

# The Availability of Ethics in Zen Buddhist Philosophy

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## Preface

This thesis is about Zen Buddhist philosophy, to which I was introduced during my semester abroad at KU Leuven by Andrew Whitehead. The course I followed there on comparative philosophy and non-duality in regards to Zen philosophy sparked my interest and eventually led me to write this thesis. Though it has been challenging to grasp a philosophy that was unfamiliar to me a year ago, I felt ambitious taking up this challenge and am satisfied with the result of my research.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Jo van Cauter, for his supervision and assistance in writing this thesis. However ambitious my plans were, you were always supportive and guided me through this project, for which I am very thankful.

To Geert Gerarts: thank you for the many informative discussions. Your expertise in Zen Buddhism helped me to understand the essential practical aspect of Zen. Your help and encouraging words were greatly appreciated.

I hope you enjoy your reading.

Warm regards,

Eva de Jong

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## Abstract

This thesis offers a renewed understanding of Zen ethics, emphasizing its singularity and integrality. Zen Buddhism is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism and is religious in nature. Several Zen masters have, however, given a philosophical account of this religious tradition, among whom Dogen. Dogen has been one of the most important figures in the Zen tradition to write of Zen Buddhist philosophy. In contemporary Zen philosophy, there has been an ongoing debate on whether or not there is ethical content in Zen Buddhism. James Whitehill has argued for the presence of a ‘premature’ form of ethics in Zen Buddhist philosophy and attempted to reconstruct this aptitude further. There are, however, two problems with his reconstruction: first, he presupposes the ‘prematurity’ of Zen ethics, and second, his attempt forces Zen ethics to fit a somewhat Western mold. Pace Whitehill’s account, this thesis argues for the availability of an efficient ethics in Zen Buddhist philosophy. It does so by emphasizing the importance of moral precepts, received by the Zen student from their teacher, and the prominence of compassion in Zen. It shows that these notions combined provide the much sought-after ethical content for Zen Buddhism to qualify as a mature and full-fledged ethics.

*Zen Buddhism, ethics, precepts, compassion, Dogen*

## Introduction

Zen Buddhism's predecessor Chan Buddhism was in China not the biggest religious tradition. Contrary to Chan, Confucianism triumphed in China and was thoroughly intertwined with politics.<sup>1</sup> Hence there was no pressing need for Chan Buddhism to develop an extensive ethics for the population.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, (Neo-)Confucianists criticized Buddhism for its relativistic attitude towards the moral sphere.<sup>3</sup> Even though there was no necessity for a systematically developed ethics, there is ethical content to be found in Chan and Zen philosophy and is mainly described as the tripartition of *sila* (moral rules), *dhyana* (inward practice of concentration), and *prajna* (transcendental wisdom).<sup>4</sup>

Since the growth of the popularity of Zen Buddhism in Western contexts, Western philosophers have been increasingly invested in articulating Zen philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Among these interests are virtue ethics as described by Dogen, an important figure in Zen philosophy, and moral exemplars, in which Christian saints are compared to Buddhist saints (e.g. a comparison of Jesus and the Buddha).<sup>6</sup> There has been an ongoing debate on whether there is an articulated ethics to be found in Zen Buddhist philosophy. While sceptics claim the impossibility of Zen ethics, other contemporary philosophers argue that a closer look into the Zen tradition reveals indications of an enunciated ethics.

Among these philosophers is James Whitehill, who did not accept the unfeasibility of Zen ethics and explored how ethics is expressed in Zen Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> He concluded that there is only an aptitude for ethics in Zen that should be developed further, which he attempts to do by advancing the Zen ethics to measure up to Western standards. The problem with his work is two-folded: first, molding the presupposed aptitude for ethics into a certain mold is highly problematic; second, there are no good arguments for accepting the immaturity of Zen ethics.

Contrary to the conclusion of Whitehill, this thesis will argue for the availability of ethical content in Zen Buddhism, which mostly focuses on the precepts a Zen student receives from their teacher and the spontaneous compassion which arises when a state of enlightenment is consciously encountered. This will counter Whitehill's argument in terms of the possibility of Zen ethics. This counterargument is not claimed to be the only way Zen ethics is to be described: it will exclusively provide the needed arguments to accept the integrality of Zen ethics.

To be able to develop the thesis statement in sufficient depth, the first chapter will provide the needed background of Zen Buddhism and its philosophy. Then, in the second chapter, the problems of Whitehill's argument will be discussed. In the third and final chapter, the counterargument will be elaborated and the presence of a mature Zen ethics will be argued.

