

When the Saints Go Marching In: Modern Day Zen Hagiography¹

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Almost all the problems of philosophy once again pose the same form of question as they did two thousand years ago: how can something originate in its opposite, for example rationality in irrationality, the sentient in the dead, logic in unlogic, disinterested contemplation in covetous desire, living for others in egoism, truth in error?

Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*

This paper takes a critical look at recently published biographies of two modern day Chan/ Zen teachers in America. The popular American magazine “*Tricycle: A Buddhist Review*” printed both biographies, making them widely available to the diverse American Buddhist communities and the interested general reader. Both biographies were presented as straightforward reporting of enlightened Chan/Zen² figures. Biography is a literary genre that implies a level of accuracy with the implications that what is presented is an actual life, not concocted fiction. Religious biographies, however, are rarely simple, straightforward, or disinterested. As with any other text, these texts are interactive; that is, they are written and published for chosen audiences with specific intentions.

This article looks at the constructed nature of these two contemporary biographies, and the role they play in generating and maintaining the view of the selfless, wise, often iconoclastic, and legitimate Chan masters. The paper also examines the elements of these constructions and shows that the literary genre used, hagiography,³ bears strong resemblances to that used in Zen’s formative period, the Tang and early Song dynasties in China.

Chan hagiography has several distinct features:⁴

1. An emphasis on heredity, with two main components, namely

¹ A shortened version of this paper was delivered at the Oslo Buddhist Studies Forum, January 25, 2011. A podcast is available at <http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/forskning/nettverk/obsf/podcast/2011/obsf20110125.html>. A short version of the paper will be given March 31, 2011 at the AAS Convention in Honolulu, Hawaii. I would like to thank Meredith Churchil, Ute Huesken, Jeff Larko, Grace Luddy and A.Charles Muller for help and support.

I welcome comments to the paper: slachs@att.net.

² Throughout this paper the terms 'Chan' and 'Zen' will be used interchangeably, as will 'master' and 'roshi'.

³ Here “hagiography” refers to a biography that idealizes its subject. See Miriam Webster Online Dictionary; <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hagiography> (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

⁴ This is obviously a condensed presentation of the features of Chan hagiography, which are discussed in many contexts in a number of books. See Cole, Alan, *Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism*, University of California Press, 2009; Jorgensen, John, *Inventing Huineng, The Sixth Patriarch: Hagiography and Biography in Early Chan*, Brill, 2005; Kieschnick, John, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*, University of Hawaii Press, 1997; Faure, Bernard, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, 1991, as a small sampling.

A. An unbroken transmission lineage of enlightened masters originating in India with the historical Buddha, transmitted to China by Bodhidharma, and brought forward in time to the present through an unbroken chain of enlightened Chan masters. Moreover,

B. The lineage is moved forward from master to master through the mechanism of mind-to-mind transmission, institutionalized in the ritual of Dharma transmission.

2. These perfected Chan masters are placed in a contemporary time and place and are presented as human beings, downplaying such phenomena as supernatural intervention. The placing of the master in a 'real' setting imbues the narrative a stamp of authenticity, but does not necessarily reflect actual occurrences. The hagiography is presented as innocent and natural with the hagiographer supposedly devoid of any motivation, aside from presenting the life of a saint.

3. The Chan master is represented as performing acts of selflessness for the benefit of others.

4. The enlightenment of the highlighted master reflects the enlightenment of the founder, the historical Buddha, and of the entire lineage and of famous earlier masters. The master's enlightenment is attained suddenly and without mediation.

5. In a similar vein, the Chan master reacts spontaneously to circumstances.

6. The master's knowledge is always presented as impossible to comprehend for ordinary people. He alone embodies the essence of Buddhist truth and he is the sole authority.

7. While the content of the master's meditative practice is not discussed, his ascetic practices tend to be foregrounded.

8. The master is presented as having transcended mundane attachments to doctrine and practice.

This paper deals with the transfer and transformation, invention and re-invention of Zen hagiographies as they move in geographical setting and forward into modern times. I show how even new hagiographies of contemporary personalities tend to use standard elements of older hagiographies. In this sense, hagiographies have a biography; they have a genealogy, yet they are constantly changing as they move through different lands and times. Yet some essential aspects, like elements of a construction plan, are borrowed or transferred from one hagiography to another.

My examination of these hagiographies pays particular attention to the attempts by their authors to create, revitalize, and affirm cultural and religious connections. These hagiographies reflect the authors' and the subjects' imagined historical and social continuity and rootedness, while simultaneously responding to and legitimizing change. At the same time, these authors paint a picture of immaculate persons superior to and different from everyone else. The authors of these hagiographies, then and now, have

sought to provide an image of the perfect Zen master: wise, selfless, compassionate, creative, and most importantly, embodying the full institutional authority.

Modern authors of historical and biographical texts attempt to write what they imagine to be historical truth. They aim for intelligent and thoughtful comprehension of events, striving to maintain fidelity in representing them paying attention to their specifics.⁵

In contrast, hagiography is commonly understood as a text that *idealizes* its subject (see above, footnote 3).

As is well known, during the Tang and Song dynasties in China, the followers of what became known as Chan Buddhists had started to write hagiographic texts to meet the requirements of their need for legitimacy and authoritative lineage. Many Zen practitioners today like to think that hagiographic writing in Zen was done only in the distant past, by other people. I show here that Zen hagiographic writing is alive and well in the 21st century in the U.S.A.—although it is hagiography that is presented as biography.

Two Hagiographies in Tricycle

Tricycle Magazine, perhaps the most popular Buddhist magazine in America, recently published two articles on two different Zen teachers in America. One article titled “The Wanderer”⁶ is excerpted from the book *Footprints in the Snow: The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk*. It deals with the Taiwanese Buddhist monk and Chan master, Sheng Yen (born in mainland China), who died February 3, 2009. The other article, “down east roshi”⁷ deals with Walter Nowick, a Zen teacher who studied in Japan, and who taught and still lives in Maine, though he has not taught Zen since 1985.

It is difficult or nearly impossible to disentangle roles played by the described persons, authors, and publishers’ role in these writings, such that one may determine who contributed what portion of the content. However, by agreeing to the publication of these articles, both Sheng Yen and Walter Nowick intentionally chose to go onto the public stage, presenting their lives as examples of enlightened Zen masters. In doing so, they are setting up a distance between themselves and the readers. Besides examining how the articles are written in such a way as to shape them into superior people, I will examine what they present as the “facts” of their lives by taking their quotes seriously. Factual claims of people who choose to go on the public stage are commonly examined. For instance, it is not considered bad taste to critically report on a star athlete who took steroids while he claimed to be “clean,” or to point out that a politician did not have the war record he claimed.⁸ Yet with religious figures, aside from outright scandals,

⁵ Christian Lee Novetzke, “The Theographic and the Historiographic in an Indian Sacred Life Story,” *Sikh Formations*, Taylor and Francis, Vol.3, No. 2, December 2007, p. 170. Novetzke discusses how the hagiographic and historiographic perspectives can interact and inform each other.

⁶ *Tricycle* Magazine, Winter 2008.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Spring 2009, pp. 48 -51, 109 -110.

⁸ For a recent example of a politician’s false war claims see NY Times online, May 18th, 2010, Hernandez, Raymond, “Candidates Words on Vietnam Service Differ from History.” Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat

investigation of actual past deeds seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Here however, we will look more closely at the lives of these two Chan/Zen masters and at what they present as their history—the supposed story of their lived lives.

Both Walter Nowick and Sheng Yen were advanced in age when these biographies were composed: Sheng Yen was in his late 70's, quite ill and approaching death, while Walter was in his early 80's. These biographies may thus be seen as their final testament—how they wanted to be thought of today and remembered in the future.

I shall make clear right from the outset that I am not a disinterested party in terms of my relationship to the events and the persons depicted in both of these texts. I had been a student of Walter Nowick for eleven years, from 1970 to 1981 at Moon Spring Hermitage in Maine. I was the “head monk,” for many years, which in the context of this lay group meant that I was in charge of the zendō, the meditation hall, communal work assignments, instructing new students in sitting and zendō procedures, along with other duties. I was the first President of the group's Board of Directors. I was also responsible for the selection of the other trustees. I was also involved in various other capacities with Shifu Sheng Yen's organization for roughly 17 years. I ran classes at his Center in Queens, New York for many years during Sheng Yen's travels to Taiwan and other places. More importantly, for roughly ten years I conducted private interviews with retreat participants in relation to their meditation practice during seven-day meditation retreats (Jp. *sesshin*). Private interviews during seven-day retreats are an important element in Chan Buddhist practice.⁹ This is to say, I have spent much time in close relationship with both these teachers while holding positions of significant responsibility, both for the spiritual and administrative matters of the communities. Therefore, I am directly familiar with many of the actual events of the careers of these two teachers.

This paper relates what I know of the lives of Sheng Yen and Walter Nowick, and contrasts it to the content of their published "biographies" as printed in *Tricycle Magazine*. It is not concerned with whether or not these teachers succeeded in matching the ideal of a fully enlightened Chan master, but rather how what was presented as biographical writing to the readers and thus as the actual life of modern day Chan teachers, corresponds with how they actually lived. It is not my intent to malign Chan and its teachers, but rather to highlight the dynamics of a religious tradition; especially how the visions of the enlightened Chan master of the past are perpetuated into the present through the very same mechanism that originally created them, that is, written hagiography. Although these two texts are presented as factual biographies of two modern day Chan teachers, they are factually inaccurate hagiographies.

from Connecticut running for the Senate, told veterans he “served in Vietnam.” But he did not. Nevertheless, Blumenthal won the election and is now a senator from Connecticut.

⁹ Seven-day meditation retreats are an important element of Zen practice. Almost the entire day is dedicated solely to meditation so that the concentration levels of the member's, has a chance to deepen. Often there is pressure put on the students to work extra hard and especially not to waste this precious time. It is in this context that the private meeting concerning one's meditation is so important.

“The Wanderer”¹⁰ or Welcome to the Land that Never Was

I will first consider what was presented in *Tricycle* Magazine as the actual life of the modern day Chan Master Shifu Sheng Yen and examine how this depiction matches my years of experience in close contact with him. As stated above, the purpose of this paper is to examine the dynamics of how the vision we have of the enlightened Chan Master is crafted and spread in our times, as it was in the past, through written hagiography. We will see many of the same rhetorical devices used in the classical Chan hagiographies creatively employed to match modern times and places.

The article in *Tricycle* magazine entitled “The Wanderer” is a re-print of the last four and a half pages of Chapter 16, “The Wanderer,” of the book *Footprints in the Snow: The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk*,¹¹ by Chan Master Sheng Yen. Though the book’s subtitle indicates that it is an autobiography, this cannot be completely true. Sheng Yen did not actually read or write in English with any proficiency. The book was written by the editor Kenneth Wapner, with the assistance of a few others. That Wapner actually wrote the book is only mentioned in the last two pages of the book after the “Epilogue,” under the heading “Editor’s Note.” It is noted nowhere else in the book and I imagine it would be possible to read the entire book without realizing that Sheng Yen did not actually write it. In the *Tricycle* excerpt, this fact is not even mentioned.

Around the year 2000, Wapner approached Sheng Yen about working together to produce his autobiography in English. Sheng Yen agreed and the project got under way. Part of the project consisted of hiring a well-known translator, Red Pine (Bill Porter) to translate some of the material in Sheng Yen’s already existing two autobiographies and one biography written in Chinese, along with some interviews, to construct an outline of Sheng Yen’s life.¹²

The process of actually writing *Footprints in the Snow*, according to the “Editor’s Notes” section of the book was that Wapner “interviewed Sheng Yen and submitted written questions to him to which he responded in Chinese.”¹³ Clearly, Sheng Yen was very interested in completing an English version of his autobiography as he gave Wapner much of his valued time and spent a fair amount of money to host him in Taiwan, in

¹⁰ *Tricycle* Magazine, Winter, 2008.

¹¹ *Footprints in the Snow: The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk*, Sheng Yen, Doubleday, 2008. The *Tricycle* article is an excerpt of chapter 16, “Wandering” starting in the middle of page 167 and ending on page 171.

¹² It should be noted this is not the first time that Sheng Yen had worked on an English version of his biography. Some years earlier in the 1990’s, a professional journalist living in N.Y.C. who was a student of Sheng Yen’s, was asked to write his autobiography. Sheng Yen gave the journalist about twelve hours of interviews with a translator. These were recorded on tape with the intention of him writing the autobiography over the next year while living away from N.Y.C. The journalist had trouble writing it but was particularly bothered because someone at Sheng Yen’s Center in N.Y.C. would have editorial oversight of his manuscript. After much soul searching the journalist said he could not do the project and returned the tapes. It should be noted that Wapner was given considerably more resources and time than was the journalist.

¹³ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 209.

addition to paying Red Pine for his translation services. Wapner writes that Sheng Yen “spent many hours answering my questions and hosted me in Taiwan so I could get a better sense of his organization there and travel to some of the places that appear in the book.”¹⁴ This should be understood in the context that Sheng Yen was a very busy man who was very careful how he allotted his time. He had obligations to Nongchan, his monastery on the outskirts of Taipei, and to the monks and nuns living there along with the large lay following committed to him. In addition, there were fundraising activities for his large new monastery complex Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, which was under construction for at least part of the time of the writing. He traveled to mainland China and other parts of the Far East. He also traveled to the West, especially America where he had a monastery under construction in upstate New York at which he led a few retreats a year.¹⁵ In a word, Sheng Yen was a very busy man with many commitments. Hence it is clear that he placed great value in having an English version of his life’s story.

Besides a number of other people who assisted with the book, the main person besides Wapner involved with its production was Dr. Rebecca Li, an Associate Professor of sociology at The College of New Jersey, who is fluent in both English and Chinese and was also a student of Sheng Yen. According to Wapner, she spent “countless hours interviewing Sheng Yen in Chinese and feeding me English text. She also read through Sheng Yen’s Chinese material and added information where needed.”¹⁶ It should be noted that Prof. Li is known for being meticulous in translating what she reads or hears from Sheng Yen; she is not one who adds extra interpretations or “fills in” what was not said or written.¹⁷

The “Wandering” chapter begins with Sheng Yen recounting how in 1976 he was the abbot of the Temple of Great Enlightenment (TGE). TGE was in a rundown section of the Bronx with a mostly Chinese following, though by then Sheng Yen claimed he had twenty Western students. Dongchu, his Taiwanese teacher of two years, visited NYC and was impressed by Sheng Yen’s abilities in teaching Chan. He decided to give Sheng Yen Dharma transmission, though as Sheng Yen notes, “without a ceremony.” Dongchu and Sheng Yen “agreed” that he would inherit Nongchan (“Farming Chan”), his temple in Taiwan after he died, so Dongchu added Sheng Yen “to his last will.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 209.

