

Justification of Dangerous Sports and the Question of Values

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to examine values within dangerous sports. We begin by discussing the article, “*The Value of Dangerous Sports*” by J. S. Russell (2005), in which such values are associated with self-affirmation. Russell believes that self-affirmation has a close relationship to the ideals of human self-realization, a manner of thinking arising from specifically Western values. In the present article, the discussion is broadened by approaching it from an Eastern perspective based on Zen Buddhism, wherein “selflessness” is understood as a value to the extent that it helps overcome any concept of the self, thereby leading to direct experiencing of what is. Selflessness is demonstrated through the example of the traditional Japanese martial arts path (*budō*), which is considered a dangerous sport. Thus, it is argued that an alternative result of self-surpassing can be “selflessness,” so that the previous aim of self-affirmation can gradually evolve into an understanding that there is no such thing as “self.” In this way, we have widened the scope of the topic beyond that presented in Russell’s article.

Key Words: dangerous sports, values, selflessness, *budō*, Zen Buddhism

危險運動的證立與價值問題之探究

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摘要

本文旨在研究危險運動的內存價值。我們是從運動哲學家 Russell (2005) 所寫的文章 “*The Value of Dangerous Sport*” 做為討論的出發點，他所提出的危險運動價值與自我肯定 (self-affirmation) 這個名詞相關。根據 Russell 的西方式主張，自我肯定 (self-affirmation) 與人類的自我實現 (self-realization) 的理想具有密切相關。這種對危險運動所產生的思維是源自西方對人類對自我實現的價值觀。在本文，我們用了不同的角度來擴充討論有關危險運動的課

題。我們也將東方的禪宗佛教哲學思想 Zen Buddhism 提出來，用一種無我（selflessness）的價值觀來探討危險運動的另類價值。無我這個價值可做為一種價值來幫助我們克服理解有關任何自我的概念，並且可引導至直接體驗的奧妙所在。無我的顯現可透過日本的傳統武道（budo）來彰顯，這種武道活動也可算是一種危險運動類型的一種。因此，我們主張自我超越的另一個面向是可以經由東方禪佛思想的“無我”來替代，這樣就可使先前自我肯定（self-affirmation）的目標逐漸衍化成為無我的境界。所以在本文，我們已拓寬了西方傳統對危險運動的價值討論。

關鍵詞：危險運動，價值，無我，武道，禪佛

I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to research values within dangerous sport. As a starting point this article discusses the article “The Value of Dangerous Sport” by Russell (2005), in which the value of dangerous sport is associated with self-affirmation. According to Russell self-affirmation has a close connection to the ideals of self-realization of the human being. This way of thinking about dangerous sport arises from specifically Western¹ values of human self-realization. In this article we wish to broaden the discussion about dangerous sport with a different view. We shall show the problem also from the Eastern perspective based on Zen Buddhism, in which we shall discuss the value of “selflessness.” Selflessness will be understood as a value to the extent that it helps overcome any concept of the self and thus it leads to the direct experiencing of what there is. Selflessness will be demonstrated through the example of the traditional Japanese martial paths (*budō*), which we offer as an example of dangerous sport. In this way, we wish to widen the scope of the topic beyond the one presented in the article *The Value of Dangerous Sport*.

II. DANGEROUS SPORT AND THE VALUE OF SELF-AFFIRMATION

This article deals with values within dangerous sport. However, before we start examining values, we need to ask: What does it mean to be a value? Values are goods; they are things that human beings find desirable. There are different kinds of values. According to Kretchmar, two classes of values can be identified, that is, moral values and non-moral values.

Moral values are certain personality traits and human motives. They describe what we often call a morally good person. These are traits like honesty, conscientiousness, affection, prudence, industriousness and courage. Non-moral values are things we desire from life. Rather than describing a person or a person's

motives, they identify items that people want – things like pleasure, knowledge, wealth, security, excellence and friendship. (Kretchmar, 1994, pp.111-112)

When values are desirable ends, then within dangerous sport we need to look for (a) desirable end(s) of dangerous sport. The Western perspective on the topic of values of dangerous sport in this article will be discussed on the basis of the article “The Value of Dangerous Sport” written by Russell (2005), the aim of which is to establish the value of dangerous sport.