It is essential to note that writing a thesis on Zen Buddhism, which teachings ultimately show the emptiness of language, is inherently paradoxical. However, since language enables us to communicate and convey knowledge and Zen Buddhism has important philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Jan van Bragt, "Reflections on Zen and Ethics," in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 12, no. 2 (2002): 138.

<sup>2</sup> Van Bragt, "Reflections on Zen and Ethics": 138.

<sup>3</sup> Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Introduction," in *Principle and Practicality: Essays in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learnings*, eds. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Van Bragt, "Reflections on Zen and Ethics": 141.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas K. Mikkelson, "Toward a Description of Dogen's Moral Virtues," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, no. 2 (June 2006): 225.

<sup>6</sup> Mikkelson, "Toward a Description of Dogen's Moral Virtues"; Thomas Brian Mooney and Mark Nowacki, "Introduction," in *Aquinas, Education, and the East*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 4 (Dordrecht: Springer Publishing, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> James Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?" *The Eastern Buddhist* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987).

insights, I will attempt to transmit this knowledge through language. I do recommend you, the reader of this thesis, to practice Zen meditation, for that is the only true way of understanding Zen and – more importantly – experiencing Zen.

## Chapter I: Background

This chapter provides the required background information on Zen Buddhist philosophy; that will enable a more comprehensive understanding of Zen and will prepare the reader for the upcoming chapters on ethics in Zen Buddhism. First, Zen will be described from a historical perspective, providing the context of the origin of Zen and how this tradition fits in the overarching tradition of Buddhism. Subsequently, the nature of Zen philosophy will be elaborated upon, covering its core ideas such as ‘the discriminating mind’ and non-dualism. Lastly, Dogen, an important figure in Zen philosophical history and principle source of Zen insights in contemporary scholarship, will be introduced and discussed.

The Zen school of Buddhism came about in the twelfth century CE during the Kamakura period in Japan.<sup>8</sup> Heisig, Kasulis and Maraldo describe this period as a “time of political upheaval, conflict, and an unusual series of natural disasters” which led to the oppression of the poor.<sup>9</sup> It left people anxious and insecure, which in turn lead unto an increasing draw towards religion.<sup>10</sup> This inspired new religious traditions, such as Zen Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism and various forms of Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> Zen underwent two strategies of development. The Rinzai (Chinese: Linji) school conducted an “elitist approach that sought the patronage of the political centers of power and authority” and succeeded in building temples in Kyoto and Kamakura (resp. the capital and the center of the shogunate).<sup>12</sup> The other tactic was “a separatist approach that founded monasteries for spiritual practice far from city distractions” conducted by the Soto (Chinese: Caodong) school of Zen, founded by Dogen.<sup>13</sup> The difference in origin thus lies in the political and societal engagement of the schools.

Zen ultimately originated from Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana and Hinayana are the two main schools of Buddhism and depict the general bifurcation within the Buddhist tradition, while other schools are said to have faded through time.<sup>14</sup> The difference between the two schools is significant, even though both claim to directly proclaim the Buddha’s teaching. Mahayanism is said to be more progressive, but is also criticized for its breadth of mind and liberality; for being too metaphysical and speculative. This is also linked to the fact that many smaller schools of Buddhism are incorporated in Mahayanism. On the other hand, Hinayanism can be understood as quite the opposite of Mahayanism, for it is conservative and promotes a more pragmatic way of thinking, leaving close to no room for speculative interpretations of the Buddha teaching. The bifurcation is mainly a result of interpreting the Buddha teaching either literally or liberally.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout history, Mahayana Buddhism branched out: among those branches of the liberal school of Buddhism was Chan Buddhism as it arose in the sixth century CE in China.<sup>16</sup> Chan Buddhism is the predecessor of Japanese Zen and was brought from India to China by

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<sup>8</sup> James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy*, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy*, 135.

<sup>12</sup> Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy*, 135-136.

<sup>13</sup> Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy*, 135-136.

<sup>14</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (New Dehli: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2000), 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Hershock, “Chan Buddhism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University Press). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/buddhism-chan/>.



Bodhidharma.<sup>17</sup> When Chan was brought to Japan, its name was translated as Zen. Both are commonly used interchangeably; it is often said that the Zen tradition is bilingual, for Dogen used both Chinese and Japanese language in his philosophical works.<sup>18</sup> As this thesis will mainly discuss Dogen and the Soto school, it consistently uses the term Zen Buddhism – but as stated before, Chan Buddhism could be used as well.