¹⁵ Though the N.Y. state monastery complex is large and cost a few million dollars, it is miniscule compared to the Dharma Drum Mountain complex in Taiwan.

¹⁶ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 210.

¹⁷ I was told this by a number of people who have heard her translate for Sheng Yen. Prof. Li holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Sociology from the University of California at Riverside and received her B.A. Summa Cum Laude in Sociology from The Chinese University of Hong Kong. In contrast to Prof. Li, some of Sheng Yen’s translators added their own words and interpretations.

¹⁸ *Footprints in the Snow*, p.165. Sheng Yen’s view of this is contested by some in Taiwan. Dongchu left three wills and according to Sheng Yen, his name was only on the last one. Some people believe Sheng Yen rushed back to Taiwan after Dongchu died because there were other monks closer to Dongchu and there was no clear decision that he would inherit the monastery. Buddhism in Taiwan is mixed with politics. See Laliberte, Andre, *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan 1989—2003: safeguard the faith, build a pure land, help the poor*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

This account of how Sheng Yen received Dharma transmission and the grounds for receiving it may seem like an incidental event. Yet Dharma transmission is most often presented in Zen circles as something treasured, attained after years of relationship and after enlightenment to the absolute nature of reality. We will see below how Sheng Yen talked somewhat differently about his giving Dharma transmission, but he rarely based it on Zen insight or attainment as is widely believed. Contrary to commonly held understandings, the reasons for giving Dharma transmission vary greatly across the Zen landscape.¹⁹

Dongchu died shortly after this visit and Sheng Yen then goes into describing how in spite of his own desires and the “promising future” he had in the Bronx, “he had to accept Dongchu’s request.”²⁰ He describes this as a “sense of mission” with a long history in Chan, connecting this to the famous Tang dynasty master, Mazu (709–788 CE). He talks of Mazu’s many disciples going out to spread the Dharma and “carving monasteries out mountains with their bare hands.”²¹ He tells of Dharma transmission starting with Shakyamuni Buddha and this transmission being emphasized in Chan. He also mentions that it “is not as simple as passing on a crown.”²² He mentions how some enlightened people may not receive Dharma transmission because they “may not possess enough merit and skill.”²³ He tells how he had to follow his master’s wishes to take over the temple, otherwise he would not be a disciple, as he would have “disrupted the lineage” that was “entrusted” to him. Sheng Yen adds that a son may refuse an inheritance, but in Chan, “it is a sacred tradition.”²⁴

What is misleading here is that “disrupting the lineage” has nothing to do with taking over a temple or not, that is, unless taking over the temple was a condition for receiving Dharma transmission. Accepting Dharma transmission is continuing the lineage. In Sheng Yen’s book, *Chan Comes West*, he describes receiving Dharma transmission as mentioned above when Dongchu sees him teaching Chan,²⁵ presumably to Westerners. So the lineage was continued, with Sheng Yen bringing Dongchu’s lineage and Dharma to the West, supposedly Sheng Yen’s reason for coming to America. However, in the *Footprints* version of the story it sounds as if there is a condition for receiving Dharma transmission, that is, he must take over Nongchan Temple in Taiwan if he wants to

¹⁹ The notion of Dharma transmission is commonly believed to be at the center of Chan Buddhist identity and self-understanding. The basis for Dharma transmission is widely seen as the moment when a Chan master recognizes that a student has attained the same enlightened state that he himself has achieved. The Dharma transmission itself is presented as a wordless transmission from master to disciple concerning absolute insight into the nature of ultimate reality. See Morten Schlutter, “Transmission and Enlightenment in Chan Buddhism Seen Through the Platform Sutra,” *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal*, 2007, no. 20, pp. 379-410 for changing notions of enlightenment and transmission with the evolution of the Platform Sutra. For other cases and different versions of transmission see, Welch, Holmes, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900–1950*, Harvard University Press, 1967.

²⁰ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 163

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 163.

²² *Ibid*, p. 163.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 163.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 164.

²⁵ Sheng Yen, *Chan Comes West*, Dharma Drum Publications, New York, 2002, p. 22. Dharma Drum Publications is the publishing arm of Dharma Drum Mountain, the name of Sheng Yen’s organization.

receive Dharma transmission. By this rhetorical move, Sheng Yen seems to be tying together the two separate matters of receiving Dharma transmission and taking over a monastery. These are indeed two separate issues, unless as is implied here, Dongchu made that a condition for giving Sheng Yen Dharma transmission.

In the passage described above, Sheng Yen artfully ties himself to Mazu and his Dharma heirs. Mazu was one of the most famous and pivotal Chan masters in Tang China, a symbol of Chan orthodoxy who supposedly had 120 heirs who spread Chan widely across China. Sheng Yen also emphasizes the Chan mythology of its lineage²⁶ beginning with the Buddha Shakyamuni. It should be noted that in modern Western scholarship this story is universally understood to have been constructed between the 8th and 11th centuries in order to give Chan a leg up in competition with other Buddhist sects in garnering imperial and elite support.²⁷ By emphasizing Chan lineage going back to Mazu and to the Buddha, Sheng Yen underscores the timelessness and historical continuity of the Chan lineage and hence of his own attainment.

Sheng Yen then tells that even some enlightened people do not receive Dharma transmission because of lack of “merit and skill.” This implies that those with Dharma transmission, including Sheng Yen and his heirs, are enlightened, do have the requisite “merit and skill” and that transmission is given to those most skilled, rather than for other reasons.²⁸ Yet he does not explain what merit means, or what skill is required. In fact with Sheng Yen’s own non-Chinese Dharma heirs, one can conjecture that the main criterion for receiving Dharma transmission seems to be that they have a group of people

²⁶The first mention of Chan lineage appears in 666 in Tao-hsuan’s *Hsu Kao-seng chuan* (Further Biographies of Eminent Monks) in relation to a remark of the second patriarch, Huiko. See Jorgensen, John, “The Imperial Lineage of Ch’an Buddhism: The Role of Confucian Ritual and Ancestor Worship in Ch’an’s Search For Legitimation in the Mid-Tang Dynasty,” *Papers on Far Eastern History*, 35:91 (March 1987).

²⁷ Chan was in competition with other Buddhist sects as well as with Confucianism and Taoism. By basing its authority on lineage, especially on lineage going back to the Buddha, it matched well Chinese culture, which places great importance on genealogy. At the same time it trumped other Buddhist sects, which were based on foreign texts and translations. Chan claims to have the heart of the Buddhist teachings. Chan even invented a Chinese Buddha in creating the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng*. A sutra by definition is the words of the Buddha. Griffith Foulk, Albert Welter, Morten Schlutter, Robert Sharf, Alan Cole, John McCrae, Bernard Faure and a host of other Western scholars have written on the subject. For example see, McCrae, John, *Seeing Through Zen*, University of California Press, 2003.

²⁸ In spite of what most people think, enlightenment is not necessary for Dharma transmission. Sheng Yen does not mention enlightenment as a prerequisite for Dharma transmission (D.t.) in his own magazine, *Chan Magazine*, Spring, 2009, p.10. Historically, D.t. has been given for such diverse reasons as to establish political contacts vital to the well-being of the monastery, to maintain the continuity of the lineage though the recipient has not opened his/her Dharma eye, to cement a personal connection with a student, to enhance the authority of missionaries spreading the Dharma in foreign countries, see Welch, Holmes, *Buddhism in China, 1900 to 1950*, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 315. In the Song Dynasty (CE 960-1280), Dharma transmission was routinely given to senior monastic officers, presumably so that their way to an abbacy would not be blocked. Foulk, T. Griffith " Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice," *Religion and Society in Tang and Song China*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory, University of Hawaii Press, 1993, p.160. Some masters, including the famous Dogen, felt they received the dharma from another master in a dream. See Faure, Bernard, *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 221. In the Soto sect of Zen virtually all priests have Dharma transmission, which is a prerequisite for being the abbot of a temple, a temple most often inherited from their father.

who meditate with them.²⁹ One can also argue that by giving these Western men Dharma transmission, Sheng Yen and his organization become international, not a small point with the competition between “big name Buddhist” leaders in Taiwan and the sense of isolation of the Taiwanese while living in the shadow of mainland China. Also, in an age experiencing the global spread of Buddhism, having international heirs and affiliated Centers around the world adds to one’s prestige in being a world player.

Giving Dharma transmission to someone who already has a following appears to emulate Sheng Yen’s own two Dharma transmissions. It was only when his teacher of less than two years, Dongchu, visited the USA and saw Sheng Yen teaching Chan meditation that he gave him Dharma transmission. Two years later when in Taiwan, Sheng Yen visited Master Lingyuan whom he had met for only one night many years earlier while still in the army. During that night of constant questions from Sheng Yen, he had a Chan experience when Lingyuan shouted at him.³⁰ Years later, when Sheng Yen reintroduced himself to Lingyuan and told him that he was “spreading the teaching of Chan and held seven-day retreats in the USA” Lingyuan said, “I should give you a name,” that is, Dharma transmission.³¹ So we see again that the criterion for giving Dharma transmission varies from teacher to teacher and from time period to time period. Sheng Yen talks of merit and skill. With Lingyuan it is unclear on what basis he gave transmission, though teaching Chan appears to be important for him, while with Dongchu there is a question of whether Sheng Yen would take over his monastery. In the next section of this paper we will see yet another perspective on the matter.

The chapter continues in this manner presenting all of Chan history and lore in the most idealized form possible. Though Sheng Yen presents himself as a Chan master as well as a scholar of Buddhism (having received a Ph.D. in Buddhist studies in Japan³²) the view he presents of Chan is off-the-shelf Chan/Zen sectarianism. Sheng Yen is inside the Chan tradition and as a Chan master is a prime representative of the tradition. So it is not surprising that he delivers the standard rhetoric of Chan lineage. It is in fact his source of authority.

²⁹ See the biographies of Sheng Yen’s Western heirs in Sheng Yen, *Chan Comes West*, Dharma Drum Publications, 2002.

³⁰ *Chan Comes West*, pp.15-16. The story Sheng Yen tells is that after a night of questioning, Lingyuan “hit the board of the sleeping platform very hard, making a loud noise.” At the same moment he shouted, “Put down, Go to sleep.” The story very much reminds one of Dogen’s enlightenment story or of other Chan stories where a great master has enlightenment on the first encounter with a Chan master.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp. 22-23. Sheng Yen then says that in two years he received Dharma transmission in two different lineages, the Caodong (Soto) from Dongchu and the Linji (Rinzai) from Lingyuan. He informs us that though “it did not mean much to me personally, it still is valuable in establishing credibility when spreading and upholding the Buddha dharma.” Indeed, having Dharma transmission does establish one’s credibility, whether correctly so or not. Sheng Yen however is careful to remark that receiving these two transmissions means nothing to him personally. Sheng Yen in a number of places in his autobiography tells us of his outstanding attainments while always being careful to remind us that personally, they mean nothing to him.

³² Sheng Yen received his PhD From Rissho University in Japan in 1975.

Sheng Yen presents himself as the ideal disciple, following the Confucian model³³ that was adopted early on in Chan's legitimating formulation. He also represents himself as the ideal Chan master, selflessly doing all to maintain the lineage and to serve disciples of his own. He informs us that all of this is beyond the understanding of his Western followers, positioning himself as the authentic old Chan master bringing the orthodox Chinese Chan tradition to the West, even if his Western disciples cannot understand all he is doing.³⁴ This too is another element of Chan hagiography wherein ordinary people cannot understand the words and activity of the enlightened Chan master. The narration of the First Chan Patriarch Bodhidharma's encounter with Emperor Wu is perhaps the best example of this hagiographical element from the classical Chan period. In classical Chan texts even an emperor, the most powerful person in the land, is considered an ordinary person when compared to a Chan master, in order to highlight the extraordinary insights of a Chan master.³⁵

The story line progresses with Sheng Yen describing once again how he gave up a "secure position in the USA" only to find himself in "controversy, chaos, and confusion" in Taiwan. Yet he prevails, attracting more followers and building up Nongchan.³⁶ At this point, Sheng Yen again ties himself to the famous Tang dynasty Chan master Mazu and his heirs. "I had to do as Master Mazu's Dharma heirs did, and I expanded the monastery, sometimes illegally, with windows that were not up to code."³⁷ What in particular this expansion had to do with what Mazu's heirs did is not spelled out. When any church or organization attracts more members than its facilities can accommodate, it commonly expands. It seems that Sheng Yen, uses this pretext to tie himself again to the famous Mazu and the classical period of Chan masters.

Sheng Yen was in Taiwan when Dr. C. T. Shen, a wealthy benefactor in New York who in 1969 donated the property for the Temple of Great Enlightenment wanted Sheng Yen to return New York City. Sheng Yen only talks of his "obligation" to Dr. Shen. All we hear is "obligation," with selflessness the only guiding rule as is standard in Chan

³³ Jorgensen, *Inventing Huineng*, p. 362.

³⁴ Sheng Yen, *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 164. When his Western followers in the United States heard he was leaving the TGE which was well funded and set up to spread the Dharma, they asked, "Why are you leaving a place like TGE...?" Sheng Yen thought, "How could I explain to them the absolute obligation we Chinese feel about such things?" (p. 164).

³⁵ Emperor Wu of Liang asked the great master Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the holy truth?" Bodhidharma said, "Empty. Without holiness." The Emperor said, "Who is facing me?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know." The Emperor did not understand. This is case one of the famous hundred koan cases in *The Blue Cliff Record*. See Cleary, Thomas, *The Blue Cliff Record*, volume one, Shambala, 1977, p.1.

³⁶ Sheng Yen very successfully built up Nongchan attracting large numbers of followers, many of them prominent and successful people. In the 1990s I was told its computer database held 70,000 names while large crowds packed Nongchan on bi-weekly Friday night recitation sessions. The weekly Sunday talk and meditation had hundreds of people attending. I gave one of the Sunday afternoon talks to an audience of a few hundred people.

