

MAPPING POTEAT ON THE BUDDHA AND ZEN¹



Milton R. Scarborough

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that none of William H. Poteat's former students on the Yale Conference email list recall ever having heard Poteat mention the Buddha or Buddhism, this article argues for a hitherto unnoticed and striking correspondence of thought between William H. Poteat, the Buddha, and Ch'an (Zen). Both the Buddha and Poteat bear closer analogies to physicians than to metaphysicians and their thought can be compared to a kind of philosophical therapy. While the Buddha's diagnosis pinpoints egoistic desire as the cause of human dissatisfaction with life, Poteat's diagnosis is gnostic apocalypticism. Both physicians are moved to employ unusual pedagogical methods in order to effect a "cure," which consists of a fundamental unity or nonduality of mind and body, a therapy requiring a practice.

William H. Poteat was born to Baptist missionaries in 1919 in Kaifeng, China, where he lived his first decade. China was home to three religions—two native religions (Taoism and Confucianism) and an import from India (Buddhism). Several years into my teaching career, when I took up the study and then the teaching of Buddhism, I saw what I believed to be convergences between Poteat's thought and that of China's first "foreign" religion. Yet I never recall a single instance during my years as Poteat's student at Duke or afterward of his ever having mentioned Buddhism or the Buddha. Following the 2014 Yale Conference on Poteat, I took advantage of the email list it

created and polled the attendees, only to find that their recollection in that matter was the same as mine. Of course, Poteat's China had, in the wake of the Boxer Rebellion and other factors, turned to Sun Yat Sen and Christianity. Poteat was perhaps too young to be interested in a religion other than his own. Joan Duffy, a librarian at Yale Divinity School, did confirm for me that the seminary in Poteat's time there as a divinity student did offer courses in "world religions/comparative religions," but she reported that she is prohibited from revealing whether or not he took them.

In what follows, I will not attempt to provide the reader with a detailed account of the thought of the Buddha, Ch'an, or Zen but will try simply to point out several of the convergences I believe to exist between them, on the one hand, and Poteat, on the other, convergences which have, heretofore, so far as I am aware, gone unnoticed and/or unremarked. Moreover, I will make no attempt to account for these convergences.

The Buddha and Poteat

Although Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was a skilled thinker who reflected profoundly on the most intractable of human problems, he did not consider himself to be a philosopher in the sense of critically seeking absolute metaphysical truths. When the monk Malunkyaputta, a student of the Buddha, threatened to leave if the Buddha did not answer questions as to whether the world exists in time (or not, or both, or neither), whether the self was identical with the body (or not, or both, or neither), and whether a person exists after death (or not, or both, or neither), the Buddha simply remained silent. The Buddha noted that he had never promised to answer such questions and insisted that answering them "does not profit," by which he meant that doing so was not helpful in attaining *nirvana* (ending suffering), a matter of overriding importance (Burt 1982, 32-36).

The Buddha drove home the point by telling Malunkyaputta a parable according to which a man was wounded by an arrow "thickly smeared with poison." Friends and family quickly summoned a physician to remove the arrow. The wounded man, however, announced that he would not permit the arrow's extraction until he learned to which of the four social classes (*varnas*) the assailant belonged, his name and clan, his height, the color of his complexion, his village's name, and many other identifying bits of information. The doctor pointed out the obvious, namely, that such a delay would certainly result in the victim's death and that what was needed in that moment was hasty removal of the arrow and the insertion of an antidote to the poison into the man's system (Burt 1982, 34-35). The point of the Buddha's story is that a philosopher often asks and seeks to answer relatively trivial questions, whereas he, like the physician in the story, wishes to encourage people to take a more urgent and life-saving course of action.

Although the Buddha clearly philosophizes in some sense, he is fundamentally a healer, not only or primarily of the physical body but of the person. Indeed, the

Buddha's Four Noble Truths, the content of his first sermon following his enlightenment and preached in Sarnath to his former ascetic companions, has often been understood as analogous to a visit to a medical doctor.

