



If You See a Cyborg in the Road, Kill the Buddha: Against Transcendental Transhumanism

Woody Evans, Arts & Humanities Librarian (visiting)
University of Texas at Arlington
[durwood@uta.com](mailto:edurwood@uta.com)

Journal of Evolution and Technology - Vol. 24 Issue 2 – September 2014 - pgs 92-97

Abstract

A stream in transhumanism argues that the aims of Buddhism and transhumanists are akin. It is the case that transhumanism contains religious tropes, and its parallels to Christianity are readily apparent. It does not share much, however, with Buddhism's Zen tradition. Zen tends to focus its practitioners on becoming fully present and human, not on becoming transcendent, super-powered, or posthuman. This paper explores some of the tensions between transhumanism and Buddhism through the lens of Zen, and suggests that transhumanist Buddhists should be careful not to conflate moments of spiritual enlightenment with permanent techno-social transcendence.

1. Transhuman meditation

The Cyborg Buddha Project (CBP) of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies promotes “discussion of the impact that neuroscience and emerging neurotechnologies will have on happiness, spirituality, cognitive liberty, moral behavior and the exploration of meditational and ecstatic states of mind” (IEET n.d.). Such discussions of the impact of technology on psychological and spiritual affairs have sometimes taken the form of claims that meditation is itself a type of transformative technology; as one transhumanist-meditator puts it, we are entering a new stage of an explicitly “transhumanist meditation” that offers “the promise of an exponential uptake in human intelligence and evolution” (Joaker 2012). Meditation is, in this light, a tool for programming the “programmable” self (Cvercko 2014), and may be considered analogous to “software enhancements” (Dvorsky 2008, 65). LaTorra proposes that transhumanists should aim to “achieve a complete scientific understanding of spiritual phenomena and, based on that understanding, to develop techniques and technologies for inducing

spiritual experiences at will” (2005, 41). It seems that meditation, for the transhumanist, is just another bit of kit.

Not so for the Zen student. We will see why shortly, but first consider some of the ways that transhumanism is friendly to religion – especially to Christian worldviews.

2. Jesus and the robots

Transhumanism can sometimes appear to have religious aspects, and it has much in common with Christianity in particular. Christian theologians have even begun to formulate a “Christian transhumanism” after the work of Teilhard de Chardin (Grummet 2011, 37). Despite concerns that transhumanism only echoes old heresies, and that it looks for salvation not from a Creator but from human will alone (Waters 2011, 171), similarities with Christianity remain. One is that transhumanism, like Christianity, insists that the world as we know it has an end (or An End!). Christianity shares with other Abrahamic religions a concern with the end of time (Judgment Day, Apocalypse, Resurrection of the Dead, الساعة , etc.), and concern for an eschatological crisis is also a dominant element in transhumanism, in the form of the techno-social Singularity.

One example of the connections between Christianity and transhumanism is highlighted in Herrick’s (2012) discussion of Mormon Christians:

Transhumanists, it turns out, embrace a parallel vision of the divine-human future. Both [transhumanism and Mormonism] affirm a kindred understanding of the current status of the human race (a work in progress) and of a transformed state to be enjoyed in an inevitable human future (we shall ascend). For traditional Mormons, obedience to Church teachings ensures everlasting posthuman exaltation; for Transhumanists technologically assisted evolution ushers in the apocalyptic Singularity and its progeny – posthumanity. The results in both cases are similar – god-like posthumans.

Even the proto-transhumanist and post-hippie talks of the late Terence McKenna (1946-2000) are full of concepts that echo Christian Gnosticism. McKenna was fascinated by Christian mystics and esotericists expressing a way to salvation through Hermetic and alchemical symbolism (listen to his many lectures on the topic, or browse his archived website, McKenna n.d., to get an idea). McKenna’s own salvific teleology – including “self-transforming elf machines” and the “transcendental object at the end of time” – was influential in the formation of what would become transhumanism (see Whitesides and Hoopes, 2012, for more on McKenna’s eschatology and influence).

Transhumanism, like many religions (including Christianity and “Pure Land” Buddhism), focuses on a moment of human dissolution and reformation; we will be torn apart in a cosmic drama and come out of it transformed and deified. In Eastern Orthodox Christian terms, we might say that transhumanism is concerned with a kind of *theosis* through materials and tools. Indeed, “Christian theology finds fault with transhumanism not because it says that human beings should be enhanced but because [transhumanism] holds too limited a view of human transformation” (Cole-Turner 2011, 200). Through the mystery of *theosis*, God “is making us ‘godlike’”; transhumanism may be understood as a merely materialist shadow

of Christian salvation (Cole-Turner 2011, 198-199).

Perhaps this material transformation is but a station on the way toward the “Ultra-human” and “Trans-human” destinations of salvation as Singularity and Omega-Point (Steinhart 2008, 13). “Teilhard’s thought has influenced transhumanism, and several important transhumanists have developed Omega Point Theories... Teilhard works out his transhumanist ideas in a Christian context” (Steinhart 2008, 18). The transhumanism of Teilhard de Chardin and his theological concern with the future of humans and technology deserve a fuller exploration than can be offered here. For readers seeking more detail, Steinhart offers an excellent analysis of the topic.

We have seen that transhumanism and religion share some things. Though the examples above focus on Christianity, there are points of agreement between transhumanism and other religions too, even Buddhism. Buddhism has a transformation in *nirvana*; Zen Buddhism’s *kensho* and *satori* are alterations of (and perhaps improvements upon) our normal state of mind – improvements that transhumanism would welcome. But to be generally similar to or friendly with a religion does not enable transhumanism to equate the experience of meditation as it may be expressed in religious traditions, including Buddhism, to a “tool” of evolution that upgrades our “software.”