³⁷ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 166.

hagiographies. According to Sheng Yen's self representation, he has no desires of his own; he only has "obligations" and follows a "sacred tradition."³⁸

After getting Dongchu's affairs in order, while remaining abbot of Nongchan, Sheng Yen returned to New York to "spread the Dharma."³⁹ He stayed at "Shen's villa named Bodhi House on Long Island and traveled back and forth to the city."⁴⁰ The retelling of the interaction between Sheng Yen and Dr. Shen runs as follows:⁴¹ Sheng Yen wants to move out of Bodhi House because it is too far from his students in the city. Dr. Shen replies, "If you move out, I can no longer take good care of you." "That's Ok," replied Sheng Yen, "I will wander." Yet this seemingly simple story is a bit hard to swallow as is. Sheng Yen wants to be close to his students to spread Buddhism to the West so he moves out of Bodhi House. However, Dr. C. T. Shen was a multi-millionaire shipping magnate committed to supporting the spread of Buddhism in the West, which he and his wife did most generously.⁴² Supporting a monk with an apartment in a poor section of the Bronx along with some simple food could hardly be a problem for someone of Dr. Shen's means, especially when one realizes the vast sums of money he and his wife donated in the service of Buddhism. Dr. Shen could easily take care of Sheng Yen and fifty other Sheng Yen's living simply in the Bronx. Clearly it is not the money aspect in spite of Sheng Yen implying that it is the money.

Rather, this narrative helps to present Sheng Yen in the style of an ascetic missionary - a lone monk, a homeless and selfless Chan master who is only concerned with his disciples and with spreading the Dharma. Although Sheng Yen mentions Dr. Shen - a real person in a real place -,⁴³ we should not necessarily assume that this episode did in fact happen in the way described in the biographic sketch. The main purpose of this story seems to be to heighten Sheng Yen's reputation as a saintly ascetic with no need for companionship, personal comfort or interest in money, while being completely devoted to his students.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 164. Also see Jorgensen, *Inventing Huineng*, p. 115, for an early view of the sacredness of mission of those in the direct transmission.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 167.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 167.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 167, 168.

⁴² C.T. Shen was a multimillionaire committed to supporting Buddhism and all religions of the world. He co-founded the Buddhist Association of the United States (BAUS). His efforts and financial support in 1971 led to the formation of the Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions in New York. In 1968 he donated a property in San Francisco to Rev. Hsuan Hua to establish the Buddhist Text Translation Society for just that purpose. In 1971, he furthermore helped found the Institute for the Translation of the Chinese Tripitaka (ITCT) in Taipei, Taiwan. He and his wife donated the property for the Temple of Great Enlightenment (TGE) in the Bronx and established Bodhi House on Long Island, which has been used as the headquarters of the 16th Karmapa in the US and as a conference center and gathering place for other Buddhist and religious meetings. In 1980 he donated a 125 acre parcel of land to build the Chuang Yen Monastery in N.Y. State which, with its Great Buddha Hall which houses a 37-foot statue of Buddha Vairocana, which at that time, the late 1980's, was the largest Buddha statue in the Western hemisphere. Other buildings included a library, the living and dining quarters, an area for urns holding the ashes of cremated devotees and family members, landscaping, etc. (see Wikipedia at <http://www.baus.org/baus/library/shen.html>; date of last access: 4.3.2011).

⁴³ Jorgensen, *Inventing Huineng*, p. 26. Though historical places and names are mentioned in hagiographies, this does not mean that the "people actually did or said what the hagiographies claimed they did, but it does mean the authors of the hagiographies used them for a specific end."

The story of the “Wanderer” continues,

I had no money for rent, so I slept in front of churches or in parks. I learned how to get by from three of my students, who had experience living on the street. They taught me to find discarded fruit and bread in the back of convenience stores and food markets. They showed me that I could make a little money here and there from odd jobs, sweeping up shops or tending a pretzel stand. I learned that I could store my things at a locker at Grand Central Terminal and wash clothes at a Laundromat. My students pointed out the fast food restaurants that were open twenty-four hours, and they told me that I could spend my nights at these places, resting and drinking coffee.

I wandered through the city, a monk in old robes, sleeping in doorways, nodding with the homeless through the night in coffee shops, foraging through dumpsters for fruit and vegetables. I was in my early fifties, no spring chicken, but I was lit from within by my mission to bring the Dharma to the West. Besides, what did it matter? The lessons Dongchu had taught me made it a matter of indifference to me whether I slept in a big room or a small room or in the doorway of a church.⁴⁴

This story reads as a veritable wonder. First we are told that Sheng Yen is completely alone –although by this time Sheng Yen had ordained his first Western monk.⁴⁵ Yet this first Western monk is written entirely out of the story. Significantly, this follows precisely the pattern of a standard hagiographic narrative of a Chan master. Sheng Yen describes himself as a totally self-contained, fearless Chan master, as the reflected image of the quintessential Chan hagiographies of the enlightened Chan master living alone in a wild and dangerous mountain area in a self-built rickety hut or a cave. Wild animals approach him but behave calmly before the enlightened, perfectly selfless and hence fearless master. The iconic master lives by foraging for nuts and roots when he can find them. He often meditates through the night in freezing cold with snow blowing into his rickety open hut. Perhaps the best-known Chan figure of this type is the poet Han Shan or Cold Mountain, named after the cave he chose for a home. Han Shan lived some time during the Tang dynasty and was known for writing poems he left on trees of the mountains where he freely roamed.⁴⁶ These narrative elements are aimed to demonstrate the great difficulties one encounters in the transmission of the true Jewel of the Dharma.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 168.

⁴⁵ Sheng Yen’s first Western monk, Guoren, Paul Kennedy was a young man in his twenties, recently graduated from college who spoke Chinese. He returned to lay life within a few years.

⁴⁶ Porter, Bill, *The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain*, Copper Canyon Press, 2000. See also Henricks, Robert G., *The Poetry of Han-Shan: A Complete, Annotated Translation of Cold Mountain*, Suny Press, 1990.

⁴⁷ See Jorgensen, John, *Inventing Huineng*, p. 115 for the third Chan Patriarch Seng-ts’an’s period in the mountains where wild animals attacked people. Also p.127 discusses Huiko cutting off his arm as snow

Sheng Yen creatively translates this type of iconic Chan story into modern times, just like a jazz musician riffing on a classic old tune.⁴⁸ Instead of living among wild animals, Sheng Yen translates this into roaming among the wild, often drugged and/or intoxicated and dangerous homeless population of New York City. Instead of living in a cave or a rickety self-built hut, Sheng Yen sleeps in front of churches or in doorways and in parks or passes the night in all night diners with other homeless denizens of the night. Instead of foraging for nuts, berries and roots in the mountains of China as Chan stories of the Tang dynasty tell us, Sheng Yen picks through dumpsters for discarded and no doubt damaged fruits and vegetables or discarded bread, or drinks coffee in cheap all night diners with other homeless and most likely dangerous people.

We can look at this story, this construction, as a form of ritualized writing.⁴⁹ It renders the old Chan format of hagiography into modern times and place, bringing visions of the long ago and the far away into the here and now. Here, as in ritual, the same elements are repeated, and here, as in ritual, action and beliefs are symbolic statements about the social order.⁵⁰ “In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined... turn out to be the same world.”⁵¹

In declaring a sacred mission for himself, “lit from within by my mission to bring the Dharma to the West,”⁵² Sheng Yen assigns himself the role of the delegate for bringing true Chinese Buddha Dharma to the West. He represents this as a mission, something bigger and more important than himself, which at the same time transforms himself into a modern-day version of Bodhidharma, the mostly mythical First Patriarch of Chan, who supposedly brought Chan from India to China. In fact, in another publication Sheng Yen

piles up around him to show Bodhidharma his sincerity in search of the Dharma. A more modern example is the famous Chinese master Xu-Yun whose “autobiography” had him involuntarily enter Samadhi for two weeks while alone in a rickety hut. He was awoken from this state by a visiting monk to find his hut surrounded by tiger tracks everywhere in the snow. Xu-Yun was waiting for his food to cook when he involuntarily entered Samadhi. He was 63 years old at the time. See *Empty Cloud: The Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master Xu-Yun*, translated by Charles Luk, Element Books Limited, England, 1988, p. 51.

⁴⁸ The idea of Chan stories being viewed as a jazz improvisation on a classic tune was mentioned to me by Prof. John Traphagen of University of Texas at Austin in a private conversation at the 2009 AAR (American Academy of Religion conference) in Montreal. As the Chan tradition developed, its self-image evolved and its self-description in writing evolved to match its needs. As an example we see the language and style of Chan masters evolve in texts and see certain people written into or out of the tradition. For example, although Shenhui promoted the obscure monk Huineng as the sixth Patriarch and himself as seventh Patriarch, he was eventually written out of the tradition. For the changing style and tone of the famous Chan master Linji, see Welter, Albert, *The Linji lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy*, Oxford University Press, 2008. As Welter says in his Introduction (p. 1), it is not the story of one man, but rather of a movement.

⁴⁹ Among other aspects, both hagiography and ritual are concerned with change and responding to new social situations, while holding up stability, continuity, and orthodoxy. These ideas were inspired by *Ritual Matters: Dynamic Dimensions in Practice*, ed. by Christiane Brosius and Ute Hüsken, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2010.

⁵⁰ See “Deference” by Maurice Block, in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, Brill, 2006, p. 496.

⁵¹ Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973, p.112.

⁵² *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 168.

talked of transmitting a new lineage, starting with himself.⁵³ From this point of view he is the primal ancestor, the head of the lineage and his hagiography functions as family instructions much as does the Sixth Patriarch Huineng's *Platform Sutra*. This deepens Sheng Yen's authority and through reflected glory, elevates the authority of his disciples and the new lineage beginning with himself.⁵⁴ The Dharma he promises to bring is not only the true Chinese Buddha Dharma, but also the Dharma of total selflessness that he inherited from his teacher Dongchu, epitomized in his activities implementing his sacred mission. This is made evident by his statement that it did not matter to him whether he "slept in a big room or a small room or in the doorway of a church."⁵⁵ Yet, no matter how much he enjoys his freedom of roaming New York City's freezing cold and snowy winter streets, eating discarded food from dumpsters, he must give it up to serve his students to spread the Dharma. In a sense he is abolishing himself in his mission, in the group of his followers, thereby making a gift - or a sacrifice - of himself to the group. One who has a sacred task such as saving the West by bringing it the Dharma, is already sanctified by this task itself. Sheng Yen thus performs a "transformation of himself into something holy".⁵⁶

Though not mentioned in the *Tricycle* selection, we are told in the next chapter of the book from which it was excerpted, chapter 17, that this period lasted for six months, throughout the winter. New York City winters are quite cold, often with periods of high wind, snow, and freezing rain. Sheng Yen informs us:

When I was wandering homeless for six months, it was winter and I greatly enjoyed my freedom. The city was windy and cold. Late at night, when the city was quiet, I wandered through the streets, wrapping my robes tightly around me. It often snowed. I called myself, "the wandering monk in the snow."⁵⁷

So not only was Sheng Yen roaming cold and dangerous New York City streets throughout freezing winter nights, while living on damaged and discarded fruits and vegetables, he was also *enjoying* this freedom. Here I would like to compare his description of himself with my eighteen years of experience with him. Sheng Yen had a weak constitution, was physically frail and had a sensitive stomach. He required most of his food to be well cooked to make it easy to digest. He never became acclimated to NYC's cold winters, and even in his centrally heated Chan Center in Queens, N.Y. during the winter months, was most often bundled up with sweaters, scarves, and a woolen hat.

⁵³ Sheng Yen, *Chan Comes West*, p. 23. This is a new lineage beginning with himself that transmits both the Linji and Caodung lineages of Chinese Buddhism. Interestingly, this mimics the Sanbokyodan line of Zen which began January 8th, 1954 founded by Yasutani roshi in Japan. The Sanbokyodan sect is very popular in the West, though tiny in Japan. Sheng Yen while in Japan, practiced Zen mostly with Ban roshi, a member of the Sanbokyodan lineage.

⁵⁴ Jorgensen, John, *Inventing Huineng*, pp. 361f.

⁵⁵ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 168.

⁵⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Language and Symbolic Power*, "The Self Consecration of the Delegate," pp. 209f.

⁵⁷ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 173.

Although I was not studying with Sheng Yen at that time, in conversations in late 2009 with several students who were associated with Sheng Yen then - the late 1970s - I could find no substantiation of the “wandering monk in the snow” scenario.⁵⁸ The idea of Sheng Yen roaming the city streets at night in a windy snowstorm wrapping his robes tightly around himself or sleeping in parks or doorways is highly unlikely. To assume that he “greatly enjoyed this freedom” is even more unlikely. Interestingly, though presenting himself as being totally selfless and only concerned with his students and spreading the Dharma, he maintained enough self-consciousness to think of describing himself with the catchy epithet, “the wandering monk in the snow.”

Sheng Yen goes on to describe how some people felt pity for him while others feared him and worried that he would want money from them. He mentions a Chinese monk, Master Haolin, who he accepted some help from but who was poor himself, so Sheng Yen did not want to burden him. He then mentions that he did accept some offers of help. “I spent nights at the apartments of my followers.”⁵⁹ What are we to make of this line? We just read of his sleeping in doorways and parks, staying up in all night diners by drinking coffee with other homeless, eating discarded food from dumpsters, while in the next chapter he tells us how late at night, often in snow, he roamed the cold, windy and often snowy winter streets for six months during New York’s bitter cold winter. What are we to make of this one line that places in question the entire page of detailed descriptions of living on the streets? For apart from here, we hear little of his students to whom he was totally dedicated. Who were they and how did they live and think? What did his students feed him and how often, did they take him to restaurants, or did they give him at least a few care packages? What did he think of this new type of food? Did he have trouble digesting this food; were the tastes very foreign to him? What did he think of their generosity or lack of generosity? Or where did he store the care packages if he did get them, did he share them with the other homeless he interacted with? Or what did his students think of him supposedly living on the streets, sleeping in doorways, eating discarded food? Did they feel guilty or express remorse at not being able to do more for their teacher who was sacrificing so much for them? Did they offer more help but he refused because he did not want to burden them? We read of the cold streets and all night diners with homeless folk.

However, like his students, there is not a word of who these homeless were or how they ended up homeless. Neither do we read of the hospitality of his students, where he stayed, how many students put him up, for how long, or fed him, what the student’s living spaces looked like, what their jobs were, whether they had spouses, children, or lovers, how he interacted with them while accepting their hospitality, how or if he instructed them while in their homes or what he thought of how they lived or of their beliefs. Were there any problems or resistance in what his foreign students thought with what he wanted to teach them? In fact, where did he teach his students and how often and what was he teaching at that time?⁶⁰ One would think this would all be new to him and interesting and important

⁵⁸ The people I spoke with did not want their names mentioned.

⁵⁹ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 168.