The first noble truth is that the life we normally live is *dukkha*, a Sanskrit word that was for many years translated as "suffering" but which is now more accurately rendered as "unsatisfactory." Death, disease, or divorce, for example, are not in themselves the real problem. The problem is our emotional reaction to them. This first noble truth is like noticing the symptoms of an ailment. Having noticed them, we pay a visit to the doctor.

The second Noble Truth is that *dukkha* is caused by *tanha*, namely, by egoistic desire. Some object, person, condition, or state of affairs dances before us, promising fulfillment, and we desire it for ourselves, even at the expense of others. Yet time and again the object of our desire does not bring the expected fulfillment but rather dissatisfaction. On the other hand, aversion, the desire to avoid something viewed as harmful or unpleasant, is also an expression of *tanha*. This second Noble Truth is analogous to a physician's diagnosis of the patient's fundamental problem or condition. The root of the problem, according to the Buddha, is precisely this egoistic desire.

The third Noble Truth, which corresponds to a doctor's prognosis, is that something helpful can be done; a cure for the illness is available. The dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) can be eliminated by means of eliminating egoistic desire (*tanha*).

Finally, the fourth Noble Truth is that egoistic desire can be eliminated by following the Noble Eightfold Path, which is, in effect, a doctor's prescription. It is an eight-step program of self-help therapy that bears analogies to a kind of behavioral modification program performed by people upon themselves.

Potter, too, engages in what most readers would judge to be philosophical reflection, yet the label "philosopher," as in the case of the Buddha, is not necessarily a perfect fit. To be sure, Potter certainly used the term and was interested in ontology and epistemology but not in an attempt to establish absolute metaphysical truths. The texts he assigned and discussed with students included the works of philosophers (Wittgenstein, Austin, Polanyi, Merleau-Ponty, to name but a few), but such authors, like himself, were often on the margins of or at odds with mainstream philosophy. He also read and had students read and discuss with him the writings of poets, novelists, psychologists, and biologists. At least by the time I came to know him, he did not belong to or attend the meetings of the mainstream contemporary philosophical societies (e.g. the American Philosophical Association), although he may have done so earlier in his career. He complained that he had ceased to attend the meetings of such societies once he determined that their members had no interest in discussing an alternative epistemology. He certainly had no interest in producing or defending a critical

epistemology or metaphysics according to the standard models. These, in fact, were often targets of his criticism.

Much of what he wrote and taught, however, could, as I have already intimated, fit readily enough into the format of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths. For example, Poteat, also, saw our modern and postmodern world as afflicted with a disease, namely, nihilism. Such nihilism is the analog to the Buddha's *dukkha*. Nihilism is not so much a philosophical doctrine or system of doctrine as it is a condition, an existential disease, a despair that moderns and postmoderns have contracted and with which they have infected others. Poteat says, for example, that modernity is "addicted to the drug of dynamic nihilism" (Poteat 1994, 46), the loss of belief in all of the basic values that support the flourishing of human existence, from religion to the very meaning of the words of our language (think Derrida). We have tumbled from belief in our power to discern absolute, divine-like, certain knowledge to the belief (among some people) that all human knowledge, judgment, insight, meaning, and belief are nothing but the causal byproducts of electrical processes going on in the central nervous system analogous to those of computers. Elsewhere, he refers to our present condition as loss of "sanity" (Poteat 1994, xxii), "madness" (Poteat 1990, 115), "mentalistic dementia" (Poteat 1990, 105), and "chronic depression" (Poteat 1994, 193). All these last terms are medical, psychological, or psychiatric in nature, and conjure up Kierkegaard's diagnosis of modernity as a "sickness unto death," by which he meant a certain kind of despair. Such "medical" diagnoses seem to call more for some kind of medical attention rather than a further dose of the mental gymnastics of "board certified" mainstream modern and post-modern philosophers.

The analogy between the Buddha and Poteat extends to the second noble truth. Corresponding to Siddhartha's *tanha* (egoistic desire) as the ultimate cause of human illness is Poteat's "hubris." Both are afflictions of the ego. Whether we are Asian or Western, Buddhists or Secularists, the ego typically seeks to *acquire* something more (wealth, flattery, power, position, knowledge, status, advantage) or to *be* something more—more powerful, more famous, more happy, more wealthy, more knowledgeable, and, among philosophers, even absolutely certain or absolutely uncertain. And rarely, if ever, does their successful acquisition bring the expected fulfillment.

