

# – The Greased Pig –

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Catching Hold of the *Self* Implicit in the  
Human



*Zen Assays on this Slippery Little Creature*

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*Let us come to view the self as a plural verb rather than a singular noun...*

—Dr. Daniel Siegel



## Contents

Preface .....	7
American Buddhist Lay Practice: .....	9
The Greased Pig—Catching Hold of the Self Implicit in the Human .....	16
The Self as Poetry – The Meditator as Poet .....	24
Buddha & Freud Become Friends.....	29
The Secret of the Self.....	36
When Thinking Is No Trouble at All .....	39
The Seven Koans of Existence.....	65
My Haunt, My Song – Poetry as Language of the Fluid Self .....	70
The Universe Dreaming The Universe Into Existence.....	75
This Flickering Self as Art .....	78
Dogen’s The Self is Definitely You & The MOMA.....	81
What Is Your Original Face Before, During & After Post-Modernism? .....	85
A True Man of No Rank .....	91



## PREFACE

**The Greased Pig – Catching Hold of the *Self* Implicit in the Human**, is a collection of essays on the vagaries and epiphanies of meditation practice in the West. The arresting image of a greased pig, typically chased (but rarely caught) by children and cowboys alike at the county fair, is meant to convey both the laughter and enervation involved in trying to catch such a slippery creature. The pig, of course—a very smart being despite its tendency toward muck & mire—is one of the central archetypal animals of the Three Poisons in Buddhist iconography, and represents delusion (despite its apparent intelligence). Hence, perhaps an apt image of this ornery *self* we keep chasing in the West.

This book, while certainly inspired by Zen (with its quirky language meant more to unsettle and point, than to settle any matter definitively) is aimed at the cultural transition, and transmission, of Buddhist practice in general. Thus, some of the writers mentioned in these essays span the various perspectives of Zen, Theravadin, Tibetan, and other iterations of the original Indian Buddhism that began with Gautama Buddha.

As a loose collection of essays, the book's intent is more akin to painting portraits of the vanishing-self than it is a lawyer's itemization of suspect-number-one's whereabouts, when the crime of *refusing-to-disappear* occurred. As such, I like to utilize the word *assay*, as opposed to *essay*, in a similar manner to the poet Jane Hirshfield: where exploration of a theme, rather than building an argument, is the intent. Or as some have called it, the *lyrical essay*, rather than the philosophical argument.

Still, this particular collection of assays is in fact intended to be a bit more didactic than my other forays into the poetics of Zen, such as *Elegy To The Bone Kimono*, or, *The Devil's In My Neck*. In this edition of *The Greased Pig*, I do intend an exploration more psychological in its approach. As a therapist, I feel compelled to chart the psyche's sea, while the poet in me is content to sing along the way—and the meditator, to enjoy the silence.

Which is perhaps one of the points of this collection: that in the West, we have the poet Walt Whitman's *I am Legion*, the sense of many selves and voices existent in a single human being. While these selves may have no more substance, in traditional Buddhist

analysis, than the Cheshire Cat in *Alice In Wonderland* (though the toothy *smile* floating in air is still a dead giveaway), these selves never really go away. Nor are they supposed to.

As with the Zen formulation of *form & emptiness*, the ephemeral self in its many protean disguises is ever moving between these poles—and flaunting itself, flagrantly, even as it keeps disappearing. Unless a lobotomy is your goal, or the concentrative absorption of the Hindu *fakirs* who always had more trouble living *in* society than outside it, then making peace with the self, rather than trying to escape, ignore, or amputate it, is the better path. To be a friend to the self, rather than its surgeon.

The entire thrust of this effort is inspired by my work with the Zen teacher, John Tarrant, and the Pacific Zen Institute’s ongoing exploration of what a more native iteration of Buddhist practice might look like in the West. The way he tells the story, there is something unique in the form that Chan Buddhism took in China after Bodhidharma traveled there from India, and before it morphed yet again into Japanese Zen and Korean Son—a form filled with humor, the arts, and perhaps a way of practice quite suited to our current era in the West. For an exploration of the Pacific Zen Institute’s forays into such matters, visit them at [www.PacificZen.org](http://www.PacificZen.org)

I close *The Greased Pig* with an account of my first visit to John Tarrant’s Open Mind meditation retreat, as a way of settling the previous chapters into an example of their implication for practice. But to begin, I focus a discrete lens on certain writers who I also count among the seminal figures in Western Buddhist innovation, who themselves rode the waves of the initial crossing of Asian Buddhist teachers to our shores. By naming a few, I fail to name the many equally engaged in exploring these themes. *Awakening is something we do together*, as Tarrant likes to say. It’s good to have friends along the way.

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## **American Buddhist Lay Practice: Art, Inquiry & The Everyday Messiness of the World**

The new American Buddhism, in these still-early stages of cultural transmission from Asia to America, looks a bit different from its ancient origins. This should be not only expected, but embraced. Traditional wisdom posits that 500 years must pass before a new culture begins to manifest clearly its own flowering of the Buddha's message. We're just getting started, here in the West.

The Buddha's timeless wisdom is indeed, well, timeless. Yet, in the span of his eighty-three years he became a master at tailoring his core insights to each person, village, and audience he encountered—be they naked ascetics, wealthy merchants, kings, women, children, philosophers, or pragmatists. Buddhist teachers, too, have been as varied, serene, ornery, erudite or simple as one might expect from human beings. We are lucky, now in the West, to have grown some of our own—teachers conversant with the particulars of contemporary culture, identity, and developmental peculiarities.

Stephen Batchelor is one of these teachers, who is somewhat ecumenical in his Buddhist approach, and generally well-respected by differing traditions. In his recent book *After Buddhism*, Batchelor focuses not only on painting a clearer historical picture of what early Buddhism was actually like – nestled in its unique cultural cradle – but also, how best to focus practice in modern times.

Batchelor says the emergence of Chan Buddhism in China (1,000 years after Buddha's life in India) included the rejection of monasticism as the primary vehicle for serious practice, recognizing instead that “the practice of the dharma was entirely compatible with a life embedded in the everyday messiness of the world.” The spirit of this expression of Buddhism, captured here by Batchelor, is as pertinent now as it was to the ancient Chinese:

Meditation is more usefully compared to the ongoing practice of an art than the development of a technical ability. Just as a painter or a musician needs to develop a certain range of technical skills in order to flourish as an accomplished artist, so a meditator needs to be adept at a number of technical skills to flourish as a practitioner of life. There will, in either case, be a spectrum of individuals ranging from those who are naturally gifted but technically incompetent to those

who are technically competent but lacking in vision, spontaneity, and imagination. The aim of a fully realized practice of the dharma is to find a balance between the two. (pg 257)

After a quarter-century of my own meditation practice, guided by the technical-virtuosity focus characterizing much of the Buddhism that first reached Western shores, I've been heartened to discover this somewhat lost artistic-focus that flourished in China as *Chan*—which is only now beginning to find expression here in America. Scholars and practitioners such as Stephen Batchelor, Peter Hershock, Mark Epstein, the Pacific Zen tradition of John Tarrant and Joan Sutherland, are cultivating a practice more inclusive of the lay-life, more focused on spontaneity and imagination in *living*, than in attempting to replicate a monastic approach in this emerging Western tradition of Buddhism.

There are aspects of Buddhist tradition that value aesthetic experience and the arts, including architecture, sculpture, poetry, calligraphy, pottery, painting, martial arts, and gardening “as integral parts of dharma practice”. Batchelor says,

By contrast, the Indian-based schools of Southeast and Central Asia have tended to be suspicious of art, treating it as a distraction from realizing the contemplative states of mind required for enlightenment and liberation. They consider the production of art to be largely a responsibility for the laity and limit its use to devotional and religious purposes. As a result, artistic practice is generally discouraged in their monastic communities.

Indian Buddhism's encounter with the culture of China, its long history of artistic and literary traditions, its love of the natural world's beauty, helped produce a new, unique flavor of Buddha's original “one taste”. Of course, Buddhism's encounter with each new civilization shaped the somewhat differing focuses of Buddhism that emerged in Southeast and Central Asia (which came to the West primarily through Vipassana and Insight/Mindfulness meditation), Tibetan Buddhism, the Chan of China, Son of Korea, Zen of Japan.

Batchelor, though, points to another key shift that, while obviously entwined with culture, describes a differing core sensibility in each tradition: the early strands of Buddhism ended up focusing more on *belief*—in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and the thorough iterations of Buddhist psychology in the Abhidamma—while the Buddhism that emerged in China, then Korea and Japan, came to focus on the centrality of *doubt* as the underlying core of inquiry.

Batchelor says he was drawn to Korean Son because of its positive emphasis on doubt, as well as the valuing of *imagination*—and the dynamic way doubt and imagination interact to spur deep curiosity about ever-changing human identity in relationship with an ever-changing world. The core early koan of *What is this?* more catalytic in its way, in this tradition, than adherence to Buddhist proscriptions—even those exemplified by The Four Noble Truths, or the Eight-Fold Path. Nothing wrong with four of this or eight of that—but it is the deeply curious inquiry into such things that is core, and the recognition that most “truths” will embody more paradox than mathematically enumerated certainties. Batchelor says:

Such questioning provides another perspective on the practice of the fourfold task. To embrace “dukkha” entails letting go of one’s views about suffering in order to open oneself to the mystery of suffering. Since “dukkha” is shorthand for one’s life in its totality, “What is this?” becomes an uncompromising inquiry into what is going on at any given moment. This kind of embodied attention entails the suspension of all views, including Buddhist views. In posing this question, it is irrelevant whether things are impermanent, suffering, not-self, or empty. One ponders the mystery that life is occurring at all...

The aim of such questioning is not to develop perplexity but to impel one to achieve unambiguous, affirmative insight into life’s impermanent, tragic, and not-self nature...The absence of reactivity leads to a spontaneous vitality in which the world is revealed as questionable, mysterious, and radiant.

What strikes me, too, is the natural “hinge” between such questioning and the realms of art—poetry, painting, music, the whole spectrum—which also rely on fresh inquiry to express the world in its eccentric, gorgeous, brutal cacophonies. Rather than art primarily reflecting religious certainties and principles, as pre-Renaissance art did in the West, contemporary art and literature are perhaps key to providing Buddhism fresh avenues of inquiry and expression.

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If meditation, then, is as much art as technique, inquiry more than belief, what should be our focus?

Stephen Batchelor’s chapter, “The Everyday Sublime”, provides such insight, and is itself sublime. It is a modern articulation of meditation that is both timely and critical

for the modern aspirant. These brief lines contain hard-earned wisdom from a scholar and teacher on the front-lines of Buddhism's transition to Western culture:

Meditation originates and culminates in the everyday sublime. I have little interest in achieving states of sustained concentration in which the sensory richness of experience is replaced by pure introspective rapture. I have no interest in reciting mantras, visualizing Buddhas or mandalas, gaining out-of-body experiences, reading other people's thoughts, practicing lucid dreaming, or channeling psychic energies through chakras, let alone letting my consciousness be absorbed in the transcendent perfection of the Unconditioned. Meditation is about embracing what is happening to this organism as it touches its environment in this moment. I do not reject the experience of the mystical. I reject only the view that the mystical is concealed behind what is merely apparent, that it is anything other than what is occurring in time and space right now. The mystical does not transcend the world but saturates it. "The mystical is not how the world is," noted Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1921, "but that it is."

This, of course, is not a new perspective per se. Hindu and Buddhist history is layered with many iterations of this basic dichotomy between the mystical interior quest, and one rooted in the particulars of this world. But it bears repeating, as it seems prescient to our particular epoch. Rather than flee the given world for an interior one, the Western enlightenment points us toward the world itself—as it did for the ancient Chinese.

As understood by Edmund Burke and the Romantic poets, the sublime exceeds our capacity of representation. The world is excessive: every blade of grass, every ray of sun, every falling leaf is excessive... They overreach us, spilling beyond the boundaries of thought...leaving one speechless, overwhelmed with either wonder or terror. Yet for we human animals who delight and revel in our place, who crave security, certainty, and consolation the sublime is banished and forgotten. As a result, life is rendered opaque and flat. Each day is reduced to the repetition of familiar actions and events, which are blandly comforting but devoid of an intensity we both yearn for and fear.

To experience the everyday sublime requires that we dismantle the perceptual conditioning that insists on seeing ourselves and the world as essentially comfortable, permanent, solid, and "mine." It means to embrace suffering and conflict rather than to shy away from them, to cultivate the embodied attention that contemplates the tragic, changing, empty, and impersonal dimensions of life, rather than succumbing to fantasies of self-glorification or self-loathing. This takes time. It is a lifelong practice.

The everyday sublime. A life-long practice. I wish someone had told me this earlier. Better late than never. Batchelor follows with a description of the simple, core practice that meditation is meant to embody for human beings:

At its core, meditation is an existential “dwelling” within the primary rhythms of the body that link one seamlessly to the biosphere. As a discipline, it involves constant vigilance against getting “eaten up” by the rush of thoughts in one’s head and to instead keep returning to the felt embodiment of experience that is so easily forgotten. By calling it a “noble dwelling” Gotama suggests that it is more than just a psychological skill in controlling one’s thoughts. It encourages a moral stance of dignity. Settling into the rhythm of breathing leads to a balanced and upright physical posture as well as a dignified and sensitized relation to others and the world.

...the everyday sublime...is revealed when the mind becomes still and focused through settling into the rhythm of breathing. The sacred is not found in a transcendent realm beyond oneself or the world; it is disclosed here and now once the mind relaxes, quiets, and becomes clearer and sharper as attention stabilizes on the breath. The “sacred” dimension of experience opens up as one lets go of the constrictive, obsessive concern with “me” and “mine”, thereby allowing a return to a world that transcends one’s petty interests and reflects one’s ultimate concerns. Such a world is excessive; it is not manageable. It pours forth relentlessly, voluptuously, but is gone by the time one reaches out to seize and control it.

The key phrase that reflects this shift away from a purely inner-focus on the breath and avoidance of “thinking”, is this:

At its core, meditation is an existential “dwelling” within the primary rhythms of the body that link one seamless to the biosphere.

The path of practice is not a struggle to get “enlightened” quickly, as a discrete occurrence separate from this core process of “dwelling” in body and biosphere. It *is* this core process of embodiment. Batchelor goes on to say:

Since focusing on the breath grounds one in the very rhythm of life it allows one to feel the same rhythm that animates other sentient creatures and realize an empathetic rapport with all that breathes. Such openhearted equanimity provides the foundation for wishing all others to be well...They are not calculated desires whose fulfillment is judged in terms of achieving a satisfactory result; rather, they are the yearnings of a sensibility that cannot hold itself back any more than the sun can restrain itself from radiating light and heat.