Before coming to the conclusion that the distinctive value of dangerous sport is self-affirmation, Russell searches for a distinctive value of dangerous sport. In this sense, McFee's (2004, pp. 154-157) distinction between normative reasons (good reasons for doing something) and motivating reasons (my reasons for doing something) is useful here. What we need is a good reason that will show an intrinsic value of dangerous sport. This value should be the value of the activity for itself, on its own terms. So if a value (such as health or fitness) is shared with other activities, then the value cannot be said to be uniquely intrinsic to the activity in question, which in this case is dangerous sport.

In his article, Russell (2005, p. 2) discusses different values that might be considered values of dangerous sport, such as “pursuit of glory or honor,” or “development of courage,” or “an outlet for physical aggression or risk-taking impulses,” or “pleasure or satisfaction or thrills”. But according to him, these are all significantly inadequate reasons to justify dangerous sport, because they do not represent a deeper explanation of the dominant, distinctive value of such sports.

In addition to Russell, other authors have discussed this topic.² For example, Shih (2007, pp. 302-303) gives two additional reasons concerning the values of dangerous sport (in

¹ In this article we shall use the words West/Western when referring to the Euro-American cultural context, while the terms East/Eastern will be reserved for the East Asian countries that have Zen Buddhism in their tradition.

² In relation to dangerous sport, there are also other terms depicting the range of similar activities as in the dangerous sport, such as high risk sport (Müller, 2004; Shih, 2007), violent sport, such as soccer, rugby, American football and boxing (Parry, 1998), and adventure sport, such as mountain climbing (Shih, 2007).

his case mountain climbing). One is based on a subjective reason which is addressed by Weiss (1969) as a “concern for excellence.” It is connected to the dissatisfaction human beings feel for their current state and conditions and thus the tendency to surpass or overcome them. Another reason to support dangerous sport, according to Shih (2007, p. 303), is related to a religious meaning, which has more to do with spiritual desire. This goes beyond our materialistic life and our civilized society, which some people consider boring, absurd and depressing.

After considering different values Russell concludes that the value dangerous sports is the value of self-affirmation:

I shall present a general argument for the value of dangerous sports that I believe represents a deeper explanation of the dominant, distinctive value of such sports. I find that value in an ideal of what I shall term “self-affirmation.” (Russell, 2005, p. 2)

Russell ascribes dangerous sports the value of self-affirmation. With self-affirmation Russell connects self-surpassing through which we affirm ourselves:

In reaching and attempting to surpass our limits, we inevitably confront what we are. In doing so, we affirm or declare to ourselves who we are and what we are striving to make of ourselves. (Russell, 2005, p. 15)

Now, it is important to consider self-surpassing and its relation to self-affirmation. Self-surpassing can be found in many human activities and in other sports that are considered non-dangerous. However, the self-surpassing in dangerous sport is distinctive as it is connected to *the higher degree of intensity of the danger involved*. It is necessary to consider this because it carries a special feature that distinguishes surpassing in dangerous and in non-dangerous sports. This is also apparent from Russell’s definition of dangerous sport:

By “dangerous sport,” I mean a sport that involves activity that itself creates a significant risk of loss of, or serious impairment to, some basic capacity for human functioning. Dangerous sports, then, range along a continuum of significant risks. (Russell, 2005, p. 3)

Note that it must involve some “significant risk” of loss of, or serious impairment to, a basic capacity for human functioning. Here, the ultimate loss is then the loss of one’s life, which is more probable than in everyday life. The mention of death is often avoided in everyday life in many societies and Western society is no exception. However, though death is often considered a frightening and valueless phenomenon (as it is posed in opposition to life) it does not have to be so. As an

example, in existentialism, death can be understood as highly meaningful. Müller speaks of this in the frame of high risk sport and existential philosophy as follows:

[...] what do we get out of these death-threat situations? What do persons get in return for risking their physical existence? I would like to summarize the “gains” of these “death-centered sports” with the term *enhanced existence* or at least *moments of enhanced existence*. (Müller, 2004, pp. 60-61)

Enhanced existence means a more intensive and fuller life. We can find this positive meaning of death mainly in the works of philosophers who examine human existence, in which death is described as an indivisible part of life. Without accepting death we are missing the knowledge of who we are (Slusher, 1967, p. 206). The acceptance and awareness of death then bring about a meaningful, authentic and whole life (e.g., Heidegger, 2001; Patocka, 1998; Slusher, 1967). Dangerous sport with its higher level of danger can provide a venue for participants not only to test themselves against danger to see what they are capable of, but it also creates the possibility of realizing an important fact in human life that leads to living more fully and meaningfully, that is, the fact that we are mortal beings. Without this knowledge we are inclined to pretend we are other than what we really *are*. Here self-surpassing means the transcendence of the existence that is not aware of itself as human existence to the realization of who we are. This is much easier to do in a dangerous or life-threatening situation than in the seemingly safe activities of everyday life.

However, now it is important to consider what is the self that is to be surpassed and how is the self-surpassing related to self-affirmation. Unfortunately, Russell does not discuss the problem of the self in his text. Let us have a look at it now. The result of self-surpassing can be a new self that is to be surpassed again or selflessness. While the former is to be found in some works of the Western philosophy (Monahan, 2007), the latter is more common in the Eastern tradition. If self-affirmation is established to be the value of dangerous sport, it means that the process of affirming one’s self is desirable. All in all, we can say that desirability of the affirmation of one’s self is very developed in the Western society. And though there are different ways of understanding the self and these different ways of understanding presuppose different consequences in relation to self-surpassing, whichever concept of the self Russell presupposes, the self is important to him. What does this mean? An emphasis on the self means emphasizing a concept of how we understand ourselves, how we think we are. In this context the concepts we are talking about do not need to be explicitly worked-out theoretical concepts that we identify with, but any concept we hold in

terms of who we are that makes our basis of our understanding and living. These concepts then influence our experiencing.

However, we would like to state that the value of this self-affirming does not have to be the only value that arises from self-surpassing. In the next part of this text, we will show a value of dangerous sports based on a Zen Buddhist view in connection to *budō*, which are dangerous martial paths, and we suggest that this value can be different to the one that Russell offers in his article. The value we intend to speak about in the context of dangerous sport is the value of selflessness. The value of selflessness can be understood as a supporting value to a non-conceptual end, that is, direct experiencing. Direct experiencing does not rely on any concepts or values (including that of selflessness).

Before we start discussing Zen and *budō* in this context, it is necessary to justify the choice of *budō*. Though *budō* is not supposed to be about physical killing, the full contact with an opponent can result in considerable damage of our existing. This fulfills what Russell (2005, p.1) demands from dangerous sports, which are dangerous because they “incorporate the presence of physical danger to a substantial degree.” This can be related to Japanese martial paths, that is, *budō*, such as Japanese swordsmanship (Sekine & Hata, 2004). However, there is a question whether *budō* should be considered sport. Some authors, such as, for example, Taisen Deshimaru (2003, p. 10), are clearly against this. Nevertheless, everything depends on how wide and of what character the definition of sport is presupposed. Here we can make a basic distinction between a narrow (close) concept of sport (essentialist view) and a broad (open) concept of sport (anti-essentialist view). The former is based on the concept of “sporting games” (see Meier, 1981; 1988; 1989; Suits, 1973) which are mainly rule-governed sporting activities; whereas the latter is based on the contextual view but it needs to be scrutinized carefully, otherwise, sport can be anything we (each different society) call it! (cf. Hsu, 2005) The problem of contextual view is that there is no specific definition on the concept of sport. It all depends how we (each society) interpret that. Therefore, it is necessary for us (sports philosophers) to scrutinize it carefully from different perspectives (such as moral view or educational value). Also, *budō* are difficult to categorize since people may begin practicing *budō* as sport, but as the time of training progresses, they begin to understand rather that they are following a martial path. However, even if we reject the idea of *budō* as sport, we can still transfer to dangerous sports the transience of the self and its recognition through facing danger which are nurtured in *budō*. The aim here is not to fit *budō* into sport, but rather to show with their example a different

