

Introduction to my Articles

By Stuart Lachs, 2008

I have been a Zen practitioner for roughly forty years. Many years ago I became interested in viewing Zen from a scholarly point of view as a way to explain the great disparity I witnessed between how the Zen institution claimed its leaders behaved and what I saw first hand. I was driven to understand what was happening and why, not out of a dry, academic interest, but rather, by the confusion, trouble and suffering that I and others were experiencing.

By luck, in the early 1990's, I met an academically-minded monk connected with Chinese Buddhism. From him, I was introduced to an academic view of the history of Zen that strongly contrasted with the more familiar history promulgated by the Zen institution. Needless to say, it was an eye opener that led to many exciting hours of study up to this day. Later, through a friend, I became interested in the sociology of religion and of institutions.

Looking at Zen through both the lens of academic history and the lens of the sociology of religion and institutions, I hope to show how Zen developed over time, and how it responded to historical settings and necessities. I will show how the institution that has grown up around Zen functions - as do most institutions - to promote and protect it self, and how it empowers its leaders and enables that power to function.

I am attempting to make clear for myself and other Zen practitioners what is happening at Zen centers in America. I have found some conceptual tools that helped me analyze how these Zen centers operate. These tools were especially helpful in understanding how the conceptions of Dharma transmission and unbroken lineage and their supporting structures impact Zen students' lives at their Centers.

Critical thinking is Buddhist and Buddhism is critical thinking. By demanding tough answers and not being satisfied with easy ones, I hope to improve the situation of Zen in America which, since the mid- 1960's , has suffered from repeated scandals-scandals that hurt its practitioners, caused others to leave and marred its reputation for years to come.

Buddhism has a history of adaptability to many cultures. No doubt, it will adapt to the West. We have an opportunity, by understanding the institutions and history of Zen, to claim its true spirit and inherent freedom for our lives.