Before proceeding with the teachings of Zen, the ultimate nature of Zen should be explained. According to Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, often referred to as one of the world's leading authorities on Zen Buddhism, Zen ultimately teaches nothing.<sup>19</sup> Suzuki states that “whatever teachings there are in Zen, they come out of one's own mind.”<sup>20</sup> Although there are certainly teachings of Zen, ultimately, we teach ourselves and Zen merely points the way. All knowledge ultimately already lies inside ourselves, waiting to be uncovered. Zen does not acknowledge doctrines of any kind, for there is no ‘one truth’ to be imposed on people.<sup>21</sup>

Its idea is fundamentally grounded in the non-dualist discourse. Zen is philosophy, but not like the logical and analytical philosophy one might associate with the word ‘philosophy.’ On the contrary, Zen arguably transcends logic which is inherently dualistic. That is, to distinguish right from wrong, to place them on opposite sides of each other is logical and fundamentally dualistic. In logic, there is A and not A; good and not good; good and bad. Zen however, claims to transcend this dualistic way of thinking. This non-duality is fundamental to almost all Eastern philosophy. Nagarjuna, a philosopher who played an important role in the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism, writes the following:

Without relation to “good” there is no “bad,” in dependence on which we form the idea of “good.” Therefore “good” is unintelligible. There is no “good” unrelated to “bad”; yet we form our idea of “bad” in dependence on it. There is therefore no “bad.”<sup>22</sup>

These interdependences and dualities are inscribed in language and are “fundamental categories of thought,” David Loy affirms.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, when using language, one is constantly differentiating and discriminating. In Zen, this is understood as ‘the discriminating mind,’ in which object and subject, good and evil, and so on, are distinguished.<sup>24</sup> The ultimate truth is therefore non-dual, for dualities only arise when we think. This is why meditation is of such importance in Zen Buddhism: when meditating, one attempts to find silence; peace; emptiness.<sup>25</sup> The acknowledgement of the duality that thinking creates, for example by using language, leads to the understanding that all things are empty (Sanskrit: *sunyata*).

The emptiness of things, also often translated as ‘openness’ as a more positively framed translation, is the arguably the most difficult teaching of Zen and it is best explained by understanding the relationships between things. When speaking of ‘good’, one essentially also speaks of ‘bad,’ as Nagarjuna depicted, which leaves us with the interdependence of things.

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<sup>17</sup> John R. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dogen* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2000), xxxv.

<sup>19</sup> Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York City: Grove Press, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 38. This does not mean that teachers do not play an important role in transmitting the teachings of the Buddha. Quite the contrary: the student-teacher relationship is of great significance.

<sup>22</sup> David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Loy, *Nonduality*, 250.

<sup>24</sup> Masao Abe, *Zen and Western Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 137-138.

<sup>25</sup> This is not the sole goal of meditation (also because it's problematic to attribute a goal to meditation), for attempting to gain insights is essential as well.

Therefore, when speaking of one thing, we automatically also speak of others: everything is related to everything. This leaves sole concepts like ‘good’ or even ‘mountain’ to be empty. As stated before, this can also be understood as ‘openness’: concepts are open to our experience of them. Thomas Kasulis writes the following about this experience in his book on Zen Buddhism called *Zen Action Zen Person*:

The Zen Buddhist view is that intellectualizations, concepts, even language itself are inadequate for expressing our experience as it is experienced.<sup>26</sup>

When meditating, this openness, away from the discriminating mind, is practiced, for it is not a concept to be known, but itself an experience as well. Kasulis states that it is important to “return to where we are”; to experience the present moment.<sup>27</sup> Transcending the dualistic world created by the discriminating mind, experiencing the openness of things, and sitting quietly (Sanskrit: *zazen*): this is the fundamental practice of Zen Buddhism.

An important, if not the most important, master of Zen Buddhism, is Dogen, who is known for his philosophical writings and poetry, and the founding of the Soto school of Zen.<sup>28</sup> According to Masao Abe, three things define Dogen’s importance: (1) his combination of deep religious realization and philosophical and speculative skills, (2) his radical interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism, and (3) the far-reaching philosophical significance of his understanding of Buddha-nature, time, death, and morality.<sup>29</sup> This is also why Dogen is of such importance to this thesis: no other Zen master has developed Zen to be on such philosophical level and of such philosophical significance. In Chapter III, the importance of his ideas in regard to ethics will be thoroughly elaborated.