⁶⁰ He does mention meeting with his students on Saturdays in a loft in Manhattan, but this seems at a later period of time, “while I was looking for a place to establish my own sangha.” *Footprints*, p.176.

if for no other reason that he wanted to bring the Dharma to Westerners. So knowing how they lived, interacted among each other, and thought would certainly be important to Sheng Yen. Yet his students and his fellow homeless people are presented as phantoms, ghosts with no lives or personalities of any interest or value worth mentioning by Sheng Yen. They are presented as disembodied abstractions, faceless people to bring the Dharma to.⁶¹ They serve as bit players, as a backdrop for the display of Sheng Yen's selflessness, sacrifice, and purity. It seems as if Sheng Yen as a delegated spokesman for Chinese Chan, that is, a doubly Dharma transmitted Chan master, owes to himself alone an existence.⁶²

The story as written neither makes sense nor is it believable. Though presented in a seemingly innocent and straight-up fashion, with a presumed level of honesty and integrity, it has a deceptive feel. The story is only believable if one accepts Sheng Yen as a Chan master—which is to say, as a legitimate representative of Chan who is beyond deceiving or misleading.⁶³ Again in Bourdieu's terms, Sheng Yen as an old Chan master is rich in symbolic capital, that is, rich in legitimate authority in the form of prestige, honor, and reputation. Being a legitimate authority implies above all, the power to create the "official version of the social world."⁶⁴

In late 2009, I spoke with a long-term student of Sheng Yen, who in my interpretation represents this kind of belief. This person was Sheng Yen's student while Sheng Yen supposedly roamed the cold winter streets of NYC, sleeping in doorways and eating discarded food from dumpsters. I said that I had a little trouble believing this story. This student replied that there were some translation problems. This person knew the story was not true as written, yet believed that Sheng Yen as Chan master could only speak the truth. In this explanation, this student scoots around any part that Sheng Yen may have played in presenting biographical details she knew were false. For this person to maintain that Sheng Yen is above misleading readers, the translator or possibly the writer must be at fault. It is, however, well understood by Sheng Yen's students that the translator, Professor Rebecca Li, is a very accurate translator who has successfully translated more difficult material such as Buddhist philosophy for Sheng Yen's talks. It is therefore highly unlikely that this lengthy and detailed account could result from mistranslation.

⁶¹ I am reminded of the joke about Communists, "They love the masses, it is people they have trouble with."

⁶² In Bourdieu's terms of analysis, he appears as an autonomous figure endowed with a life of his own, a life he has transformed into something holy. (*Language and Symbolic Power*, "Delegation and Political Fetishism," pp. 203–219). Bourdieu examines the question of how the delegate can have power over the person who gives him the power. "The delegate thus performs—to quote Nietzsche—a 'transformation of himself into something holy.' To enable his necessity to be fully felt, the delegate resorts to the strategy of 'impersonal duty' (p. 210).

⁶³ See Bourdieu, "Authorized Language," in *Language and Symbolic Power*, pp. 107–116. "Most of the conditions that have to be fulfilled in order for a performative utterance to succeed comes down to the question of the appropriateness of the speaker—or better still, his social function- and of the discourse he utters" (p. 111). For an interesting paper that discusses belief in reference to "deference," that is, reliance on the authority of others to guarantee the value of what is said or done, see "Deference" by Maurice Bloch, in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, Brill, 2006, pp. 495–506.

⁶⁴ Harris, John, *Power Matters*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 9.

Another attitude that allows believers to accept the unlikely narrative of Sheng Yen's homeless life on the streets is "deference." "Deference" is defined by T. Burge as the reliance on the authority of others to guarantee the value of what is said or done.⁶⁵ This fundamentally alters the relationship between the understanding⁶⁶ of something and the holding of it to be true. When deference is the prominent attitude of the agent, understanding something by one's self is not required. This is particularly relevant in the case of Chan, whose self-understanding stresses "not establishing words and letters and directly pointing at the human mind."⁶⁷ It might be out of an attitude of "deference" that the above-mentioned early student of Sheng Yen's, and possibly other followers of Sheng Yen, Chan/Zen enthusiasts, *Tricycle Magazine's* editors, and the editors at Doubleday, the book's publisher, cannot present the master as uttering anything less than the perfect truth. In effect then, the Chan master embodies the truth, just as Chan hagiographies instruct. Sheng Yen may be viewed with the same deference as old Chan masters are, that is, as a sage, so that his hagiography is to be read as scripture first and history second.⁶⁸

I believe this story exemplifies the process by which myths of the perfected Chan master take root. Would Buddhists have questioned this story if it was the narrative of another tradition? Imagine, for example, that a Catholic priest with generous benefactors leaves a comfortable position in an upscale section of Long Island in the middle of the winter, to move to New York City. His benefactors refuse to help him after he left Long Island. He lives as a homeless person on the streets. He is inspired by his compassionate desire to be closer to his parishioners and by his newly found joyful freedom. His parishioners in turn, occasionally allow him to sleep on their couches, but mostly leave him out in the cold to sleep in parks and on the steps of churches. They instruct him however, how to survive by finding discarded and damaged food in dumpsters. The priest, lit from within, enjoys the bracing winter weather. In this case, it certainly would have occurred to followers of Sheng Yen, Chan/Zen enthusiasts, *Tricycle Magazine's* editors, and the editors at Doubleday, to question this story. This was evidently not the case with Sheng Yen's story—but why not? Should we have the firm belief that a Chan master can utter nothing less than the perfect truth? Should our thinking and common sense be overshadowed by Chan hagiography, a literary form developed in China a thousand years ago?

Sheng Yen informs us that being out on the street was a good thing, because it "taught me not to rely on anyone and pushed me to find my own place to propagate Chan."⁶⁹ Then in

⁶⁵ T. Burge, "Content Preservation," *Philosophical Review* 102 (1993), 457–488; see for the role of "deference in processes as the above-described, Maurice Bloch, "Deference," p. 497.

⁶⁶ "Understanding" is here "the power to make experience intelligible by applying concepts and categories" (see *Miriam Webster Dictionary*; <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/understanding>, date of last access: 3.3.2011).

⁶⁷ Welter Albert, "Mahakashyapa's Smile," *The Koan*, ed. by Steven Heine, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 79. This comes from the four-part definition of Chan/Zen attributed to Bodhidharma: 1. A special transmission outside the teachings, 2. Do not establish words and letters, 3. Directly pointing to the human mind, 4. See one's nature and become a Buddha.

⁶⁸ Chen, Jack W., "Blank Spaces and Secret Histories: Questions of Historiographic Epistemology in Medieval China," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 69, Number 4, November 2010, p. 1074

⁶⁹ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 169

a manner that is repeated mantra-like in his story, Sheng Yen reminds the reader how bodhisattvas endured difficulties from the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni to spread the Dharma, forgetting themselves while single-mindedly being concerned with easing the suffering of sentient beings. Sheng Yen thus informs us that he is such a person just in case we missed it. He repeats a line that is part of his standard refrain: “Ordinary people just want life to be smooth, without problems. But Buddhist practitioners have a different attitude. They are ready to endure many difficulties if they are in the service of transforming others.”⁷⁰ Clearly here, “Buddhist practitioners” does not refer to lay people who practice Buddhism. This is a rephrased version of his teaching to his ordained disciples, that ordinary people just want life to be smooth, without problems, but monks and nuns are only concerned with helping all sentient beings.⁷¹

Sheng Yen ties himself to bodhisattvas from the time of Shakyamuni selflessly enduring difficulties to spread the Dharma and to ease the suffering of sentient beings. At the same time he separates himself from “ordinary people,” the readers in this case, who “just want life to be smooth” and most other Buddhist practitioners who live “normal” lives. He describes those special Buddhist practitioners, including himself, as people who “are ready to endure many difficulties if they are in the service of transforming others.” He repeatedly presents himself as completely selfless. Moreover, he presents himself as special, separate and above other beings.

He reminds us again and again how difficult it is to bring the Dharma to people. However because he is “lit from within” this difficulty was not a concern to him. Though there are roughly 1,300 years between Sheng Yen and Mazu, he presents the Chan lineage as continuous and unchanging. Sheng Yen, through his auto-hagiography, would like us to believe that he is in fact a living replica of the famous Tang dynasty Chan master Mazu. He also presents himself as a model for salvation.

Sheng Yen also advises the reader on how to “endure hardship.” Once more we are referred back to Master Mazu who “taught that it is necessary to maintain a mind of equanimity. This means always maintaining a calm, stable mind, which is not ruled by emotions.”⁷² Sheng Yen goes on to explain what this means: not becoming proud when things go well, or depressed when things do not work. “Becoming upset only causes suffering.”⁷³ The chapter and the article ends with the selfless Sheng Yen informing us how his

life is very different now. I have met with world leaders and given a keynote address in the general assembly hall at the United Nations. My disciples include high-level officials in Taiwan. I was received as a VIP in

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 169

⁷¹ On a number of occasions at his Center in Queens I have heard Sheng Yen’s monks repeat this to lay people.

⁷² *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 171.

⁷³ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 170.

motorcades in mainland China and Thailand. I am venerated by my followers.⁷⁴

Hence we learn that “not becoming proud” does not mean keeping from announcing your accomplishments to the world both in the religious and secular arenas. Rather, it is by presenting his accomplishments under the persona of a selfless Chan Master that he can remind people of his worldly accomplishments yet dismiss it as meaning nothing to him and still be taken seriously and honestly. Another person, an ordinary person without the stamp of authority of being a Chan master and the deference that this engenders, when enumerating his worldly accomplishments and international fame but then immediately adding “it doesn’t make any difference to me,” would be looked at as being self congratulatory, duplicitous, or phony.

In Sheng Yen’s auto-hagiography we see how power, place, and authority are overlapping elements, as is common in Chan hagiography.⁷⁵ He mentions his power over human drives and motives, repeating a number of times that money⁷⁶ and women were red lights for him—as was fame. He also mentions that he was the teacher of high-level officials in Taiwan⁷⁷ and attained a worldwide recognition, hence informing us of his fame while he claims fame did not matter to him. He lets us know that the world is his home and that he traveled between Taiwan and the USA and England and China and Thailand. Hence he informs that he was a major player in the global spread of Buddhism. We learn that his religious authority is clearly established by receiving Dharma transmission, the holy grail of Chan authority, from both the Linji and Caodong lineages. We are also informed that his authority and power were recognized in the secular world by giving a “keynote address at the general assembly hall of the United Nations”⁷⁸ and receiving VIP treatment in China and Thailand. We see in this overlap of power, place, and authority that Sheng Yen presents himself as transcending the ordinary boundaries that define most people. In this depiction, he is not bound by either secular or religious limitations and moves effortlessly between both these worlds; it appears that the world is his oyster.

In creating the story of “The Wanderer” Sheng Yen seems to have a sense of what Western people desire in the hagiography of a Chan master—the “Eastern genre” conveys authenticity to the Westerner. In addition to being in two chapters of his “autobiography,” “The Wanderer” was chosen to be excerpted in *Tricycle Magazine*, and is often mentioned in obituaries of Sheng Yen and in reviews of *Footprints in the Snow*

⁷⁴ *Footprints in the Snow*, p. 171.

⁷⁵ Jorgensen, John, *Inventing Huineng*, p. 531.

⁷⁶ Though money may have been “a red light” for him, he managed to raise approximately \$3 million for his N.Y. State country retreat center and probably around \$100 million for his Taiwan monastery complex. He also had an air-conditioned four-door Volvo sedan for trips around Taiwan. With the high tariffs for imported cars in Taiwan, this Volvo was considerably more expensive than it would have been in the USA.

⁷⁷ He ran retreats for high level people in Taiwan, what he referred to as VIP retreats, where Chinese women volunteers acted as maid service for the all male VIPs, taking care of their well appointed sleeping mats, cleaning their living quarters, and preparing their meals.

⁷⁸ *Footprints in the Snow*, p.171.

from which it was excerpted.⁷⁹ It is also mentioned in the “blogosphere” as an example of “real Dharma” as opposed to the scandals surrounding Eido Shimano and Gempo Merzel.⁸⁰ In repeating the story under various banners, we see how the dynamics of Chan hagiographic writing in the 21st century clone a self-created myth into a fact of the modern tradition.

Sheng Yen’s narrative may be termed an auto-hagiography. This text raises more questions and is more complicated than that of Walter Nowick, which is dealt with in the second part of this paper. Part of the complication is that Sheng Yen lived in two cultures: Chinese and modern Western, mostly American. Modern American culture has one view of biography and historiography, demanding historical and factual accuracy. At the least the older Chinese view is quite different. In Song dynasty writing, fictionalization was often not seen as the falsification of events but as the verification of truth.⁸¹ One can see an example of this in the changing language of Linji in different versions of the Linji Lu⁸² or how the Platform Sutra changes from the early Dunhuang version to the orthodox version written in the Song dynasty.⁸³ These Song texts were also meant to strengthen the faith of followers of the tradition. How these different views of biography and history played out in Sheng Yen’s mind mixed with his need for adulation can only be speculation on our part, and perhaps they were unclear to him too.

There is a strange irony at work here. By definition the picture Sheng Yen paints of himself is intentional and may even be viewed as self-serving, yet the subject of the picture, that is, Sheng Yen himself, is made to appear selfless, the image of a Tang or Song dynasty innocent, down to earth, desireless Chan master. One can say his auto-hagiography is both aggressive and inventive in seducing his western readers into accepting himself as a living example of the original Chan masters of ancient China, the

⁷⁹ For one such obituary see “The Venerable Chan Master Sheng-yen. A Brief Obituary Chuan-deng Jing-di,” by John Hurrell Crook, at <http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/obituary-chan-master-sheng-yen.html> (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

For a book review repeating the story see

http://www.yoga-abode.com/review_footprints_in_the_snow (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

Also see <http://www.shambhalasun.com/sunspace/?p=5901> (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

⁸⁰ Eido Shimano roshi has been embroiled in sexual and perhaps monetary scandals for 45 years. See www.shimanoarchive.com. Gempo Merzel roshi has had the same problems, though for a slightly shorter time. Merzel just recently resigned as a Soto priest. He started “Big Mind” a combination of Jungian psychology and Zen that makes great promises for personal transformation. Some of his events can be quite expensive, costing \$5,000 for five days with Merzel.

⁸¹ Welter, *The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy*, p. 163.

⁸² Ibid, p. 133, “the true man of no rank’ is central to Linji’s teaching. Yet, the variance with which it is depicted in different sources suggests a four-stage development.”