The latter statement is perhaps a helpful rephrasing of the standard Buddhist prayer-

affirmation to “save all beings”. It is more of a sun’s intrinsic attribute of radiating light and heat, rather than a triage nurse’s scan of the emergency-room-of-life with too many patients to save in one shift.

There are other passages in Batchelor’s chapter which serve as correctives to aspects of learned-meditation that have become skewed in cross-cultural translation:

Like birds and deer, a meditator...does not intend to breathe in any particular way...You just let the body be the body, let the breathing happen, while remaining full aware...The breath rises and falls as a tidal rhythm throughout the entire body...

Gotama compares a meditator who dwells on the breath to a skilled woodturner, who understands the effect of the slightest movement the hands and fingers will have on the wood being worked on the lathe. This analogy illustrates how mindfulness is not just about stepping back and passively noticing what is passing before the inner eye. It involves an exploratory and potentially transformative relationship with the pulsing, sensitive, and conscious “material” of life itself. Such embodied attention heightens mindful awareness, intensifies curiosity about and investigation of what is unfolding, stimulates an energetic application to the task, induces a sense of delight in what one is doing, and leads to tranquility, concentration and equanimity.

Nor is such meditation confined to what you do in a formal seated posture...The practice extends to everything you do. To associate mindfulness primarily with sitting on a cushion for a prescribed length of time is to limit its effectiveness. The aim is to integrate mindful attention into the totality of your conscious life.

Batchelor then cites a passage from the Buddha which is “repeated throughout the canon”; he updates the terminology to make it more contemporary:

They are ones who act with full awareness when leaving and returning, when looking ahead and looking back, when flexing and extending their limbs, when wearing their clothes and carrying their bags, when eating, drinking, consuming, and tasting, when shitting and pissing when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

This is a timely description of modern Western lay-practice. A primary focus on sitting meditation (which has been the primary mode of practice transmitted to the West) is like standing at the free throw line on a basketball court and practicing 100 free throws. But this is not the primary purpose nor activity of meditation; the idea is to “get in the game”, is to *play*. In other words, the goal and process of meditation are the same: to *live*.

Sitting is just one posture among many during the day. While it helps establish “good mechanics” of attention akin to the basketball player’s mechanics, pursuing such a strategy is more apt to produce a “good meditator” than an integrated “enlightened” person. Just as only practicing free throws may render a basketball player completely incapable of moving around the court fluidly in the midst of its chaos, or making free throws *during* the intensities of the game itself.

Let us *live*, then, let us navigate the court of life—by remembering that meditation off-the-cushion is just as important as meditation on-the-cushion. That the everyday messiness of lay life, the urges of art, the domains of inquiry – and as we shall see in the essays that follow, the demands of the modern self – are all aspects of meditation. Of this new American Buddhist lay-practice slowly budding in the West.

## The Greased Pig—Catching Hold of the Self Implicit in the Human

As discussed in the previous essay, Stephen Batchelor’s book *After Buddhism* is a compelling call to root one’s own meditative practice in the implicit realities of modern life. Not aspiring to the myth Gautama Buddha became, but rather the robust human being who awoke. Leaning-into the ways in which we, too, may become more awake in this complex, contingent, and impermanent world.

Batchelor says there has been much lost, or mystified, in the transmission of Buddhism to the West. He uses keen linguistic and historical scholarship to examine the truer meaning of key words, such as *suffering*, and *self*. But the book is no mere act of scholarship—it is a finger pointing, in its own way, toward the changeable waking-light of our moon-like psyches.

I appreciate Batchelor’s syncretistic approach to Buddhism, with his broad and deep background in Tibetan, Korean Son (Zen), and Theravadin traditions. The book has much more to offer than the thread I pull in this essay, but this particular-thread—how to hold or ignore the *ephemeral self and its experience of suffering*—is what draws me most. It is in many ways the essential thread to unravel, and reweave, in the practice of Western Buddhism.

Traditional Buddhism often seems to lean toward “disappearing” this troublesome self, as though we were Mafia hitmen targeting the stool-pigeon of our own minds. And no wonder—even the Western cultural heritage has had trouble getting a hold of this slippery self. Philosophers and psychologists and priests tend to look like so many cowboys attempting to wrestle a greased-pig to the ground, when it comes to the self. Still, traditional Buddhism too often seems to ignore such rodeos, ignore the cute and snorting little rascal all together. Or call it names – the pig being the third of “three poisons” (delusion), along with the rooster (greed), and the snake (hatred).

In the West, Buddhist meditation teachers and psychotherapists (such as Dr. Mark Epstein, included in a subsequent essay) are attempting to embrace this farmyard of the mind, articulate what is traditionally known as the *non-dual* path: where self and no-self get better acquainted as aspects of a singular human rodeo.

Here is Batchelor's language regarding emptiness and self:

The realization of emptiness begins with an inquiry into what it means to be a self. When you try to get to the essence of a person, whether yourself or someone else, the quest goes on and on. It is not that no one is there—the uncanny sense of someone uniquely alive persists. But you will never arrive at an irreducible core of which you can say: “There! Found you!” In this sense, the self or person is said to be “empty”.

What an eloquent description of this essential Buddhist inquiry. But Batchelor goes on to describe the traditional Tibetan Buddhist philosophy he was raised in, and now finds misleading, with its insistence that emptiness “removes a fiction that was never there”. The belief that any sense of “inherent existence turns out to be a chimera”. Similarly, he summarizes the Theravadin notion that “unless we dispel the fiction of *self* or *inherent existence* we will never behold the true nature of things.”

Batchelor thinks this negation misses what the Buddha was actually pointing towards. That the Buddha actually taught “dwelling in emptiness” as a *robust, fully contingent human enterprise immersed in the world of the senses*, rather than a state of “non-conceptual meditation”. This is certainly more akin to John Tarrant's Zen approach, too—another insightful Western teacher (also included in a subsequent essay) who says the *chimera of self* is nothing to get rid of per se, but a poetic encounter with the evident-world that keeps rising each moment to meet us.

As if to test this out, as I write these words I have one of my frequent “moments” staring out the bay window from my desk into the garden: the yellow of lemons against leafy green astounding in the storm, the clusters of orange mandarins arching the tree limbs low, the Buddha bust against the far fence so serene in the rain. My *self*, whatever fiction it may be, is indeed quite uncanny in its persistence. I have not disappeared, I am still here—yet the boundaries between this permeable self and the lemons, mandarin oranges, and Buddha are what disappear as I gaze through the bay window. Feel my warm socks in old leather shoes. Throat scratchy, nose dripping like rain from what I wish was an illusory cold.

Batchelor says the earliest Buddhist texts found in the Pali Canon and the Chinese Agamas do not speak about emptiness primarily as *negation* of the form and appearances of world and mind. In the *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness*, Buddha tells Ananda that he

does “mainly dwell by dwelling in emptiness” even in the midst of his kinsfolk in the town of Nagaraka. The Pali word *viharati*, which has often come to refer to a monastery, actually describes more of a “primordial relation to this earth on which we live. Emptiness is first and foremost a condition in which we dwell, abide, and live.” Batchelor summarizes by saying,

Emptiness thus seems to be a perspective, a sensibility, a way of being in this poignant, contingent world. The ‘great person’ would be one who has cultivated such a sensibility until it has become entirely natural. Rather than being the negation of ‘self’, emptiness discloses the dignity of a person who has realized what it means to be fully human.

To be fully human. In an entirely natural way.

Such emptiness is far from being an ultimate truth that needs to be understood through logical inference and then directly realized in a state of nonconceptual meditation. It is a sensibility in which one dwells, not a privileged epistemological object that, through knowing, one gains a cognitive enlightenment...

Rather, it is a way to *live authentically on earth*. Buddha, in the cited discourse, tells the story of a man who seeks to overcome his anxiety and suffering by entering into progressively refined states of meditative absorption, only to find that at each stage there is a new and more refined sense of suffering. Only at this point, “having exhausted the possibilities of meditating in sylvan solitude, does he realize that all these exercises are ultimately futile because they will come to an end”. Batchelor says that the *Shorter Discourse on Emptiness* concludes with this insight:

To dwell in emptiness means to inhabit fully the embodied space of one’s sensory experience, but in a way that is no longer determined by one’s habitual reactivity. To dwell in emptiness does not mean that one will no longer suffer. As long as one has a body and senses, one will be ‘prone to the anxiety’ that comes with being a conscious, feeling creature made of flesh, bones, and blood. And this would have been just as true for Gotama as it is for us today.

My mother, still lively in her eighties, knocks on the bay window in her lavender raincoat, requesting help with the stuck parking brake in her car. She is anxious to get to her exercise class. Her body is failing, her mind sharp, but finding the right word or name is more elusive these days. To “inhabit fully the embodied space of one’s sensory experience” in your eighties is a practice indeed—one the Buddha, too, experienced till

he was round my mother's age. The point, as Batchelor says, is not to reject these experiences "in favor of a hypothetical 'non-duality' but to learn to live with them more lightly, fluidly, and ironically".

Lightly, fluidly, ironically—I can do this. It seems more *human* somehow than the visions of enlightenment hovering as a pretty ribbon-wrapped present in the sleepy brains of children awaiting Christmas morning.

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Stephen Batchelor's pragmatic, poetic descriptions of what he thinks Buddha really taught is as illuminating as it is down to earth. Rather than enlightenment being an abstract, other-worldly event, he describes it more as a profound awareness of human life in its contingent, unpredictable and interconnected flow:

Awareness of conditionality discloses the existential horizons of our time-bound life on earth. To dwell in the present does not mean enclosing yourself in a punctual now, severed from past and future. It means settling in a lucid equanimity that is as open to your personal and communal history as it is open to the projects that can be actualized in whatever time remains before your death. There was one project the Buddha regarded as subsuming all other projects: namely, the project of a finite and temporal self embedded in a finite and temporal world.

The daily practice of a "finite and temporal self, embedded in a finite and temporal world". This sounds more like a sane life than even the most beautiful ancient monastery could provide. Enlightenment lies in the human, not outside of it. The following passages further illustrate this sense of full-humanity as the only ground in which enlightenment may do its full work:

The places to which I belong are manifold: a race, a gender, an ethnicity, a culture, a nation, a city, town, or village, a social position, an employment, a political part, a religion (or lack thereof), not to mention a psychological and emotional identity as "me". At different times I catch myself delighting and reveling in all of these things. Here I am: a white European male from Scotland, living in a village near Bordeaux, a middle-class intellectual, a writer and teacher liberal and green in politics, a secular Buddhist who spends a lot of time narrating, editing, and worrying about the story of me in my head.

It is impossible not to consider oneself in such terms. The Buddha may have no longer delighted and reveled in his place, but for as long as he lived he belonged to the solar lineage, was a subject

of King Pasenadi of Kosala, the father of his son (Rahula), a nobleman from the town of Kapilavatthu, a cousin of the Sakiyan chief, Mahanama. And since he continued to inhabit the same body, nervous system, and brain with which he was born, I can see no reason why his primary intuitive sense of being the person he was would have changed significantly either.

Identity may be contingent, impermanent, mercurial, something we love or loathe—but it is the only terrain in which awakening occurs. We do not wake to some dreamland version of enlightenment, but to this very life, in this very body. It is a human life. I am grateful.

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In Batchelor's chapter entitled "Experience", he quite eloquently says what needs to be said over and again, differently nuanced for different ages. First, the famous Nagarjuna's paradoxical verse:

Were mind and matter me,  
I would come and go like them.  
If I were something else,  
They would say nothing about me.

Paradox is the language of *this* realm, hinting at what is obvious in another. In Buddhism, it is the question of whether we *are*, or *are-not*, truly made of *mind and matter*. If we are only mind and body, then we are only pragmatically real in a temporary fashion. Or, if enlightenment is something other than mind and body, it would "say nothing about me".

The Buddha says, *It is in this fathom-high mortal frame endowed with perception and mind, that I make known the world.* The entirety of one's experience, the vast world we come to know, is located inside the few feet of space we inhabit. Batchelor says there is no other location, realm, altered state of consciousness to liberate us, per se, from this contingency. We wake as humans, in a human world.

But what a world it is. One that makes us long for escape, it seems, given the persistent quest for liberation from its contingencies. Elsewhere, Buddha says,

It whirls, it whirls, that is why it's called the world...

This is the nature of experience. Yet we seemingly do most anything to have it otherwise. To attempt to nail-down this whirl & whorl, to hold it, make something permanent of it. This next segment from Batchelor captures this struggle quite lyrically:

“Dukkha” is the tragic dimension of life, implicit in experience because the world is constantly shifting and changing into something else. “Dukkha” is life’s minor key, its bittersweet taste, its annoyingly fugitive charm, its fascinating and terrifying sublimity. The origin of “dukkha” lies in the very structure of the world itself, not in an emotion such as craving or an erroneous cognition such as ignorance. A contingent and impermanent world like ours is not the kind of place where we will find enduring happiness. Yet the more we wholeheartedly open ourselves to and embrace this tragic dimension, the more we appreciate the beauty, joy, and enchantment of the world: precisely because they are fleeting and destined to vanish.

What a beautiful description of the word *suffering*, one that is traditionally translated as a blunt and featureless noun. Batchelor elaborates:

The whirling disintegration of the world is a failing to be deplored only if we measure the world against the eternity, perfection, and unity of an Absolute. But when God or God’s surrogates are outside one’s domain, the world is just what it is, neither to be preferred to nor rejected in favor of something else. Instead of grasping hold of the world in order to preserve it from falling apart, or recoiling from it in order to transcend it, someone who practices the dharma embraces the world in order to comprehend it. Such an embrace nurtures a contemplative relation with experience, where attending to what is happening transforms its passing into the fertile nirvanic space from which an unprecedented response to the world’s “dukkha” can emerge.

This “contemplative relation with experience” which fosters in each moment “an unprecedented response” to the world’s suffering, and our own, is what the Buddha is truly pointing to, according to Batchelor.

Most of the original Buddhist texts use, or are translated into, a “churchy” good-bad approach to these intrinsically nuanced concepts, such as suffering and its causes. I find Batchelor’s language, that of a Westerner skeptical of a “magical” approach to Buddhism, but conversant with its pragmatism and lyricism, very refreshing.

Likewise, Batchelor uses fresh language to mediate the longstanding dispute about the existence of a “self” as a real or fictional entity. Beyond the traditional dispute-settlement language granting “relative” reality to the experience of self while denying it

in any “absolute” sense, Batchelor alludes to this whole “anti-Hindu, anti-Atman” argument as a red herring of sorts. The Buddha’s message, he emphasizes, is a *pragmatic* one, not primarily a metaphysical or ontological one. His more-Western language used to describe this traditional notion of “anatta”, of “not-self”, is poetic and pragmatic at the same time:

Although Buddhism says a great deal about the mind, it says hardly anything about the self or person who is conscious, who feels, perceives, intends, attends, and thinks. This is largely, I suspect, because “anatta” is misinterpreted as “no self”...

