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On the basis that even a basic scan with a searchable abstract is better than nothing I have scanned this piece of my juvenilia for inclusion into the Unisa Institutional Repository. I have not OCR'd and edited it: the temptation to correct my younger self would just have been too great.

PARADOXICAL INTENTION AND ZEN

NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD TECHNIQUE?

By Michel Clasquin

Abstract

This article argues that “paradoxical intention”, a therapeutic technique used in the logotherapy of Victor Frankl, can be used as a valuable conceptual model in the further understanding of paradoxical teachings and instructions in religious practice, and in particular in understanding the use of koans in Zen Buddhism.

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PARADOXICAL INTENTION AND ZEN NEW LIGHT ON AN OLD TECHNIQUE?

M. Clasquin

'Basho (Pa-chiao), a Korean monk of the ninth century, once delivered a famous sermon which ran thus: "If you have a staff, I will give you one; if you have not, I will take it away from you"' (Suzuki 1985: 273).

That religious language often functions in a paradoxical manner is a truism in the scientific study of religion. Two main forms of the religious use of paradox may be distinguished: firstly, the practice in which two statements are made which contradict each other. In the above example, the first statement is not a paradox, but the second is; how should Basho take a staff from someone who had none? This is what we might call the logician's paradox, which consists of two or more verbal statements which cannot both simultaneously be true. This form of paradox may be found in the Biblical injunction that the first shall be the last (Luke 9: 48; Mark 9: 35) or Meister Eckhart's pronouncement '. . . I pray God that he may quit me of god . . .' (Ellwood 1980: 116). This form of paradox may be 'solved' by stating that the two statements refer to different levels of meaning. For instance, in Meister Eckhart's case, the term 'God' is first used to refer to the Neoplatonic 'One' and then to God as conventionally conceived.

The second form of paradox is the situation in which the religious person is instructed to *act* in a way which either contradicts conventional religious wisdom, as in much Tantric practice, or, alternatively, is instructed to perform a self-contradictory act. Consider, for instance, Christ's commandment 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy soul, and all thy mind' (Mark 12: 30). As has been pointed out by thinkers as diverse as Watts (1960: 63-4) and Smart (1979: 254) there is an implied contradiction in this commandment. If, as both these writers do, one defines love as a spontaneous emotion, the Christian is here *commanded* to act *spontaneously*!

The dichotomy between the two types of paradoxical religious language (the paradoxical statement and the paradoxical injunction) should not be absolutized. They overlap, as in the case of a person being instructed to ponder a paradoxical statement.

Such instructions are typical of that form of religious practice commonly labelled 'mysticism'. While, in its shamanistic origins (Ellwood 1980: 43-7), mysticism probably antedates the deliberately paradoxical use of language in religion, the latter mystics do seem to view their practices as an overcoming of contradictions in a kind of dialectical process in which the final synthesis (union with the Godhead, enlightenment, etc.) is considered to be non-different from Absolute Reality. In the process of attaining such beatitude, paradoxes can be used as tools, or, in the Buddhist phraseology, as 'skillful means', in attuning the neophyte's mental processes towards the Infinite. Nowhere is this use of paradox more immediately obvious than in Zen (Ch'an) Buddhism. Not only does Zen, in spite of its being the practical expression of the exceedingly scholastic Hua-yen (Jap. Kegon) school (Cook 1981: 26), reject intellectual speculation and replace it with '... an enigmatic barrage of double-talk' (Hyers 1974: 30), but also insofar as quality is concerned, it seems to be '... more daringly concrete in its paradoxes than any other mystical teachings. The latter are more or less confined to general statements concerning life, or good or the world, but Zen carries its paradoxical assertions into every detail of everyday life. It has no hesitation in flatly denying all our most familiar facts of experience' (Suzuki 1985: 273). While paradox is far from the only instructional device in Zen (*cf.* Suzuki 1985: 267-313), its use of this method is so common that it is intended to utilize Zen as a paradigm case for the remainder of this paper.

The need for a model

But why should paradoxical language lead the religious person to the ultimate? This question has yet to be addressed as fully as it deserves to be. Schmidt (1980: 118), for instance, merely states that 'Koan are perplexing problems because they are questions for which there are many correct answers, but, paradoxically, no single right answer'. This amounts to saying that koan are perplexing problems because they are paradoxes, a tautology which gets us no further.