approach to the values of dangerous sport. *Budō* is then a very suitable example of demonstrating selflessness in the context of dealing with dangerous situations.

III. DANGEROUS SPORT AND THE “VALUE” OF SELFLESSNESS

Budō, that is, traditional Japanese movement practices, coincide with the Zen perspective of reality. In Japan, Zen permeates nearly every phase of Japanese cultural life and influences the Japanese arts or paths (*dō*), such as tea ceremony (*chadō* or *sadō*), the way of calligraphy (*shodō*), flower arrangement (*ikebana* or *kadō*), dance, theatre as well as the martial paths (*budō*) (Suzuki, 1988, p. 21). However, in this regard, there may be variations between Zen and the many different schools of *budō*. The schools most influenced by Zen were usually those run by masters who taught at *dōjō*³ affiliated with Zen temples, while the masters who taught martial arts in *dōjō* associated with local authorities were less influenced. The influence of Zen on the teachings of the masters is thus exhibited in different measure. Further, in this context, it is also necessary to distinguish *budō* from the westernized martial arts.

However, let us first introduce main characteristics of what we mean by Zen Buddhism. One of the main characteristics of Zen Buddhism is that it rejects conceptual thinking since a concept is always only an approximation of reality. Zen is aware of the limitations of concepts and thus concepts are seen as mis-concepts. Concepts change the sense-experiences of reality and give us a different picture. What Zen seeks is to remove our concepts and to install direct experiencing of what there is. “What there is” is empty of form and is in perpetual flux. (Nhat Hahn, 1988) To capture something with one’s mind would mean changing this nature of transience and continuous change into a static form. But Zen does not try to capture anything and promotes direct experiencing, which is in line with reality.

If we wish to understand what direct experiencing means, first, let us take a look at the process of our experiencing. Primarily we usually get to reality through different concepts that we do not recognize as concepts as we usually think that what we experience is the reality. All in all, we do not usually think much about the way we experience, but rather experience in the way we have learnt. When we think that our life goes fine, we do not feel any necessity to make any change. However, when it does not, we usually try to change our external conditions. When this does not work or is not possible,

³ *Dōjō* is a place of practice for *budō* and the term also means the site of enlightenment (Kiyota, 1990, p. 19).

we may try and change our experiencing. Zen can help us in this. It leads us to destroying the concepts through which we experience. Like this, we start experiencing the reality differently, that is, directly. We gradually become fully immersed in the immediate reality and through it we re-make our lives.

It was said above that we do not usually experience without the mediation of concepts. We do not experience the self without the mediation of concepts either. We tend to identify with something, usually with the things we think are lasting (body, ideas, thinking, beliefs, worked-out concepts etc.). Thus, first, there is a self as most of us usually think that we *are* something. A concept in this sense can be a worked-out concept as well as different ideas through which one understands himself or herself. When in Zen one learns to shatter all his or her concepts, the concept of what the self is needs to be shattered too.