There are several fundamental Buddhist ideas Dogen approached differently and developed further. First, Dogen approaches ‘the way’ of Buddhism, seen as a spiritual path or pursuit to a final destination (enlightenment, in the case of most Buddhist schools), as a circle, but does not reject the understanding of ‘the way’ as a successive process in which progress is possible.<sup>30</sup> He argues that “each moment of practice encompasses enlightenment, and each moment of enlightenment encompasses practice.”<sup>31</sup> Secondly, he emphasizes the ‘true dharma eye,’ which roughly represents authenticity and the genuine understanding and continuous awareness of the teachings.<sup>32</sup> Third, Dogen sees *nirvana*<sup>33</sup> not as an ultimate stage only reached by Buddha’s (‘enlightened ones’), but as inseparable from enlightenment and practice.<sup>34</sup> These three ideas of Dogen lead to the final significant idea, which is two-folded. Enlightenment is omnipresent during practice, because of the circularity of ‘the way.’ However, enlightenment is also, as commonly understood throughout many Buddhist schools, a moment of breakthrough and depicts one’s ultimate realization; one’s awakening.<sup>35</sup> Dogen thus understands enlightenment in two ways: enlightenment immanent to practice and enlightenment as a moment of breakthrough. These significant ideas altogether have made Dogen’s work of great significance to the Zen tradition, as well as this thesis, for they provide the most extensive

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Kasulis, *Zen Action Zen Person*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Masao Abe, *A Study of Dogen: His Philosophy and Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Abe, *A Study of Dogen*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, xxviii.

<sup>31</sup> Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, xxix.

<sup>32</sup> Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, xxviii.

<sup>33</sup> *Nirvana* originally means ‘putting out of fire’ and depicts a state where there is freedom from burning desire or anxiety, or from the enslavement of passion. (Source: Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, xxx.)

<sup>34</sup> Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, xxx.

<sup>35</sup> Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, xxxii.

account of Zen philosophy, and, as mentioned before, no other Zen master has provided a work on such philosophical level.

## Chapter II: The Possibility of a Zen Ethic

In this chapter I will discuss James Whitehill's "Is there a Zen Ethic?" in which he argues that there is some aptitude for a full-fledged ethical system in Zen Buddhism that needs to be further developed. Although I agree with Whitehill to the extent that Zen philosophy should be adequately and accurately articulated when introduced in non-Buddhist contexts, I disagree with him when he chooses to argue that the potential of an ethic should be further developed towards a normative moral system. The issue with his line of thought is two folded. First, to further develop a 'beginning ethics' towards a normative moral system is to pour it into a mold: it's being forced to take a certain shape and thereby neglects its singularity. Whitehill presupposes that an ethic is only an ethic when it's modern, philosophical, descriptive, meta-ethical, and normative. Secondly, Whitehill presupposes that Zen ethics is unfinished; incomplete. I disagree: there surely is an ethic, but perhaps not the ethical system one is used to in the West. This chapter will confront these problems and prepare for my counterargument: I will argue the presence of ethics in Zen, which both undermines Whitehill's supposed immaturity of Zen ethics, as well as deny the need to reinvent Zen ethics. My counterargument will be the main objective of my thesis and will be presented in the next chapter.

James Whitehill has made an attempt to analyze the possibility of Zen Buddhist ethics in his paper "Is There a Zen Ethic?" This work is divided into two parts: in the first part, Whitehill questions the presence of a Zen ethic and concludes there is only an aptitude that needs to be developed further; in the second part Whitehill provides possibilities for developing the supposed premature Zen ethics. Whitehill states that "Zen Buddhism lacks, or seems to lack, an ethic," and that therefore a modern, philosophical Zen ethic should be developed.<sup>36</sup> What is meant by 'a modern, philosophical Zen ethic' is rather unclear though. Whitehill does, however, suggest what appears to be a Western approach to Zen ethics:

Zen Buddhism will only have a marginal influence upon the West if it fails to penetrate Western culture's spiritual style to its living core: the moral heart and will, shaped by ethical inquiry.<sup>37</sup>

Whitehill also mentions the "eagerness of Zen's Western audience for the stimulating and corrective insights of Zen thought [...]."<sup>38</sup> This suggests a concern for the import of Zen in Western cultures, which further strengthens Whitehill's use of the term 'a modern philosophical Zen ethic.' He also emphasizes the importance of descriptiveness, meta-ethics, and normativity for a modern, philosophical Zen ethic.<sup>39</sup> Whitehill mentions that "without an adequately articulated ethic, a philosophical interpretation of Zen lacks comprehensiveness, as well as practical usefulness."<sup>40</sup> Although not precisely described, these remarks do give a good indication of what Whitehill means by a modern, philosophical Zen ethic.