3. Not a tool

Buddhism, particularly various Zen Buddhist traditions, differs notably from transhumanism in its emphasis and methods. Within Buddhism’s Soto School, we find little concern with any transcendental aims that could be shared with transhumanism. Zazen is “the form of meditation at the very heart of Zen practice,” as the students of Maezumi Roshi put it (Zen Mountain Monastery, 2012); indeed, meditation itself *is* the practice. Maezumi taught a Zen practice that was influenced by the dovetailed Rinzai/Soto vision of Hakuin Yasutani, in which even koan practice was done in the context of a “Soto emphasis on *shikantaza* – ‘just sitting’” (Wright, 242). If Zen can be said to have a goal or an aim, it may be that zazen itself – meditation itself – is the only aim; Deshimaru said, “Zazen has no object, it is purposeless, it brings us back to ourselves” (American Zen Association 2009a). The *shikantaza* attitude has affected Zen in Japan and the West, and in the Rinzai and Soto schools. Its simplicity stands in contrast to transhumanist views of Buddhism, which see meditation as extractable from ritual context, and as merely useful as a means of conscious evolution.

In pop culture, Zen is often shown as a path leading to superhuman powers. Superheroes like Wolverine of the X-Men do it for the “alpha waves” (Morrison 2001). See Megan Bryson’s Zensanity.net for an ongoing roundup of Zen in popular culture; it is clear that Zen has a mystique and a power in the popular imagination. Yet even in the Rinzai school there is a strong emphasis on simplicity and becoming a “true human” – not an exalted Buddha, but fully human, fully oneself (Parkes, 123). There’s nothing “zen” (as in Zen spa, “zen and the art of” or “how are your alpha waves developing?”) about Zen. “Zen is Zazen” (American Zen Association 2009b).

It is conceivable that committed Zen students may sometimes have an interest in making Zen “sexy” in order to attract more adherents and more temple donations – and, if so, an allegiance with superheroes, soap advertisements, or transhumanists might make sense. But that is not Zen practice, and concern with

super powers is not a focus of Zen Buddhism. From Bodhidharma, to Dogen, through twentieth-century teachers such as Kodo Sawaki, we see a focus on *mushotoku* (“no gain” from the practice) and *shikantaza*. In the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen emphasizes this “just zazen” attitude:

Be it known that, for studying the way, the established means of investigation is pursuing the way in seated meditation [zazen]. The essential point of its standard is the understanding that there is a practice of a buddha that does not seek to make a buddha... [The practice of zazen] is not to make a buddha. (Dogen 2004)

The practice of zazen is focused on the simple and the human: breath and posture. As the Zen exponent sits in meditation on the *zafu*, many distractions, fears, and temptations rise up. But in the words of Robert Livingston (a student of Deshimaru’s), these are to be regarded as “bubbles in the toilet” that will pop and disappear (Livingston 2009). The simple experience of somatic concerns makes the practice of meditation very human indeed, and perhaps much more simple, pedestrian, and even boring, than transhumanists would like to believe.

Buddhism is focused on the present moment. Again and again, we find a focus on “here and now” in its various branches. In contrast, transhumanism is concerned with what we *will* become, and how the universe will change in the future. “The Singularity is near,” but not yet here. Not now.

4. Sit down, shut up, pay attention

Buddhism and transhumanism may not be incompatible, but their differences must be taken seriously. Yet we see at the CBP continual attempts to make Buddhism fit into a transhumanist paradigm. In a CBP article that acts as a general warning not to pursue advanced technology without spiritual foundations, Buddhism is still recommended as a toolkit for bringing on Singularity: “the flexibility of Buddhism makes it the perfect candidate for a universal cultural revolution... this is particularly relevant to the development of smarter-than-human AI programs” (Neumann 2013).

Buddhism is not in itself a tool for becoming anything, and it certainly is not a way to become more than human. It does not lend itself to the material/technological, psychedelic, or spiritual transcendence of transhumanism. If anything, it is a practice in which one may realize the heights and depths of this simple moment, maybe even an eternal moment, in which one is utterly human, and in which one might perhaps invite greater expressions of humanity from others.

By contrast, transhumanism is a child of humanism. Nick Bostrom’s (2005) article detailing the history of humanism and its evolution into transhumanism works through the ethical dimensions of human enhancement; certainly transhumanism is, or tries to be, “an ethical enterprise” (Evans 2013, 58). It has both secular and sacred influences, but it proceeds from a Western tradition and to whatever degree it may be a (quasi-)religious project it is not a Buddhist project.

Now it may be that the religious projects of “salvation,” in Christianity or whatever other forms they may take, or transhumanism’s ethical and philosophical projects of enhancement, uplift, and bringing on a technological and social Singularity, are greater projects than that of Buddhism’s Zen. It may be that

zazen is not enough for the needs of modern people seeking some solution to life's essential problems through communication technologies, computing power, and nootropic drugs. Such questions are beyond the scope of this brief paper.

We can conclude, however, that Buddhism is not transhumanist, and transhumanism is not Buddhist. Transhumanism is alien to the core practice of Buddhism: zazen. It would be misleading to romanticize transhumanism by comparing it to Buddhism and appealing to an oriental mystique.

If you see the Buddha in the road, says the old monk, kill the Buddha. Suffer not a cyborg, while you're at it.

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