This disjunction is problematic: it is like saying that individual hydrogen and oxygen atoms are real, but the water molecules formed through their combination are illusory. Taking such a stance means that Buddhists have to explain how such a non-existent self can function as a moral agent, capable of making responsible choices with consequences that will determine a person’s fate.

There *is* somebody home, so to speak—and in Western psychological terms, this slippery little self is an essential poetic and pragmatic phenomenon to fully appreciate, even if it *is* a bit like trying to tackle a greased pig. Batchelor says:

Gotama recognizes that consciousness is a seamless whole that is not equivalent to the sum of its parts, much in the same way that a hand as a whole is not reducible to the sum of its fingers, skin, bones, nerves, and muscles. Just as my hand can pick up a glass of water and raise it to my lips (which none of the parts can do on their own), so consciousness has a total, unified awareness of what is happening that none of its constituents...can achieve on their own.

Such language helps the therapist and poet in me find a common field with the Buddha, riding my belligerent ox-mind about, neither abandoning nor confining myself to the bull’s immense snorting body. There are more serious matters to engage with than analyzing whether I’m real or not:

Experience happens to you. You are thrown into this world at birth, subjected to accidents, infections, cancers, and strokes; if you survive you will age and decline until one day you exhale your last breath and die. Each of us seeks to mitigate the negatives in life by taking care of our health, keeping fit and active, avoiding dark alleys and war zones, but in the end the grim reaper cuts us down. There is nothing we can do about it. Gotama regards belief in self as the conviction that one is ultimately in control of one’s destiny...

We are *not* in control of such things. What I *can* learn to do is relax my constant reactionary fight against this wild and turbulent world—instead, to swim inside of it, embrace its very flow. An iron-clad self can only defend, like a clunky medieval knight. The mindful self, the meditative self, learns to un-armor—to live wide-awake as part of life, rather than primarily attempting to control life. Batchelor describes this “Buddhist” self:

...the self is ambiguous and elusive, incapable of being pinned down and defined. Today we might say that this is because a person is not a static, circumscribed thing but a hub of complex living processes that are continually evolving and changing in vital interactions with the environment.

This is skillful, beautiful language—casting in contemporary terms the timeless wisdom of the very-human being named Gautama Buddha. Like us, born in a landscape of particulars, in perpetual inquiry, chasing the greased pig of the self implicit in the human.

## The Self as Poetry – The Meditator as Poet

I've been appreciating Peter Hershock's book again, *Chan Buddhism*, which I purchased at one of the Pacific Zen Institute retreats led by its core teacher, John Tarrant. In many ways, Hershock's book complements Stephen Batchelor's, *After Buddhism*. Each brings a kind of poetic immediacy to this still-new Western Buddhism, transmitted down the centuries through Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures. It takes a kind of poetics, a nimble translation, to keep the Buddha's core insights fresh.

After many years of practicing mindfulness meditation – brought to America's shores by the Theravadins of Southeast Asia – I have immersed myself again in Buddhism's trek from India to China, which helped Buddhism flower into the Chinese *Chan* that eventually also made its way to the West, primarily through Japanese Zen. But Chan is its own earlier expression of Zen – and somewhat less *samurai*, so to speak, with its iconoclastic Marx Brothers approach to koans, and its rootedness in everyday life (rather than monastic life).

*Zen* is perhaps my favorite word—three letters rather than Chan's four, and maybe cooler. Given my father's early exposure of his children to all things Japanese, Zen has been my natural aesthetic. But as Tarrant says, Zen has primarily been a monastic transmission to America, with all its attendant Japanese culture and ritual. Which I love. But *Chan* embodies more of the raucous lay-spirit that in some ways better reflects the lay practice predominant in America, and is where Zen had its origins.

Zen, to much of the Buddhism that has come to our shores, has tended to focus on “attaining” enlightenment in the context of formal sitting practice—except of course among the early Beats, who tagged the word onto just about everything. Chan, however, is more about living in an enlightening way, intimate with and not-untouched by the world's vicissitudes. Hershock begins his book with,

This is not a book about enlightenment...Chan Buddhism does not promise any such extraordinary state of full and final spiritual attainment. Indeed, it explicitly insists that there is ultimately nothing to attain. The path of enlightening all beings, Chan master Mazu notes, is just “ordinary mind”. Of course, it is ordinary mind with a difference: the absence of any boundary or horizon on the other side of which lies something “more” or “better” or “mystically complete”...

How's them apples? Enlightenment, as such, is not *beyond* the apple, nor a return to any pristine Edenic garden. It *is* the apple.

Passing through the gate of Chan is to leave behind the narrowness of the self and its binding destinies...directs us into an unending process of cultivating...both appreciative and contributory virtuosity...this is not freedom from the world and its relationships but tirelessly within them...a process of restoring our original intimacy with all things...

This language puts one on the scent of Chan's unique poetry—cultivating *virtuosity* in both appreciating and contributing to life, being intimate with all things, tirelessly, rather than seeking to escape them.

Similar to Batchelor's recasting of the traditional Buddhist concept of *no-self* into a modern idiom, Hershock describes the practice of seeing all things as *empty (sunya)* as indicating they/we exist as part of a “relational pattern of interdependence”:

Things can be seen as having no essence or core because they actually consist of particular patterns of relationship. That is, nothing literally exists or stands apart from all others... Emptiness—the absence of any abiding, essential nature—is often equated with fullness. Far from signifying its privation, the emptiness of a thing consists in its unique way of bringing all other things into focus. Through each thing, all things join.

The self, then, is not an illusion, and not empty as a nihilistic black hole. It is, however, also not primarily a single, enduring entity that must be defended, against a life constantly seeking to change it. Ego versus the World. It is more that we, too, *are* this world, a part of it, interdependent with all things.

This is the genius of early Chinese culture, even before Indian Buddhism made its way across and around the Himalayas into China a thousand years after the Buddha's death. That the self is part of an interdependent web—that realization-itself occurs within this web, not apart from it. Initially, Chinese scholars developed a mad passion for translating and cataloguing as many original Indian Buddhist texts as they could find, including the focus on “no-self” as counterpoint to the Indian Hindu obsession with the eternal *Self/self* of the divine *Atman*. Eventually, Chan Buddhism developed its own focus, blending imported Indian Buddhism with the centuries-old wisdom of Chinese Confucianism & Taoism. With its own unique expression of how this contingent “self” best conducts itself nestled in the web of life.

Confucius and Lao Tzu lived in China roughly during the same era as Gautama Buddha in India—circa the sixth century BCE. Confucius’ teachings, collected in the dialogues and anecdotes of the *Analects*, began as a “coherent and comprehensive strategy for responding to personal, social, and political turbulence and decline—a method for restoring settled and harmoniously flourishing community”. It centered on respectful ritual conduct (*li*) and the cultivation of authoritative personhood (*ren*). When *li* is carried out in the daily life of a family, community, society with a spirit of *ren*, “it is like hearing a virtuoso pianist giving an inspired performance of a Mozart concerto...only the virtuoso makes the music come so fully alive that everyone present is moved by it”, according to Hershock.

Lao Tzu was the *jazz* counterpoint to Confucius’ *classical* music. The wandering Taoist sage an improvisational master “soloing with unconstrained immediacy over the changes of a driving rhythm section”, as opposed to the embodied virtuosity of honoring tradition. As Lao Tzu’s student Chuang Tzu articulated:

When energy (qi) circulates freely, the ten thousand things take care of themselves.

Perhaps akin to the right and left hemispheres of a single brain, Taoism (or Daoism) served as creative complement in Chinese culture to the linear ordinances of Confucianism:

Instead of carefully rehearsing culturally regulated rituals as a way of countering the conditions of human suffering, the Daoist tradition recommends letting go of any and all principles and certainties. In the unending transformation of things and events, insisting on such regularities is simply to deny our continuity with all things.

So, Chinese culture embodied in its own *Yin/Yang* symbol these two contrary but constantly intertwining principles: Confucian humanism and Taoist (or Daoist) naturalism. In more contemporary terms, akin perhaps to Yo-Yo Ma’s exquisite rendition of Bach’s Cello Suites versus the improvisational genius of Thelonious Monk. All part of one music. One life. But in each, the contingent interconnected self is assumed as an aspect of life, not as something to be rid of or vacated—the mistranslation of which, it seems, still haunts Western Buddhists.

According to Hershock,

In China, the development of fully Chinese Buddhism eventually involved blazing a...responsive Middle Path between Confucianism's humanistic "li" and Daoism's cosmic/natural "dao", between conduct demonstrating authoritative personhood and conduct marked by free and easy spontaneity.

In neither case, however, was this American misperception of the self as primarily an "illusion" a primary part of Chan Buddhism. The self is as-assumed as weather, emperors, society, and lonely mountains are. Rather, the path entails how to find one's unique balance of *li* (ritual) and *tao* (natural improvisation) in the virtuoso expression of *ren* (authoritative personhood)—the self as maestro in the very song one is part of, whether classical, jazz, or opera!

Reflecting on another of China's exquisite cultural and philosophical contributions, the *I Ching (Book of Changes)* extends the metaphor of the self's position within the matrix of life in a corollary, almost poetic manner. The sixty-four six-line hexagrams of the *I Ching* describe the "common situational changes" that occur in life's unceasing flux, as elements of both life-and-self temporarily take shape, then shift into new temporary order. While often used in a divinatory manner, this "book of changes" is really a poetic way of expressing the unceasing interdependency of the conscious-self, poised halfway between heaven and earth—arms and heart outstretched, feet grounded but dancing, finger to the wind, feeling one's way through the shifting weather of life. The self as maestro, as embodied opera, as poet expressing in *ren* the exquisite *suchness* of self-in-motion-in-the-given-world—rather than self-as-scarecrow that one attempts to burn, or clock one attempts to dismantle.

This reminds me of poetry – the poet with a limited dictionary of words, yet with this finite book of words, the poet unceasingly invents herself and the world around him in endless variation. The self as expressive verb as well as dense noun, with a little adjective-flair thrown in.

The *self* in Chan Buddhism, in Zen, is more of a poetic phenomenon than a fact that either exists or doesn't, in some final way. The meditator is a kind of poet, with not only the 64 hexagrams of the Book of Changes to mark the shifting self-world, but the

1,025,109 words of the evolving English language with which to give expression to it. The One expressed *in* the Ten Thousand Things. Shakespeare himself ostensibly invented 1,700 new words. Perhaps Western Buddhism, with its flair for both classical emulation and jazzy improvisation—and its Walt Whitmanesque poet-of-a-legion-selves—will continue to find expression in a few more.

## Buddha & Freud Become Friends

Mark Epstein, M.D., graduate of Harvard Medical School, a professor and psychiatrist in New York City, is a longtime collaborator with the leading Buddhist teachers of our time. Steeped in the rigors of psychoanalytical theory as well as the rigors of Buddhist meditation, he is a seminal writer seeking to bridge the two. A sort of matchmaker between Buddha and Freud—suspecting they may actually be close friends, each with a gift for the other.

I remember a moment many years ago, standing in the back of the audience at Bookshop Santa Cruz, one author speaking, waiting for the other to show: Mark Epstein. Suddenly, a winsome, elvish presence appeared next to me, who stood listening, scanning the scene, looking for where to go. We smiled and nodded at each other, as though two intrepid travelers were passing in the mountains. He'd go on to become one of the important bridges between East and West that we needed.

From Dr. Mark Epstein's book, *Psychotherapy Without the Self – A Buddhist Perspective*:

As Buddhism merged with the nature psychology of Taoism in China...it gave birth to the new form of Ch'an, or Zen, Buddhism. Similarly in the West, our understanding of the psyche is entrenched in the psychoanalytic tradition, whose basic assumptions and vocabulary about the self have permeated our society. In order for Buddhism to be understood by our culture, it must be reinterpreted in the psychological language of our time.

The psychological language of our time is that of the *self*, a subjective *knowing* that in the West is all the rage, so to speak. Full of rage, and, a pretty cool little hipster. Epstein notes that the ubiquitous self-concern of practitioners in traditional Asian cultures was that of self-as-part-of filial and tribal identities. In the West, it is the unprecedented focus on the individuated-self, ostensibly liberated from the bonds of primary allegiance-to and definition-by filial, tribal, or national affiliations. The Descartes dictum, *I think therefore I am*—rather than the Confucian web-of-obligations to family, emperor, nature—as the constituent self.

Already, this difference in the apprehension-of-self between East and West is a core fulcrum upon which the transmission of Buddhism to the West is turning. Epstein continues:

As I learned more about Buddhism, I came to appreciate that its central tenet of *anatta*, or no-self, does not mean what I had initially assumed it to mean. The Buddha did not dispute the relative reality of the conventionally appearing self. But he did insist that we tend to give this relational self an absolute status that it does not possess.

This “absolute status” of the self is a one-sided error which the ancient Hindus shared, in their way, with the classical Western tradition. It was the lop-sided tilt of this tendency that Buddha reacted to, in old India, as Buddhist practitioners do now in the modern West. Hinduism, to be accurate, emphasized the self (*atman*) as a holographic part of the divine Self (*Atman*), whereas the classical West emphasized the self in-relationship-to a separate Divine; of course, in a true “perennial philosophy”, both approaches appear as the different hemispheres of a single cosmic brain, so to speak. In modern psychological parlance, it is the dual recognition of both poles of existence: individuation, and, union.

Still, having been given license in the West to embrace this unique, separate self—and it *is* a gift—the Buddha’s message is a timely antidote to the extremes we’ve taken this quest to “find ourselves” to. Epstein says of this slippery-self:

We think that it is more real than it is, and we expend an extraordinary amount of energy propping it up and protecting it, reinforcing the certainty of our own separateness. Both psychotherapy and Buddhist meditation have the potential to undo this tendency, relieving us of our defensive loads.

Still, the potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding is as prominent as the wisdom offered:

From the making of art to the practice of psychotherapy to the appreciation of intimate relations, the Buddhist influence creates the possibility for both new understandings and new misunderstandings.

While nirvana once connoted “freedom from rebirth” in South Indian cultures where the endless rounds of death and reincarnation could seem even more interminable than a lengthy psychoanalysis, the freedom that the Buddha taught might more accurately be described as the ability to maintain one’s composure in the face of an impermanent, always changing, and apparently imperfect, world.

Which includes an *impermanent, always changing, and apparently imperfect, self*. It is this self that is of immense interest to both Freud (representing here the entire scope of Western

tradition) and Buddha (representing the entire swath of Eastern wisdoms). And contrary to popular opinion (by the groupies of both), they each have something essential to offer the other.

Epstein acknowledges that the field of psychology does begin with a prejudice against anything spiritual:

Freud, it seems, was in search of what the Buddha taught. Dreams, jokes, hypnosis, free association, and transference all undermine the sense of a separate, distinct, and unitary self...Yet Freud...mistook nirvana for disintegration and death.