⁸³ Morten Schlutter, “Transmission and Enlightenment in Chan Buddhism Seen Through the Platform Sutra,” pp. 401–408. The orthodox version written some time between 1183 and 1225 not only contains new elements but changes the focus of the early Dunhuang version. In the Dunhuang version the focus is on Huineng’s authority as the Sixth Patriarch together with the Platform Sutra as the embodiment of Huineng’s teaching and the proof of membership in his school. In the later orthodox version “Song ideas about the Chan lineage are fully played out.” “Huineng’s disciples are now depicted as fully enlightened masters who became virtual equals to Huineng,” whereas in earlier versions Huineng’s disciples have “relatively little prestige and power.”

very founders of the tradition. Representatives of Japanese Zen commonly present Chinese Chan as now dead with the only real Zen being alive in Japan. In that sense, Sheng Yen presents himself as a modern day Bodhidharma bringing authentic Chinese Chan in the form of a new lineage beginning with himself to America and the West. Another irony in Sheng Yen's auto-hagiography is that a primary role of a spiritual teacher is to be a role model for the student. How will his calculated presentation as a completely selfless Chan master serve as a role model to students, when/if it becomes known that his living as a homeless wanderer on the cold winter streets of NYC, was totally made up—it never happened! I spoke with three of his longest term students who were with him during his fantasized time as a homeless wanderer; each admitted the story as written did not happen. Yet it did not affect any of them in a negative way. How people less close to Sheng Yen will take this remains to be seen.

Another complication in Sheng Yen's case is that he chose to be a player in the competitive world of big name Taiwanese Buddhist leaders and on the world's stage.⁸⁴ In this context, Sheng Yen was aware of the global outreach of Buddhism and the service of modern mass media in spreading the Dharma and his name. His monastery in Taiwan has a media center producing CDs and videos; he produced a magazine in both Taiwan and America, had a weekly T.V. program in America and published many books in Chinese and English, at least two autobiographies and one biography in Chinese, and now an "auto-hagiography" in English. For all his claims of innocence and selflessness, he constructed a view of Chan that privileged monks and nuns as the real Buddhists and promoted a perfumed version of himself as the focus of attention.

Sheng Yen did in fact accomplish some remarkable tasks in his life. He turned Nongchan monastery outside of Taipei into a thriving Buddhist center, built the Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery complex, a major center housing a Buddhist university, a large meditation hall, an auditorium and more along with facilities to support these diverse activities. He built another monastery in upstate N.Y. about two hours drive from N.Y.C. and established affiliated Chan centers around the world while giving Dharma transmission to five Westerners and a number of Easterners. He also published many books on Buddhism and Chan in Chinese, English and other Western languages. Through the Sheng Yen Foundation he donated a considerable sum of money to Columbia University Press to support the publication of books on Buddhism.

⁸⁴ Iannaccone, Laurance R., "The Consequences of Religious Market Structure," *Rationality and Society*, Vol.3 No.2, April 1991, pp. 156–177, Sage Publications. This paper examines Adam Smith's view of religion as a commodity affected by market forces and asks, "Whether competition stimulates or retards religious activity." In what certainly was a conspicuous point in Taiwanese Buddhist circles where in recent years there is enormous interest in Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama, Sheng Yen and the Dalai Lama shared a stage in NYC, May 1-3, 1998. Though billed as "Wisdom Teaching with the 14th Dalai Lama and the Venerable Sheng Yen," the Dalai Lama did 100% of the teaching the first two days. Sheng Yen however, paid a far larger share of the costs for the three-day event in order to sit on the stage with the most prominent Buddhist in the world, the Dalai Lama for two days and to engage in dialog with him only on the third afternoon. Interestingly, this follows an historical pattern, "Tibet-China ties followed a characteristic asymmetry: what Tibet imparted to China was religious goods, while what China bestowed in return was material." *Buddhism Between Tibet & China*, ed. by Kapstein, Matthew, Wisdom Publications, 2009, p.11.

Yet he also had an overwhelming need for adoration that seemed to increase along with his accomplishments. Creating the fantasy of the selfless Chan monk living on the cold and dangerous winter streets of N.Y.C. in order to be near his students and spread the Dharma to the West is clearly a manifestation of his strong need for adoration. All his accomplishments did not seem enough. He also wanted to be remembered or to live on into the future as a modern reflection of the iconic Chan figures Mazu and Bodhidharma. This makes the reader wonder how much of the rest of his auto-hagiography is to be taken as “really happening” since the one part that could be examined here for veracity, took place in the “land that never was.”

But there is a tragic side to this story, in that all his accomplishments never seemed to really satisfy him. After all, Sheng Yen was a human being who to my eye, sadly chose to present himself as more than human, as an icon, hence not as a human being at all. Unfortunately, many others saw him as an icon too creating a vicious cycle of denying his humanity.

Other players in this story are the author/editor, Kenneth Wapner, Doubleday publishers who published *Footprints in the Snow: The Autobiography of a Chinese Buddhist Monk*, and *Tricycle Magazine* who excerpted “The Wanderer,” chapter of the book. Evidently, the editors of Doubleday and *Tricycle* owe their readers a more reflected presentation than an auto-hagiography of a contemporary religious leader that mirrors a classical Chan hagiography. Both Doubleday and *Tricycle* are tacitly endorsing the veracity of the story. They grabbed a story that sounded good and would sell rather than being concerned with accuracy.

*down east*⁸⁵ *roshi*⁸⁶ or Why let details upset the picture of a perfected life?

“Don’t pay much attention to what people say, but watch what they do”

Gregory Schopen, UCLA Today, Feb. 25, 2009

The second example of modern day hagiography occurring in the context of contemporary Western Chan/Zen Buddhism is the *Tricycle Magazine* article titled “down east roshi” which is about Walter Nowick. Again the purpose of this paper is not to defame or malign a supposed Zen master, but rather to examine the dynamics of a religious tradition, in this case Zen.

The *Tricycle* article begins with Huston Smith, a professor of world religions informing Dana Sawyer, the author of the article that Walter Nowick is “the quietest Zen master in

⁸⁵ The term “down east” has a number of meanings, though in this context it is generally understood to mean Hancock and Washington counties, the two northern most counties along the Maine coast. Walter lives in Hancock county. *Down East, The Magazine of Maine* FAQ explains the origin of the term: "When ships sailed from Boston to ports in Maine (which were to the east of Boston), the wind was at their backs, so they were sailing downwind, hence the term 'Down East.'"

⁸⁶ *Tricycle Magazine*, Sawyer, Dana, Spring 2009, pp. 48–51, 109-110.

America.”⁸⁷ Smith then talks of Walter’s Japanese lineage and of Walter having “some of the best” credentials as a Zen master. Sawyer never heard of Walter but realizes he lives close to where he has been summering in Maine for many years. Sawyer finally finds Walter after a difficult search.

We learn that Walter lives on a non-functioning farm, that he never married or had children, and that he comes from a Russian immigrant family. We hear that Walter was a child prodigy in the piano, became interested in Zen from his piano teacher Henriette Michaelson, at Juilliard School of Music, who summered in Maine where Walter now lives. Wanting to train more deeply in Zen, Walter went to Japan in 1950 to study with Goto Zuigan roshi, at first supporting himself teaching English but soon by teaching piano. According to Sawyer’s story, Walter became a Dharma heir of Goto in 1965 and shortly after returned to the USA.

The story continues with a group forming around Walter in Maine reaching 40 plus members, Walter buying a sawmill to help the group support itself, with Walter avoiding the limelight and “choosing instead a life of quiet practice.”⁸⁸ According to the story after some years Walter decided to use music to teach Zen and spread compassion, and that this bothered his students. According to Sawyer’s narrative, Walter became so busy with his newly formed amateur opera company that he formally stopped teaching Zen in 1985, compassionately donated the land on which the meditation hall (zendō) and supporting buildings were situated to the Sangha, and retired as roshi.

The story closes with Sawyer assuring us that Walter is “believable as a roshi” and “has an easygoing presence that bespeaks the real deal.”⁸⁹ We learn that Walter is oriented towards the practical, as opposed to Huston Smith who, according to Goto roshi had the “philosopher’s disease.” In closing, Sawyer assures us that a “lotus is in bloom in Maine.”

From my perspective of eleven years of close contact with Walter Nowick and the members of his Center, Moon Spring Hermitage, the *Tricycle* article gives a much distorted view of both Walter and what occurred at the Center. Just to reiterate, I was “head monk” for many years and was the President of the Board of Directors for most of my eleven years with the group. In fact, it is hard to find a sentence in the entire article that I could accept without at least some qualification. This is not surprising, as the author, Dana Sawyer, did not bother to interview the ex-members who still live close to the now discontinued Moon Spring Hermitage, or the others, who moved away from the area. Instead, he mentions speaking with only three people: Walter Nowick himself, Huston Smith, a well known professor of world religions, who had some short connection with Walter in Japan roughly 50 years ago, and Allen Wittenberg, who lives close to Walter and who Sawyer describes as a long time disciple of Walter’s. In fact, Allen only arrived in Maine in the mid 1980s, well after the period (from 1969 to the early 1980s) when Walter was teaching Zen. Allen is extremely close to and cares for Walter who is

⁸⁷ “down east roshi,” p. 48.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 51.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 110.

now in his 80s, but explicitly has said me that he does not consider himself Walter's disciple.⁹⁰ Sawyer's description of Walter is consistent with the ideal of a Zen roshi made popular by D.T.Suzuki among many others. However, I don't believe his description is consistent with the actual experience of most of Walter's ex-students. It was certainly not consistent with mine. Had Sawyer spoken with easily available ex-students, he would have developed a more nuanced view, including a number of critical assessments by people who spent years at the center.

I will deal here with only a few aspects of Sawyer's article, beginning with Walter's alleged Dharma transmission—an important aspect of all classical Zen hagiographies and the basis of Zen legitimacy. Dharma transmission is widely understood as the recognition by a teacher that his student has attained the awakened Buddha Mind that according to Chan/Zen rhetoric has been passed along beginning with Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha to Mahakashyapa, who smiled when the Buddha held up a flower in front of the assembly of monks. Zen professes through its self-acclaimed unbroken Dharma transmission based lineage to have maintained the heart of the Buddha's teaching. This is understood to be in opposition to other sects of Buddhism that Zen claims "only have words." Modern Western scholars have shown the constructedness of this Chan/Zen strategy of legitimation and authority. The notion of an unbroken Zen lineage going back to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni "is best understood as a mythical construct."⁹¹

Sawyer begins by quoting Huston Smith, "He's [Walter] the quietest Zen master in America." And, "he was the first American to go to Japan and receive full Dharma transmission in the Rinzai lineage."⁹² We then learn that in 1957 Smith was "shepherded" around Kyoto by Walter for a season. One can only guess where Smith got the idea that Walter has "full dharma transmission in the Rinzai lineage." In fact, Walter does not have Dharma transmission in any lineage of Zen.

Soko Morinaga roshi, Walter's older brother in the Dharma,⁹³ in the early 1980s as the group was disintegrating, wrote an open letter to students who had left Walter informing them that although Walter was much loved by the Japanese and was the best Western student he had seen, Walter did NOT receive Dharma transmission from Goto Zuigan roshi, their mutual teacher. He then gave examples of how Goto was slow and careful and

⁹⁰ Allen mentioned this in a phone conversation we had in late 2009.

⁹¹ See Schlutter, Morten, *How Zen Became Zen*, p.15, as well as the works of Griffith Foulk, Robert Sharf, Alan Cole, Albert Welter, Bernard Faure. See also McRae, John R., *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Buddhism*, University of California Press, 2003. For an academic view of the Mahakashyapa myth see Albert Welter, "Mahakashyapa's Smile: Silent Transmission and the Kung-an (Koan) Tradition" in *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. by Steven Heine and Dale Wright, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 75-109.

⁹² "down east roshi," p. 48.

⁹³ Chan/Zen follows the genealogical model of Chinese culture. Morinaga roshi and Walter had the same teacher/father, Goto Zuigan roshi. Therefore they are considered Dharma brothers. However, not only did Morinaga have Dharma transmission and Walter did not, but also Morinaga was the older brother, that is, an earlier (elder) student of Goto than Walter.

watched people for a long time before giving Dharma transmission. The letter also encouraged people to continue in the practice.

In the eleven years I spent in Maine with Walter, he never said he had Dharma transmission, he never asked to be called roshi, and no one ever called him roshi. Morinaga Roshi visited the group on two occasions in the early 1970s to see what we were doing and to instruct us in zendō procedures. Morinaga clearly treated Walter as a subordinate and Walter acted as a subordinate. There was no mutual sense of equality between two roshi who had the same teacher. Morinaga never said Walter had Dharma transmission or should be called roshi.

However, most of the Moon Spring students assumed that Walter was a roshi, but that he did not think it necessary to employ the formalized Japanese titles and robes. The American informal style and the earthiness around the farm and woods work were attractive draws to many students as opposed to the formality of Japanese Zen. Almost every student called him Walter, though a very few, for reasons of their own, called him sensei, which means teacher in Japanese; one can be a baseball sensei or a math sensei.

When told of Morinaga's letter, Walter never denied what Morinaga wrote but only seemed upset that it was now known that he did not have Dharma transmission. Whether it is a real issue or not in terms of his attainment is immaterial, but in the minds' of Zen followers, it took away from Walter's unquestioned authority. Without Dharma transmission, that is the sanctity of the entire Zen lineage, Walter only spoke as Walter. His educated opinion then is one among many educated opinions, but not as a legitimate representation of Rinzai Zen. All the authority and legitimacy that goes along with the term Dharma transmission, this supposed unquestioned triple A stamp of approval was gone.

In order to see how Walter handled his privileged position and authority, let's look at Smith's remark, "He's [Walter] the quietest Zen master in America." We have already seen that Walter was not a Zen master in the strict sense of the word. But what did Smith mean by "quietest"? It is certainly true that Walter, though the leader of an active Zen group did not take part in the greater American Zen activities and meetings that were occurring among Zen leaders at that time, the 1970's. In that sense he was indeed quiet. It is also true that under Walter's direction we did not send out mass mailings to raise money for our building projects. Walter even on one occasion refused an unsolicited large monetary donation to the group because he thought the person would later want to have a say in how to run things.⁹⁴ To Walter's great credit, at least in my opinion, we raised money for our building projects by taxing ourselves and keeping the projects within our own budget constraints. This was rare if not singular at that time of fast growth of Zen groups in America.

⁹⁴ We had a yearly open house weekend during the summer. A few hundred people would attend. Though we had a donation box, it was out of sight and only if someone asked to give a donation, a member would direct them to the box. On the occasion mentioned above, a man wanted to donate roughly \$10,000 and wanted to speak with Walter about it. Walter said he did not want the donation for the reason mentioned above. Someone thanked the man kindly, but said we did not accept large unsolicited donations.

However, if what Smith meant by “quiet” had anything to do with not interfering in his students’ lives, then the word “quiet” has to be qualified. Walter constantly interfered in student’s lives, even among married couples, advising them to have more children to hold a marriage together, arranging and coaxing people to marry, commenting and interfering on types of medical care to take, interfering in friendships between members, ostracizing people who crossed some imagined boundary, which took the form of shunning as a form of punishment, as well as getting upset and heated when a student may have disagreed with him on matters which might not even have had to do with Zen. In this sense, he was hardly quiet at all.