Western ethics, however, cannot and should not be summed up in a sole sentence, Warran Ashby argues in his book *A Comprehensive History of Western Ethics: What Do We Believe*.<sup>41</sup> However, throughout history, ethics in Western contexts have been predominantly

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<sup>36</sup> Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?": 9.

<sup>37</sup> Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?": 11.

<sup>38</sup> Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?": 10.

<sup>39</sup> Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?": 21.

<sup>40</sup> Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?": 19.

<sup>41</sup> Warran Ashby, *A Comprehensive History of Western Ethics: What Do We Believe?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010).

focused on the individual: how one should behave, what rights one has, and the like.<sup>42</sup> A Western conception of ethics has therefore often focused on normativity and standardization.<sup>43</sup> This could explain Whitehill's tendency to reformulate Zen Buddhist ethics to fit this model of normativity.

Whitehill argues that the lack of a Zen ethic is because (1) it hasn't been on the Zen philosophical agenda to develop the beginning ethics any further and (2) it is ultimately deemed implausible for there being any substantial form of an ethic possible at all in Zen.<sup>44</sup> These arguments are very plausible and legitimately supported: Japanese philosophers haven't been invested in the ethics of Zen and critics depict Zen as an antinomian tradition. Whitehill does not agree with these critics and gives examples of expressions of ethics and morality in Zen Buddhism. However, this does not leave him to believe that therefore there is a Zen ethic. To the contrary: he states that Zen ethics in its current form is futile and should be restructured and redefined in order for it to qualify as an 'ethics.'

The first problem regarding Whitehill's argumentation comes forth out of his conclusion that – because of the presupposed aptitude for an ethics – a modern, philosophical Zen ethic should be developed, for otherwise it cannot be called an 'ethics.' The problem with this is that Whitehill supposes that an ethic should be modern and philosophical, as well as descriptive, meta-ethical, and normative, and that the current Zen ethics does not have these characteristics. This line of argumentation creates the impression that the existing aptitude of a Zen ethic should be poured into the mold of a modern, philosophical, descriptive, meta-ethical, normative, and arguably a Western ethical system. It seems like the aptitude for a Zen ethic should be forced to take a certain shape. This is problematic because by forcing it into a mold, a great deal (if not all) of Zen ideas will be altered to such an extent that they lose their original meaning. To counter this reader, this thesis argues that Zen ethics should instead be regarded as an already full-fledged ethics that differs from the modern, philosophical ethics we are used to in the West.

The second problem lies within the presumption that the ethics in Zen Buddhism is unfinished. It seems as though Whitehill is met with a bifurcation at the end of the first part of his paper. He has at this point discussed critics of Zen ethics and described multiple 'preludes' to Zen ethical insights, and now has the option to continue into two directions: first, study these 'preludes' further and research how ethics could possibly be manifested in Zen ethics, or, second, conclude that there is only an aptitude for ethics. Remarkably, Whitehill chooses the latter: he accepts the lack of ethics in Zen Buddhism, thereby neglecting the various 'preludes' mentioned earlier in his paper. However, as indicated by Whitehill's own exploration of the 'preludes,' there is a substantial amount of ethical ideas in Zen Buddhism which could lead one to believe there actually is a 'complete' Zen ethics. This counterargument will be developed in the next chapter.

While disagreeing with Whitehill's direction and ultimate conclusion, this paper nonetheless retains some important insights. Whitehill acknowledges the Bodhisattva model, for example, which is an essential aspect of Zen ethics. Bodhisattva essentially is a being (Sanskrit: *bodhi*) who is enlightened (Sanskrit: *sattva*), and the Bodhisattva model depicts how one can act enlightened in everyday life in which wisdom (Sanskrit: *prajna*) and compassion (Sanskrit: *karuna*) are combined.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Whitehill also mentions the *paramitas* which he calls "psychological dispositions to act more generously and patiently with others [...] and, finally,

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<sup>42</sup> Ashby, "Conclusion," in *A Comprehensive History of Western Ethics*.

<sup>43</sup> Ashby, "Conclusion," in *A Comprehensive History of Western Ethics*.

<sup>44</sup> Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?": 9-11.

<sup>45</sup> Oleh Owen Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva Brain: Buddhism Naturalized* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

to practice (or trustfully rely on) the perfection of wisdom, *prajnaparamita*.”<sup>46</sup> Apart from the Bodhisattva and the *paramitas*, Whitehill also discusses the importance of the teacher-student relationship, Buddha-mind and Buddha-nature, and *sunyata* (emptiness; openness); all of which are essential to Zen ethics. However, as mentioned before, Whitehill does not pursue these fundamental components any further and concludes instead that they need to be further developed.