Freud peered over the edge of the self, and saw only an abyss—rather than the pregnant emptiness the Buddha saw. Still, some of Freud’s theoretical progeny began to see more of what Buddha pointed towards; D.W. Winnicott, a favorite of Mark Epstein’s, became a bridge:

Winnicott had the idea that the opposite of integration (the state of an apparently cohesive self) is not disintegration but something he termed *unintegration*. Here he was moving away from Freud and toward the Buddha. He compared unintegration to what it is like for a child to surrender himself in play, knowing that his mother is in the next room providing what he called “good-enough ego coverage”. He also compared it to a lover’s consciousness “after intercourse,” when the urges are relaxed and the mind and heart are open, and to an artist’s mind when unburdened in the studio. He saw the state of unintegration as the foundation of creativity...

This state of “unintegration” is perhaps akin to the Pali word for such a self: *anatta* – *the insubstantiality of any permanent or unchanging self*. While the depths of meditation do yield the full range of consciousness – from disintegration to enlightenment – it is indeed some version of a relative *self* that one returns to, in order to “chop wood, carry water”, go back to work, kiss your wife and kids, do the bills, take out the garbage, and write the great American novel. Unless, really, all you want to do is sit in a cave and face the wall for the rest of your life – which *is* a path, but not the one most choose, thank goodness. Life is generally to be lived, rather than escaped.

Still, much of the Buddhism transmitted to the West – given both translation problems, and, differing cultural emphasis – has interpreted words like *anatta*, or *no-self*, or *emptiness*, to mean something the Buddha did not necessarily intend. Buddha was neither empty-headed nor illusory, unengaged nor without personality. If he had been born in a well-

to-do modern family, say, in Silicon Valley or the Ivy League (a kind of modern “prince”), or frankly, been born poor or in any contemporary environment, he’d have wrestled with all the Western developmental tasks commensurate with modern life. Front and center would be this task of self-identity, ubiquitous in today’s parlance. The brilliance of the Buddha, and the penetrating insight of his enlightenment, is its applicability across cultures and times. Necessitating that it encounter-afresh the psychology and culture of each new geography and epoch it reaches – as it has across the centuries in India, China, Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, and now the West.

What Epstein notes in his practice as both therapist and meditator, is that everyone he encounters is deeply imbedded in terrain I am euphemistically calling *Freud* – and that sidestepping his dark couch will only lead to repressed entanglements that undermine enlightenment. In *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, Epstein says,

When the psychologists Daniel Brown and Jack Engler studied experienced meditators, they found, to their surprise, that meditators were just as anxious as everyone else. There was no lessening of internal conflict, but only a “marked non-defensiveness in experiencing such conflicts” among their subjects. The implications of these findings are profound, because Brown and Engler discovered that **meditation, on its own, is not particularly effective at solving people’s emotional problems**. It can prepare the ground, so to speak, by making the person more accepting and less defensive, but without a therapist’s intervention, there is a very real danger of paralysis.

He goes on to say:

We are faced here with our first conundrum: Meditation, it seems, can bestow the kind of ego strength necessary for a successful psychotherapy, but it cannot do the psychotherapy by itself.

However, the relationship between meditation and therapy can be reciprocal:

...meditation can also rescue a psychotherapy, by providing the **means** of what Freud called “working-through”

This is the key insight that Epstein and other researchers are discovering, that meditation and therapy can complete each other, and provide what the other cannot alone. He describes in detail how psychotherapists continually encounter clients asking, *But how?* when it comes to the actual technology of consciousness-change; and, the way meditators continually encounter gurus and masters who ignore or side-step (often out

of their own ignorance) the entangled dilemmas of relationship, vocation, and sense of woundedness that Westerners almost universally report.

Freud stopped short at the abyss of freedom that Buddha was quite comfortable in, and, the Buddha could not quite imagine the abyss of the psyche that Freud would shine a light on. I suspect that if the historical Buddha were alive now, she would dive-in to this abyss of identity and relationship straightforwardly, pragmatically, with much relish. As I suspect that Freud, if offered the wisdom, insights, and technologies of meditation flowering now in the West, might sit himself down on the closest zafu (or comfortable chair for his old knees), and relish the “unintegrated” mode that Winnicott later spoke of, “as a lover after intercourse”, or an “artist unburdened in his studio”.

Epstein notes again:

What Westerners often do not understand is that experiences such as these require an ego, in the psychoanalytic sense, that is capable of holding and integrating what would ordinarily be violently destabilizing...The work of meditation, in one sense, is the work of developing an ego that is flexible, clear, and balanced enough to enable one to have such experiences.

In his book *Going on Being: Buddhism and the Way of Change*, Epstein concludes, “Meditation has enabled me to take possession of myself, to inhabit myself, not through identification but through acceptance.” In traditional Asian societies, this acceptance tended to be of one’s filial roles and spheres of responsibility, while in the West it has tended to be acceptance of the ever-changing flow of self. Meditation leads one to deep acceptance of the *suchness* of life, which may appear very differently in a traditional agrarian society based on duty, and a modern industrial society based on self-actualization.

Epstein feels that traditional Buddhism does not provide enough specific wisdom for Western practitioners mired in the turbulent concerns of identity and relationships, unmoored as we tend to be by more fluid role and filial identifications. Likewise, he feels that traditional psychology does not provide the specific attentional tools that meditation does to effect the change it identifies as needed. Epstein says:

It is the knowledge of this ability to retrain the mind that has been lacking in Western psychology. There is no reason that the interpersonal vehicle of psychotherapy cannot be as effective in encouraging it as the intrapersonal one of meditation...

Psychotherapy can be enormously helpful in pointing out a person's habitual reactive patterns as they occur in the here-and-now. The therapeutic relationship itself is a powerful vehicle because of its intrinsic non-intrusive and nonabandoning nature. But the most important element, as the Buddha discovered, is the healing power of awareness.

Epstein notes that the ancient Buddhist psychology of *Abhidharma* identifies a host of mental "factors" that become strengthened by meditation. Adapted to Western practice, it becomes a kind of "how-to manual" that much of psychotherapy lacks, or has in only a limited-way through efforts at cognitive-behavioral change. A modern Zen master's use of koans, too, in gestalt-like dialogue conversant with the Western psyche's deep recesses (ala John Tarrant), can mirror the movements music makes, in opening the heart to new territory.

The actual experience of meditation practice, and its related attentional-strategies, becomes the "how" that psychotherapy is missing. Epstein says that by strengthening, through interior practice, factors such as "buoyancy, pliancy, adaptability, and proficiency of mind and body", they effect the change therapy points toward:

They are enablers of the capacity to go on being, since they permit an individual to find balance in a sea of change. No longer struggling to find certainty in an endlessly shifting reality, a person grounded in her own awareness is free to discover and declare herself afresh as life unfolds. In the somewhat awkward language of psychodynamics, we would call this the ability to live in an uninterrupted flow of authentic self.

Epstein says the ego needs to "concretize reality so it can be understood and managed, and this extends to our experience of ourselves":

We cling to "being" and believe that our selves are absolutely real, that they have self-identity or intrinsic reality; or we swing to the opposite extreme and cling to "nonbeing", seeing ourselves as nothing, empty, and unreal. But both the something and the nothing are wrong, the Buddha saw; they both precipitate out of our clinging for certainty...

I know that, if I can help people find their attachments to being and nonbeing, that their own Buddha nature, their own authentic selves, will shine through... It is about what makes it possible to live in an uninterrupted flow, absorbed in the moment, in accordance with one's truest self.

"The alternative to being is reacting, and reacting interrupts being...", says Winnicott. The elimination of incessant reactivity to life as one's predominant mode of experience

ushers us into a deeper capacity for living. In *Thoughts Without a Thinker*, Epstein says again:

Self, it turns out, is a metaphor for a process that we do not understand, a metaphor for that which *knows*.

While the dismissive-attitude we've inherited from traditional Buddhism for any semblance of granting the self even relative reality still pervades much of Western practice, it is this subtler language of *self-as-metaphor* that is perhaps truer than any quest for a non-existent self. Perhaps like the puppet named Pinocchio, who longs to be *real* – to be more than dead wood and reactive strings – we too can surrender to the suffering imbedded in life and the human heart, and become more real for it. As Epstein concludes, being open *to the transitoriness of experience (that) paradoxically makes us feel more real*.

In this sense, I think Pinocchio, Freud, and Buddha would all become best friends.

## The Secret of the Self

In the *Book of Equanimity*, Zen koan # 63, master Joshu asks, *When a man dies the Great Death, what then?*

I meditate on the demise of my own tiny self, though it keeps sticking its head up from the coffin, perplexed, asking *Am I dead yet? Am I dead yet?* akin to another ancient koan. To which I reply, *I'm not saying! I'm not saying!*

Baffled by this self that is unsure of its own demise, I open to an essay in *The Best American Spiritual Writing – 2006*, entitled “The Secret of the Self”, by professor Wilfred M. McClay. Though it is not a Buddhist essay per se, it reflects aspects of Western Buddhism’s attempt to find more nuanced language for this ostensibly non-existent self. To describe the phenomenon of apparent-*self* in psychologically accurate terms, awareness that integrates its apprehension as both our greatest treasure (the classical Western tradition), and, our worst enemy, the source of all suffering (the classical Eastern tradition).

The essay begins by noticing how photos are chosen for newspaper obituaries: whether to use an earlier photo near the “prime” of the deceased’s life, or one from shortly before their death. He then muses that a spectrum of photographs would be needed to convey the whole of a human being through time, ever-changing in size and constitution. The author posits that the word *person* or *soul* might better reference this ever-changing self, this subjective sense of self, that *is* the flickering human being. It is a native Western tone that, I believe, may add its flavor to Buddhism’s attempt to be poetically in-sync with, and psychologically contemporary with, the modern psyche. The Zen teacher John Tarrant, also a Jungian-trained therapist, and poet, uses this Western notion of soul in just such an attempt (see *The Light Inside the Dark: Zen, Soul, and the Spiritual Life*).

McClay says,

We are attempting to represent a soul, something whose nature is greater and deeper than any particular instance can adequately show.

Our age, of course, prefers to speak of selves. “Souls” seems a term too laden with metaphysical implications to pass through customs. But it is striking to note how poorly the word “self”,

even though it is one of the cardinal terms of our discourse, serves us as a marker for that thread of essential continuity in the individual life that we acknowledge and commemorate in the obituary...

The self is too changeable and contingent and interior a thing for that, and too tied to a romantic view of the isolated and autonomous individual, to tell us adequately about the individual. The self is a movable and malleable target, one that adapts to changing circumstances, revising its constitution repeatedly over the course of an individual life, taking on strikingly different colorations at different times.

And it is, in some fundamental way, unreachable...

This Western language from a professor of Humanities at the University of Tennessee seems to mirror Stephen Batchelor's Buddhist descriptions of the contingent, changing self. One that reflects the Theravadin notion of *anatta*—*the insubstantiality of self*—but is also tangible enough to constitute a moral fulcrum of awareness. Without which, as Batchelor says, there would be no ability to *choose* the Middle Path of the Buddha.

McClay's intent, though, is more to nest the individual person in the web of the world—acting upon it and being acted upon—without capitulating to the endlessly reflecting mirror of individual psychology, nor the futile atomizing of postmodernism. The word “person” becomes a vehicle—much like the *vehicles* of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha—in which to take refuge amid the ever-changing flow of existence. This is what the word “person” begins to accomplish, says McClay:

It reaffirms the core meaning of individualism with its insistence upon the ultimate value of the individual human being. But it also embraces the core insight of communitarianism: the recognition that the self is made in relationship and culture, and the richest forms of individuality cannot be achieved without the sustained company of others.

Which reminds me of the role of *sangha*, or as John Tarrant likes to say, *waking is something we do together*. Which perhaps *persons* do, however insubstantial and changing our subjective *selves* are. McClay says again,

...it is in the school of public life, and in the embrace and exercise of the title of “citizen”, that the selves of men and women become most meaningfully equal, individuated, and free—not in those fleeting, and often illusory, moments when they escape the constraints of society, and

retreat into a zone of privacy, subjectivity, and endlessly reconstructed narratives of the “self”.

Professor McClay ends his essay with a reference to Henry James’ story, *The Figure in the Carpet*—a classic of ambiguity in which an earnest young literary critic searches for the hidden meaning, “the undiscovered, not to say undiscoverable, secret” animating the work of the story’s fictional novelist. Much like the supposed hidden meaning of *the self*, McClay says:

And so the story teaches us something about how to look for such things—if not necessarily to know when we have found them...It is a triumph of patience, a quality pervading the life of the subject, like marriage...it is a suffusing presence...not a nugget hidden here or there.

The suffusing presence will not be disclosed in a single fact-nugget, or by a dark secret, pulled from a personal diary or a police file or a divorce testimony or how-to manual. Instead, it is the sort of complex secret that reposes in plain view, an abiding condition that can only be seen, if at all, by standing still and looking, until the pattern emerges and makes meaningful the life of the subject.

It may be as hard to detect as the atmosphere...Seeing it may well be a gift of grace.

Perhaps this suffusing presence of mindful, astonished awareness *is* this person one keeps waking to. While a single photograph of this changing “self” can only capture one static moment in time—its own obituary if one lingers in its tiny coffin—there is a pattern that emerges in the flow of awareness that the imminent Buddhist teacher and psychiatrist, Mark Epstein, calls *Going on Being* (see, too, his marvelous book of the same name).

Indeed, the secret, so to speak, of the self might reside in this koan: *Am I dead yet? Am I dead yet? I’m not saying! I’m not saying!* The deep inquiry that’s keeps us wide awake.

## When *Thinking* Is No Trouble at All

*The Zen of Thinking*—an under-appreciated art in Buddhism. In fact, it is often seen as the enemy of enlightenment. In any discussion of the self—whether one intends to apprehend or annihilate the bugger—it is “thinking” that is the primary bane and boon of existence.

However, Zen Master Dogen in his essay *Such*, says that while we needn’t “trouble” ourselves over many things (thinking, striving, enlightenment), *because troubling too is such a thing, it is not trouble*. This is an example of the “non-dual” thread in Buddhism—the world, not-two, but one. That everything, even thinking, is not the *trouble* to strive to be rid of. It is all Buddha-mind. Dogen says,

Even if there is *suchness* which seems strange, this too is such—there is the *suchness* of “one should not be surprised.”

One should not be surprised at such strangeness—the strangeness even of *thinking*, of the trouble it mischievously causes. Why try so hard to rid ourselves of what is no-trouble at all?