The "medical" crisis the Buddha addressed was related to the concept of the self that arose in India in the wake of the decline of Vedism, religious practices and beliefs arising in 1500 B.C.E. and lasting until 500 B.C.E. Vedism was based on the Vedas, poetical and philosophical texts containing four core Vedas (*Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama*, and *Atharva*), each of which had three kinds of appendices (*Aranyakas*, *Brahmanas*, and *Upanishads*). Vedism was dominated by a priestly class and consisted largely of elaborate ritual sacrifices for which ordinary people paid in the hope of receiving certain

material blessings. Vedism, however, was afflicted by clericalism, materialism, racism, classism, and sexism. It benefitted the few at the top.

Faced with a growing skepticism and pessimism about Vedic religion, the authors of the Upanishads, commentaries on the earlier and more poetic parts of the Vedic scriptures, began a philosophical elaboration of the term “*atman*,” which had first been mentioned in the early hymns, where it had simply meant “self.” In this elaborated view, human nature consisted of several “sheaths” that surround a central ego or *Atman*. The sheaths—body, perceptions, feelings, intellect—are, however, illusions (*maya*) because impermanent. Hidden deep within the sheaths, however, is a permanent metaphysical substance or being (*Atman*), which is one’s true self. This inner self transcends all finite, earthly “realities,” limitations, and sufferings. It does not die but is reincarnated in a new set of sheaths in another life. Of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy—Nyaya (logic), Vaisheshika (Atomism), Samkhya (Distinctionism), Yoga, Purva Mimamsa (Exegesis), and Vedanta—only Samkhya and Yoga were earlier than or contemporary with the Buddha, but all of them eventually came to embrace this view. Acceptance of the reality of the *Atman* was, in fact, the touchstone of Hindu orthodoxy. Doubtless, the Buddha would have viewed the idea of a substantial self as grounding egoistic desire.

Analogously, Poteat’s diagnosis of the Western affliction is “gnostic apocalypticism” (Poteat 1994, xi). He describes it as a modern elaboration upon ancient Christian and pre-Christian Western Gnosticism, namely, “the belief that men and women are pure spirits, now held captive in the prison of this world.” Only a special, esoteric knowledge can free them from bondage to this evil world and permit the resultant “pure, untrammelled spirits” to transcend this world and enter a more suitable one (Poteat 1994, xi). The parallels between this Gnosticism and the Upanishadic view described above are obvious.

For Poteat, an early modern Western analogue of ancient Christian Gnosticism is exhibited by Descartes. Puzzled and dismayed by the fact that nowhere in the world did he find unanimity of opinion, he devised an updated version of an ancient and well-worn tack. The root of the problem, he concluded, is that mind is distracted and deluded by association with the material body, which is finite and particular. Pure mind, however, dissociated from body, is capable, he asserted, of achieving the certainty and universality for which he longed. This longing for God-like knowledge is the object of Descartes’s egoistic desire, the Buddha’s *tanha*. For clinical psychologist and psychotherapist John Welwood, the tendency to view reality dualistically is, in psychological terms, a self-centered defense strategy. Welwood goes on to say that dualistic thinking is “essentially a survival mechanism on a par with fangs, claws, stingers, scales, shells, and quills that other animals use to protect themselves” (Welwood 2003, 139).

In describing the human mind and its capabilities when detached and thus liberated from the material body, Descartes, according to Jacques Maritain, used as a model Aquinas' description of the knowledge of angels as "intuitive, as to its mode, innate, as to its origin, independent of things, as to its nature" (Maritain 1928, 57). Angelic knowledge is "a single intellectual operation that is at once perceiving and judging" and which travels "by intuitive leaps from perfect act to perfect act, from intelligible fullness to intelligible fullness" (Maritain 1928, 59). Angelic thoughts are not abstracted from perceived objects but are infusions into the mind by God (Maritain 1928, 56). Angelic ideas are not dependent upon things, but are copies of ideas in the mind of God, which are the models used by God in creating the world. Here is a hubris almost sufficient to think oneself, if not a god, then at least God-certified.

