CHAPTER 5

Same Forms, Same Sensations?
The Practice of Sitting Still in Traditional Japanese and Contemporary Urban Settings

Inken Prohl

Silently sitting still in the lotus position in the manner of Buddha Shakyamuni is an impressive example of transcultural flows between ‘East’ and ‘West’ within the last 150 years. Images and narratives of practitioners and Buddhas who sit quietly with crossed legs on a cushion have become globally popular in this century. They serve as symbols for meditation practices, mindfulness, Buddhism in general or emblems of pop-Buddhist narrations and discourses. Although it has become a common practice to sit still as a means of meditation or mindfulness, there is hardly any reliable information concerning the spread and prevalence of these practices in traditional (Gómez 2004) or contemporary postmodern urban settings. The practice of silent immersion—often called meditation—plays an important role in different Buddhist traditions. Meditation and the detailed instructions of these meditative practices are often seen as the major reason for the worldwide popularity of “modern Buddhisms” (McMahan 2008).

In this article, I will concentrate on the practice of zazen—the practice of sitting silently in the lotus position—and illustrate transformations, which Zen Buddhist practices have undergone as a result of their adaptation by so called Westerners and their re-entry into Japanese contexts.

The changes that affected zazen developed in the context of a fundamental modification of Zen Buddhism in the last 150 years: Up until the last third of the nineteenth century, one can speak of Japanese Zen Buddhism as a rather

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1 Many of the transformations, which will be dealt with in this article have originated in parts of the world commonly known as the ‘East’ (Asia) and were transferred to regions known as the ‘West’ (primarily North America and Europe, and other parts of the Western world). However, a number of articles in this volume as well as mine argue that geographical factors are no longer the most relevant parameters influencing these transformations. One should rather focus on social factors and global trends, which affect traditions, organizations and individuals regardless of their place of residence. Thus geographical ascriptions will be put in quotation marks to emphasize my non-dualistic and non-dichotomizing approach towards analyzing different regions, religions and cultures of the world.
small and conservative branch of Japanese religions. Apart from dealing with many administrative procedures, Zen monks were mainly in charge of conducting traditional funeral rites. Zen Buddhism was also an influential factor in legitimizing and protecting the Japanese state by performing rituals dedicated to the safety and welfare of the *tennō* and his country (Williams 2004). Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Zen Buddhism was captured by the global translocative flows (Tweed 2011) that have led to numerous new forms of Buddhism. These are highly dynamic conglomerates of Buddhist orientations and practices, that emerged in dialectic interchanges with paradigms of democracy and capitalism, notions of a modern individual self and central protestant concepts of religion. These Protestant concepts that put God, scripture and belief into the center of religion shaped the framing of Buddhism. The ‘Buddhist Modernism’ (McMahan 2008) was nurtured by the very “engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity” (ibid.) and centers around meditation, individual experience and the compatibility of Buddhism with science, democracy and classical humanistic ideals. Numerous encounters between Asian Buddhists and a ‘Western’ audience led to dynamic processes of transcultural hybridization. These moments of contact transformed the notion of Buddhism for ‘Westerners’ and Asian Buddhists alike and led to an ongoing process of transcultural flows and a conceptual synthesis between Europe and Asia and many other parts of the world. In the middle of these manifold transformations, Zen Buddhism became the epitome of a mystic and highly experiential religious tradition with a strong focus on meditational practices.

Against the background of this history of transformations, I want to ask to what extent these meditational practices have changed and if the term ‘meditational’ is even appropriate to describe this practice. I will focus on the practice of *zazen* within Sōtō-Zen in its Temple Buddhist version in Japan, versions of *zazen* in urban contemporary mostly German settings and on ascriptions towards *zazen* in contemporary Japan. The term ‘Temple Buddhism’ (Covell 2006) refers to one of the main functions of Buddhist temples as providers for funeral rites as well as rituals for worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*) (Reader and Tanabe 1998). Due to their long history, these forms of Buddhism are often described as the traditional versions of Buddhism in Japan.

My analysis is based on a praxeological approach to religion. The basic assumption of this approach is that religious ideas and regimes of knowledge are embedded in social practices, artifacts and architectures. Relying on the

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2 I here draw on praxeological approaches and theories developed by Andreas Reckwitz (2003) and Stephan Moebius (2009).