The article continues with Sawyer quoting Huston Smith giving the standard Zen claim for authenticity and for being a superior being: the declaration to having inherited the Zen lineage⁹⁵, which is, receiving Dharma transmission. In a quick outline, as is common in Zen hagiographies, the lineage of Walter is given going back through his teacher Goto Zuigan roshi, and further back to the beginning of the twentieth century with Soyen Shaku.⁹⁶ Then we are informed of the key point to this story: “Walter Nowick Roshi,” as the last in the lineage, has brought the Japanese Rinzai lineage to America. “Walter Nowick Roshi,” is the supposed living Zen master, the last link of Dharma transmitted roshi bobbing back along the unbroken lineage to Soyen Shaku and beyond, supposedly through Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch and Bodhidharma, the first Chinese Patriarch to the historical Buddha himself. However, since Walter never received Dharma transmission in the first place, Huston Smith’s⁹⁷ presentation and the imputed authority for Walter is all

⁹⁵ Lineage is a trope that Zen adopted early on to establish its authority by tying itself directly to the historical Buddha through the idea of Dharma transmission, rather than depending on texts of a foreign provenance, that at best required translation. In the process it understood the Zen master as the equivalent of the historical Buddha. Since sutras are supposedly the words of the Buddha, the Chinese text, the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng* made Huineng into a Chinese Buddha. The nascent Chan sect focused less on Indian texts, and came to privilege domestically generated Chan texts following a biographical and genealogical model.

⁹⁶ Zen is most often presented as apolitical though it has almost always been very heavily invested in politics. See Victoria, Brian, *Zen at War*, Weatherhill, 1997 (see p. 109 there). For instance at the time of the Russo Japanese war, Shaku said, “In the present hostilities, into which Japan has entered with great reluctance, she pursues no egoistic purpose, but seeks the subjugation of evils hostile to civilization, peace, and enlightenment.” Japan shortly before had annexed Taiwan in 1895. In 1905 Japan made Korea a protectorate and fully annexed it Aug. 25, 1910. Also see Victoria’s *Zen War Stories*, Routledge Curzon, 2003, and Jerryson, Michael and Jurgensmeyer, Mark, *Buddhist Warfare*, Oxford University Press, 2010. The biographies of roshi who lived through WWII, often skim over the years 1939 – 1945, if mentioned at all. For example, the Sanbokyodan sect’s short biography of Koun Yamada roshi, former head of the entire Sanbokyodan sect, states that he started zazen in Manchuria in 1943. http://www.sanbo-zen.org/histry_e.html. It leaves out that at the time, he was a labor supervisor in what was a slave labor camp. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yamada_Koun.

⁹⁷ See Payne, Richard K., “Traditionalist Representations of Buddhism,” in *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, Third Series, Number 10, Fall 2008, pp. 177 – 223. Payne’s exciting article points out that Huston Smith was the person most responsible for introducing Traditionalist ideas into American popular religious culture. Traditionalism, “effectively founded by Rene Guenon, had deep and pervasive influences in the formation of contemporary conceptions of religion because of the power of its claims of universality and inclusiveness.” It joined with the Perennialist hypothesis that there is a single core common to all religions that is unitary and universal and esoteric. “Traditionalists oppose rationality and modernity; they claim to be representing the traditional or premodern aspects of all religions.” I think

smoke, at least if measured by Zen standards. Yet this depiction makes Walter a living link, the last man in the lineage chain, a superior person, supposedly representing the heart of authentic Zen Buddhist attainment. This gives the sense of an historical and religious continuity connecting Walter to Japanese, Chinese, and Indian enlightened figures and places over a 2500 year period. It also, through Walter, plants that authentic tradition in America.

Sawyer informs us he has done an “exhaustive search for a teacher”⁹⁸ only to find “a Zen master living his backyard.” With this remark, the story takes on a familiar Zen form of the hungry student desperately searching for a teacher only to find a teacher right under his nose. One wonders how exhausting his search was or what he means by this, as there are by now, well over a hundred fifty Zen roshi living in America.⁹⁹ He then informs us it was hard to find Nowick as he doesn’t answer his phone. Why Walter would be hard to find is a bit questionable too, as Walter, who is a fine classical pianist, has been hosting well advertised summer music concerts continually in his barn for forty years and started an amateur opera company in the 1980s that also gave performances in the barn. Everyone in the neighborhood knows where it is and his connection to Zen is well known locally. Sawyer summered only six miles away “for many years.”

The article continues along in this vain; sounding simple and straightforward but when actually examined, all is questionable at best, outright misinformed in key places, and plain fantasy in others. It therefore would be helpful to touch on a few more points to show how the Sawyer article employs standard Zen hagiographic elements.

After painting a picture of Walter’s farm as a collection of “dilapidated buildings”¹⁰⁰ in the New England style, Sawyer informs us that “Walter never married or had children.”¹⁰¹ This implies as is the case in virtually all classical Zen hagiographies that Walter was only interested in his Zen training; that human relations and things involving emotional or sexual content were not issues for him or he did not let them distract him from his practice and training. There is no mention of any concern on Walter’s part for a close human relationship. Sawyer just states this “never married or had children” and leaves it to the reader to fill in according to the well known Zen map of the master single mindedly pursuing enlightenment, not side tracked by need for emotional comfort from another human, eventually becoming enlightened and receiving Dharma transmission and hence becoming a Zen master, then teaching or living a solitary iconoclastic life with

that Smith’s ideas are reflected in Sawyer’s article. See also, Sedgwick, Mark, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁹⁸ “down east roshi,” p. 48.

⁹⁹ See the “Sanbokyodan lineage” at

<http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVLPages/ZenPages/HaradaYasutani.html> (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

This lineage alone has dozens of roshi living in America. For the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center see, <http://www.sfzc.org/zc/display.asp?catid=1.5&pageid=426> (date of last access: 4.3.2011), which also includes dozens more roshi. Katagiri roshi in Minneapolis alone gave Dharma transmission to 11 people shortly before his death. The American Zen Teachers Association (AZTA) has roughly 130 Zen roshi members and that does not include all Zen teachers in America.

¹⁰⁰ “down east roshi,” p. 50.

¹⁰¹ “down east roshi,” p. 50.

people seeking him out to teach. This seems to reflect Sawyer's familiarity with the accepted content of Zen hagiography, or at least one version of it. He then shoe-horned Walter into the accepted mold.

Certainly this is a believable story. But unfortunately it is believable fantasy parading as biography. Walter had great emotional needs and a desire for close human contact. However, the contact he desired was with men. He had a long-term friend from his days in the army, an extremely warm, emotional, open and loving fellow who visited Walter at the farm. Unfortunately, his friend/lover had a drinking problem, which made things quite difficult and more complicated than they would have been otherwise. Walter also got involved with a number of his male students and he became especially attached to one student. This was a cause of great trouble for the target of his affections, for this man's wife and children, and for the group. It was a good part of the reason for the unraveling of the group. Walter seemed out of control, he became exceedingly jealous of any one having anything to do with the man he adored, along with all the usual problems that arise in a situation of a jealous and possessive lover complicated by an extremely unbalanced power relationship. This is human. But exactly this human-ness is precluded by Sawyer's depiction of Walter Nowick as an iconic Zen roshi who "never married or had children."

In Sawyer's narrative, the whole emotional side of being a human being does not exist for Walter, the enlightened Zen master. This implies that in the pursuit and fulfillment of spiritual life, the emotional side of life does not exist for the Zen master and perhaps by implication, for all serious Zen students. It is as if in painting Walter as the classical iconic Zen master, there is no need to consider the emotional side of life. This procedure is standard in the Chan/Zen hagiographical form, with only very rare exceptions.¹⁰² Sawyer, most likely from having read Zen stories/hagiographies, constructed Walter to fit this form. It is only human for Walter to have emotional needs and to look to fulfill them in a way satisfying to him. However, a Zen teacher being sexually involved with students raises many problems and for the last forty-five years, has been and continues to be a source of great trouble in American Zen.¹⁰³ By omitting even a hint of Walter's emotional life the article produces a complete discontinuity between Walter, the supposed Zen master, and readers of the magazine, the vast majority of whom are lay people who are emotionally involved with other human beings.¹⁰⁴ It also fails to let students know

¹⁰² Ikkyu (1394–1481) is the most prominent example of a Zen monk displaying an interest in emotions. He is known for frequenting brothels and bars, befriending artists and poets, as well as criticizing the monastic order of his time. He met and fell in love with Nori, a blind singer when he was in his sixties. In his eighties, at the behest of the government, he became abbot of Daitoku-ji.

¹⁰³ Zen teachers having sexual relations with their students have caused major problems at just about every major Zen Center in the USA. Besides Nowick, a partial list includes Eido Shimano of the Zen Studies Society in NYC, Richard Baker of the San Francisco Zen Center, Taizan Maezumi of the L.A. Zen Center, Joshu Sasaki of the Cimarron Zen Center in L.A., and Seung Sahn of the Kuan Um Zen Center in Providence R.I. The affairs of Katagiri roshi of the Minneapolis Zen Center only became widely known after he died. The August 20, 2010 New York Times did a story on Eido Shimano's latest troubles. See http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/us/21beliefs.html?_r=1 (date of last access: 4.3.2011). Recently (Feb., 2011), Genpo roshi resigned as a Soto priest after it became known that he had affairs with his students while being married, a repeat of an early 1990's scenario.

¹⁰⁴ Bourdieu, Pierre, "Rites of Institutions" in *Language and Symbolic Power*, Harvard University Press,

that their spiritual life and insights are as valuable and authentic as anyone's, including Zen roshi. It fails to let them know that their doubts about a roshi's behavior may be legitimate and it fails to warn them to be careful in situations where too much power is attributed to a role. It fails moreover to let roshi know that they are accountable for their behavior or to give them a way to work out their issues without acting them out upon their sanghas.

In the article Walter explains how he got involved in Zen through his music teacher at Julliard, Henriette Michaelson. Through Michaelson he met Ruth Fuller Sasaki, the Western woman married to Sokei-an Sasaki, a Japanese roshi who "had started the First Zen Institute in New York in 1931."¹⁰⁵ Walter goes on to say how he "wanted to train deeper in Zen, but there was no one who could help me." He adds that though Ruth Fuller knew a great deal, she was "not a roshi—and there's a difference between a teacher and a roshi: one has information, and the other has experience."¹⁰⁶

Here Walter draws a black and white over simplifying line between a Dharma transmitted roshi who has "experience" and other people who only have "information." In reality, as we have seen, Dharma transmission is given for many reasons, aside from experience. Some people without "experience" receive Dharma transmission,¹⁰⁷ while other people with experience may never receive Dharma transmission. Soen Nakagawa Roshi, Robert Aitken's first teacher, talked of receiving Dharma transmission before having a Zen experience.¹⁰⁸ Acts of institution, such as Dharma transmission "always manage to

1981, pp. 117–126. This type of biographical presentation reinforces the separation that rites of institution such as giving Dharma transmission generate. That is, according to Bourdieu, the complete separation between those who have received the rite, not from those who have not yet received it, but rather from those who will not undergo it in any sense- thereby instituting a lasting difference between those to who the rite pertains and those to whom it does not pertain. Most Zen followers quickly learn they will never receive Dharma transmission.

¹⁰⁵ Sokei-an (1882–1945) was a disciple of Sokatsu Shaku who was a disciple of Shoyen Shaku who visited America in 1893 to attend the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Shaku returned in 1902 for a short lecture and teaching visit. Sokei-an was interned for a year during WWII. Sokei-an was the first Zen master to reside permanently in the U.S.A. The First Zen Institute was originally founded as The Buddhist Society of America. It changed its name to the First Zen Institute after WWII. See <http://www.firstzen.org/sokeian.php> (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

¹⁰⁶ "down east roshi," p. 50.

¹⁰⁷ Shunryu Suzuki of the San Francisco Zen Center gave dharma transmission to a student of a friend as a favor, as well as to his son Hoitsu, who did not study with him. For an example from the Chinese tradition, see Welch, Holmes, *Buddhism in China, 1900 to 1950*, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 315. Welch gives the interesting case of one Chinese monk in the twentieth century who gave Dharma transmission to another Chinese monk then in Burma, "without ever having met him, and indeed, without even finding out whether he would accept the Dharma." In Soto Zen Dharma transmission is commonly given to virtually all monks so they can assume leadership of a temple, most often inherited from their father. Eido Shimano was given Dharma transmission in 1972 by Soen roshi, though he has been tainted by scandal from 1964 to the present. See <http://www.shimanoarchive.com/> (date of last access: 3.3.2011). Soen roshi too received Dharma transmission before having enlightenment. This is stated in a letter from Phillip Kapleau to Koun Yamada available from slachs@att.net.

¹⁰⁸ Kjolhede, Roshi Bodhin, "Roshi and His Teachers, Dharma Transmission and the Rochester Zen Center Lineage," an edited transcript of a teisho [Dharma talk] given January 8, 1995, p. 4, <http://rzc.org/drupal/sites/default/files/file/Roshi%20and%20His%20Teachers.pdf>; (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

produce discontinuity out of continuity.”¹⁰⁹ The principles of differentiation, which produce divisions are never completely congruent. The investiture by the institution focuses all attention on the sanctified agent—in this case on the Chan master/roshi,¹¹⁰ rather than, for example, on what Dharma transmission means, on the criteria for giving it, or on how it has been used historically.

Walter's mention of a roshi's assumed "experience" moreover does not address important aspects of such "experience", such as what this experience means in daily life, how deep and transformative the experience is, and so on.¹¹¹ Yet it is just this kind of remark that separates the institutionally sanctioned roshi from the rest of the world and focuses all attention on this person as the inheritor and living embodiment of timeless Buddhist truth. This is also the image that D.T. Suzuki propagated so successfully to Western readers, making the roshi appear exotic and beyond one's understanding.¹¹² This seems also to be the image Walter has of himself or at least allowed Sawyer to create it in his narrative. He seems to have forgotten that he was never initiated into this select club, and apparently he did not inform Sawyer of this inconvenient truth.

Sawyer goes on describe how Walter after about seventeen years in Japan returned to Maine and bought a “rustic farm” from friends of his music teacher Henriette Michaelson. A group soon formed around Walter that eventually grew to roughly forty members.

It is at this juncture that the story presents Walter as the iconic Zen master who chooses “a life of quiet practice,” as opposed to other roshi pretenders “who lectured in multimillion dollar facilities.”¹¹³ We learn that Walter “ran a sawmill and lived in a shack.”¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, the sawmill hardly made any money even with free labor. The sawmill was just one part of the operation. There were milk cows, chickens, ducks and pigs, all that were slaughtered and eaten in spite of Sawyer’s picture of Walter as a traditional Zen master. Chinese Chan and Korean Son monks and nuns are vegetarians, while Japanese Zen priests will eat meat, at the least if served it, or when donated to a

¹⁰⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 120.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 117–120.

