JUL 9 2012

'Zen Has No Morals'

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An academic paper by Christopher Hamacher presented on 7 July 2012 at the International Cultic Studies Association's annual conference in Montreal, Canada has been uploaded to The Zen Site. It covers the cases of Eido T. Shimano in the USA, and Dr. Klaus Zernickow (also known as Sotetsu Yuzen) in Germany.

"*Zen Has No Morals*!" – The Latent Potential for Corruption and Abuse in. Zen Buddhism, as Exemplified by Two Recent Cases by Christopher Hamacher [PDF from The Zen Site]

It's lengthy at 44 pages but well worth a read, footnotes included, as they provide further insight and documented references into the abuse and misuse of the Buddhadharma in the Zen context.

One of the most pertinent elements of the paper is the eight types of behavior the author describes as being characteristic of both these cases and possibly other cases as well. These behaviors include:

- a) Aggression upon being confronted
- b) Extreme formalism
- c) Blaming the student's ego
- d) Hypocrisy
- e) Groupthink
- f) Information control
- g) Self–aggrandisement or "cult of personality"
- h) Autocratic institutional control

Explanations and examples are given for each of these categories.

The author concludes the paper with an examination of some of the possible causes for these situations drawn from commonalities in the two cases he outlined. The causes the author lists, again with solid explanations, include:

- a) Lack of morality
- b) Japanese authoritarianism
- c) Impossible ideals
- d) The Absolute vs. the Relative
- e) The institution of dharma transmission
- f) Emphasis on enlightenment
- g) Cultic tendencies

There are a few more potential causes or contributing factors I'd like to add to that list. Most relate to larger cultural, psychological and cognitive issues at play in this dynamic.

- h) Larger culture of obedience to authority. That includes illegitimate authority via numerous fallacies.
- i) Generalization of celebrity culture influences. Popularity is seen as expertise and authority.
- j) Lack of cross-cultural or cross-class understanding. Where a leader is of a different culture or class than the majority of students there is a lack of knowledge of what is and isn't appropriate for the leader to be doing. Leaders exploit that ignorance and use their "special" knowledge to their advantage. One can also note this when sangha leaders are in the psychological counseling profession occasionally as well.
- k) Excessive emphasis on roles superseding individual's boundaries. The roles played within structures such as a monastery or religious community or large group training situation are manipulated such that moral and other individual boundaries are removed, reoriented or recast to incorporate misbehavior. This moving of the goal posts erodes our moral orientation.
- l) Conspicuous consumption and display as indicator of expertise, spiritual superiority, holiness and/or spiritual purity. Exaltation by way of shiny material goods harkens back to human social notions of tribute. Tribute goes to the victor, the leader, the one who has proven him/herself better than others. There is an assumption of infallibility or at least superiority when large amounts of expensive material goods surround the leader.
- m) Rejection of rational thought and critical analysis. It is popular in some Buddhist circles to invoke the currently in vogue cultural meme of anti-intellectualism. Rather than take "no thought" to mean "not piling up a bunch of deluded nonsense, and wrestling with it like a hyperactive simian, on top of the experience of reality" it is taken to mean some extreme kind of zombification wherein ones eyes roll back in their head and all semblance of thought or even instinctive reaction is obliterated. I've got to haul out the Chogyam Trungpa quote that was the inspiration for the original incarnation of this blog to elucidate this further.

"If we regard meditation as just getting into a fog so that you do not see, you do not feel, something is terribly wrong. In that case meditation would reduce one to a zombie. The enlightened man would have to be rescued. Someone would have to feed him and take him to the bathroom. We would have to have an enlightenment ward. "

- n) Psychological mechanisms and processes. Confusing reality experience with emotional reaction to reality experience. I have noticed this kind of action with some frequency amongst Buddhist practitioners. The often heard phrase of "as it is" really means "as it is". It doesn't mean how I feel about or react to what's presented in front of me. That is about 3 general steps removed away from "as it is". [technically we are getting into the twelve Nidanas and Abhidharma stuff here but I'm using an easier to explain psychological framework] Those three steps are 1. Becoming conscious of the situation (a recognition of sorts brought about by attention being attracted to something via the senses) 2. Identifying the situation by conventional means and categories 3. Reacting to the situation by fomenting thoughts and emotions (which are a type of thought) about it. Consequently these thoughts and emotions are then projected back onto the situation as analysis along with latent judgments and ego engages rendering it unreal from itself and making conclusions about the situation warped to a degree similar to whatever our projection is from the situation itself. At this point we can add a lot more filters borne of the same kinds of processes, which affect our categorization abilities through a feedback loop. This is how cognitive dissonance rises. With fallacious thinking we can end up examining a wholly fictitious situation mistaking it for reality. We end up talking about our projections of the situation which we have manufactured (fabrications) rather than the situation. This happens both individually and in groups.

One large category that contributes significantly to the issue of dysfunction between leaders and students is the inability of students to examine their thought patterns for fallacious content. We are not accustomed to questioning authority in most societies nor are we accustomed to questioning ourselves. We don't often ask ourselves questions such as, "Where did I get this belief?", "Why do I think that is true?" or "What evidence is provided for that statement?". Most often we dismiss our own concerns with "That sounds about right." or underneath it "It gives me a sense of emotional satisfaction to agree with that", whether it actually is right or not, because to confront our beliefs in this fashion exposes us to the discomfort of the cognitive dissonance we live with on a daily basis. [conditioning] Cognitive dissonance is when what we believe is going on is different than what's going on in the outside world. We use all kinds of mechanisms to avoid dealing with that clash since it engenders confrontations with the ego and larger ramifications especially in shared belief social groups (families, neighborhoods, sanghas, cities, nations). We don't like to be wrong. We certainly don't often set out to prove ourselves wrong, and if circumstances start to emerge where that is happening we often fool ourselves by using various means, including fallacies to shore up our own beliefs rather than do some serious reality testing.