Which brings me to the essay “Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought”, by George Steiner, in the *Best American Spiritual Writing 2006*. Leave it to a French-born existentialist to peer deeply into the act of thinking. I often look to Western writers to adapt aspects of Zen in a native light—just as the Japanese did with the Chinese Chan masters who preceded them, and the Chinese with the Indian Buddhists before them. It’s all part of grounding practice in our natural cultural inheritance.

Ironically, Steiner’s provocative essay, which makes a case for *thinking’s* innate sadness, also elaborates on the *miracle of thought*. There is something of Dogen in this, given Dogen’s sense that *thinking* is not-separate from Buddha-mind, nor from enlightenment itself. That, while it may indeed be the origin of sadness, as the Buddha’s formulation of *dukkha* suggests—thinking is typically suffused with desire’s grief—still, *mind* is also none other than Buddha. It is not other-than our own original nature. The koan of which runs contrary to the traditional manner in which meditation is taught—where thinking is something to be eradicated, if possible, or tolerated like a neighbor’s barking dog.

But this rushes to the conclusion too early. Leave it to the Western mind to embrace so fully, so extravagantly, what the Eastern mind too often dismisses as unessential. This *Mind* which Dogen assures should not become lost in the rush to penetrate beyond mind: *because troubling too is such a thing, it is not trouble.*

Western culture more easily celebrates the hard-won glories of the private self, an extraordinary condition that, in developmental psychology, is a mature attainment not to be ignored or bypassed—even in the necessary quest to keep moving through and beyond the limitations of this astonishing attainment. In the rush to transcend the self, it is easy to become inured to its magnificence as the very thing some aspect of the Universe apparently cherishes. Even if it's *trouble.*

In George Steiner's essay about thought, I find a similar awe. But first he begins, as does the Buddha, with its griefs. He quotes Schelling, *This is the sadness which adheres to all mortal life, a...heavy-heartedness which is spread out across the whole of nature, hence the profound, indestructible melancholy of all life.* Steiner then says:

Schelling, among others, attaches to human existence a fundamental, inescapable sadness. More particularly, this sadness provides the somber ground on which consciousness and cognition are founded. This somber ground must, indeed, be the basis of all perception, of every mental process...

Current cosmology provides an analogy to Schelling's belief. It is that of "background noise", of the elusive but inescapable cosmic wavelengths which are the vestiges of the Big Bang, of the coming of being into being.

Buddha begins with a similar recognition. However, Gautama Buddha proceeds along a more deconstructive path in addressing this predicament, to rebalance the prevailing Indian-Hindu obsession during his time with the existence of a divine, unchanging-self nested inside each human: the *atman*. Unchanging, divine, perfect—which the Buddha found somewhat preposterous, given his deep insight into the ever-changing flux of existence. So he leaned the other way, and the rest is Buddhist history. But in its way, it was a "corrective lean", away from centuries of solidifying the self, and toward its essential fluidity.

In the West, though, *Mind* came to the fore in Descartes' famous dictum, *I think therefore I am*—and the rest is the Western history of the Enlightenment (not to be confused with Buddha's enlightenment, though perhaps more akin than one might think). To make Buddhism our own, in the West, is to enter this *gate* that Descartes opened, in the spirit of Dogen's *even this troubling is no trouble*. To climb into our little boat of language and set sail in this dimly charted territory: where Zen meets the self, and gives it a hug.

Steiner begins with *thinking about thinking*, its own kind of koan:

So far as we are aware, so far as we can “think thinking” ... thought is limitless. We can think of and about *anything*.

This, according to Steiner, is the origin of our greatest dread as well as the magnificence of our being. And it is both: not only one or the other. Meditators aim toward the depths of single-pointed concentration, where thoughts, and all worlds, disappear into the formless. Which the Western philosophical and psychological traditions are not too keen on, since it is this very world that is the abode of *the self thinking itself into existence*—with magnificence and dread alike. Though even in Buddhist thought, it is *here* the One ever returns to, where the formless takes form as the *ten-thousand things*.

Increasingly, there are bridges between these great traditions of East and West. Between thinking and no-thinking, form and the formless. Zen, as the great tradition of *no-thinking, no-mind*, still illustrates the ox-herder riding the ornery ox-mind back into village life in the tenth ox-herding picture—where thinking and living and much trouble reside. The non-dual *suchness* of what is ultimately a human life. The original ox-herding pictures ended at the eighth frame, where the meditator disappears into the Formless. Zen came to add the final two frames, acknowledging the deeper insight that village life, life on Earth, in all its *trouble is where the One returns to*.

Something to think about—because without such thought, the spiritual seeker remains moored to a formless life that is no abode, finally, for the human. Because *this* very life, the genius of this ornery mind, may indeed be where the trouble lies—but according to Dogen (and the *non-dual* thread in both Buddhism and Hinduism), it is the very direction the One, the Formless, pregnant Emptiness, moves *toward*.

It is a core insight of Buddhism that entire worlds rise and fall with every breath, every thought—all within the “fathom-long body” we inhabit. To *fathom*, so to speak, this miracle is to embrace, rather than flee, its occurrence. Once *thinking* no longer becomes the *only* interiority one experiences (in its obsessive, circular fashion), it begins to find its place as a-part-of experience rather than its only hub (to use Dogen’s language again). Like the weather—without storm and rain and blistering sun and sunset hues, the sky would be uniform, bland. But it can kill you, too.

*Thinking* is a miracle, the precious *infant* of this fledgling self that should not be so cavalierly tossed with the dirty bathwater of its all-too-human condition. The mind got us here in the first place—it is the path the *One* follows every day through the human into *The 10,000 Things* of this world: civilization, poetry, chocolate ice cream, the mathematics that guide one to the very moon the ancient Zen masters pointed at. The moon itself. How might *mind* continue once we pass through the Buddha’s gateless gate, climb into Master Dogen’s little boat, and sail further?

For Steiner, thought is an infinite enterprise:

...within these ill-defined, always fluid, and perhaps contingent confines, thought is without end, without any organic or formally prescriptive stopping point. It can suppose, imagine, assemble, play with (there is nothing more serious and, in certain regards enigmatic, than play) anything without knowing whether there is, whether there could be anything else. Thought can construe a multiplicity of universes...

Thought experiments, of which poetry and scientific hypotheses are eminently representative, know no boundaries. That humble monosyllable “let” which precedes conjectures and demonstrations in pure mathematics, in formal logic, stands for the arbitrary license and unboundedness of thought...

How’s *that* for *trouble*. I think Master Dogen knew what he was up to, which is why he wrote the ninety-five chapters of the *Shobogenzo*, of which Thomas Cleary initially translated thirteen. Because the mind and its languages, its art, its scientific and poetic exploration, is beautiful trouble. Hence, a part of the *Suchness* of human and Buddha minds—which ultimately, are *not-two*.

Perhaps we are *meant to think*, as much as we are meant to breath. In meditation, one does not attempt to stop breathing, but to inhabit it, be deeply aware of its rising and falling through the whole body. Steiner says the two marks of human experience that

are always with us are *thinking* and *breathing*. Perhaps meditation is meant to embrace and embody both, rather than seek escape from either. Buddhism is actually replete with innumerable meditative and contemplative practices that involve the mind, give it something to do, to gnaw on like a dog a bone: koans, mandalas, mantras, deepening levels of insight, just to name a few. The Tibetans have tons more.

Why is this important? Because at the heart of mistranslations of aspects of traditional Buddhism is a *nihilism* that seeks to escape everything human, that posits only a *cessation* of suffering by, in essence, ceasing to be human. Understandable, given the inherent sadness, the grief of *dukkha*—one of the Buddha’s noble truths about existence. But the Buddha’s insight does not merely stop alongside the parallel bus-stop of Western existentialism, with its mustering of a stiff-upper-lip and brave fist-waving genuflection against the sadness of existence. In Zen, *enlightening* (enlivening) does occur. The young boy *does* ride the ornery ox-mind back into the utter richness of life in the world, *as* the world—this very contingent world full of trouble. Which becomes, then, no-trouble (not to be too pat about it). Nihilism may be an understandable branch on the path, but it is neither the main-path nor the goal—*life* is. Which gives one a lot to think about, doesn’t it?

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So, pragmatically, how does thinking help one in the matter of being fully human, in a resonant Zen way? Perhaps the trick is to embrace mind in all its cacophonous, artistic, scientific boisterousness, rather than *only* noting dispassionately *not-this, not-this* in the powerful but ultimately one-sided practice of the dis-identifying mode of meditation. The *bare attention* practice of mindfulness meditation provides an important and necessary first-disentangling from the obsessiveness of thinking—the practice of witnessing initially frees one from the claustrophobia or mania of one’s own mental gyrations. Tremendous liberation lies herein.

However, mindfulness meditation, similar to Zen’s *just sitting*, and particularly in koan work, includes the full range of robust human awareness. Using the weather analogy again: everything in the sky that crosses one’s attention. The aim is not, ultimately, to be immune to such rising and falling of thoughts and worlds, but to become ever more spacious in which to exclaim, *my god, look at that rainbow, feel the power of storm, this wetness,*

*the scalding desert, the chirping sparrows of thinking, the ingenious snake of inspiration, the fullness of sea, the peace of this quiet river, this tumult of mind, this gorgeous trouble.*

This is where, in Chan Buddhism and Zen, the role of koans, of poetry and the arts, emerged as strategies to engage the full range of the human, rather than escape it. Escaping the prison of mind, if you will, is a noble venture—but not if it means rejecting the mind as somehow not-life, not-enlightenment, which is its own kind of prison.

Hence, it may be the role of this newly emerging Western Buddhism to re-integrate the mind, the arts, the psychological and the humanistic, the political and the scientific, into practice. What might be expressive of *the awakened mind & heart, the awakened life?* How might we say it, build it, play it?

This, perhaps, is the mark Western culture will imprint on Buddhism, much as Chinese culture imprinted Indian Buddhism with its own artistic Taoist and Confucian sensibilities, as Japan then did with the shaping of its own kind of Zen. As many others (Richard Tarnas, Huston Smith, Joseph Campbell, Robert Bly) allude to, the “two great ideas”, as Bly calls them, of the Eastern “No-Mind” and the Western “Mind” are not actually “two”; in a non-dual sense, they are linked hemispheres of a single brain. It is up to Western Buddhism, perhaps, to crosswire these differing approaches into a whole Zen for this new era—which would be no surprise to Master Dogen.

Of course, any new imaginative approach may eventually produce a state of affairs reminiscent of speculative Indian Hinduism when the Buddha first said, in essence, *oh my*, and pointed practitioners toward a more-spare inquiry. Or centuries later, when the new Chan Buddhist masters in China grew tired of the philosophical ruminations of the translated Indian Buddhist texts transported to their country, and wrote instead their own texts of ironic and humorous koans. In an interdependent and contingent world that is in constant flux, Zen can best remain fresh and relevant by leaning into this flux, rather than contracting solely into tradition and past-cultural forms. Monasteries and all those black robes and shaven heads are cool culture and art, in their way, and certainly expressive of a profound commitment to the Buddha Way nested in centuries of rich tradition; but they are not necessarily the only or even primary form that Zen might take in America. It is not the cultural transmission we should be after, but awakening.

Sounds like trouble to me—but ah, such a trouble to have!

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So, perhaps we could compose some additional Noble Truths—beginning with the truth of this noble *self*—this twitchy little tyrant, the demon that keeps us from “enlightenment”. The noble truth may be that this *self* is actually a gift, without which there would be no Buddha, no Dharma, no Sangha. The self exists primarily by *thinking*, about itself in particular, and life in general. Without thinking, we would not be human, nor have any semblance of society and civilization. So unless we truly want to fly backwards toward the irreducible beginning of the black hole that became the Big Bang we are, it might be helpful to take a deeper look at this ornery no-thing called the “self”. See what all the fuss is about. Learn the gift-of-it that lies at the heart of this vast Universe.

I’ve adapted George Steiner’s insights, in “The Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought”, to see if they might add something to the Buddha’s “Four Noble Truths”. They could be conceived of as ten additional “noble reasons” for suffering, but also, as *ten noble reasons for beauty—in the best paradoxical and dialectic sense*. These *reasons for sadness* are double-sided: each reflecting a contingent, inter-dependent relationship between a beautiful aspect of mind, and its parallel angst. Only in a *non-dual* approach can human suffering be mediated in a deeply human way. Rather than opting for a lobotomy, or skirting the superhighway of enlightenment via a spiritual-bypass.

### **First Noble Reason: *Thought is Limitless, Yet Contradictory: Leaving Us in Doubt, Yet Unbounded***

The first noble reason is that *Thought is Limitless*. We can think of and about *anything*. What lies outside or beyond thought is strictly *unthinkable*.

Hence, a “Theory of Everything” lies outside and beyond human understanding. Yet such thought can create anything, as Stein says, and know no boundaries. “Thought can roam at liberty across the entire gamut of possibilities”, a theme reflected by Plato, Jung, Pythagoras, Nietzsche, and others.

“The infinity of thought is a crucial marker...of human eminence.” But, “it is an incomplete infinity.” It is subject to internal contradiction for which there can be no resolution. It is this “internal contradiction (*aporia*), this destined ambiguity...inherent in all acts of thought” that is one of the sources of human suffering. One can and does think *anything, everything*—yet can know nothing for certain, nor know if one ends up knowing all things, or all sides of things.

Because one can think all possible sides of a matter, one confronts the inherent contradictions of a world defined by opposites: up & down, good & bad, right & wrong, pleasure & pain. While such freedom to think and experience is grand—*engenders human civilization, its sciences, its arts, its religions*—such infinity is contradictory at the level of thinking-itself. Steiner says,

Listen closely to the rush of thought and you will hear, at its inviolate center, doubt and frustration. This is a first motive for “Schwermut”, for heaviness of heart.

With all the glories of thought, the rise and fall of worlds both intimate and historical, there will always be contradiction—no Utopia. Hence, the Buddha’s *dukkha*, or heaviness of heart. Still, who would truly thrive in a one-dimensionality of “only-up, only good, only right” any more than a song played absent the black keys of mood and nuance: a bright devotional mantra perhaps, an angelic harp of one note, but not *this* world. Not the *many* the *One* mysteriously and unerringly moves toward.

### **Second Noble Reason: *Thought is Uncontrollable & Messy, Yet Creative: Leaving Us Anxious, Yet Generative***

The genius of thinking is that it gives birth to universes, is creative, generative. Yet, the creative thrust that is at the heart of the human is also by definition, by existential imperative, uncontrollable and messy. Steiner says:

Thought is uncontrolled. Also during sleep and, presumably, unconsciousness, the current flows. Only very rarely are we in control. The pulse of thought looks to be manifold and many-layered. It can originate at somatic and psychosomatic depths far beyond the reach of introspection.

