestant view of religion, which emphasizes faith over ritual and private spiritual conviction over public ceremony. This understanding of religious experience tends to dichotomize doctrine and practice, consciousness and action. However, as several scholars have argued, this notion is alien to the Buddhist tradition (Hori 2000; Sharf 2005). As long as we consider awakening as an *inner* experience, a breakthrough to a pure consciousness, it can never be fully mediated by way of public display. However, in Zen, awakening is not merely a mental or psychological state; rather, it is manifested in body, conduct, and actions. Realization is embodied in the enactment of the individual, and it becomes an inherent part of one's character.

Accordingly, *performance* should not be understood as a method for affecting or transforming *reality*, because there is no reality apart from the performance of reality. Nishitani Keiji's (1900–1990) discussion of a “person” in *Religion and Nothingness* elaborates on this point:

We can understand person as persona—the “face” that an actor puts on to indicate the role he is to play on stage—but only as the persona of absolute nothingness. We can even call it a “mask” in the ordinary sense of a face that has been taken on temporarily, provided that we do not imply that there is some other “true” or “real” thing that it cloaks, or that it is something artificial devised to deceive, or that it is a mere “illusory appearance.” (1982, 67)

Consequently, there is no “face” to look for underneath the mask, no ultimate truth outside performance. Rather, performance is the nonduality of performance and reality, or as Nishitani aptly puts it, “Every bodily, mental, and spiritual activity that belongs to [a] person displays itself as a play of shadows moving across the stage of nothingness” (1982, 73).

Lastly, we come to the question of sincerity. By nature, any performance involves a certain degree of make-believe, and certainly in this sense *teishō* is no exception. As Goffman accurately observes, “When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (2004, 59).

However, this does not necessarily call for cynicism, since the individuals themselves might be taken by their own act, truly convinced of the

impression of reality that they attempt to engender (Goffman 2004, 59). Accordingly, the abbot's performance is an active process in which, more or less consciously, he plays the role of a Zen patriarch. However, this role should not be regarded as deceptive. It is rather an integral part of being a *rōshi*, of the ideal persona they have trained to become. To cite Robert Park's eloquent observation: "The role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons" (1950, 250).

Referring to the possibility of cheating in *kōan* interviews, Victor Hori argues: "It is also worth remembering that the very activity of play-acting is a training in overcoming subject and object duality, of *narikiru*" (2000, 294). Similarly, the abbot's performance should be understood as play-acting that enables him to overcome the duality of language. He can proclaim Zen by means of *becoming*, and if there is a level of fakery involved, it is a genuine one (Hori 2000). Hori's understanding of the relations between authenticity and ritual performance is perhaps best understood in light of the *original face* (*honraimenmoku* 本來面目) *kōan*, which states: "Without thinking of good or bad, what is your *original face* before your father and mother were born?"⁴⁴ Ostensibly, the *original face kōan* points to an essential state of being, to be found prior to social, cultural, and even biological conditioning. However, according to the model suggested here, the long-sought-after *original face* does not point to ridding oneself of all masks, but rather, to the constant awareness of the part that one is playing.

The emphasis on presence, liveliness, agency, and participation is not unique to contemporary performance theories; rather, it underlies an East-Asian understanding of ritual. According to Confucius, the carrying out of a ritual in a "mechanical" or "automatic" manner will result in failure. Effective ceremony should be done all heartedly, or not at all.⁴⁵ For seriousness, commitment of the participants together with ritual skill acquired through repetition is what guarantees the ritual's beauty and effectiveness. As Herbert Fingarette remarked, when "the truly ceremonial 'takes place'; there is a kind of spontaneity. It happens 'of itself'" (1972, 8–9). Accordingly, spontaneity and authenticity are not contrary to prescribed repetition, but rather, complementary, and the sincerity of the

⁴⁴This famous *kōan* is attributed to the six-patriarch Huineng (*Eka* 惠能) in the first chapter of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. See McRae 2000, 25, and T 2008, 48, 349b25.

⁴⁵*The Analects* (3:12).

teishō as a transformative event is to be found in the participants' *presence* in the act.

I hope that I have established that a performative approach, combined with ethnographic data, can offer important insights into the nature of the relationship between texts and enactment. By recognizing the seriousness of a play, performance can bridge the fundamental gap between the insider/outsider interpretations of religious experiences. One direction, which was only briefly considered and certainly worth pursuing, is extending the theoretical scope of the analysis to include non-Western notions of performance.

Throughout history, Asian civilizations have created their own terminologies for understanding performances, ranging from the *Book of Rites* to Zeami's treatises on drama. Applying them to various forms of practice may prove insightful for both Buddhist and performance studies.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶For an extended discussion of ritual in the *Book of Rites*, see Puett 2010. On Zeami's performance theories, see Masakazu and Matisoff 1981.

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