¹¹¹ For example, Morinaga roshi, Walter’s “older brother in the teaching,” shortly before he died transmitted to a rather young disciple. Two years or so later this Dharma transmitted roshi committed suicide. Of course Brian Victoria’s *Zen At War* and *Zen War Stories* raise all manner of questions about how this supposed “Zen experience” manifests in life. There is much written in modern Chan scholarship on the many reasons for receiving Dharma transmission besides attainment. See also Vlad K and Stuart Lachs, “The Aitken – Shimano Letters” at http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken_Shimano_Letters.html; (date of last access: 4.3.2011) for a look at a contemporary case.

¹¹² Chan Master Sheng Yen who is discussed in the first part of this article claimed "it should be remembered that the mind of the master is ever pure... and even if the master tells lies, steals, and chases women..., he is still to be considered a true master as long as he scolds his disciples for their transgressions." This is surely a mysterious state beyond an ordinary person's comprehension. This was stated in a public talk given at his Center. It was later printed in his Center's newsletter, Chan Magazine, No. 38, 1984, pp. 1-2.

¹¹³ “down east roshi,” p. 51.

¹¹⁴ “down east roshi,” p. 51.

monastery. But I have never heard of any Zen priests or masters/roshi raising animals for meat. Interestingly, raising animals for meat was left out of Sawyer's picture of the iconic Zen master, as was Walter's badgering people who were vegetarians to eat meat.

In spite of Sawyer's description of Walter living in a shack, in the years when he was teaching Zen, he lived in a modest old farmhouse with electricity, indoor plumbing, and a phone. This is in contrast with many of his students who really did live in small, simple self-made cabins with none of the above-mentioned amenities. But Sawyer apparently never investigated how Walter lived before his moderate farmhouse burned down in the spring of 1986. Sawyer's description of Walter living in a shack fits well with other Zen hagiographies describing the master as not concerned with mundane comforts like where and how they live. It is not uncommon to read in Chan hagiographies of the master living in caves or in a self-made flimsy dwelling that barely protected against the elements (see above, footnote 47). We have seen in the previous section of this article how Chan master Sheng Yen also took up this standard hagiographic element and how he spun it into a modern translation by professing to have been living homeless on the cold and dangerous winter streets of N.Y.C.

Walter's story now takes on a real fantasy twist. Walter is depicted by Sawyer as a music loving pianist who "couldn't stop playing music." According to the story, "Some of Nowick's students saw his musical activities as a distraction from his duties as a roshi."¹¹⁵ "But Nowick disagreed. Zen can be taught through any medium of expression, and many Zen masters before him had been musicians, artists, and poets."¹¹⁶ Sawyer seems to be highlighting Walter as a version of the well-known poetic, brush-painting Zen masters. Walter is presented as an artist who can't stop making music like the Zen masters of old who were poets, calligraphers and artists. This also implies the students supposedly objecting to the music are small or ordinary-minded folk unable to comprehend the ways of the enlightened roshi. In fact, however, Walter's students loved his piano playing. Walter is an outstanding pianist. His piano playing was a regular and wonderful part of life with the group at least from 1970 on, especially so during the summer months when there were well-attended weekly Saturday night concerts in the barn that were open to the public. If I may speculate here, perhaps Walter to maintain his self respect and image of being an enlightened Zen teacher rationalizes away his group dissolving around him by explaining that in 1985 he stopped teaching because he could spread compassion in a wider sphere of influence through music.¹¹⁷

Sawyer, not having interviewed anyone who was part of the group when it was active, never deals with the important issue of why the group went from an active forty or so members with six, seven-day retreats (Jp. sesshin) a year, with smaller two or three day retreats a day before and a day after the seven-day retreats, to an almost non-functional group of about twelve members with no full seven-day retreats. Sawyer never asks why so many people left, why was no one attending the full seven day retreats if there even were any, and what happened that made the remaining group a shadow of its former self?

¹¹⁵ "down east roshi," p. 51.

¹¹⁶ "down east roshi," p. 51.

¹¹⁷ "down east roshi," p. 109.

If he had, he might have seen a connection between Walter's dysfunctional personality, his strong attachment to the man of his desires, his being enamored of power and the fact of the wholesale leaving of the group's members. He also may have realized that Walter switched his energies to music and his amateur opera group only after the Zen group had all but disappeared. Although it is true that by the mid 1980s Walter formed an amateur opera group, which seemed to take more of his time and interest, by that time the Zen group was already a Zen group in name only. By then the continuing group was at best a weak reflection of its former self. Some remaining students did complain about the music at that point but for all practical purposes the group was on life support by then.

Then we learn that Walter stopped teaching Zen formally in 1985, "finding a greater sphere of influence for spreading compassion through music."¹¹⁸ This is a wonderful plot line: the iconoclastic artistic Zen master, spreading Buddhist compassion through music, easing world tension, but misunderstood by ordinary-minded students and so on. In this plot line, Walter accurately fits the oft-repeated vision of the exotic Zen master, part of the orthodox lineage, a Dharma heir from a supposed hallowed Japanese lineage, iconoclastic, yet giving, pure and selfless. Crafted by Sawyer to fit the Zen mould, Walter only has concern for Zen practice, for spreading compassion, only seeking the best way to spread Zen whatever form it took, living a simple pure life, going back to the land while living in a shack. Sawyer's image of Walter is the iconic Chinese Tang dynasty Chan master relocated in rural Maine and moved forward in time some eleven hundred years to the 1970s.

But let us look at Sawyer's spreading compassion angle, which is a key plot element here. We will see however, that real life experience tells an entirely different story. Walter had an older woman student, who was also an artist, about 75 years old at the time (in the mid 1980s). She was in fact his first and most loyal student. She was very generous to him with her money, time, running errands, driving him to places, having him for dinner, and importantly, she painted slides that Walter cleverly projected as backdrops for his operatic productions. As this woman grew older and weaker, she wanted to finish some of her own artwork and therefore, after approximately twenty years of unquestioning and unhesitant obeisance to Walter's requests / demands, refused to paint the slides for one of his operas. Walter cut her off fully, effectively shunning her, as was his usual way when someone crossed an invisible line of his. It turned out that the woman had cancer and, after various treatments in a number of distant places, she returned to her house in Maine. This house was at most a mile from Walter's house. Walter, described by Sawyer as the unfathomable Zen master, with all his supposed concern for compassion, and people harmoniously living together, and world peace, never once visited this most loyal student who everyone knew was dying, a woman who had been at his side at every call for a period of roughly twenty years. Another woman student asked Walter why he did not visit the sick student. According to this woman, Walter replied, "She is already dead to me," which is exactly how he acted. The woman died with Walter never having gone to visit her.

¹¹⁸ "down east roshi," p. 109.

In what follows, the “poor research job” of Sawyer flows into exoticizing Walter and styling him as selfless. The story continues with Walter presented as having simply and generously “donated the land on which the zendō and supporting buildings stood, to the sangha”¹¹⁹ which all together was called Moon Spring Hermitage. Sawyer’s text presents this as a simple and selfless act of generosity of Walter to the sangha, depicting it as just one more example of the Zen master Walter's manifestation of bodhisattva-like compassion, answering the needs of suffering sentient beings. But once again, real life experience tells a very different story.

In 1985, by the time of Walter’s resignation as leader, the group had shrunk considerably and much of the energy directed towards Zen practice was dispersed. Walter became more interested in his opera productions and frequently visited Russia, the birthplace of his parents. There was much disagreement among the remaining members. Some felt closer to Walter and wanted to stay with him no matter what, while others wanted to break away, become independent and change directions. This was complicated because in the mid 1970s, when the group incorporated as a non-profit religious group, it signed a 15 year contract with Walter that stipulated that if the group was viable at the end of 15 years, the zendō land and buildings, approximately nine acres, would be turned over to the Hermitage at a nominal fee. The term “viable” was never defined. It was getting close to the end of this 15 year period. There were many discussions about the land and what to do. Walter did not want to turn the land over to the group. After much contention, a professional mediator was called to monitor discussions between Walter and the differing factions of the group. At some point the mediator gave up and left. Both the group favoring independence and Walter retained lawyers. After a few years of heated discussions there was much enmity between people depending on which side of the Walter divide they were on. People essentially stopped talking across this line. Those who felt that by the earlier agreement they had the right to the land and buildings and wanted to purchase it were struggling with whether to go to court or not.¹²⁰ No one wanted this, but they felt that after years of discussion and arguing, the only choices remaining were court or to walk away from the land and the buildings.¹²¹

On December 7th, 1990, the last day of rohatsu, a seven-day period honored in Japanese Zen with a seven-day retreat as the day the historical Buddha supposedly attained enlightenment, Walter sent a message to the group agreeing to settle the land issue. After years of dispute, he donated the land to the new group, with the condition that he could use it from the day after rohatsu through April of each year. This covers the most severe winter months in Maine. During those months it is extremely difficult to use the zendō

¹¹⁹ Sangha traditionally means ordained monks and nuns, but in the context of western Zen coming from Japanese lines, it has come to mean fellow practitioners or the group of practitioners of a given center. In these groups, people considered monks and nuns may have wives and husbands or girlfriends and boyfriends. In Chinese affiliated Chan groups ‘sangha’ still means ordained celibate monks and nuns.

¹²⁰ The purchase price set in 1975 was nominal, almost nothing. The problem was whether Walter was willing to sell it, to part with the land and the buildings the group built.

¹²¹ Interestingly, the group wanting to buy the land and hence willing to go to court contacted Sheng Yen for his opinion, the Master discussed in the previous section of this paper. Sheng Yen had run a retreat at the Center a year earlier. They were seeking perhaps a more enlightened or broader view. Sheng Yen advised them to go to court only if they thought they would win.

buildings as they are located down a long and often ice-covered hill while heating with the electric heat would be quite expensive. Walter has never exercised his option to use the buildings.

Sawyer then quotes Walter to the effect that it is no longer a zendō since he donated it to the group, because there is no roshi, “But people still sit there.”¹²² With this definition of a zendō and Walter implicitly claiming that he was in fact a roshi, the implication is that that the zendō has lost its value because of his leaving. If however, his definition in fact applies, it was never a zendō because Walter never received Dharma transmission in any Zen lineage. He too is not a roshi, as he well knows. This is a prime example of bending historical facts when the need arises, something especially common in Chinese Chan hagiographies, repeating itself in the 21st century.¹²³ In some strange twist of logic, by taking a swipe at the reconstituted group for not having a roshi, he underlines his own pedigree, however much it is only imagined.

Near the end of Sawyer’s hagiographic presentation of Walter Nowick as the selfless, iconoclastic, down to earth, iconic Zen roshi, Sawyer declares, “Nowick is deeply believable as a roshi: he has an intense and yet easygoing presence that bespeaks the real deal.”¹²⁴ Notice Sawyer’s choice of words here, the casual and straight from the shoulder, “deeply believable” and “the real deal.” It seems that Sawyer believes in the fantasy Zen roshi he has just created; he adores his own creation. He has turned an intense man, filled with all the intensity that is the basis of his desires, into a selfless being; turned an extremely self centered person into a compassionate soul; turned a person uneasy with other people into a relaxed easygoing presence; turned a person who could be emotionally out of control into a self contained, timeless wise Zen roshi. It appears to me that Sawyer sold himself on the idea of the enlightened, all-wise, exotic, selfless roshi, and then fell in love with the clay figure of Walter Nowick roshi he just created.

There is an unintentional pointed tone when towards the end of Sawyer’s article he rhetorically asks, “Why wasn’t he [Walter] teaching Zen and doing what his master wished?” It is too bad that Sawyer did not pursue this important question. If he had, and if he had really researched the story, he would have found that by wisely not continuing to teach Zen, Walter avoided causing more trouble both for himself and his would-be followers.

Perhaps without knowing it, Dana Sawyer, most likely from reading many Chan stories, absorbed well the time-tested format and repeated the standard Chan form of genealogical and hagiographical texts that focuses on convincing the reader that all of

¹²² “down east roshi,” p. 109.

¹²³ Welter, Albert, *The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 162.

“The distinction between fact and fiction prized in modern historiography, ... was never strictly adhered to in Chinese historiography where literary imagination was ready to intervene in order to enhance the story.” We saw a full-blown version of this aspect in the last section of this paper that looked at Chan master Sheng Yen.

¹²⁴ “down east roshi,” p. 110.

Buddhist truth is in the Zen master's body. It is too bad that *Tricycle's* editors failed to question a story, which is based on so little evidence.

It is well known in Zen circles that Walter and his group kept away from the wider Zen community so that little was known about them, except to say that the group discontinued. So when an article came into the hands of *Tricycle's* editors, should they have wondered why the group suddenly disintegrated, especially given the many scandals that have come to light in recent years? Should they have noticed that none of the sources for the story other than Walter, the subject of the article, were involved in the events reported? Should they have looked more deeply into the story of such an isolated group? Should they be comfortable or uncomfortable when they were presented a story that so neatly follows the image of an idealized Zen roshi?

In these hagiographical texts there is little of what the roshi knows of Buddhism or how he applies this Buddhist wisdom in real life situations, but mostly the claim that the master was the repository of all Buddhist truth. The master is purified of desire to render him desirable by describing him in terms of simplicity, innocence, and naturalness. Rather than writing a biography that would match a familiar Western form which would have been interested in the realities of human experience and the complexity of being fully involved with Zen practice while living in an "open" lay setting, we are given a simulation of a human being matching the old accepted Chan format.

Tricycle Magazine aims to be more than a collection of good poems and children's stories about Buddhism. At its best, it can present a realistic picture of Buddhism and Buddhist leaders in America, and provide a context for open inquiry. But in this case at least, *Tricycle* instead presented a fantasy picture of a Zen teacher. *Tricycle* created a Zen hagiography, another saintly master to match Zen's constructed earlier idealized history. It missed the opportunity to present the story of a true to life person with strengths and weaknesses. In this, it failed its readers in not dealing with common human problems in the context of a Zen leader in modern day America.

Hype and Consequences

The effect of presenting human beings possessing both strengths and weaknesses as immaculate, enlightened Zen masters has on the reader calls for some examination. After all, many Buddhist teachings are about causes and consequences. Creating imagined immaculate people and presenting them as real, as opposed to everyone else, the defiled masses, naturally including the reader, must have some consequences. The reader's own humanness is reconceived and contrasted with the imagined perfection of the purified Zen master, creating an unbridgeable divide between the master and the reader or student.