Whereas the suggestion that Zen ethics should be remade to fit certain Western standards is highly problematic, Whitehill’s overall concern remains valid and relevant. He acknowledges the extension and deepening of the encounter of Zen and the world civilization and recognizes the importance of discussing Zen more in the global academic philosophical debate. Furthermore, Whitehill also acknowledges the important aspects of Zen Buddhism which should not go to waste when developing Zen ethics further.

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<sup>46</sup> Whitehill, “Is There a Zen Ethic?”: 26.

## Chapter III: Spontaneous Compassion

This chapter argues that the combination of Zen Buddhist precepts with the spontaneous compassion arising from Zen enlightenment suffices as requisites for a full-fledged ethical system.

The precepts given from master to student function as a step along the Zen Buddhist path. These precepts contain mainly moral codes. The precepts are an exercise – there is no punishment involved; there are no sins. The Buddha never spoke of right and wrong; of moral and immoral, the Buddha only spoke of what causes one's suffering and what relieves one from suffering, the Buddha spoke of wholesomeness. The precepts are meant to make the student more aware of all suffering; an awareness is often thought to be the main objective of Zen. This is why sitting meditation (*zazen*) is of such great importance.

Dogen – the important Zen master and philosopher mentioned earlier in Chapter I – thought of the Buddha path as a circle: there is no end and no beginning; there is no goal and no failure. However, there is a state to be achieved called enlightenment: complete awareness in a non-dual state, achieved by distancing oneself from the thinking mind and its constant production of dichotomies. In this state, compassion arises naturally.

The conclusion developed throughout this chapter will in a certain aspect be similar to Whitehill's conclusion. He concludes that, considering the increasing popularity and global spreading of Zen Buddhism, a clear Zen ethic could be very helpful. Even though I disagree with the fact that we should mold Zen ethic into an ethical system we (in the West) are used to, I do agree with the fact that the world could benefit from a clear formulation of how ethics are incorporated in Zen Buddhism.

The foremost concern of this chapter will be compassion, but first, the precepts will be covered. Then, the practice and state of enlightenment in regard to ethics will be explained and particularized. Finally, an account of the practical ethics of Zen Buddhism will be given, which will further support the conclusion of this thesis.

The precepts given from Zen master to student are of great importance in the Zen tradition, as well as in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism in general. The precepts depict a set of moral rules, given to a student to guide them towards being a Bodhisattva: an enlightened being. In the Soto school of Zen, founded by Dogen, the precepts generally are given to a student when they decide to live their lives in a monastery as Buddhists; the transmission of the precepts are “the first act of entering the Dharma.”<sup>47</sup> The precepts consist of Three Pure Precepts (ceasing from evil; doing only good; and doing what is good for the sake of all sentient beings) and Ten Great Precepts (do not kill; do not steal; do not covet; do not say that which is untrue; do not sell the wine of delusion; do not speak against others, be they laity or monastics; do not be proud of yourself and devalue others; do not be mean in giving either Dharma or material possessions; do not be angry; and do not defame the Three Treasures).<sup>48</sup> These are to be seen as a code, passed from master to student during a traditional ceremony.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the Zen master passing the precepts along is a kind of moral exemplar to his students: this relationship is fundamental to the Buddha-path and the eventual reaching of Buddha-hood, or enlightenment.

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<sup>47</sup> Dogen, “*Jukai*: On Receiving the Precepts,” in *Shobogenzo*, trans. Hubert Nearman (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007), 930-936.

<sup>48</sup> Dogen, “*Jukai*,” 932-935.

<sup>49</sup> Dogen, “*Jukai*,” 931.

The precepts seem to depict a morally right way of conduct, even though Zen Buddhism is often said to transcend the dichotomy of right and wrong. Dogen elaborates on this apparent contradiction in “*Shoaku Makusa: Refrain from All Evil Whatsoever*.”<sup>50</sup> He states that ‘all evil’ is not the same as all that is wrong, nor as what is thought of evil in the past or present, nor as what ordinary people consider to be evil.<sup>51</sup> Dogen writes the following:

What is seen as good and what is seen as evil depend on the times, but time itself is neither good nor evil. What is good and what is evil depend on what thoughts and things they give rise to, but whatever arises is likewise inherently neither good nor evil. To the extent that thoughts or things are alike, they partake of good alike, and to the extent that they are alike, they partake of evil alike.<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, it is all about refraining oneself from evil: only then one can understand the true Dharma of Buddha.<sup>53</sup> This refraining is, according to Dogen, a matter of “refraining from things not to be done;” there are essentially no evils but there are only things not to be done.<sup>54</sup> There is no existing evil, because evilness does not arise naturally in the Buddha-mind: “there are only things that one should not do.”<sup>55</sup>