Poteat's more up-to-date description of such Cartesian hubris is what he calls "the theater of solitude," which he describes as follows:

When I interrupt the flow of my ordinary practical activity in the world in order to reflect, I will find myself and the objects of my curiosity presented in a certain fantasy-setting, upon some particular stage, in some singular theater both *in* which reflection is *given* and *upon* which reflection is *brought to bear*. . . It is a theater at once silent and solitary. . . In this theater language is all but completely abstracted from its use" (Poteat 1990, 59).

In such a setting, Poteat adds, one becomes, as it were, a silent, static, solitary, disembodied mind, a self that is transcendent of bodily existence, of other persons, and acts of language-bearing and communally-generated shared meanings. It is a world in which no actual reader, thinker, or language-user appears to exist. It is easy in such a rarified atmosphere to believe, as Descartes did, that one can achieve absolute certainty. It is a fiction, Poteat suggests, made possible, in part, by the invention of an alphabet, then print, which seemed to remove meaning from a community of embodied speakers and relocate it into books and then, when read and contemplated, into minds (minus bodies, even eyes). Thus "liberated" from the limitations of any finite, particular mind, the resulting universal mind can presumably achieve the certitude of transcendent truth. Here is egoistic desire on steroids. This imaginative picture, says Poteat of us moderns, has, quoting Wittgenstein, "held us captive" (Poteat 1985, 9).

The Buddha's therapeutic prescription critically brought to bear on Hinduism's doctrine of the *Atman* produced several alternative doctrines. The first is *Anatman*, the position that no permanent substance exists or can exist. Buddha's claim was based, in part, on the fact that in his own meditation practice he never experienced such a reality, despite having studied with several of India's top Hindu masters of his day and

even surpassing them in his meditative achievements. This is an indication that for the Buddha metaphysical claims must meet the test of phenomenological experience.

The Buddha's view was further buttressed by the doctrine of *anicca* or impermanence, evidence of which is everywhere available to the senses. What experience taught him is that all things are undergoing change and are therefore temporal. *Anicca* was also noticed in his experiences in meditation, in which sensations, images, and ideas were found to be constantly shifting.

A third insight of the Buddha was *pratityasamutpada*, which is translated as "dependent co-origination," the view that all events, both so-called mental ones and physical ones, are dependent upon, indeed constituted by, multiple other events. Again, this rules out the idea of a permanent substance.

Finally, he held the view, based on what might be termed a descriptive phenomenology, that human beings are constituted as *namarupas* (name and form). Each *namarupa* or person is comprised of five *skandas*. These are body, feelings, perceptions, dispositions, and consciousness. All five are actually processes, characterized by *anicca*, that jointly interact to generate persons. Thus, there is no substantial, permanent ego or self or substance—no *Atman*. The implication of this insight (prognosis) is that the ego and its egoistic desires of craving and aversion can, in principle, be eliminated.

Like the Buddha, Poteat's philosophical therapy seeks to undercut all notions similar to Descartes' mind, understood as a bodiless, thinking substance. His strategy is simple. He, too, employs a kind of descriptive phenomenology to reveal the human self, not as a disembodied spiritual substance or a discrete faculty, but as a mindbody, a concept that rejects a dualism of mind and body and is the counterpart to the Buddha's *namarupa*. A mindbody is a nondualistic being constituted by the temporality of intentionality, which is in every moment both retrotending past moments and protending future ones. Such a temporality of intentionality is analogous, at least with respect to human beings, to the Buddha's *anicca*.

A mindbody is at once both fleshly and social, possessing trunk, limbs, muscles, brain, tongue, ears, eyes, and relations with other such beings, all co-arising with each other. All these processes, working together (as in the Buddha's dependent-co-origination) are constitutive of human existence and functioning, including reflecting. Thus, for Poteat, even the bodily roots of presently-used concepts are retrotended from the past for present use. They are often discernible in the etymology of words. Such etymological inquiries, coupled with a phenomenology of our ordinary acts of language usage, expose and undermine the hubris that generates the Gnosticism that sustains the theater of solitude and its consequent nihilism.