It is here proposed that what is required for the fuller understanding of this process at this stage is the use of a model. A model, according to Chaplin and Krawieck (in Viljoen et al 1987: 30), is a scientific method in which '... loosely coherent propositions regarding a phenomenon are joined and represented by means of an analogue'. Thus, to give a simple example, if we wish to understand the social organization of a beehive, much can be gained by examining what other, better understood phenomena it could be compared with. A beehive, then, could be compared with the industrial-military complex in

human society, or with a single organism. This method of inquiry can lead to valuable insights, provided that it is not confused with a 'nothing-butterish' reductionism. The main thesis of this essay, then, is that a valid model for the paradoxical use of language in religion generally, and Zen in particular, may be discerned in the 'paradoxical intention' technique employed in the logotherapy school of psychology.

Paradoxical intention

This form of psychotherapy was first set forth by Victor E. Frankl in 1939 and more comprehensively in 1946 (Frankl 1967: 145) and is a part of the psychotherapeutic system known as logotherapy, which likewise is associated with the name of Frankl. It is not the intention here to explore the possible similarities between logotherapy generally and religious thought, as has been tentatively done by Takashima (1985) and Chakravarty (1987), and more comprehensively by Tweedy (1961), while Frankl (1971: 142-57) has himself pointed out the religious implications of his system. Suffice it to say that some similarity to Buddhist thought may be found in the following statement by Fabry (1982: 25); '(Frankl) developed paradoxical intention not as a trick, but as a means of helping patients establish distance between themselves and their systems, helping them see that while they *have* fears and compulsions, they are not identical with them'. While this sounds surprisingly like Buddhist (especially Hinayana) conceptions of anatta, Fabry then spoils the effect by saying: 'What you have you can lose again, but what is an essential part of you stays with you'. Needless to say, mentioning the word 'essence' to a Buddhist is likely to lead to a splitting of exceedingly thin philosophical hairs.

The intention in this essay is, then, to isolate paradoxical intention from its logotherapeutic base and to explore the similarities between this technique and certain procedures commonly found in Zen Buddhism. That paradoxical intention may thus be considered in isolation is suggested by Frankl himself (1971: 113) when he states that '... even doctors who adhere to theories different from the one which underlies logotherapy include paradoxical intention in their armamentarium', and (1971: 101) '... logotherapeutic treatment ... (in this instance the related method of de-reflection-MC) is effective regardless of whether or not one adopts the logotherapeutic theory'. Experimental evidence of the effectiveness of the technique is provided, *inter alia*, by Gertz (in Frankl 1967: 221), who states that 'twenty-four phobic and obsessive-compulsive patients ... were successfully treated with Frankl's technique'.

Having established the *bona fides* of the technique, of what does it consist? In

Frankl's explanation of the method and its underlying rationale (1967: 145), he uses '... as a starting point ... anticipatory anxiety ... such anxiety often produces precisely that situation feared by the patient. The erythrophobic individual, for example, who is afraid of blushing when he enters a room and faces a group of people, will actually blush at precisely that moment'. Conversely, 'many sexual neuroses ... may be traced back to the forced intention of attaining the goal of sexual intercourse - be it the male seeking to demonstrate his potency, or the female her ability to experience orgasm'. The principle seems to be that '... the more one strives for pleasure, the less one is able to attain it. Thus we see an interesting parallel in that anticipatory anxiety brings about precisely what the patient fears, while excessive intention, as well as excessive self-observation with regard to one's own functioning, makes this functioning impossible. It is upon this twofold fact that paradoxical intention is based. For instance, when a phobic patient is afraid that something will happen to him, the logotherapist encourages him to intend or wish, even if only for a second, precisely what he fears' (Frankl 1967: 146). 'Encouraging the patient to do, or wish to happen, the very thing he fears engenders an inversion of intention. The pathogenic fear is replaced by a paradoxical wish. By the same token, however, the wind is taken out of the anticipatory anxiety' (Frankl 1971: 103).

Perhaps the technique is best illustrated by one of Frankl's patients himself: 'There was practically not one minute during the day when I was free of the thought that I might break a store window. But Dr Frankl told me to go right up to the window with the intention of smashing it. When I did this, the fear disappeared completely, and I knew that I wouldn't go through with it. It all seems like a dream now: the fears and impulses to do these things have all vanished' (Frankl 1967: 156).

As Frankl mentions, '... this report ... was given twenty years after the treatment'. This points out another noteworthy feature of the technique, namely that it should not be put down as a mere 'symptomatic treatment' with benefits of only a short duration. Wolpe (Gertz in Frankl 1967: 211) states that 'a survey of follow-up studies comprising 249 patients ... showed only 4 relapses (1.6%)'. Although this sample contained both logotherapeutic and other non-psychoanalytic patients, the point of this study was to invalidate one of ... the more common illusions of Freudian orthodoxy, (namely) that the results of therapy (and the) ... durability of results correspond to the length of therapy' (Gutheil in Frankl 1967: 156). As far as paradoxical intention is concerned, Lehembre (Frankl 1971: 107) goes so far as to state that 'symptom substitution has not been observed in even a single case'. Paradoxical intention,

though a short-term therapy, yields long-term results. While this seems counter-intuitive, a 'getting something for nothing', its effects, as already mentioned, are well documented. Frankl (1967: 153) states that the method works in the long term because '... the logotherapist, when applying paradoxical intention, is concerned not so much with the symptom in itself, but with the patient's *attitude* towards his neurosis and its symptomatic manifestation. It is the very act of changing this attitude that is involved whenever an improvement is obtained.'