By destroying all concepts, the Zen practitioner can achieve pure and full experiencing. The basis of Zen practice is to support and develop this understanding and experiencing so the self and any other concept will fade away and human beings can approach reality without mediation. Thus Zen supports the mind to be a flowing mind, that is, the mind flows throughout an entire situation and does not stop on anything (Kiyota, 1990, p. 26). Like this, there is no form of one's own mind nor any other set form. All is in flux. We can also refer to this state of mind as a free state of mind or as no-mind (*mushin*) (Kamata, 1992, p. 22). The experiencing with no-mind is not limited, however, only to the mental state. It means experiencing with the entirety of ourselves. If this is realized, everything happens in line with what is happening here and now, and in this way, it is possible to say that the human being is in immediate reality.

One way to promote direct experiencing is through the idea of selflessness. That is why we present it in the context of this text as a value. However, selflessness itself is also only a concept, which is supposed to help the human being realize direct experiencing. Thus it is necessary to note that selflessness is not an ultimate value of Zen as Zen is aware of the fact that any values we set out are concepts established on the basis of our limited individual experiences and knowledge. That is also why Zen is not a philosophy describing how things are. Rather, Zen leads to experiencing things as they are. Therefore the concept of selflessness must also be abandoned.

The practice of Zen is derived from the above-mentioned attitude. Zen practice is usually done in sitting meditation (*zazen*) and slow walking meditation (in *kinhin*). In *zazen* one is in a position that welcomes the direct experiencing to settle in.

Basically, it is sitting while being fully aware, without any pursuing of one's ideas, that is, so to say, while doing nothing. However, Kamata (1992, p. 23) says that Zen can create an infinity of forms – while the still form is the practice of sitting meditation (*zazen*), the movement forms are the different kinds of *budō*. The common foundation of *budō* and Zen consists mainly of this non-conceptual and experiential basis, as they both are about actual practice. When reality is experienced without the mediation of concepts, the practitioner becomes more and more spontaneous, fearless, aimless, ready for the unexpected, fully aware of what is happening, while his or her natural faculties are freed (Herrigel, 1971; Martínková, 2006; Suzuki, 1988). This is all not only helpful for the *budō* practitioner in fighting, but also in everyday approach to things. The practitioner gets flexible and open to what is coming, while his or her movement flows, effortless and efficient.

While direct experiencing is traditionally supported in Zen through *zazen* and *kinhin*, in *budō* it is developed through the endless repetition of one technique to the point of perfection. For example, in *karatedo* it may be seen in the length of time spent repeating one form (*kata*). In archery (*kyudō*) it can mean shooting into a target the size of eighty centimeters in diameter from a distance of three meters for several years (Dürckheim, 2002, p. 30; Herrigel, 1971, p. 29). However, the significance of Zen training in *budō* goes beyond how much we improve our skills in technical practice (Sekine & Hata, 2004, pp. 183-184; Suzuki, 2000). The development of technique is of importance mainly because it leads to the development of full awareness and direct experiencing. Any clinging to the past or preparing for the future leads to an opening or stopping. In other words, when the mind is attracted to an object it stops on it, instead of flowing freely along with the whole situation. Stopping then results in disturbances in direct experiencing with different kinds of disturbing feelings, desires, moods, worries and thought (Herrigel, 1971, p. 40; Kamata, 1992, p. 89; Suzuki, 1988, p. 95). But the *budō* practitioner needs to be ready and open to what is happening at that very moment. As every situation is different, it is dangerous to plan in advance, because things can develop differently than expected. In *budō* this is of immense importance because any stopping causes delay, which can be used by the opponent for an efficient counter-attack. Without direct experiencing the *budō* practitioner becomes vulnerable and an easy target for an opponent. When the response to an attack is not prepared in advance nor blurred by thinking, and the practitioner is open to what is just happening, the reactions are spontaneous and, as innumerable Zen and *budō* stories tell, enormously efficient. The right action cannot be employed by

our conscious self as it is too limited:

[...] all right doing is accomplished only in a state of true selflessness, in which the doer cannot be present any longer as "himself". Only the spirit is present, a kind of awareness which shows no trace of egohood and for that reason ranges without limits through all distances and depths, with "eyes that hear and with ears that see." (Herrigel, 1971, pp. 49-50)