Ch'an or Zen and Poteat

To this point, I have focused on the Buddhism of the Buddha. Buddhism, however, is itself a historical process, subject to *anicca*. India and Sri Lanka produced not only Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism but also *Dhyana*, the less-well-known Buddhism that the missionary Bodhidharma brought to China. In China it became known as *Ch'an* and later in Japan as *Zen*. All three terms (*Dhyana*, *Ch'an*, and *Zen*) mean “meditation.”

Although East Asian Buddhists read and understood the Buddhist philosophical texts of India, they largely rejected India's exuberant and exhaustive intellectualism to focus attention on practice and intuition. This was Buddhism's pivot to East Asia. According to now-disputed tradition, it was Bodhidharma who gave the following summary description of Ch'an or Zen.

1. A special transmission outside of scripture
 2. No dependence on words and letters
 3. Direct pointing to the self of man
 4. Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood
- (Dumoulin 1994, 85).

Huston Smith provided a summary of the Zen critique of words, understood as carriers of abstract mental concepts: (1) they “build up a kind of substitute world,” (2) they “dilute the intensity of immediate experience,” and (3) they are inadequate for our “highest modes of experience” (Smith 1958, 126). Clearly, for Zen, as for Poteat, reflecting is not simply or fundamentally a purely intellectual or conceptual enterprise. In fact, for both Poteat and Zen, it can be an impediment to enlightenment.

Lin Chi, founder of one of the two principal sub-schools of *Ch'an* Buddhism, says concerning doctrine (*Dharma*): “I don't have a particle of Dharma to give to anyone. All I have is a cure for sickness, freedom from bondage” (Watson 1993, 53). Again, he tells his students that what he is saying to them “is for the moment only, medicine to cure the disease” (Watson 1993, 45). Thus, Lin Chi, like the Buddha and Poteat, was a physician. As a consequence, Ch'an/Zen does not promote abstract thinking but a practice that is based on the phenomenologically-grounded belief that all people already have the Buddha nature within them. This nature is not a metaphysical substance but simply the capacity to become liberated from the tyranny of egoistic desire. Thus liberated, one reaches nirvana, which is *equanimity*, imperturbability, and quiet happiness in the face of life's surrounding turmoil. It also produces compassion in the face of human misery, and the ability to live in harmony with others.

Lin Chi says of himself that he is “a true man of no rank” (Watson 1993, xxiii) and a “lump of red flesh” (Watson 1993, 13). He calls one of his students a “shitty ass

wiper” (Watson 1993, 13). In so doing he is not simply indulging crudeness by uttering catchy or vulgar epithets. He is pointing in dramatic fashion to the inescapably fleshly or bodily nature of human existence. He advised his students as follows: “Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down” (Watson 1993, 31).

Nevertheless, the Ch’an-Zen person is also mindly (a grammatical deviation intended to avoid terms that suggest substance) not, of course, the sophisticated and allegedly disembodied mind of abstract thought as described by rationalistic philosophers. He speaks, instead, of “Buddha mind” (Watson 1993, 66) and “everyday mind” (Watson 1993, 45). Zen masters also speak of “original face,” “mind before you were born,” and even “mind before your parents were born.” Here is the counterpart to Polanyi’s tacit dimension and tacit knowing and to Poteat’s bodily and prereflective mind or mindbody. The “mind before you were born” is reminiscent of Poteat’s remarks about the effect of his mother’s heartbeat in setting the rhythm and cadence of his own heartbeat while in the womb, as a bass drummer does for a marching band. This prereflective mindbody is the Buddha nature or Buddha mind or original face and the ground of enlightened living. For Zen, enlightened life lives largely, if not entirely, from that mind.

