

## Introduction



### ***Global Zen Buddhism—Looking at the Popular and Material Cultures of Zen***

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The contributors to this special issue participated in a workshop on Zen and popular and material culture convened at Heidelberg University in 2012. We aimed to understand the global potentials of contemporary Zen Buddhism, as well as the challenges Buddhist institutions are facing in the course of Zen's shifting role in the religious marketplace. This transformation of "Zen" is rooted in Buddhist reform efforts and movements in late nineteenth-century Meiji Japan, when government officials frequently and increasingly criticized Buddhism as a product of decline and degeneration. Anti-Buddhist riots in Japan resulted in the destruction of Buddhist temples, statues, and ritual objects in a movement that is known as *haibutsu kishaku* ("abolish Buddhism and destroy Shakyamuni") (Ketelaar, 1990). The persistent academic discourse on early modern (Edo Period) Buddhist decadence that developed in the context of Meiji Japan (1868–1912) was directly connected to responses to this movement, which extended well into the 1870s, as well as to inter- and intra-sectarian Buddhist criticism in Japan (Klautau, 2008). Both Asian and Western reformers sought to develop a new Buddhism that was compatible with Western concepts of modernity, rationality, and the natural sciences (Sharf, 1993; McMahan, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Literature on Zen Buddhism by D. T. Suzuki and other authors found recognition in the West during the first half of the twentieth century, but it was only after the 1950s that Zen Buddhist practice found a wider audience outside Japan (Fields, 1992; Offermanns, 2002). Transformations of Zen Buddhism occurred in the process of its translation and transfer to the West. "Zen" came to be known as an epitome of religious experience (Sharf, 1998) with a particular emphasis on meditation (Sharf, 1995; Borup, 2004; McMahan, 2008). Shunryū Suzuki's role in popularizing Zen Buddhist practices in the United States can be compared with Taisen Deshimaru's efforts in Europe. Both were pioneers of "Zen" in the West and served as teachers or initiators of numerous Zen Buddhist groups, networks, and institutions. This global spread of Zen Buddhism (see Rocha, 2006 for Zen in Brazil) emerged along with the spread of ritual sitting (*zazen*; see Faure, 1991), understood as meditation, which became the best-known Zen practice in

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<sup>1</sup> See Josephson (2012) for an analysis of the ways in which Buddhism and other traditions were shaped in the course of the invention of Japanese definitions of "religion."



the modern world. Across the globe, sitting in silence continues to fascinate individuals in their search for enlightenment and a spiritual self, a temporary release from stress, and the desire for well-being and healing. It is within this context that Zen Buddhist practice spread beyond Buddhist institutions and groups into therapeutic, wellness, and healthcare programs.

This special issue seeks to contribute to recent research on contemporary Buddhism and the ways in which “Zen” was shaped to negotiate modern concepts of religion, spirituality, and individual identity. However, questions remain as to how this transformation of Buddhism has altered forms of social and cultural organization in the West and in Japan. Further empirical proof is needed, notably when it comes to answering if the re-import and re-invention of modern and transculturally shaped concepts of “Zen” have a lasting impact on practitioners and their self-understanding in Japan today. “Global Zen” is not representative of Buddhism as practiced at the great majority of Zen Buddhist temples in Japan, which are primarily concerned with rituals and death (Covell, 2005; Rowe, 2011; Nelson, 2013). Modern and transculturally shaped concepts of “Zen,” however, continue to float and be transformed within and beyond institutionalized religion in Japan, as shown by the case studies presented in this volume. Zen appears in global brands, in commercials, in books and lifestyle magazines, some of which promote Zen as a way of transforming and optimizing the self, while others depict Zen as an everyday down-to-earth practice beyond *zazen*, and notably as a marker for cultural and sectarian identity. Understanding this “floating signifier” and its multiple ascriptions and audiences poses methodological challenges, such as the lack of access to information about the marketing strategies behind “Zen” products, sales figures, and customer opinions. The negative experiences of members of *zazen* group sessions at Buddhist temples are also difficult to research, since dissatisfied one-time visitors are less likely to respond to follow-up inquiries than long-term members of these groups. Furthermore, a working definition of religion is needed that enables us to tackle the complexity and fluidity of a process like the “Westernization” or reversed “Easternization” of traditional “Eastern” Buddhist beliefs, objects, and practices. It is for these reasons that further research on global Zen Buddhism may contribute to the study of religion.

By exploring the seemingly endless ways in which contemporary “Zen” attracts different interpretations and meanings, this special issue presents perspectives on the transformation of Zen Buddhism into a global and transcultural phenomenon. What makes “Zen” so successful and adaptive to the expectations, norms, and needs of a wide range of practitioners and consumers in contemporary societies? What are the effects of the diverse ascriptions to “Zen” on Buddhist institutions in Japan today? And how do these ascriptions find their way to their respective audiences?

The authors of this special issue pursue these questions by placing global Zen Buddhism at the intersection of spirituality, popular culture, and marketing. Joshua Irizarry examines how the branding of products as “Zen” has contributed to the commercial success of a wide range of commodities that are not affiliated with Buddhism or any particular religion. With a focus on the United States, Irizarry traces the detachment of “Zen” from its institutional foundation over the past fifty years. He concludes with a

discussion of the challenges facing Zen Buddhist clergy in contemporary Japan, where the semiotic transformation of “Zen” into a marketing byword keeps challenging priests’ authority over the defining question of what “Zen” is.

Elisabetta Porcu discusses Zen Buddhism in Japanese *manga* and films through an everyday image of “Zen” that is different from typical representations of Zen Buddhism in Western popular culture formats. Porcu’s case studies show a down-to-earth character of Zen Buddhism that is not focused on *zazen* “meditation,” whereas “Zen” in the so-called West is mostly portrayed as meditation, as a method for stress reduction, as a journey into the self, or in terms of philosophy. The author introduces sides of Zen in Japanese popular culture that are less well-known to Western Zen audiences: their role in creating commercial products that appeal to different groups and their potential influence in promoting Zen Buddhism in Japan.

Based on the observation that “Zen” relates to religious, spiritual, secular, and popular levels of representation, Jørn Borup investigates “Zen” and “spirituality” as two related yet separate narratives in contemporary Japan. Modern Zen apologists like D. T. Suzuki construed Zen as spirituality (*reisei*), amidst interactions between Japanese intellectuals and Western scholars. This modern and transculturally shaped concept of “Zen” became highly successful in the West. In contemporary Japan, however, “spiritualized Zen” remains largely separated from the everyday lives of the great majority of Zen Buddhist temples. As Borup points out, neither *zazen* practitioners nor temple Buddhist institutions in Japan seem to identify themselves with the new spirituality movement and culture, but may value “Zen” as a product and producer of Japanese culture and as a marker of sectarian identity.

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