Direct experiencing is especially important when one's life is at stake. Being unattached also includes being unattached to one's own life, to be ready to accept one's death. And this was what the samurai had to learn at a time when fights were a question of life or death. For a samurai, it was necessary to overcome the fear of losing his life. In order to accept one's own death, an understanding of the flowing and transient nature of reality which supports the realization of the unfettered state of mind was helpful. This is why Japan's warrior class was receptive to Zen and its teachings:

First, when a samurai faced his opponent, with his sword drawn, fear inevitably arose. What was the source of this fear? The opponent? The sword that was thrust toward him? The Buddhist response is that fear is created by one's own mind. The samurai had to conquer the fear within oneself before he could conquer the opponent. (Kiyota, 1990, p. 26)

Nowadays, *budō* are not nearly as dangerous or lethal as before because of the safety precautions and protective gear commonly used. Nevertheless, the idea of having one's life at stake has remained. Even though *budō* are no longer meant to be lethal practices, one's life still remains at stake, but in a different sense – it is not the naked life in the sense of survival, but rather, the fully lived life that is in question. And in order to live one's life fully in the sense of the direct experiencing of reality, it is necessary to destroy the self. By this, it is meant that all subjectivity, individualism, concepts and thought must be overcome so that the self can disappear and thus unite with the universal (Deshimaru, 2003, p. 52; Suzuki, 1988, p. 94).

The danger that existed in the age of the samurai has been lessened for the purposes of *budō*, but the attitude towards the self remains the same. Self-surpassing in the context of *budō* is necessary, however, it does not lead to self-affirmation, but is connected with self-dissolution, and direct experiencing. First, there is an illusionary self that causes many problems and hindrances in terms of human experiencing within as well as outside actual martial combat. But in practice this is gradually changed into a selfless flow that is in harmony with the universal flow. The human being surpasses his or her smallness and subjectivity and dissolves into the flow of the universe.

However, even *budō* can be understood as practices

through which *I* can affirm *myself* and seek *my* own perfection. In the Western context, this is often considered to be the case. But like this, *budō* are understood more as martial sports than as *budō*. The westernized martial arts do not usually follow these Zen teachings but rather follow the value of self-affirmation that Russell has offered as the value of dangerous sport. This motivation can be the same with the beginning practitioners of *budō*. However, if the traditional path of *budō* is followed, the previous aim of self-affirmation can gradually evolve into selflessness with the result of an enormous transformation of one's life. One of the features of this transformation is experiencing and understanding that there exists no such "thing" as self nor any other thing, so there is nothing to affirm.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the text above it is evident that there is a vast difference in terms of self-realization or self-perfection in the Western and Eastern context. We could see that the same words do not necessarily imply the same meaning. Western education relates to the self and its improvement. Self-realization in the Western context usually means building and strengthening the self. Other related values are self-affirmation, self-assertion or the pursuit the value of excellence (again understood as the excellence of the self). This is interconnected with the Western emphasis on the individual. Self-realization in the context of Zen Buddhism and *budō*, however, is quite the opposite. Here, unifying with the universal and the dissolution of the individual is sought. This difference is mirrored in dangerous sport as well. While in the West, dangerous sport is mostly understood in terms of the Western impact on the self and self-affirmation, in the example of Japanese *budō* we could see a different understanding, which brings about self-dissolution, direct experiencing and allows inclusion into the universal flow.

Russell (2005) says that an important value of dangerous sport is self-affirmation (often achieved by self-surpassing), which is closely related to self-realisation. But these ideas rely upon a (Western) concept of an individual human self, which is to be the subject of the processes of affirmation, surpassing and realization. Here, the result of self-surpassing seems to be a new "self" that is perhaps to be surpassed yet again. We argue that an alternative result of self-surpassing could be "selflessness", such that the previous aim of self-affirmation can gradually evolve into a selflessness that understands that there is no such thing as "self".

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