As a cure for egoism and its consequences, both *Ch’an* and *Zen* prescribe a practice. For all Buddhism, but for *Ch’an-Zen* in particular, practice includes meditation, as their names make clear. But this is not a transcendental meditation as is Hinduism’s *raja yoga*. It is a noticing of one’s own actions in the world and also of the stream of mind-bodily consciousness, noticing the sorts of egoistic ideas and urges that appear, and then through further practice bringing this ego-stream to a halt in the nirvana of the pre-reflective Buddha Mind. Moreover, meditation is not limited to sitting still (*zazen*) but can also be done while walking (*kinhin*) and even working (*nitten soji*). Either gradually (in Soto Zen) or suddenly (in the “great Death” of Rinzai Zen) the basis of one’s existence is transformed with the death of *tanha*. That basis is no longer the individual ego but becomes the interdependent and ongoing co-origination of self with others, which is, according to Mahayana Buddhism, the profound basis of compassion (Skt. *Karuna*). Such compassion for the other does not derive from the practice of altruism (self-denial in favor of the other), but from the insight that, in part, one *is* the other and the other *is*, in part, one’s self, a form of the Buddha’s dependent co-origination (*pratityasamutpada*) and Nagarjuna’s emptiness (*sunyata*), both of which reject fixed substances and autonomous egos.

The foregoing also means that Buddhism rejects the absolute dualism of ego vs. no ego. If, as someone suggested, egoistic desire powers the construction and maintenance of a castle wall around the ego in order to hoard all good things inside the wall for itself while tossing all bad things outside the wall, then elimination of egoistic desire brings

down the wall and re-integrates the self with the wider community. In this respect, as in all others, Buddhism is not dualistic but nondual.

For Poteat also, practice is crucial. He says, “Our mortal wound is healed in practice” (Poteat 1994, 185). For him also, meditation, a practice, plays a part in curing nihilism. Recall the title of Poteat’s first monograph—viz., *Polanyian Meditations*. His meditation, however, is a rumination about and phenomenological description of the source of our action, speech, and reflection that traces them to their grounding in our sentient, motile, reflective, nondual mindbodies and the life-world they inhabit. For Poteat, mindbodies, as indicated earlier, provide one’s ultimate grounding. He says, “My mindbody is the absolutely radical and prior—at the root of and antecedent to absolutely everything (!)” (Poteat 1990, 68). Such prereflective mindbodies, as has been previously noted, are analogous to the Buddha nature or original mind. In fact, Lin Chi admonishes his students to illuminate things “for yourself with the light from your own body” (Watson 1993, 55). That is an ongoing practice.

To be sure, there are also differences in the aim of the two practices. The Buddha and *Ch’an-Zen* focus on bringing about both human happiness (*nirvana*) and the compassion (*karuna*), which egoism precludes. Poteat, on the other hand, focuses on enabling us to affirm our most cherished beliefs, the ones that give ultimate meaning to living in our mindbodily-generated lived world, and to dispel nihilism, our modern and postmodern affliction. That, of course, would contribute significantly to happiness.

For Poteat, that ultimate meaning is embodied finally not in theological doctrines but in an ongoing religious practice, which, in his case, includes the practice of reciting the Apostles’ Creed and participating in the ritual of the Eucharist. He reports that his recitation and participation cannot properly be described as belief. He says: “What I believe—and I do not think of it as something I *believe*, it goes much deeper than that, in fact, all the way to the bone—is that the bread and wine are the *presently actual* body and blood of Jesus Christ; and that, if they are not, then the Son of God has nothing to do with the concrete person I am in *this* time and place; and if this be so, the whole of Christianity is but an elaborate system of symbols at no point engaged with the actual fabric of the world” (Poteat 1994, 135). But he also affirms that even scientific beliefs share the very same ultimate grounding, namely, the coherence of all the mindbody’s multifaceted pretensions and retentions, which form the world, including the world as conceived by science (Poteat 1994, 138).

Given the apparently unorthodox nature of the content of their teaching, what methods do Ch’an or Zen masters, on the one hand, and Poteat, on the other, employ with their students? Both give lectures, assign texts for the students to read, hold discussions in class, and sometimes meet with individual students, but these provide only general contexts in which personal transformation can occur.