Humour seems to be an integral element of paradoxical intention. Frankl (1967: 147) states that '... when paradoxical intention is used, the purpose, to put it simply, is to enable the patient to develop a sense of detachment towards his neurosis by laughing at it (*cf.* Shaughnessy 1984). A final point which will be relevant to our discussion is that paradoxical intention was used long before Frankl 'invented' it. As one of his students explains:

My stomach used to growl in the company of others. The more I tried to keep it from happening, the more it growled. Soon I started to take it for granted that it would be with me the rest of my life. I began to live with it – I laughed with others about it. Soon it disappeared' (Frankl 1967: 148).

Similarly, Frankl reports that stutterers are unable to stutter when obliged to do so, for example to act the part of a stutterer in a play (Frankl 1967: 148–9).

To summarise, paradoxical intention is a psychotherapeutic technique in which a person suffering from a phobia with an underlying anticipatory anxiety mechanism is encouraged to do, or imagine doing, precisely that which he fears most. Stutterers are told to stutter even more; compulsive handwashers are told to imagine their hands full of grime; in each case the treatment is determined by the patient's specific symptoms. The method has a success rate of as high as 75.7% (Frankl 1967: 153), and symptom substitution is so rare that psychotherapists of other theoretical persuasions have been known to adopt the technique, although they may use different terms, such as 'desensitization', 'implosive therapy' or 'flooding' to describe the method, and interpret its action in terms of their own paradigm (Carson, Butcher and Coleman 1988: 590–2), the essential methodology remaining the same.

Paradoxical intention in Ancient China?

As we have seen, paradoxical intention has been 'unwittingly and unwillingly' used in everyday life by people unaware of its theoretical basis. The

main assertion of this essay, therefore, is that this technique, or something analogous to it, was used, whether consciously or not, by the Zen masters of T'ang dynasty China and later institutionalized in the koan technique.

Zen, of course, belongs to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, which owes so much to Nagarjuna's masterly exposition of the human dilemma. According to this *weltanschauung*, Nirvana (the Absolute) and Samsara (the phenomenal world) are non-different – what is awry is our way of looking at the world, not the world itself. It is necessary, therefore, to radically change our outlook, to '... put an end to your conceptual thinking' (Huang Fu 1985: 45) in order to view the world, and ourselves, as it really is; that is, void. Immediately we are reminded of Frankl's insistence that what must be changed is the patient's attitude towards his phobia. In both systems one is dealing with an epistemological error rather than with an ontological state.

From the Zen point of view, of course, Frankl and his entire system belong firmly to the world of unenlightened conceptual thinking. Nevertheless, if we apply the basic framework of paradoxical intention to Zen instruction the parallels are sufficiently striking to show how the former may serve as a model for at least a partial understanding of the latter.

For 'phobia' in logotherapeutic jargon we may substitute the Zen equivalent 'conceptual thinking' or its near-synonym 'dualistic thinking'. The novice is informed that, in order to attain enlightenment, he should stop thinking in terms of 'I' and 'not-I'. However, to decide that 'I shall not think dualistically', is itself a dualistic thought, as true non-dualism does not allow of a distinction between itself and dualism! Thus the harder the neophyte attempts to give up his customary mode of cognition, the deeper he gets drawn into it. This closely resembles the way in which anticipatory reaction and symptom interact to form a self-perpetuating 'vicious circle' in logotherapeutic theory (Frankl 1971: 102).

It should not be thought, however, that such instructions serve to introduce a dilemma in the student's mind for the first time; rather, the purpose seems to be to focus attention on what Zen holds to be the universal human problem by intensifying it beyond its normal quiescent state. The human dilemma should not, for the Zen monk, be something that lives a shadowy background existence – rather, it should be a burning question for which a solution is desperately sought (*cf.* San-un Zendo (sa): 29–30; Kapleau 1980a: 84).

