

Zen and the Art of Everyday Evaluation

The First *JMDE* Essay Competition

Michael Scriven

Zen Buddhism was often said, by those subscribing to other varieties of Buddhism, to be “the last guest at the table.” This was a kindly reference to its nouveau status, since it was not part of the centuries-long Indian and then Chinese phases in the history of Buddhism, only emerging in the last historic phase of development, in Japan. Although Buddhism is, in general, a sect not intensely concerned with theology in the Western sense, the Zen version is opposed to the intellectualization of religious ontology and epistemology more strenuously than its predecessors, perhaps because of the direct encounter with the theology the Jesuits brought to Japan. The Zen attitude towards reason was associated with the legacy of the koans, questions and puzzles that were designed to show the limitations of reason, and, by implication, of reason about deep matters concerning life and existence. Of the supposedly 1700 koans, by far the most famous is the question, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

Despite this skepticism about rational theology, some highly intelligent, although disparate, efforts have been made by Western intellectual writers such as Aldous Huxley and Arthur Koestler to express the essence of Zen. The disagreement amongst them is considerable: it would not be hard to find sources amongst them that would deny every comment made so far in this note, although these are remarks based on august sources in Western history of philosophy. Robert Persig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is one of the most interesting of these

high literary efforts and is perhaps unique in a respect that is not commonly remarked: it is about evaluation. This is quite overt, since the subtitle of the book is *An Inquiry into Value*, and the Platonic inscription is:

And what is good, Phaedrus,

And what is not good—

Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?

And here is what Persig says about his own effort:

“I would like not to cut new channels of consciousness but simply dig deeper into old ones that have become silted in with the debris of thoughts grown stale and platitudes too often repeated. “What’s new?” is an interesting and broadening eternal question, but one which, if pursued exclusively, results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion, the silt of tomorrow. I would like, instead, to be concerned with the question “What is best?” a question that cuts deeply rather than broadly, a question whose answers tend to move the silt downstream. There are eras in human history in which the channels of thought have been too deeply cut, and no change was possible, and nothing new ever happened, and “best” was a matter of dogma, but that is not the situation now.” (p. 16). The quotes are all from the importantly altered 25th anniversary edition (Morrow, 1999).

That can be an inspiring thought for us in evaluation, at the start of a new century. Evaluation is a discipline built by constructing a science out of extensions of everyday evaluation, just as probability theory is an extension into mathematics of everyday reasoning about games of chance. From time to time in these pages we will revisit Persig’s theme and thoughts. On this occasion, we’ll simply pose an anti-koan, a puzzle about what is “best,” a puzzle that is intended to produce, not

laughter at the flounderings of reason but rather reason's best exercise in the pursuit of value. The puzzle is this:

“In the evaluation of revolutions—political or intellectual, in medicine, in warfare, or in education—should one use, as a basis, the values of the victor; or those of the vanquished; or both; or neither?”

We read all the time about revolutionary new technology, revolutionary new ways to prevent or cure diseases, or to deal with crime or terrorism; or revolutions in the government of countries or the treatment of the oppressed. Each of these presents an evaluation problem for the historian or other evaluator and it's a notoriously difficult problem to deal with. Is there any common thread that should run through the best approaches, whatever disciplines are involved? Perhaps a good problem for those interested in multidisciplinary evaluation!

There will be a small prize for the best short essay on this topic; perhaps appropriately, a good book, suitably inscribed. The winning submission, and perhaps others deemed amongst the best entries, will be published here. Five hundred words should suffice; a thousand will be considered excessive in the present context. The prize will be awarded by mid-summer, 2005; but the topic will not be closed to further discussion in these pages thereafter. Suggestions for the Second JMDE Essay Competition will also be welcomed and considered carefully.

Evaluation Humor

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A section of *JMDE* whose importance is much greater than its size . . . maybe.

Here's an opening entry . . . could this be the most important reference in your professional life?

The *Journal of Nondestructive Evaluation*. Convince your clients that evaluation is a positive force! give them a copy of a good article on Appreciative Inquiry and a copy of the Table of Contents of, for example, the current issue of *JNDE* (vol. 23), which follows:

1. Influence of Wall Thickness on the Ultrasonic Evaluation of Small Closed Surface Cracks and Quantitative NDE
2. Rayleigh Wave Propagation for the Detection of Near Surface Discontinuities: Finite Element Modeling
3. Residual Magnetic Flux Leakage: A Possible Tool for Studying Pipeline Defects
4. Review of Advances in Quantitative Eddy Current Nondestructive Evaluation
5. Using a Single Transducer Ultrasonic Imaging Method to Eliminate the Effect of Thickness Variation in the Images of Ceramic and Composite Plates

A gift subscription is probably not a good idea, especially at \$650!