Here are eleven fairly common fallacies which leave students vulnerable, can be promoted by groupthink and can be used by unscrupulous leaders in lieu of an explanation for their own improper behavior. There are dozens more that could be listed. I've included a few examples of what this kind of thinking looks like as well.

- False Contingency: from a small sample to a large conclusion. "He's always been truthful with me, therefore he is not a liar.",
- False Dilemma: only 2 choices allowed. "You either agree with the rest of the sangha or you're not a sincere Buddhist.", "If he doesn't agree with the teacher he must be mentally ill.", "
- Appeal to Closure. A situation, no matter how questionable, must be accepted or else the point will remain unsettled and people will be denied "closure." This doesn't recognize that some points can never be settled. It is also an appeal to emotion for which a separate case has to be made, if it is to be valid. "If we start to address this particular problem it will open a huge can of worms that we'll be dealing with for years. That'll be too hard on everyone." [This is often used to rationalize avoidance. It includes other fallacies such as "slippery slope" and "future prediction"] Lots of times this crops up in criminal cases particularly where wrongful convictions are involved. "We've got to get someone locked up so the community can relax."
- Appeal to Tradition or conversely, Innovation."We've always done things this way." or "Anything that old is obviously invalid in the modern world" These are not reasons but appeals to comfortable abstract positions. The latter is also a false equivalency old=invalid.
- Argumentum ex Silentio. The idea that remaining silent or not having information about something proves something about the truth of a situation. "We don't have all the facts, therefore nothing can be done." [Further investigation would bring further facts but the point to this statement is to close down a discussion], "Noble silence." [Implies nobility in silence even where the noble action might be to call the police.] "If we don't talk about it, it will pass." [Trivializes the situation.]
- Testimonial Fallacy: well known figures incorrectly used in absentia to support a conclusion. "If the Dalai Lama was here I'm sure he'd support this.", "Gandhi would say...[fake Gandhi-like quote]"
- Anonymous Authority: the authority in question is not named. "Experts say...", "It came from the highest levels.", "Senior students said..."
- Post hoc ergo propter hoc: Because one thing preceded another in time, it is held to cause the other. Also known as the correlation is not causation argument. "Things got bad just after you showed up, therefore you caused bad things.", "
- Wrong direction: The direction between cause and effect is reversed. This is often partly in effect when 'blame the victim' comes into play. "It happened to her therefore she caused it to happen somehow." "He must have wanted to be in that situation in some way." Law of attraction people, when it doesn't work (and it doesn't), also use this one as a rationalization. "If your vision board items haven't manifested yet, then you haven't really wanted them."
- Attack the Person (ad hominem) which is to attack the person's character, presentation, circumstances, unrelated activities, or argue the person does not practice what he preaches in some other area. These are generally irrelevant to an issue under discussion. "You use an iPhone therefore you're a hypocrite and cannot be against capitalism.", "You don't know how to cast

a horoscope so you can't comment on the efficacy of astrology." [Terrence McKenna, the psychedelic anthropologist, actually used that one. It's equivalent to saying, "You don't know how to make a Quiche Lorraine so you're view as to whether quiche is a suitable breakfast item is invalid."], "You don't have a PhD so none of your points are valid.", "You're mean, so you're wrong." [tone trolling often takes the ad hominem approach], "Homeless people can't understand social policy.",

- The Straw Man. Arguing with points not made or creating the illusion of different opinions or misrepresentation of an opponent's position by altering, adding or ignoring irrelevant points. This has a lot of different forms.[many of which appear in blog comments] "If we discuss Roshi's behavior publicly we're bound to lose students and support." [This shifts the discussion from behavior to public relations. Also includes jumping to a conclusion and mind reading:two more fallacies.], "Gays can't be good parents because they can't have "natural" children."[Qualities of good parents are confabulated with how children enter a family. Also an implied moral ad hominem "unnatural".], "Those who argue against increased surveillance should acknowledge that if they've done nothing wrong then they have nothing to fear from a surveillance state." [The argument leaves the rails from pros and cons of surveillance in society to the real or imaginary actions/motives of the person with the anti–surveillance position. This is an implied ad hominem "You must be bad." as well as a false dilemma [either a criminal society or a surveillance society] and false equivalency of wrong equaling anti–surveillance without any argumentative substance.]

Our processes of dealing with the world and communicating our experience of it can get pretty complicated. When we have to deal with situations of misuse of power there are the aggravating factors of our own mistaken thinking, that of other people, emotional reactions, intentionality and a whole host of others.

When there are situations such as the cases outlined in that paper some extra effort is required not only within the social sphere but with everyone involved to make sure erroneous thinking is kept at bay. Otherwise such situations just stumble from one catastrophe to another, often with a few different cast members each time, without anything real being addressed.

More on Fallacies

Master List of Logical Fallacies

Argumentative Fallacies