This complex idea can be explained when looking at the positive formulation of these precepts: these are things to be done – not to refrain from. Dogen writes that, even though one should “uphold and practice all that is good,” all that is good is not something which already exists and is pending to be put into practice.<sup>56</sup> Again, Dogen emphasizes the dependence of ‘all that is good’ on e.g. time and place. “This adherence and practice will manifest what is good, without fail,” Dogen writes.<sup>57</sup>

Even though Dogen mostly speaks of the monastic life and not the ‘everyday practice available to laic,’ Dogen, as well as the Mahayana tradition, generally emphasize that enlightenment is available to everyone – no-one excluded.<sup>58</sup> One does, in short, not have to have received the precepts in a spiritual ceremony to study, practice, and exercise them.

Apart from the precepts, which can be understood as a moral code of conduct, Zen ethics is expressed in the notion of enlightenment as well. As mentioned before, Dogen’s idea of enlightenment is two folded: enlightenment is available to everyone, is ubiquitous, and is immanent to walking the Buddha path; and enlightenment is an ultimate realization or awakening, depicted as a moment of breakthrough. Both ways of interpreting enlightenment are not inherently contradictory, even though it might seem so. Dogen writes of ‘realizing enlightenment,’ for enlightenment is omnipresent but can be realized in a moment of breakthrough.<sup>59</sup>

When practicing; meditating, in which sole awareness is central, and in which enlightenment is ubiquitous, one can learn what the ‘true self’ is. Dogen teaches in his renowned

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<sup>50</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa: On Refrain from All Evil Whatsoever*,” in *Shobogenzo*, trans. Hubert Nearman (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007), 78-88.

<sup>51</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa*,” 79.

<sup>52</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa*,” 79.

<sup>53</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa*,” 79.

<sup>54</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa*,” 81.

<sup>55</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa*,” 81.

<sup>56</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa*,” 83.

<sup>57</sup> Dogen, “*Shoaku Makusa*,” 84. Dogen’s ideas of the Dharma are an extensive philosophical work, so, for further reading I would strongly recommend reading *Shobogenzo*.

<sup>58</sup> Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy*, 136; 142-143.

<sup>59</sup> Dogen, *Shobogenzo*, trans. Hubert Nearman (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007).



*Genjo Koan* that “to learn what the True Self is, is to forget about the self.”<sup>60</sup> Here, one is met with non-duality: the dichotomy of ‘I’ and ‘other’ fades, beyond the discriminating mind. In this state, compassion (Sanskrit: *karuna*) allegedly arises spontaneously, as a result of this faded distinction.<sup>61</sup> Compassion is seen by Dogen as Buddha-nature, and since Buddha-nature is immanent to all human beings, compassion is omnipresent as well.<sup>62</sup> However, like realizing enlightenment, there’s also realizing compassion; and like enlightenment can’t be forced or taught, compassion can’t be forced or taught either: it arises naturally and spontaneously.

Masao Abe describes the following in his study of Dogen: “True compassion can be realized only by transcending nirvana to return and work in the midst of the suffering of the ever-changing world.”<sup>63</sup> This notion of suffering in Zen Buddhism is essential to understanding compassion, for when the dichotomy of ‘I’ and ‘other’ subsides, and the ‘true self’ is realized, another man’s suffering is suffering of your own. The compassion that comes forth out of this awareness is vital to Zen ethics.

To stimulate this awareness during practicing meditation, the Zen student contemplates on certain issues or questions, often in the form of *koans*.<sup>64</sup> Ethical issues are often central to these *koans* too, but in this aspect, it is crucial to mention that these *koans* are not anecdotes or metaphors for moral behavior. One merely sits with these *koans*, being aware of the content. In this practice of meditation, in which *koans* are often described as a tool, one gradually can become more aware (of e.g. the discriminating mind) which stimulates the natural surge of compassion.<sup>65</sup>

However, compassion doesn’t end when the practice of meditation ends: its spontaneous arising is not left behind at the *zendo*<sup>66</sup>. Instead, the awareness resonates in one’s daily life. Made observations and gained insights ought to be remembered, not forgotten, and should help one in his journey towards Buddhahood, or enlightenment. This is how the non-dual realized enlightenment resonates in the relative world of everyday life.

