



André van der Braak. *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Zen Buddhism in the West.* Leiden: Brill | Rodopi, 2020. 252 pp. \$64.00, paper, ISBN 978-90-04-43507-0.

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With *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age*, André van der Braak has written an engaging—if flawed—reflection on contemporary Zen in the West. His “hook” is the work of Charles Taylor, in particular Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007), a massive and massively influential work in which the Canadian philosopher delineates the development and various implications of secularism/secularity in the modern West. As someone who was a student of Taylor at McGill in the early 1990s, who once considered using his 1997 opus *Sources of the Self* as a lens with which to reimagine modern Buddhism, and who has since written about Japanese Buddhist modernism in relation to Taylor’s understanding of the “immanent frame,” these connections make perfect sense to this reader.

Van der Braak sets up his argument by noting a “very real tension” between traditional Asian and modern Western forms of Buddhism. Although this could (and sometimes does) degenerate into a superficial East-West or traditional-modern distinction that bypasses, among other things, the various ways in which “Western” Buddhism was informed by the work of Japanese Buddhists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the author usefully complicates matters early in the introduction. One of the principal burdens of this book is to argue against a pat delineation of “immanence” and “transcendence”—and, by exten-

sion, the “secular” and the “religious”—when it comes to understanding modern Zen. That said, I am not entirely convinced by the contrast Van der Braak goes on to draw between the “religious” aspect of Zen (“the bodhisattva work of liberating all sentient beings”) from the “secular” aspect (“a toolkit for contemplating fitness”) (p. 17). This seems an odd distinction to make, as it effectively takes “ethics” out of secularity entirely, a move that many Buddhist modernists (especially those associated with Engaged Buddhism) would surely oppose! Overall, however, I appreciate and concur with van der Braak’s method, rooted in (Gadamerian) cross-cultural hermeneutics, within which the goal is to seek not what Zen “is” in some essentialist or transhistorical sense but rather: “what Zen has been and *can be* to the citizens of secular modernity in the twenty-first century” (pp. 11–12, my emphasis).

The initial two chapters of the book introduce to the reader the two primary discourses the author seeks to bridge: modern Zen and Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. For scholars and students of either, there is little new here; but then, the Venn diagram that contains those conversant with both the history of Chan/Zen and the work of Taylor is likely small. Van der Braak’s rapid-fire survey of the origins of Chan/Zen pays particular attention to the various “negotiations” and “reimaginings” that

occurred over the 1,500-year transmission from Bodhidharma to Jon Kabat-Zinn. Toward the end of this chapter, the author usefully highlights some aspects of the “two-way transmission” of Zen to the West, and how these have affected its “hermeneutic horizons” (p. 42). In chapter 2, as well, the final few pages (pp. 64–72) offer some helpful critiques of Taylor’s argument—including the whole question of the transcendent/immanent distinction—though these are mainly reliant on the critical work of other scholars. These first two chapters set the tone for the book as a whole: wide-ranging and ambitious in scope, but also heavily reliant on secondary scholarship on both Zen modernism and (albeit less so) Taylor’s thought. The bulk of the argument is relegated to the “Discussion” sections concluding each chapter.

Utilizing several key Taylorian concepts, the third chapter summarizes the various “Zen cross pressures” that buffet Taylor’s “immanent frame”—that is, the secularist assumption of a “natural order” to the world that has emerged as a result of “disenchantment”—focusing again on the question of whether (and how?) we need to go beyond the transcendent/immanent distinction in speaking of Buddhism/Zen. (At this point, the answer seems clear: *yes, of course...*) This is followed in chapter 4 by an analysis of the various ways that Buddhism—particularly Zen—has been interpreted as a form of “universal mysticism.” Here the argument of the book really begins; albeit, once again, it is an argument heavily reliant on the work of contemporary scholars like David McMahan, Dale Wright, and Hee-Jin Kim. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of “psychologization”—that is, the modern tendency to think of religion in psychological terms. Here the author highlights the value of Dōgen’s (and more generally, Sino-Japanese) epistemology in thinking through the “contact theories” of knowledge proposed by Taylor and Dreyfus. As the book progresses it becomes clear that, as with the Japanese Critical Buddhists, Dōgen will emerge as the “hero” of van der Braak’s quest for a reimagined modern Zen.