The paradox of thought’s genius is that, while its energies can and must be harnessed—like a rider on a horse, a youth upon the wild-ox of mind, wind in a sail, water turning a

wheel, fire warming the cold—this very urge toward complete control of such energies is futile. Even if attained (in fantasy), such total control would dim and ultimately snuff the very life-force that by definition must be wild, be larger than us. Life, and thought, is a kind of barely controlled chaos, a cacophony of forces that is the secret and source of both our deepest angst, and, our most profound generativity. Suffering, in this way, much like the birth pangs attendant any birth, any emergence, is part of what it means to live.

Yet these very energies, through sustained practices such as meditation (in all its variety), can be ridden as a surfer a wave, mulched as a gardener does to produce a rich harvest, mined to unearth hidden diamonds buried in stone. The goal is not to dim, dampen, diminish such energies, though such a goal *has* been taken-up by some: Buddha’s forest-ascetics; various subsequent interpretations of Buddhism itself where *nirodha*, complete cessation of sensation, even final annihilation, is sought; or versions of Shankara’s Vedanta-Hinduism. These tend to be termed “dualistic” paths, setting nirvana against samsara, the relative against the absolute. However, the “non-dual” paths whereby nirvana and samsara are seen as one and the same, the absolute and the relative everywhere co-existent and entwined, tend to be seen as the heart of what the Buddha truly taught.

It is one thing to know this; it is another to embrace the unruly, overwhelming energies of thought, desire, creativity in a productive way. The One flows into the unruly-Many for a reason, not as a mistake one must “correct”. But the organic process of it is jarring, and certainly not controllable by even the best meditator. The chaos of it is part of its determinant power. Steiner describes this further:

At each and every moment, acts of thought are subject to intrusion. A limitless congeries of external and internal elements will interrupt, deflect, alter, muddle any linear deployment of thought (Dante’s *moto spirituale*). The stream is incessantly muddied, dammed, and diverted. A sudden sight or sound, however marginal, any tactile experience, a wisp of tiredness or boredom, the wedge of sudden desire, will appropriate a thought-response...Daydreaming, pathological misprisions...perpetual discontinuities...inherent drift.

Yet as any scientist or artist knows, such is the origin of conjecture and dream, and the creations that emerge from such instabilities. But not only for such professions; the very act of human consciousness is possible only *because* of such flux. Anything else would be merely replicative, robotic, mimicry. Still, trying to stay afloat (which is one

aim of meditation), much less move in a determined direction (even just following your breath) amid this flux can be daunting, even maddening. Steiner again:

Is it, in fact, possible to “think straight”? Can thought be made laserlike? Only at the price of trained, disciplined concentration and abstention from diversion.

Steiner gives examples of such necessities: the mathematician, the chess master, the surgeon, the virtuoso musician, masters of concentration meditation. All can testify to “spells, sometimes of astounding length, of absolute compaction, of an ingathering of the psyche so exclusive of any dispersal that it allows a single, total intentionality.” Yet, as a course of development for the average person, even for these savants, even for the most disciplined of meditators, it can produce:

...not only temporary exhaustion but long-range mental collapse (notably in chess masters and pure mathematicians...or logicians). Prodigies in mnemonics rarely mature.

This could apply just as well to the ancient Indian fakirs, capable of extraordinary physical feats of concentration applied to the body, or to any number of gurus, even contemporary meditation teachers, whose extraordinary accomplishments in any single-directed manner can leave one incapable of broader adaption to the complexities of daily life. For meditators in the West, in particular, the complex exigencies of intimate relationship, family, career, political involvement, are all part of the necessary messiness of leading more than an autistic life immune to all but mono-attentive focus.

Luckily, the innate structure—the messiness—of our minds ensures that most of us have the opportunity to develop, to mature, in a more nuanced and complete fashion. Stein says,

This allows the hypothesis whereby the involuntary, polymorphic wash of common thought is a safeguard...It enables us to respond more or less adequately to the spontaneous, often shapeless demands and stimuli of the everyday.

The bursts of concentration...the coercion of absolute focus, may carry the risk of subsequent mental exhaustion or impairment. There is monomania in certain intensities...(lasers can burn). It is, nonetheless, a monomania without which many peaks of human understanding and accomplishment would not be feasible.

This is true, too, of Buddha's experience—his deep insight into the nature of reality was predicated on a profound, deep, concentrated state of mind. Yet, unlike some of his contemporary cave-dwellers, he also knew that there was more to life than holding on to such focus by staying forever in its singular eye. He lived for more than eighty years in the delightful messiness of world and mind, rather than tucked away in a cave.

Ultimately, meditation practice helps one to live with a measure of equanimity by embracing its exigencies: there is even bliss, nested in the contours of life's innate messiness, its generative chaos.

### **Third Noble Reason: *Thought is Private & Impenetrable by Others: Leaving Us Unique, Yet Alone***

George Steiner says:

Thinking makes us present to ourselves. Physical sensations, notably pain, are instrumental. But to think of ourselves is the main constituent of personal identity.

While this may seem the very state of affairs meditation traditionally attempts to transcend, we too often mistake dissociation for transcendence, the latter including all its constituent parts in a larger whole, while the former merely splits parts of one's self off (to wreak subsequent havoc). To progress in meditation is to become ever more present to ourselves, which includes the embrace not only of "thinking", but of the profound depths of unique privacy that such awareness engenders. The "Second Noble Reason" discussed previously is the precursor to this third: the creative, generative nature of thought deepens into depths that, by nature of such laser-like focus, birth a privacy that leave one "unique, yet alone". Yet, what a gift this impenetrability is. Steiner says,

Thoughts are our sole assured possession. They make up our essence, our at-homeness or estrangement from the self. Their interwoven pressure is such that we may at times labor to hide them from our awareness, to silence them internally by means which psychology qualifies as amnesia or repression. It is doubtful that they remain irretrievable. I breathe therefore I think.

While meditation may stretch us through and beyond the confines of this unique possession—this self, constituted by its unique thoughtfulness—its gift is not designed

to be lost. It may turn into a prison when disconnected from others, and the larger Mystery that enfolds and surrounds. But it by no means is meant to be discarded, exiled, annihilated. No need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It's a cute baby, and quite brilliant!

This noble truth of privacy, of uniqueness, is deep and profound—too often skirted by meditators intent on escape from its existential anxieties, its sufferings. The suffering, though, is also profound:

There follows a consequence whose enormity...is strangely taken for granted. No closeness...will enable us to decipher beyond uncertainty the thoughts of another. The quest for telepathic communications and simultaneities is an attempt, almost certainly futile, to overcome this almost maddening or tragic inhibition.

The beloved lies in our arms, the treasured child in our embrace, the best friend clasps our hand. Yet we have no indubitable truth as to (their) thoughts...

Hence, the innate anxiety that comes with this existential condition. Still, as developmental psychologists know, it is this very condition that allows for the birth of a self, separate from merged-identification with both parent and universe, without which none of us would exist. The dark enigma of existence itself is that it presumes the ability to shield the nascent-self from complete transparency, from total accessibility—to be opaque, even disguised, so as to become something *new*. To become something at all. Yet, Steiner offers a paradox:

This inaccessible core of our singularity, this most inward, private, impenetrable of possessions is also a billionfold commonplace...our thoughts are, to an overwhelming degree, a human universal, a common property...

Our performative ecstasies, our taboo scenarios...are shared, synchronically, with numberless other men and women.

It is the very communal, commonplace nature of human thinking that binds us in a kind of *sangha* of consciousness. The noble truth is that, in the words of Maya Angelou, *We are more alike than not*. Yet we remain imbedded in this paradox that can only be embraced, not resolved: this flux between self and mysterious-other. The possibility that our very privacy is the gift of *Form* that the *Formless* endows, and flows to; just as we flow to the *Formless*—the two-way-street essence of Zen.

#### **Fourth Noble Reason: *Language Will Ever Find “Truth” Elusive: Leaving Us Insecure, Yet Capable of New Expression***

Despite Buddhism’s belief—shared by most religious, spiritual, philosophical systems—that it is indeed “the Truth” they reveal, the Buddha himself advised practitioners to “be a light unto yourself”. Particularly in Chan/Zen, utilizing *doubt* as the core investigative tool of consciousness is essential. Because, all teaching involves *language* that is both the beauty and bane of shared practice and the passing of wisdom through the ages. Any glance, even at Buddhism, reveals a wild proliferation of various approaches and perspectives mediated by century, culture, geography, temperament and predilection. One can be driven to despair by such variability, or awed by ever-new expressions of we-as-universe learning about itself. But the journey is a constant entanglement between surety and doubt. Steiner concludes:

Language, as it were, is inimical to the monochrome ideal of truth. It is saturated with ambiguity, with polyphonic simultaneities...Human creativity, the life-giving capacity to negate the dictates of the organic, to say “No” even to death, depend integrally on thinking, on imagining counterfactually. We invent alternative modes of being, other worlds—utopian or hellish.

While traditional meditative practices often point to the mind’s capacity to “create worlds” of suffering and delusion from mere thoughts, the flip-side of this coin is the correlative marvel of this very capacity: to create worlds from nothing—more than a thought. The power of this is literally “mind-blowing”. The extravagance of thought, of the universe’s creative capacity, keeps any final summation of itself elusive, hence, alive.

It is not only the clear pond that calls to us—it is the muddy waters, the mud itself, that gives life to the lotus. And to us. The muddiness of things, the very *dark matter* and *dark energy* cosmologists now know make up most of the universe, is the source of the very generativity that supports us. Still, the muddiness appalls the mind itself, which ever seeks to clarify—and on it goes. As Steiner summarizes, there are limits to what even the greatest of philosophers can think. And so,

*At twilight, Socrates sang.*

## **Fifth Noble Reason: *Thinking is Profligate & Wasteful, Yet the Key to Freedom***

One of the core Buddhist insights is: everything that rises, passes away. The machinations and products of the mind may be infinite, as are their corollary means to suffering. Maya, the legendary, archetypal figure who assaulted Gautama Buddha as he sat under the Bodhi tree intent on enlightenment, threw everything at him. Yet Buddha knew that chasing after every profligate urge, attempting to grasp each proffered novelty, led to more suffering. In a way, the singular key to freedom lay in the singular thought of enlightenment. All else paled by comparison.

However, this key to freedom was *not* to stay seated passively under one tree, any more than it was for Eve & Adam to stay away from one particular tree, nor for Pandora to leave the box closed, curiosity sealed. The Buddha rose, and lived to be more than eighty years old, striving to teach in any manner he might to meet peasant and king, householder and monk, at the very point of their unique predicament. Everything was fair game, because the key to freedom lies in its infinite applicability to every profligate whim, every eccentric obsession. Curiosity is not just Pandora's bane, it is our gift. Eve & Adam ate of the fruit from which everything human has evolved. The key to freedom is not to limit curiosity, the longing for more knowledge and experience, but to leave hand and heart open to allow the cornucopia and cacophony of it all to wash through.

But isn't it all too much? Aren't most things wasted effort, pointless desire? Steiner describes this succinctly:

The point is this: thought processes, be they conscious or sub-conscious, the thought-stream within us articulate or unvoiced, during waking hours or sleep—those rapid eye movements much studied in recent decades—are, in overwhelming proportion, diffuse, aimless, dispersed, scattered, and unaccounted for. They are, quite literally, “all over the place”, which makes the idiom “scatter-brained” entirely valid. The economics are those of an almost monstrous waste and deficit. There may be no other human activity more extravagant.

To ponder too closely this sometimes aimless and extravagant activity—the mind's irrepressible, unceasing operation—is to wonder at its efficacy, or purpose. It can become a source of ennui, of aimless suffering.

By far the iceberg mass of human thought vanishes unperceived, unrecorded in the trash bin of oblivion...Or consider the banal disappointment when one wakes convinced of having a dream of major insight, an elusive solution, of having composed significant poetry or music only to find recollection helpless and the bedside pad covered with meaningless scribbling. Which frustration and embarrassment does not prove that the effaced, lost thought or imagining was not of signal merit and importance. It is simply out of reach, erased as are millions and millions of other thoughts tiding through us in unfathomable waste.

There are endless, unique ways to suffer. But the suffering comes from trying to hold onto such wild profligacy. As any scientist knows: one proof is the endpoint of endless wasted hypotheses; for the poet too, it is allowing the endless press of random words to flow that allows their condensation into the few particular words that birth a new poem. The permission to be profligate is the key to freedom and the wonder of creation. The sadness lies, as Buddha knew, in the grasping, the attempt to hold-on, to limit this very sweep.

However well-intentioned the urge toward limitation and simplicity is, toward monism of any kind, if compulsory, it becomes the opposite of freedom. It becomes a prison, whether of imagination, truth, or desire's own heart. It lies, too, at the core of tyrannies of any kind:

Efforts to ration thinking, to constrict it within permitted, circumscribed channels are at the very heart of tyranny. Anarchic, playful, wasteful thought is that which totalitarian regimes fear most.

Whether that totalitarian regime is a country, or one's own mind. Hence, the paradox: though Steiner muses that *the deficit is beyond reckoning*, it is this very wastefulness, the mulch, of the vast swath of human consciousness that is the key to generativity, innovation, and ultimately, to freedom.

### ***Sixth Noble Reason: Thought is Incomplete & Imprecise: Leaving Us Disappointed, Yet Ever Striving for Truth***

Buddha's First Noble Truth is that life itself is suffused with suffering, though the Second Noble Truth locates the primary reason for this as our desire, even craving, for things to be other than they are. Life can be brutal enough, but it is also filled with wonders every day. Life itself is often a fifty-fifty proposition: traditional Buddhism

posits the human realm as perfectly balanced halfway between endless heavens above and endless hells below. The human realm is the middle realm.

Which means the cup is often half empty, and, half full. Non-dualism eyes the cup with a clear eye, seeing it as both—not just the one-or-the-other of the idealist or the cynic—and enjoys the brew. Having a realm, world, body, mind, cup of tea or mug of beer half-full is actually an ideal condition of sorts: one can feel both satisfied and still thirsty, sustained yet hungry for more. Complete emptiness is a kind of non-existence, while complete fullness leaves one more akin to a placid cow or a gurgling baby. Cute, but not very capable of doing much on its own.

So perhaps the imprecise, incomplete nature of desire, and its vehicle in this world—thought—is a design rather than a flaw, a feature rather than a bug, as the Zen teacher John Tarrant says. The perfect state-of-affairs in which to become enlightened, as the old Buddhist logic goes. The gods too drunk with bliss above, the demons too besotted with their own pain below. Humans, smack-dab in the middle, pulled both ways: and like Buddha, charged with remaining poised in the wild-middle of it all.

So, to unpack this Sixth Noble Reason a bit, Steiner begins with thought's maddening imprecision when it comes to effecting its desire in the world:

Thought is immediate only to itself. It makes nothing happen directly, outside itself. Fragile, disputed experiments in telekinesis have sought to show that thinking can produce minute material phenomena, effects of vibration or minimal displacement. Quantum physics, itself so enigmatic, has it that the act of observation alters the objective configuration of that which is being observed...Here almost everything remains conjecture...Only God, so the theologians say, experiences no hiatus between thought and consequence.