On one hand, the idea of the perfected Zen master may serve as a role model or as a model for salvation making it seem possible for the defiled or ordinary reader to attain this perfected state. This aspect of presenting the roshi as an idealized person may act as an inspiration to practice. However, on the other hand, the picture of the idealized roshi is more often than not is taken seriously by practitioners and acts as blinders to what is

going on in front of their eyes. All the activity of the roshi is seen as an example of enlightened activity no matter how self-serving it may be. Often the older student, more invested in the center, the teacher, his place in the hierarchy of the center, and the practice beholds enlightened activity where a newcomer, not yet blinded by the rhetoric and his investment in the teacher and the group and its empowering rituals, will see things as they are, namely as self-serving activity.¹²⁵ Another aspect of this imputed absolute divide between the roshi and his flock is that the student feels very much beneath the teacher so that his own view of himself is diminished. This often develops into an infantilized position in relation to the roshi. It is not uncommon to hear repeatedly remarks preceded by “roshi says” or “master says.” In some cases this develops further so that people with responsible positions in the world will think they are incapable of really ever understanding Zen; that only the idealized master and certain other practitioners who are going up the institutional ladder have a chance to understand Zen. This easily turns into a cult of personality or of adoration, where these practitioners desire to sit at the feet of the master and bathe in his presence. What he says or does is not important; it only matters to be in his presence. We have seen in American Zen over the last forty-five years scandal after scandal that in one way or another was related to over-empowering the master/roshi and his attainment in relation to the student, which is exactly what hagiographies do. People come to believe, as Zen claims, that all the master’s actions are teachings, if only the student can see it, that the master is selfless and only concerned with helping students, when in reality there is an abundance of self-serving or crazy behavior on the part of masters and roshi.¹²⁶ Essentially, the students project the idea of the perfected master/roshi they read about in Zen hagiographies onto the living roshi standing in front of them. After all, a spiritual teacher is supposedly a role model for his students and followers. However, when the students realize the self-serving and less than truthful aspects of these hagiographies, they often are forced to do some mental tricks to maintain devotion to a teacher, so that their faith in the efficacy and meaning of the practice is not questioned.

The questions remain: What does projecting an idealized attainment do to the person it is projected on, the Chan master? And what does the public sanctifying of a person as the spokesman and living representative of the entire Chan tradition do to that person? For one, he is forced into publicly playing a role, while at the same time he knows well that his desires, likes and dislikes are often in contrast to his officially sanctioned and public face. It is not uncommon for the master to become alienated—where one part of the self is in conflict with another part. All the while his flock is acting adoringly so that a certain disdain¹²⁷ can develop for these adoring, yet somewhat blind worshippers.¹²⁸ Another

¹²⁵ Michael Downing in *Shoes Outside the Door*, Counterpoint, 2001 describes this well in the context of the San Francisco Zen Center under the leadership of Richard Baker roshi.

¹²⁶ Most major Zen centers have been involved in scandal, including the Zen Studies Society in NYC, the San Francisco Zen Center, Moon Spring Hermitage in Maine, the L.A. Zen Center, the Providence Zen Center, the Bar Harbor Zen Center, the Minneapolis Zen Center, the Mount Baldy Zen center, and many more.

¹²⁷ For the most extreme example of disdain generated in this fashion that I have ever seen or heard of, see Hubner, John and Gruson, Lindsey, *Monkey on a Stick: Murder, Madness and the Hare Krishnas*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988.

effect of idealizing the institutionally sanctioned Zen master is that he comes to see his own wants and needs as being the needs of the group. He sees himself as the embodiment of the group, which only exists through him.¹²⁹ It seems that the master, presented as an idealized Zen person, cannot maintain a healthy self-reflection of being human without feeling like a fraud. Instead of seeing themselves as changing human beings the idealized Zen masters become co-producers of a world in which they are role players, paradoxically, a world that denies who they really are.¹³⁰

Let us turn to another agent in the production of the hagiography, the publisher. The articles discussed here raise important questions about *Tricycle* Magazine and its agenda. *Tricycle* claims to be a magazine that presents Buddhism in America to both practitioners of the many sects of Buddhism as well as to the interested general reader. Already this claim presupposes that *Tricycle*'s editors are more informed than most readers and that the picture they are presenting is an accurate portrayal of what is actually going on with Buddhism in America and in particular, what it means to be an attained Buddhist practitioner.

But I wonder what the editors were thinking, aside from seeing two articles that present lovely and charming stories and that match the standard idealized fantasy of a Zen roshi. Is *Tricycle*'s role to present another story about Buddhism as exotic, inspiring, peaceful, and insightful or is it to critically present and evaluate a broader and more accurate view?¹³¹

It Has Four Legs, a Tail, and Goes “Moo,” What Do You Call It?

If you pursue truth and justice it will always mean a diminution of power and privilege. If you pursue power and privilege it will always be at the expense of truth and justice.

Chris Hedges, “Noam Chomsky Has Never Seen Anything Like This,” Truthdig, April 21, 2010.

I have attempted to show in this article how the hagiographic view of the perfected Chan/Zen Master that arose early in Chan's history and development, mostly as a literary form, has been perpetuated into the present. More so, the mechanisms to do so are also

¹²⁸ See section 4, "Religion and Alienation" in Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy* (pp. 81–101): “The great paradox of religious alienation is that the very process of dehumanizing the socio-cultural world has its roots in the fundamental wish that reality as a whole might have a meaningful place for man.” I have written about alienation and the Chan master/roshi in my paper “Means of Authorization: Establishing Hierarchy in Chan/Zen Buddhism in America,” which was presented at the 1999 AAR conference in Boston. It is available at http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Means_of_Authorization.htm (date of last access: 4.3.2011).

¹²⁹ See “The Self-Consecration of the Delegate,” pp. 209–214 in Bourdieu, Pierre, *Language and Symbolic Power*.

¹³⁰ Berger, Peter, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 86.

¹³¹ On occasion, *Tricycle* has printed an article critical of Zen. It printed an article by Brian Victoria criticizing Yasutani roshi, an influential roshi in bringing Zen to the West, for his stance on war before and during WWII, his anti-semiticism, and his right wing associations. It had four Westerners associated with Yasutani reply in his defense.

perpetuated into the present. We find the importance of lineage and the connection to an authentic Chan Master highlighted. Too, in both cases, we see a kind of filial piety directed towards their teachers, certainly more pronounced with the Chinese Sheng Yen than with the American Walter Nowick. We also see, especially in Sheng Yen's case a concern for Dharma heirs, a continuation of the transmission family. In Walter's case this point is passed over since he is not in a transmission family himself, though for the article, he imagines such membership. We find the Chan Master presented as a simple and straightforward person, a person only dedicated to practice, teaching or in Chan terminology, to spreading the Dharma and lessening human suffering, however that may be accomplished. There is no interest or problem with close personal human interactions or human desires common to just about all "ordinary" people. This follows the format of early Tang and Song dynasty Chan hagiographies, which rarely ever dealt with the human experiences that the masters had in common with ordinary people. These early hagiographies set the tone and style of later hagiographies and importantly, of what readers came to accept and expect as a Chan biography/hagiography.¹³²

In both hagiographies considered here, all other people are extremely peripheral, really bit players presented as faceless beings, disembodied abstractions or non-existent except as some foil to showing how exemplary the master is, or to move the plot-line along. In fact, almost anything that a real person experiences is ignored, unless to say or show that it does not effect Chan masters. The masters tell their story and life in what appears an open and innocent fashion, masking any idea that they have intentions and personal motives. In both the examples discussed, these Chan/Zen Masters present themselves as selfless, free of emotional encumbrances, and common desires, and only are concerned with the welfare and suffering of others, even when their followers do not understand what they are doing. In this they completely separate themselves from their defiled and unenlightened followers and readers. There is no hint at manipulation or anything less than the whole straightforward simple truth. Both examples follow the Chan/Zen time tested hagiographic form of presenting a perfected being that the readers of these hagiographies, that is "ordinary" people, can only look up to and especially to desire as desireless icons of Buddhist perfection. As in classical Chan texts, the modern Chan master/roshi "is the prime arbiter of Buddhist wisdom."¹³³ Both Wapner and Sawyer did not recognize the Chan/Zen rhetorical style of hagiographical writing that developed in the Tang and Song dynasties for what it is, a style where "life was consciously placed in stereotypical categories."¹³⁴ In this style the sense that a person has desires, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, a personality that inclines a person to act in the world in one way rather than another is mostly removed from the main protagonists.

Both Sheng Yen and Walter Nowick are more interesting than as they are presented. They literally allowed themselves to be reduced as people in order to make a hagiographic description of them appear more accurate.

¹³² Cole, Alan, *Fathering Your Father*, p. 309.

¹³³ Welter, Albert, *The Linji Lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 131.

¹³⁴ Jorgensen, *Inventing Huineng*, p. 18.

Though Chan masters are presented in these two hagiographies as immaculate saintly people held up as the epitome of Chan/Zen attainment, they in fact are much less saintly than their hagiographies would like us to believe. But this presentation does not come without a price. In a manner similar to the way photo retouched images of models and celebrities engender insecurities in ordinary people making them feel as if something is wrong with them, or that they are less complete people, often leading them to become neurotic over their looks, so too does the hagiographic image of the perfected and saintly Chan master work on the Chan student and interested religious seeker. Chan hagiographies transfer the written word's generated saintliness and idealized attainment to the role itself and hence to the living title holder. Students and interested followers then come to see themselves as lesser people than the master, not uncommonly becoming infantilized before the master who is seen as the only real full person. It is perhaps not surprising that most all the pure and immaculate Chan masters we know and look up to are from the distant past and that we know them through the written word, that is, Chan texts, and mostly heavily redacted texts at that.

But worse, creating Chan hagiographies, that is, making people with mostly ordinary strengths and weaknesses into immaculate people supposedly beyond the understanding of ordinary folk, is the fuel that has generated the seemingly endless stream of scandals in Western Zen. It is the over-empowering of titled people that undermines these very people making them into role players, while their disciples, putting aside their common sense, look to be embraced, blessed and to gain power and wisdom from the master's saintliness and attainment.

As mentioned earlier, we may also look at these hagiographies as a form of ritualized writing developed in Chan's early development where the Chan master embodies the heart of all Buddhist attainment, as opposed to texts of other Buddhist sects. As in ritual in general, these hagiographies are concerned with changelessness and continuity. However there is always a tension between change and continuity. I have shown above how Sheng Yen attempts to establish changelessness and continuity with Chan's earliest beginnings while at the same time, introducing elements of change to fit modern day life. An interesting aspect of people identifying themselves with invariability and timelessness is that they resist the uncertainty of past and future, life and death. Through this ritualized form of writing the two protagonists become eternal, related to something that has always been there, never changed and detached from everyday life and profanity. These hagiographies in a sense are then "staged productions of timelessness," an effort to oppose change, which implies finality and ultimately death. The two hagiographies written late in both Sheng Yen's and Walter Nowick's lives may be an attempt, perhaps unconscious, on the parts of both to create an "arena of timelessness" and importantly, their own immortality.¹³⁵ Or stated differently, "Man dies but the cult goes on..."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Michaels, Axel, "Ritual and Meaning" in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Strausberg, Brill, 2006, pp. 247-261.

¹³⁶ Fortes, Meyer, "Pietas in Ancestor Worship," in *Ritual*, Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Statham (eds.), Ashgate Publishing Limited, Surrey, England, 2010, p. 420.

What Pierre Bourdieu says about “legal discourse,” at least for devotees and sympathetic believers, applies to hagiography. Hagiography “is a creative literary genre which brings into existence that which it utters.” It “creates what it states, in contrast to all derived, observational statements, which simply record a pre-existent given.”¹³⁷ Hagiography derives its power by reproducing the collectively recognized, in these cases projecting it onto contemporary figures, and in this way confirming its own validity, and that of its protagonists, who embody the values of a tradition. It seems fair to assume that both Sheng Yen and Walter Nowick both desired to be remembered as modern Chan/Zen masters who are present-day reflections of the classic masters of the formative Zen texts.

One may therefore ask, whether hypocrisy is built into the system of Chan/Zen itself? Chan legitimated itself and defined itself as distinct from other sects of Chinese Buddhism based on Dharma transmission and unbroken lineage going back to the historical Buddha. Other sects of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhism, in contrast, based their legitimacy on privileging a given text.¹³⁸ Zen’s life force itself is based on the superiority of the Zen master, who not only represents the tradition, but is also supposed to hold the entirety of Buddhist truth and to represent the very heart of Buddhism. Zen hagiography developed where falsification was viewed as the verification of truth and the living Zen master was presented as a living Buddha or close to one and superior to and beyond the understanding of ordinary people. As this came to be accepted as Zen biography, how then can the modern Zen master be presented to the West any differently and still maintain the authority and legitimacy of the tradition?

In a sense, Zen is trapped by its own legitimating fantasy that we see playing out today; how successfully in modern twenty-first century America, is still a question. An added pressure on Zen today to maintain the fictionalized and mythological accepted Zen hagiographical style is that Zen must now compete in the tough market place of Eastern religions, especially against the creatively marketed and appealing mythology of Tibetan Buddhism.

We have seen in the two cases discussed above that Zen hagiography is alive and well in the twenty-first century. The less it is understood what Zen masters do and how Zen masters actually live, the more compelling the need to clothe them in an aura of saintliness, one that you can only see on people you don’t know very well or don’t know at all. We have just seen that major American publishers, Doubleday and the leading American popular Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* have both endorsed these hagiographies with until recently, not a word of criticism. Contributors to *Tricycle*’s online blog and “letters to the editor” section who commented on Sheng Yen’s living on the street fantasy and the Walter Nowick piece, gave positive reactions. “However, human beings are much messier, less perfect, not quite so holy and radiant all the time.”¹³⁹ The accepted form of

¹³⁷ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 42.

¹³⁸ For example the Hua-Yen sect privileges the Avatamsaka Sutra and the Nichiren sect privileges the Lotus Sutra. Other sects constructed lineages too, the Tiantai sect being a well known example.

¹³⁹ Josh Baran on the OBC Connect blog, <http://obconnect.forumotion.net/t156p50-on-personalities-and-shadows-kennett-s-and-shasta-s> (date of last access: 4.3.2011). This is a forum for current and former members of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives founded by Kennett roshi. They openly share their

Zen hagiography reproduced in the present day is able, like its modern counterpart, the software Photoshop, to turn night into day or the other way around, if that is your desire. “If we choose, we can live in a world of comforting illusion.”¹⁴⁰

Or not.

diverse views and discuss problems surrounding Kennett and the order both in America at Shasta Abby and in England at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey.

¹⁴⁰ Noam Chomsky, http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/n/noam_chomsky.html; date of last access: 4.3.2011.