Chapter 6 extends the analysis of the previous chapter with a more specific look at modern Zen in light of Taylor’s “therapeutic turn” in modern religious discourse. The discussion here makes sense, though van der Braak’s invocation of controversial mid-twentieth century “master” Sawaki Kōdō (p. 152) raises the specter of the rhetoric used to justify Zen nationalism in the twentieth century. And this is even more so the case with Sanbō Kyōdan founder Yasutani Hakuun (not Yasuun, p. 156), now notorious for his imperialistic leanings. Even if one doesn’t fully accept the critique of Sawaki and Yasutani offered by Brian Victoria, this seems like an issue that needs to be addressed.[1]

Chapter 7 turns to the rise of (Romantic) “expressive individualism” as another “cross pres-

sure” on modern, secular forms of Zen, particularly as this relates to an understanding of Zen as a “transtraditional, global spirituality” (p. 158). Within this chapter we find one of the author’s most interesting arguments: that some contemporary forms of Buddhism—particularly, it would appear, “engaged” forms that prioritize the “other-oriented” self—provide resources for a “postmodern” critique not only of Western individualism but also of the Buddhist “status quo” (pp. 163–64). The basic premise is that classical forms of Buddhism, with deep roots in doctrines of “no self” and interdependence, “constitute[] a critique of consumerism and neoliberal ideology” (p. 163). At the same time, however, the radical “other-oriented self” promoted in texts such as the *Vimalakirti Sutra* also challenges the Buddhist status quo—that is, the residual conservatism of premodern Buddhist institutions. Here Dōgen returns as a potential resource, with the promise of more to come.

The book concludes by looking at three possible paths for any contemporary Zen that aims to “overcome modernism,” using the work of Stephen Batchelor, David Loy, and Dōgen as respective touchstones and, it would seem, progressive stages of Zen awakening. As always, the Discussion sections of each chapter are where we find the bulk of the analysis and critique—the reader is tempted to skip to those pages and bypass the summaries. Van der Braak first interprets Batchelor’s “secular Buddhism” in relation to Taylor’s “immanent frame” and “exclusive humanism.” After arguing that Batchelor is actually proposing something like an “existential Buddhism,” one which flips between exclusive humanism and antihumanism but leaves at least some space for “religion” in the Romantic/Tillichian sense of “re-enchantment” and “ultimate concern,” the author concludes that Batchelor’s approach remains limited in being “purely this-worldly” and thus, it would seem, not allowing for belief in bodhisattvas or “the radicality of the bodhisattva vow” (pp. 195–96). While I, too, have concerns with Batchelor’s approach to

secularism, I do not find this last charge particularly compelling, given the way that the bodhisattva vow was interpreted as *both* existentially transformative and radically “material” by twentieth-century progressive Buddhists like Seno’o Girō. In short, while I concur that Batchelor’s “existential Buddhism” lacks a strong political element, I do not think this has much if anything to do with his “immanentism.”

As if the terrain of Zen and modernity were not already broad enough, chapter 9 invokes the thought of several major figures of the Kyoto School in addition to the prolific David Loy. Much of this chapter is culled, as noted, from earlier works by Van der Braak. While this is fine in principle, one wonders whether the section on the Kyoto School does any real work here in terms of the author’s argument. With regard to Loy—an engaged Buddhist thinker who could hardly be more different than Nishitani Keiji—van der Braak concludes that in his work we see a higher stage of thinking beyond the immanent-transcendent divide (p. 216), one that only lacks the “specific practices that will help us engage in a reimagined transcendence” (p. 219).

And this brings us back, once again, to Dōgen, the subject of the final chapter. In reconstructing Zen as a form of “contextualized practice,” van der Braak leans into an interpretation of Dōgen’s Zen as being rooted in social ethics—that is, “collective bodhisattva work” (p. 224). While the points here are reasonable and well qualified, the author does tend to oversimplify “Western materialism” or “immanence” (p. 237)—arguably, in the work of, say, Spinoza, one finds Western precedents for the “overcoming” of these same dichotomies. Moreover, the Japanese New Buddhists of the early twentieth century had made at least halting steps toward a similar understanding of Buddhism (albeit, not usually Zen) as a “pantheistic” tradition with clear ethical (and even political) resonance. And finally, on a related point, I might have liked some recognition of the role played by Dōgen with-

in Critical Buddhism, where he similarly plays a foundational role in a reimagining—albeit a very different reimagining—of Zen/Buddhism for our contemporary age.

As should be obvious by now, I have mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand, I admire van der Braak's ambitious attempt to bring Taylor's complex and multilayered work on the secular to bear on the various issues surrounding modern Zen (and Zen modernism). There is unquestionable value in this connection, and the author frames his project in such a way as to forestall criticism of superficial comparativism. That said, the book relies rather too much on the work of others, including McMahan and Loy, and doesn't pay quite enough attention to the complexities of "secular"—and ostensibly pan-sectarian—Buddhist modernism as it emerged in Japan. With these caveats, *Reimagining Zen* is a recommended read for anyone interested in Western Zen, Buddhist modernism, secularism, and the work of Charles Taylor.

Note

[1]. Brian Victoria, *Zen at War*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), "Zen Masters on the Battlefield, Part I," *Japan Focus: The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, 24.3 (June 16, 2013), "Zen Masters on the Battlefield, Part II," *Japan Focus: The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, 27.4 (July 2, 2013), and "Sawaki Kodo and Wartime Zen: Final Pieces of the Puzzle," *Japan Focus: The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, 8.3 (May 4, 2015).

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