Ch'an and Zen, however, also employ more bizarre methods. Lin Chi, like some other Zen masters, shouts at students, walks away from them, berates them by calling them derogatory names, kicks them, and strikes or even drives them away with stout sticks. Lin Chi warns students that if they seek the Buddha, they will lose the Buddha, who is "like the hole in a privy" (Watson 1993, 76). This statement is not meant to show disrespect for the Buddha but to make forcefully the point that each person is a potential Buddha and that enlightenment comes from focusing in practice on one's own condition and resources, not on a figure in the past. It bears analogies to St. Paul's injunction to "work out your own salvation in fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

Zen masters, especially in the Rinzai tradition, also assign students conundrums (*koans* or public cases) with which to wrestle in the hope that these often bizarre and puzzling tales or expressions ("What is the sound of one hand clapping?") will eventually unravel a student's merely rational grasp of truth and open the way for *satori*, a more profound insight into life that will ultimately contribute to the death of egoistic desire. While Poteat never used *koans*, so far as I know, he does seem to acknowledge the value of something like *koans* when he says: "Words that appear plainly absurd when read in the direct language of everyday, may, when read as an indirect language, disclose the most potent because covert images and values of our imaginations" (Poteat 1990, 100). Perhaps the term "mindbody" is itself just such a *koan*. What is the sound of a mindbody thinking? Certainly, Poteat would endorse such a suggestion in view of his own admission to using "awkward syntax, nonlinear progression, reflexivity, dialectical reduplication...deliberately 'atonal' diction congested with...clever usages" in order to "drag the reader...even against her will...to dwell in herself as her own unique place" (Poteat 1994, xiv).

Zen practice requires not only sessions of meditation as one important context in which such insights can occur but also includes private meetings, sometimes quite intense, with the master, in which these insights can be tested and either demonstrated or not by the student and affirmed or denied by the teacher. In Rinzai the sessions are called "*sanzen*" and in Soto "*dokusan*." In the West education, for the most part, uses written feedback on tests and term papers as somewhat less personal encounters with the "master," and although private meetings between teacher and student can be arranged, they are probably infrequent and rarely, if ever, so intense as those in Zen.

For Poteat, teaching does not simply mean giving full-blown and formal lectures. In my experience as his student, his "lectures" were often simply short introductions to a topic for the day, one to be discussed in class. Ultimately, however, his teaching aims to induce students to become persons, responsible selves, in the paradigmatic and ethical act of saying "I", a word with the logical peculiarity of designating uniquely the very person who uses it in the very act of using it. Poteat explains as follows:

When I use the pronoun *I* with the reflexive force it always has when in use I am not merely making an identifying reference to an entity—though no doubt this is accomplished. Nor am I merely identifying myself as over against *you, them, this* (physical object), nor, even the bearer of the proper name *William H. Poteat*. In saying *I*, I assume responsibility... More to the point here however is the fact that I could not truly say *I* in good faith, thereby, inter alia, accepting responsibility for myself without being *before* another, a you, bearing and taking up what I say... Every speech act is the act of entering into an implied contract, into a covenant with a speech community the conditions—the requirements, terms—of which are given in the grammar of the language (Poteat 1994, 34-35).

Later, he says that speaking is the “paradigmatic action by which *I* am... *Dicto ergo sum*” (Poteat 1994, 173), both a nod to and rebuff of Descartes’s “*Cogito ergo sum*.” Both writing term papers and participating in discussions provide many opportunities to say “I,” as do writing and defending dissertations.

Yet Poteat’s emphasis on the *I* is, like Buddhism’s campaign against egoism, not to be understood dualistically. He would have learned from H. Richard Niebuhr that the self is an existential and social being, a self constantly engaging, whether tacitly or explicitly, in an ongoing communal dialogue (Niebuhr 1951, 32, 241ff). That is why Poteat insists that his understanding of saying “I” requires accepting “responsibility” always “before another.” Thus, neither Zen nor Poteat is advocating a dualism of ego vs. no ego. Both “physicians” prescribe the “medicine” of nondualism.