Immersed in the mediating medium of time and space, the emerging child learns that the immediacy of any and everything it can imagine—the magic of thought's quicksilver nature—is, for better and worse, not immediately materialized. Thought takes time, work, and luck to manifest in the external world—though its minute effects in and on the body can be instantaneous, as in the experience of “butterflies” in the stomach at the simple thought of going on stage, or meeting someone you love, or hate.

Still, the lag between thought's desire and its fulfillment is the maddening distress at the fulcrum of our being. Steiner enumerates one example after another: inevitable

deviancies in even the most exacting engineering and architectural constructs; the painter's distress at not fully transferring to canvas the inner vision or external world; music that embodies only partially the complex feelings of the composer; the impossibility of conveying, precisely and wholly, what one "really" feels toward another, the unique and private experience of what it is to be.

Ineluctably, therefore, the totality of our futurities, of our projections, anticipations, plans—be they routine or utopian—carries within it a potential of disappointment, of prophylactic self-deception. A virus of unfulfillment inhabits hope.

A revealing emptiness, a sadness of satiety follows on fulfilled desires (Goethe and Proust are the unsparing explorers of this *accidia*). The celebrated gloom post coitum, the longed-for cigarette after orgasm, are precisely those which measure the void between anticipation and substance, between the fabled image and the empirical happening.

Buddha had it right, and the encyclopedic Buddhist *Abhidamma* details in obsessive and thorough fashion the endless and inevitable pitfalls of desire. Still, the other side of this coin is equally lucky. That engineering feats and architectural wonders occur as often as they do; that so many works of art, of music, of literature, convey as much as they do; that we can actually love, and be loved, by another in fulfilling, thrilling, and equally miraculous steady, ordinary ways; that sex, even cigarettes, occur at all; that both routine and utopian urges fill our days as they do. Disappointed, yet full of so much. The cup, and the heart, full enough to savor, empty enough to be filled with more.

**Seventh Noble Reason: *Thought as Window or Mirror: Uncertain What We See, We Peer Deeper into Mystery***

To think about the world, even to perceive it in the depth and clarity of meditation, is to ever be uncertain, still, what it is we actually see. While this is obvious to the realm of thought, given the vast differences between philosophical schools, neighborly banter, barroom rhetoric, political diatribe, even scientific paradigms, it is just as applicable to the realm of even the clearest, most penetrating wisdom. To enlightenment itself. A simple scan of the centuries will suffice, given the infinite variety even of Buddhist perspectives—from the spare Theravadin to the elaborate Tibetan, the breadth of the Mahayana to the subtlety of Zen. In the panorama of spiritual, cultural, human perspectives—in all its amazing variety—one can only wonder at the mystery of how so many can *see* so differently.

If there were only one reality, one truth, the window metaphor might suffice. But the mirror is an alternate metaphor that has equally captured eons of subjective idealists, psychologists, and oracles of every ilk. We see ourselves—projected into the world, reflected back unerringly—in every bias, apprehension, determination. Each point of the glittering jeweled-net of Indra, to use the ancient image, is simultaneously imbedded in the whole, and, fated to perceive all other “jewels” from a unique vantage. To “be” the whole is to entertain the One’s legion identities in all manner of mesmerizing complexity. Steiner reviews these long-standing dueling perspectives that cause us, and every field of knowledge, such angst:

The first (view) characterizes our consciousness and awareness of the world as being that of perception through a window. This model, founded somewhat naively on an analogy with ocular vision, underlies every paradigm of realism, of sensory empiricism. It authorizes a belief, however complex or attenuated, in an objective world, in an “out there” ...

The other epistemology is that of the mirror. It postulates a totality of experience whose only verifiable source is that of thinking itself. It is our minds, our neurophysiology which project what we take to be the forms and substance of reality...All thought about the world, all observation and understanding would be *reflection*, mappings in a mirror.

On one capital point these two opposed systems concur: the glass, be it window or mirror, is never immaculate. There are scratches on it, blind spots, curvatures. Neither vision through it nor reflection from it can ever be perfectly translucent. There are impurities and distortions. This is the crux: there is interposition between ourselves and the world we inhabit.

Which reminds me of the visceral, stunning experience I enjoyed one day at San Francisco’s Exploratorium, sitting in front of a dual-lighted glass pane with another person seated on the opposite side. Push a button, and the glass becomes a window, allowing one to see the other person clearly; push another, and the glass becomes a mirror, allowing one to see only oneself. The eerie part was pushing both buttons, with half the glass becoming window, the other mirror, so as to see both faces superimposed on one another, or half and half in the glass pane. A phenomenal metaphor of this Seventh Noble Reason for not only despair, but the joy of discovery.

The Buddha posited enlightenment not as a single flash of insight that suddenly ends the search, but as a way of perceiving, of living, inside this enduring paradox of window & mirror. To live with too much certainty is to freeze the light-show in one position,

thinking our sight is only window, or only mirror. Any initial awakening simply orients one to the never-ending double-vision of faith and doubt, certainty and curiosity: the depth perception that two eyes (I's) provide, rather than the flat surface, and the flat world, that any singular view allows.

**Eighth Noble Reason: *Thought is Idiosyncratic & Opaque: We are Unique, Yet Strangers to Each Other***

The mystery of being an inviolate *self*, endowed with privacy, idiosyncrasy that endows both uniqueness and alienation, a well of deepening depths that has no bottom, is not the error it is sometimes made out to be by Eastern and Western religions alike. Developmental psychologists know it to be the stunning, delicate, obstinate emergence of unique awareness in each child with any hope of blooming into the world as a separate being, capable of standing on its own two feet.

This flowering of a more complex sentience is perhaps the manifestation of something in the universe, in the absolute, that longs for specificity, the deeply relative, the mystery that boundary provides. Spirituality can tend to gloss over this astonishing feat, make it seem a trivial bus-stop on the way to a paradise where all individuality is left at some utopian terminal like irrelevant baggage. It may be that the Absolute, whatever it may be, loves to dress up in the very clothes we too easily jettison. Buddhism *does* tend to have a reverential attitude toward the very act of incarnation, the “gift of a precious human life”. However, the *self* is still suspect number one.

Even without committing a crime, the isolated self is indeed its own worst enemy, the cause of much of its own unrelenting suffering. But it's not because it's doing something *wrong*, per se; it was born to this: to be what it is, a separate, viable, inviolate, private self. And if any infant could talk, you'd get an earful about the utterly profound struggle to become separate, to navigate this contradictory and unpredictable world without too much rage and crying and throwing up. It is a miracle of unprecedented proportions.

Still, the victory itself is ambiguous, since one is left craving the very union one just emancipated from. This is the existential dilemma at its core: why am I a stranger to every other? Why do I feel imprisoned in a bag of skin, the mirrored labyrinth of my own mind? How can I now feel truly one with anything? Steiner says:

The mere question “what are you thinking, what have you in mind?” solicits answers which are themselves many-layered, which have, however unnoticed, passed through complex filters. Hence, the unsettled relations between thought and love. Hence the likelihood that love between thinking beings is a somewhat miraculous grace.

Every man and every woman, every adult and every child uses what linguists call an “idiolect”, this is to say a personalized selection out of available language with private, singular, perhaps untranslatable counters, connotations and references which the recipient in dialogue cannot wholly or with certitude interpret. We try to translate to each other.

Even in moments and acts of extreme intimacy—perhaps most acutely at such moments—the lover cannot embrace the thoughts of the beloved. “What are you thinking, what am I thinking as we make love?” This exclusion makes the vaunted fusion of orgasm and its rhetoric of unison arguably trivial...The closest, most honest of human beings remain strangers, more or less partial, more or less undeclared to each other.

Yet it is this very partialness, this opacity, that provides the spark of attraction to the unknown, the mysterious, the not-fully comprehended in the other. The sense of one’s own boundary, as with Flamenco dancers, provides the strength of form necessary for impassioned artistry; without such tension, there is only a flaccid falling into and over each other. Yet the boundaried merging of movement and limbs allows we dancers a more nuanced union than simply hugging each other in the middle of the floor. Though both are nice.

If all were transparent, there would be no mystery, and only a limited, undeveloped capacity. The gift of a separate self is both the bane of existence, and its boon. Enfolding the tensions between these polar realities is the daily practice that allows one a true experience of oneness. The absolute in every relative. The me in you, and the you in me.

***Ninth Noble Reason: Great Thought is Not Democratic: We are Given Great Truths, Yet Must Find Our Own***

We are not all equal, in fact, but we are innately equal, if disparate in ability, gift, predilection. It takes all kinds, every hand, each role, contribution, function, to make the world go round. If we were all kings and queens, it would be a crowded chessboard, a turbulent politics, and everyone would starve. But if not for folks like Gautama Buddha, or any personal pantheon one esteems to be extraordinary, we might never have

emerged from the primordial slime of our own minds. Just as it took a few precocious, uniquely gifted single-celled creatures to figure out they could replicate, and make two, before others figured it out. The rest is history—evolution, and all that.

But it has often been a history of sadness, of suffering, as the great clamor for survival, prestige, power, civilization (both glorious and brutal) unfolds—each of us desiring to find our place, together, in this world. Even spiritually, one wants to become a Buddha in one's own right—in fact, it is the imperative we're given by the Buddha. In Zen, the inflammatory phrase, *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!* points toward just this paradox. The potential in each person to fulfill just such a destiny is, ostensibly, encouraged by the very Buddhas we are inspired by; yet this very desire gets in the way. We'd often prefer to have a mommy or daddy Buddha to take care of us, do what we cannot; or, in the best Oedipal/Electra fantasy from Freud's dark basement of the psyche, we *do* secretly hope to kill the Parent/Buddha, and replace them with ourselves in an aggressive fusion.

Steiner ruminates:

...each and every living man, woman, and child is a thinker. This is as true of the cretin as it is of Newton, of the virtually speechless...as it is of Plato.

Our taxonomy, notably in the current political-social ambience, tends toward the egalitarian. Does this not disguise and falsify an obvious, but scarcely or uncomfortably noticed hierarchy? Vaguely, rhetorically we attach to certain acts of spirit and what we assume to be their consequences—the scientific thought, the work of art, the philosophic system, the historical deed—the label “great”. We refer to “great” thoughts or ideas, to products of intellectual, artistic, or political genius. No less vaguely, we adduce “profound” as distinct from trivial or superficial thoughts. Spinoza descends into the mineshaft; the man in the street customarily skates at the banal surface of himself or the world.

To live inside this paradox is to live as a kind of *koan*, a paradox of desire and its destinies. It is the classic dilemma of meditation practice: how to desire to be desireless, how to strive to stop striving. And, when all is said and done, how to embrace our gifts of beingness and contribution in the larger *sangha* of the world—to find the Buddha within—yet humbly take our place in the circle, embrace the unique, often small role it is ours to play.

This itself is an opportunity for suffering, but it is also an opportunity for joy: we aren't in this alone. We don't have to do everything by ourselves. As the Zen teacher John Tarrant often says, *Waking up is something we do together.*

Still, in the desire for a democratic, equally realized, mutually shared experience of the world, there will always be this tension between following those we deem great and infallible, and following one's own creative intimations, however humble and fallible.

...(is) authentic thinking and its receptive valuation impeded, even destroyed...by ideological denial?

When the "greatness" of large Truths turn rote, unthinking, even coercive, what happens to the possibility of finding one's own truth within this larger field of shared realization? Steiner says,

Truth, taught the Baal Shem, is perpetually in exile. Perhaps it should be.

The ancient Chinese modeled the dynamic tension required of this Ninth Noble Reason for both suffering and beauty by embracing both the exhaustive Confucian proscriptions for how to behave in every complex situation possible, and, the spare Taoism of Lao Tzu who promoted spontaneous, unrehearsed, ever-adaptable response to the uniqueness of each situation. Ultimately, these two opposing-yet-complementary philosophical and socio-cultural systems were required to bind a country together.

Still, Steiner says,

But so far as we know, there is no pedagogic key to the creative. Innovative, transformative thought, in the arts as in the sciences, in philosophy as in political theory, seems to originate in "collisions", in quantum leaps at the interface between the subconscious and the conscious, between the formal and the organic in play and "electric" art of psychosomatic agencies largely inaccessible both to our will and to our comprehension.

The burden, and the beauty, of the great realizations required to personally and collectively advance perhaps lies in these very collisions. The earnest, humble, arrogant, blind struggle for what is truly true for each, and, what seems to be true for the many. Each of us, with a burden, and a beauty, to bring to our collective struggle.

But the metamorphic use of these means toward novel configurations of meaning and mappings of human possibility, toward a *vita nuova* of belief and feeling, can neither be predicted nor institutionalized. There is no democracy to genius... There are the few, as Holderlin said, who are compelled to catch lightning in their bare hands.

Thank god for those who do. And, each of us may look at our own palms, feels its burn, see its light. As Buddha did; as he instructed us to do.

**Tenth Noble Reason: *Thought Longs for Mastery, Yet Ever Resides in Mystery: the Tension in the Driving Force of Life Itself***

Mastery versus Mystery—this is one way of speaking about the Tenth Noble Reason for both sadness and beauty. The gift of *thinking* is a pearl-of-great-price, formed at great price; a grail both holy and maddening; a mandala of labyrinthian design. Perhaps ultimately, a way of singing into the vastness of sky.

Much like the expanding *dark energy* scientists have calculated to be the cosmic terrain within which the universe's invisible *dark matter* mysteriously operates, the mastery that thought seeks never finds the limit, the boundary, of its universe. To not-think means Gautama would never have become the Buddha, never have pressed toward the foundational insights of Buddhism, which he saw as the foundational truths of life itself. And in the West, Steiner describes our trajectory thus:

The attempts to “think”, to “think through” these questions toward some sanctuary of justifying, explicative resolution have produced our religious, philosophic, literary, artistic, and, to a large extent, scientific history. The effort has engaged the most powerful intellects and creative sensibilities in the human race – a Plato, a Saint Augustine, a Dante, a Spinoza, a Galileo, a Marx, a Nietzsche, or a Freud. It has bred theological and metaphysical systems of fascinating subtlety and suggestive proposal. Our doctrines, poetry, art, and science before modernity have been underwritten by the urgent questioning of existence, mortality, and the divine. To abstain from this questioning, to censor it would be to cancel out the defining pulse and dignitas of our humanity. It is the vertigo of asking which activates an examined life...

The Buddhist paradox is that its core views about the nature of reality undermine the very certainty of its assertions. Which, if one is comfortable with paradox as the “truer” version of any singular truth, is not a problem at all. But it often leaves one uncomfortable, and grasping.