At this point, one might expect the master to present himself and pronounce the magical words which resolve all the novice's problems. Something like this does indeed occur, but in a most unexpected fashion. At this point the Zen master acts almost exactly like the logotherapist: instead of solving the pupil's

problem for him, he directs the latter's mind deeper and deeper into the problem by suggesting that he does exactly that which is troubling him; that is, think in conceptual, dualistic terms. This the master does by presenting the student with a paradox, here in the form of a conceptually unsolvable problem. Being set in his ways, like all unenlightened beings, the student immediately attempts to 'solve' the problem by means of his usual ways of thinking. Unfortunately, this is impossible!

As we have seen, the logotherapist adjusts the paradoxical suggestion to be made by referring to the patient's specific symptoms. To some extent the Zen master does likewise insofar as different statements are presented to different novices to 'solve', but, in the final analysis, Zen recognizes only one 'mental illness', namely conceptual, dualistic thinking, and all the varied paradoxical statements and seemingly irrationalistic behaviours that have been used by different masters may be viewed as amounting to the same instruction; the student is not, as is commonly imagined, led directly to non-conceptual thought by the riddle he has received from his master – rather, a two-stage process seems to be involved. Initially, the student's attempt to 'solve' the problem in a conceptual way draws him deeper and deeper into exactly that which he is trying to avoid, namely the conceptual activities of his own mind, until finally he has reached the end of conceptual thinking. At this stage, he sees for himself the futility of such activity and is able to give it up without regrets.

The similarity to the logotherapeutic patient continues. Just as the abovementioned patient's fear of breaking shop windows disappeared completely and immediately once he was enabled to face and understand it, so is Zen realization typified as 'instant enlightenment'. If Zen realization seems to take much more effort and determination, this surely is due to conceptual thinking being more deeply rooted in the human psyche than the type of phobia treated by paradoxical intention.

Likewise, analogous to the logotherapeutic patient's overcoming of his symptoms by first understanding and then laughing at them, the Zen practitioner's sudden understanding of reality as an undivided whole, the nature of which is void, is often typified as 'seeing the point of a joke', and humour has played a significant role in Zen (Hyers 1974).

Initially, this use of paradox as an instrument for the conversion of dualistic, through hyper-dualistic, into non-dualistic thinking, was developed on a spontaneous, ad hoc basis by the Zen adepts. As time passed, however, the method was formalized and institutionalized into what is today known to us as the koan method, especially in the Rinzai branch of Zen (Suzuki 1980: 90–1). This may clearly be discerned from the fact that many koans are identified with

some or other specific Chinese master. For instance, the 'Mu' koan, commonly given to beginners, was first pronounced by Chao-chou (Jap. Joshu), who lived in the ninth century C.E. (Kapleau 1980b: 293).

Kapleau (1980b: 154) quotes one of his students who had been given this koan as saying: 'On the sixth day I realized I had never really tried to go through Mu. Over it, under it, around it, away from it – but never really facing it, right through it. Right then this huge Mu rose up in front of me and there was just nowhere else to go.' Another, a student of Yasutani-Roshi's, writes, 'My habit of thought about Mu, however, persisted. What a curse thought is! I would explain in chagrin. "It confuses the mind, creates disputes between men by setting them apart from each other, it creates war itself. Stop thinking! Stop analyzing!"' (Kapleau 1980a: 260). This shows how the koan technique exhausts the rational mind in a way reminiscent of Frankl's paradoxical intention. Thus does the contemporary Zen master Shibayama quote his teacher as saying:

Suppose there is a completely blind man who trudges along leaning on his stick and depending on his intuition. The role of the koan is to mercilessly take the stick away from him and to push him down after turning him around. In short the role of the koan is not to lead us to (enlightenment) easily, but on the contrary to make us lose our way and drive us to despair.
(Kapleau 1980a: 71)

The Mu koan, which originates in a discussion on the presence or absence of Buddha-nature in a dog, is in fact considered one of the most powerful koans since, as Kapleau (1980: 69) states:

Whereas such koans as 'what is the sound of one hand?' and 'what is your face before your birth?' bait the discursive mind and excite the imagination, Mu holds itself coldly aloof from both the intellect and the imagination. Try as it might, reasoning cannot gain even a toehold on Mu.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the technique of paradoxical intention, as developed by Frankl, may be fruitfully used as a model for the further understanding of the use of paradoxical statements in Zen Buddhism. The question that naturally arises from this is the following: how valid is the use of this model in other religious traditions, and in religion as a whole? While further research is

necessary, one might here speculate that the usefulness of this model would be directly related to the extent that a given tradition stresses 'mystical' elements.

For religions in which the 'prophetic' or 'revelatory' elements predominate, the model would seem to be less useful in furthering our understanding of the role of paradox in religious language. Even in such cases, however, the assumption underlying the model, namely that the use of paradox in religious language is a matter of interpersonal communication and instruction, rather than an effort to describe reality, suggests further areas of research.

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