The practical ethics of Zen Buddhism is arguably the most important aspect of the description of Zen ethics in the context of the increasing diffusion of its philosophy in the world. Without formulating how spiritual descriptions of the precepts and metaphysical descriptions of compassion can be put into practice in daily life, outside the context of a monastery, Zen ethics could be considered empty, futile, premature, or unsubstantial – even though these are strong judgements. Therefore, the focus will shift towards the practicalities of Zen ethics.

So far, the precepts have illustrated the moral rules Zen Buddhists are ought to live by. This depicts at least some form of an implied normativity in Zen ethics, for the precepts describe moral rules to live by. These are mostly fundamentally practical regulations. The spontaneous compassion, however, which arises when enlightenment is reached, most importantly through Zen meditation, is not practical to the same extent the precepts are. Compassion only seems to rise and present itself to the meditating Zen student. In Dogen’s *Shobogenzo*, for example, there

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<sup>60</sup> Dogen, “*Genjo Koan: On the Spiritual Question as It Manifests Before Your Very Eyes*,” in *Shobogenzo*, trans. Hubert Nearman (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007), 31.

<sup>61</sup> A. D. Brear, “The Nature and Status of Moral Behavior in Zen Buddhist Tradition,” *Philosophy East and West* 24, no. 4 (October 1974): 436.

<sup>62</sup> Dogen, *Shobogenzo*.

<sup>63</sup> Abe, *A Study on Dogen*, 58.

<sup>64</sup> A *koan* is regularly referred to as an intellectual riddle, used to stimulate students “into new ways of thinking,” and are based on stories of famous Zen masters, or ‘patriarchs.’ (Source: Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy*, 202.)

<sup>65</sup> Again, as mentioned several times before, this notion is essentially not to be described, but to be experienced.

<sup>66</sup> A *zendo* is the space in which Zen meditation is practiced. Zen meditation is, however, not exclusively ought to take place in a *zendo*.

is no description of what to do with the compassion one can spontaneously encounter and experience.

For this spontaneous compassion has been argued to be the result of distancing oneself from the inherently dualistic mode of thinking, and therefore transcending the discriminating mind and accepting the non-dual nature, compassion can be comprehended as the blur of the distinction of 'I' and 'other'. The description of 'no-self' Dogen provides, may leave one to experience a growing feeling of connectedness with others. As Dogen mentioned as well, awareness and enlightenment do not end when one stops meditating. Compassion should therefore also resonate in one's daily life. This, together with the conscious comply to the precepts, proves the availability of ethical content in Zen Buddhism. If one were to be eager to know more about how ethics is developed in Zen, they should not force the first content they encounter to fit their mold, but should patiently look into the extensive content of Zen Buddhist philosophy, and ethics will meet them.

## Conclusion

In short, this thesis has questioned the availability of ethics in Zen Buddhist philosophy by assessing the problems of James Whitehill's contribution to this debate and presenting a counterargument. Whitehill's objective is valid and relevant: he observes the global spread of Zen and argues the importance of an adequately articulated philosophy. Contrary to critics and sceptics, Whitehill does not accept the alleged absence of ethics in Zen Buddhism and mentions various important sources of ethical content. Where Whitehill retains from the in-depth examination of these sources, this thesis attempted to depict how an already full-fledged ethical system is present in Zen.

In Zen Buddhism, meditation is of great importance to understanding the Buddha teachings. Dogen has described enlightenment as immanent to this practice and interpreted the Buddha-way as a circle, in which each moment of practice encompasses enlightenment and vice versa. In this practice, one allegedly overcomes dualities and categories immanent to the way one thinks and transcends the discriminating mind, and compassion arises naturally and spontaneously. As Dogen emphasized: the practice of the Buddha teachings does not stop when one stops meditating. Therefore, compassion should also be brought into one's daily life, influencing one's daily behavior.

Apart from this spontaneous compassion, when one is traditionally handed the precepts by its Zen teacher, one receives them as a moral code, depicting how one should act. These precepts, which are described by Dogen as acts to refrain from, can also significantly influence one's behavior outside meditation.

Concluding, there is a significant amount of moral content in Zen, which is most prominently defined by the precepts and the spontaneous rise of compassion, and which could be elaborated on further. Whitehill's presupposition of the 'immaturity' of a Zen ethics is therefore untenable and, consequently, there is no need to force the ethical content of Zen into a modern, Western mold. Even though Zen's main interest has overall not been ethics, there is ethical content available which should not be neglected. In the end, however, Zen is ultimately understood and experienced through practice, as mentioned in the Introduction as well. Therefore, when attempting to understand ethics in Zen, Zen meditation cannot and should not be neglected.

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# Appendix: Formulier Verklaring Kennisneming Plagiaat

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