For Zen, then, demonstrating one’s enlightenment before a Zen master is an analogue to Poteat’s saying “I” before others. Consider the famous Zen story about Nansen’s cat. Master Nansen discovered some of his monks fighting over a cat. He seized the cat, then addressed the young monks as follows: “If any of you can say a good word, you can save the cat.” The students were tongue-tied, so Nansen cut the cat in two. When Joshu, later a famous master himself, returned to the monastery that evening, Nansen recounted for him the story of the cat. Upon hearing it, Joshu removed his sandals, placed them on his head, and walked out. Nansen said, “If you had been there, you could have saved the cat.” Mumon, a commentator on the story, said that if Joshu had been there, he would have “snatched” the sword and made Nansen beg for his life. Joshu could have also taken less drastic actions, namely, verbally challenging Nansen’s threat as a violation of Buddhist ethical precepts, one of which urges doing no harm to any living being, or simply snatching the cat from Nansen’s hands. In Poteatian terms, Joshu, confident in the belief that it was wrong for Nansen to kill an innocent cat and feeling a sense of responsibility to act, performed the equivalent of saying “I” (Reps 1957, 101).

Zen practice, however, is not only serious but sometimes, even if rarely, dangerous, as the following story makes clear. Whenever asked about Zen, Master Gutei simply raised his finger, a response that turned the question back on the questioner. A boy attendant began imitating Gutei's one-finger Zen, lifting his finger when asked about Gutei's teaching. Gutei learned of the boy's imitation, found him, and cut off his finger. The boy howled in pain and ran away. Gutei called after him. When the boy stopped and looked back, Gutei raised his finger at the boy (Reps 1957, 92). He was making the point that no two persons are identical and hence Enlightenment is unique and uniquely arrived at. Perhaps also, he hoped to prompt the boy's breakthrough to enlightenment. Bloodlessly, Poteat makes a similar point by emphasizing the significance of the first person singular present indicative active use of language.

Yet, Poteat, too, employed some non-traditional pedagogical strategies. I recall that in a course on religious language Poteat read or quoted a passage from Wittgenstein, then turned to me and asked if I thought the quote was meant to be understood in an absolute or a conditional sense. I had no idea, but after an anxious moment of hesitation I guessed "conditional." At first glance, there is nothing unusual about that exchange. Initially, I thought that he was either checking to see if I had read the assignment or if I had understood what I had read. It also occurred to me that he might have been simply encouraging me to get more involved in class discussions. What was puzzling for me, however, is that he ignored my reply altogether and went on with the class as if the incident had not occurred. He did not confirm, deny, or comment in any way on my answer. Only much later did it occur to me that he might have been authorizing me to make my own judgments about such matters.

His intent and pedagogical strategy were somewhat clearer in a case recounted by Bruce Haddox, who reports that one day in class (one in which I, also, was present) Poteat sat on Bruce's desk and asked him to "identify himself." Bruce recalls replying with a "Strawson-like...third person, objective analysis," to which Poteat replied, "Haddox? Is that who you really are?" (Haddox and St. Clair, 12). While such an incident might not have been altogether unheard of in an undergraduate seminar in religion or philosophy, it seemed to me to diverge significantly from what I expected in graduate school. Poteat's approach signaled a divergent aim from that of the modern, Western, Cartesian, rational university. Its goal was self-knowledge, which, again, accords well with the aim of Zen.

Yet, according to R. Melvin Keiser, Poteat's pedagogy was not completely devoid of some of the more bizarre tactics of a Zen master. Keiser reports that having sent Poteat some writing, Poteat

responded to my writings like a Zen master rather than his usual approach as a midwife...He whacked me, calling my writing and tape discussions 'weird,' 'absurd,' 'stupid,' 'shocking.' I remembered

smiling in class as Poteat told someone that what they had just said showed them to be a 'post-critical basket case' (Keiser, 140).

Moreover, one of the editorial referees of this essay affirms that he is aware of other incidents similar to Keiser's. Happily, Poteat never went so far as to shove or strike with a staff any of his students, and he certainly cut off no fingers.

As stated at the outset of this essay, my intent in this paper is simply to call attention to hitherto unnoticed convergences between Poteat's views and practices, on the one hand, and those of the Buddha, Ch'an, and Zen, on the other, rather than accounting for them in some way. Almost certainly, they cannot be explained by Poteat's initial decade in China. If pressed to suggest how to explain them, however, I would propose that the similarities result from their common truth. In so saying, I say "I."

ENDNOTE

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