In the Pali language, Buddhism posited *The Three Marks of Existence*. *Anicca*, that life is marked by constant flux, change, impermanence. It is our very attempt to establish permanent truths, conditions, experiences, that is the source of suffering—as well as being the very vehicle of insight. *Dukkha*, that life is suffused with some measure of dissatisfaction, disappointment, suffering both trivial and overwhelming, to the extent that one clings-to or avoids life's impermanent conditions; though it is this very suffering that can turn one towards a deeper experience of life, rather than lying shallow upon its surface, unconscious of its depths. *Anatta*, the mark of existence which describes the condition of the *self* as empty of any final, static, eternally-unchanging form—which also means this intangible self *is* inter-dependently intertwined in the web of life's unceasing emergence.

*The Three Inverted Views* become the corollary versions of suffering, in Buddhist thought, and a kind of grace, in Western thought, as human beings seek some measure of permanence against the sweep of nature and history; of pleasure and satisfaction amid constant cycles of attainment and loss; and a cogent, congruent identity as a separate entity in the whirl & whorl of a universe of otherness.

Yet, in Buddhist thought, even these truths are subject to constant shifts in nuance and emphasis, are contingent on historical-cultural idiosyncrasy, adaptable to evolving contingency, personality configuration, the *upaya* or “skillful means”, in the Pali language, of applying such wisdom in an infinite variety of venues and situations.

The stunning revelation of such *mastery* reveals only more layers of *mystery* as personal journey, historical evolution, and cosmic story unfold. This, perhaps, is how it is meant to be, because it is the *suchness* of how things actually are. But it's still quite mysterious, even in the momentary mastery of such insight.

And there is no proof sufficient for thought to rest in any final affirmation. Steiner laments:

No proof is forthcoming. Indeed the history of successive attempts to prove immortality or the existence of God amount to one of the more embarrassing chronicles in the human condition. The agility of thought, its inexhaustible propensity to narrative, leads to the humiliating, almost maddening conclusion that “anything goes”. For uncounted millions, God combs His white beard and Elvis Presley is risen. No refutation is axiomatically possible...Science cannot give an answer to the quintessential questions which possess or ought to possess the human spirit.

Wittgenstein noted that point insistently. It can only deny their legitimacy...Yet we are so created that we do inquire...

In Zen, there is as much emphasis on doubt as there is on faith—in fact, the Buddha encouraged the presence of doubt as the lynch-pin of true practice. *To see for one's self, to be a lamp unto one's self*, however quixotic and uncertain this chimeric-self may be. Certainty breeds a kind of illness, in Zen, that its masters are constantly rousting their students about, to make sure they don't fall prey to its illusions. There is room though for deep faith in this process, for the grace that curiosity and openness, uncertainty and inquiry, bring to living, to the most faithful of practices.

Steiner points toward a faculty beyond *thought*, or perhaps a more musical kind of thinking:

Meanwhile, it is not theological or philosophic argument which draws thought to the very limits of its indispensable, ever-renewed “dead ends”. It is, I believe, music, that tantalizing medium of revealed intuition beyond words, beyond good and evil, in which the role of thought as we can grasp it remains deeply elusive.

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So, having come full circle round these Ten Noble reasons for both sadness and beauty, I like to think of them as a more nuanced examination of the role thought, even *thoughtfulness*, plays in the continuum of an evolving Western-Buddhist practice. Categorically, and just for fun, one could say they are ten sub-sections of Buddha's Four Noble Truths, elucidated for the Western mind steeped more in the exigencies of such matters. Or one could play with them, expanding the *Four* into *Fourteen Noble Truths*, just for the fun of it.

In either event, the intent of these reveries is to more-fully include existentialism's contribution of both *dialectic* and *paradox* to Buddhism's formulations, perhaps enhancing how the *non-dual* is experienced in the Western psyche. The *existential* layer of awareness, which can be posited as existent in the depths of The Three Marks of Existence, tends to remain mesmerized by the sadness of the world's impermanent, unsatisfying, and insubstantial reality; albeit *bravely*. It is, for the Buddhist, the necessary precursor to the liberation and openness these very same *marks of existence* bring to the deepening insight of meditation. Namely, that the flip-side of these sad conditions is a

marvelously fluid-self, which neither grasps nor avoids the ever-changing conditions of the universe's beautiful and baneful nature. Resulting in the very embrace one originally seeks through grasping—but which finally comes in the letting-go.

So, to return to Dogen, all this thinking may be trouble (as it classically *is* for a Buddhist), but *because troubling too is such a thing, it is not trouble*. Everything, even thinking, is not the *trouble* to strive to be rid of. It too is Buddha-mind. As Dogen says,

*Even if there is suchness which seems strange, this too is such—there is the suchness of “one should not be surprised.”*

## The Seven Koans of Existence

This morning, I was talking with myself (always a bit suspect) about this continuing transmission of Buddhism to the West. The conversation involved the notion of integrating Theravada Buddhism's *Three Marks of Existence* (and the corollary *Three Inverted Views*), with Dr. Irvin Yalom's Existential Psychotherapy, and its *Four Paradoxes of Existence*. To then refashion these key insights as the *Seven Koans of Existence*. The goal? To explore a more robust integration of Buddhist thought with the exigencies of *being-a-self* in this modern Western landscape.

At first blush, this reformulation might begin with Buddhism's traditional *Three Marks*, adding Yalom's *Four Paradoxes*, then positing each as a paradoxical koan. Why? Because koans, as do the existentialists, place paradox at the core of what it means to be alive. To chew on a koan, as a dog its bone, is a kind of meditation practice. The marrow of life itself "hides" inside.

I've often thought of the Theravadin Buddhist *Three Marks of Existence* as a kind of koan, though both Zen and Theravadin practitioners might balk. But I'm more ecumenical in my leanings, and sense a symmetry inherent in them. For quick review, the *Three Marks of Existence*, and their corollary *Three Inverted Views* which cause us to suffer, are:

- **Anicca:** *Impermanence & Change is the only constant; looking for Permanence is such a world results in suffering.*
- **Dukkha:** *Desire leaves us unfulfilled, dissatisfied, suffering; looking for the ultimate fulfillment of desire leads to more suffering.*
- **Anatta:** *There is no perfect-self to defend, since this no-self is interdependent with all things; attempting to grasp this illusion of separateness causes suffering.*

As profound as this articulation of the Buddha's original insight into suffering is, I've often felt it's been translated in the West through the inevitable lens of our Calvinist quest for perfection, a Puritan moralistic fog that leaves modern meditators feeling like we've done something *wrong* by experiencing the world through these three "inverted" views.

However, human beings are *designed* to seek permanence in a world of change,

satisfaction in a world of want, a self in this churning sea of chaos. As Zen teacher John Tarrant says, it is a *feature* of our operating system, not a bug. Yet, given the paradoxical nature of existence, it is only half the story. We indeed must open to impermanence, desirelessness, selflessness—though this openness does not mean we *only* drift unmoored in a sea of change, desiring nothing, empty of identity. Being human still means crafting the temporary permanence of home, relationship, work, the arts; still desiring, enjoying this passing flow of experience; still delighting in the unique constellation of one's contingent beingness. The effort required is more akin to having an ear for music, strings tuned neither too tightly nor too loosely; or the poise of an athlete tensed between the poles of effortlessness and discipline. Resonantly capable of the whole range of music and motion that *is* human life.

Since the *amygdala* in the reptilian base of the human brain-stem is wired to perceive everything as either threat or acquisition, this binary reductionism is understandably where we start. Even in meditation practice. Yet the brilliance of the human brain is that it arcs upward through the resonant middle brain, with its emotional warmth and passion, into the neo-cortex rich with the potential for not only language, cognition, but also the capacity for a more non-dualistic experience: a synesthesia of not only the different senses, but these three core conditions of life itself.

Meditation, at heart, is an act of loving-embrace of these vastly contrary urges—yielding a new synesthesia of effortless effort, desire that flows but does not cling, identity that shimmers then disappears over and again.

The beauty of Western thought is how it offers reflections of this nuanced jewel, with its propensity to see the *self* as inescapable as it is ephemeral—with a robust vocabulary for its quandaries. For Westerners, crawling from the primordial sea of our own continents, it is the unique language we bring to the evolution of Buddhist practice—as Japanese Zen practitioners did to the Chinese Chan Buddhism that came before them, and the Indian Buddhist practice that preceded them, as well as the Southeast Asian sensibility that followed the Theravadins, or the exiled Tibetans, here to America.

In the West, it is perhaps Existential Psychotherapy that has best posited a language of the modern self, one that reflects the Buddha's original insight into suffering, and its possibilities for freedom. Dr. Irvin Yalom is one of my favorite theorists, and has written extensively in this area. He posits four paradoxical conditions that we human beings

find ourselves continuously stretched between, which, luckily, can never be fully resolved—because it is these very contrary-pulls that produce consciousness itself, and help us develop as sentient beings. They can be described as:

- ***Life vs. Death:*** *we want to persist in being, but face an apparent end with death*
- ***Freedom vs. Structure:*** *we desire absolute freedom, yet need structure to become anything*
- ***Aloneness vs. Union:*** *we desire to know ourselves as unique, yet merged with others*
- ***Meaning vs. Meaninglessness:*** *we long for higher purpose, yet fear having to create our own*

Really, language is simply a brush to paint with, to shade and elucidate the light we see. The Buddhist formularies of *The Four Noble Truths*, *The Eightfold Path*, *The Three Marks of Existence*, *Form & Emptiness*, as well as these *Four Paradoxes*, are more styles of painting than definitions of light. Nor the light itself. But they point toward something every human senses in the marrow of life—these contrary tugs and pulls that produce suffering. Yet, which also offer enlightenment, to the extent one learns to *live* robustly inside their tensions.

Existentialism offers the reflection that we, at core, feel torn between the desire for more life, and the sense of its impermanence; the freedom to do what we want, yet desire for the very structure that allows such freedom to find expression; the desire for union with another, with life itself, yet the contrary desire to be alone, to feel one’s uniqueness apart from others; and finally, the desire to be part of something larger than ourselves, for innate meaning, yet with equal longing to construct one’s own meaning, to find one’s own destiny.

Still, Dr. Yalom’s formulation stops at the traditional cliff-edge of existentialism’s insight, which is to suffer *bravely* these unresolvable and irreconcilable conflicts. At best, this represents a kind of “negative capability” as Keats coined the phrase, where one is “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after...”. But the Western tradition is thin on *how* to accomplish this.

This is where the actual practice of meditation comes in; not simply to keep a stiff-upper-lip at the cliff’s edge, but as a famous Zen koan intimates, to savor the rocks, the fall, the whole poignant predicament. That we are alive at all, to be stretched by such powers into being—interdependent with, not ultimately separate from, existence itself.

Without going into such meditation technique here, for which there are now countless good teachers and books, let it suffice to say that the path involves cultivating a greater, more sustained capacity to breath-through these manifold experiences, to be mindful of their rising and falling with less “irritable reaching-after”, to embrace these innate paradoxes of existence not only on the meditation seat, but while living, mindfully, *in* the world.

Of course, the Buddhists covered most of the bases with the Eightfold Path, a kind of how-to manual for everything from meditation to conduct to thinking. But the essence of koan-work in Zen utilizes more of an intuitive, right-brain approach to balance the left-brain’s need to know exactly what-to-do, and how-to-do-it. Koans, like poems, like music or art, invoke a kind of response that is less about fixing what is ostensibly broken, and more akin to wonder, to curiosity, and hence discovery.

The old koans are often framed as provocative dialogues, a kind of dharma-combat, between teacher and student, or between two ornery masters, intent on evoking a spontaneous expression of the awakened life. Fragments of the koans, often just a phrase, even a “turning word”, can be fingered in the mind’s hand like a stone, to suck on like a cough-drop, entertain as a mysterious guest. For the purposes of this essay, I’ve tried to herd these seven mysterious creatures into a kind of order, which, like herding cats, yields little but cat-calls and evasive scampering. Still, the formless seeks form like an incorrigible drunken poet, so here’s seven knotty lines to live inside of. It casts as paradoxical koans the Buddhist *Three Marks of Existence*, then moves to incorporate existentialism’s *Four Paradoxes*:

### **The Seven Koans of Existence:**

- ξ *Striving for Permanence in a world where Change is the only Constant (Anicca).*
- ξ *Looking to Fulfill Desire when by nature Desire exists only through its Unattainability (Dukka).*
- ξ *Building and Defending a Perfect Separate Self, when the Nature of Self is more Imperfect Process than Final Thing, is Interdependent with All Other Things for its very Existence (Anatta).*

- ξ *Desiring Life's known parameters, even as Death (of all kinds) offers a door to the Unknown, the New (Life vs. Death).*
- ξ *Desiring Freedom while longing for Structure (Freedom vs. Structure).*
- ξ *Desiring Individuation while longing to Belong (Self vs. Other).*
- ξ *The desire for final Meaning in a world that requires we discover our own (Meaning vs. Meaninglessness).*

Boiling these down to more pithy statements, we might describe the creative tensions inherent in the *Seven Koans* as:

- ξ *Permanence vs. Change*
- ξ *Desire vs. Desirelessness*
- ξ *Self as Thing vs. Process*
- ξ *Life vs. Death*
- ξ *Freedom vs. Structure*
- ξ *Individuality vs. Belongingness*
- ξ *Meaning vs. Meaninglessness*

Similar to koan-work in Zen, or deepening-insight into the nature of reality in Vipassana meditation, steeping awareness like sweet-bitter tea in the subtle mix of these flavors yields a more complex awakening. It is here, in these factors, that the arising of deep insight occurs in both traditions. These *Seven Koans of Existence* can live with us: in sitting meditation, the meditation of daily living, the inexorable passage of time, the exigencies of growing older—enlightenment & endarkenment as twin poles of one body.

It is only by living in the tensions *between* these core structures of existence, these puzzles of emptiness and form, that true awakening can occur. It is in their *embrace*—rather than any final answer or solution—that enlightenment peeks out from the shell of us, rustles its wet feathers, chirps.

## My Haunt, My Song – Poetry as Language of the Fluid Self

There is an essay in the *New York Review of Books* (Feb. 23, 2017) about poetry and William Wordsworth, entitled “I Heard Voices in My Head”, by Helen Vendler. What she says, is for me applicable to any form of poetics and Zen that explore the nature of consciousness itself. Here’s a few of her passages:

In truth, what a meditative poem contributes to the history of consciousness is a reenactment in real time of the volatile inner life of a human being. Such a poem does not present itself as plot or character portrayal or argument, but rather (in I.A. Richards’s theory) as a hypothesis: “Suppose we see it like this.” The poet’s proposed hypotheses change “minute by minute” (Yeats), and include waverings, self-contradictions, repudiations, aspirations, and doubts; they are not offered as a philosophical system. They actively perform the “mobile and immobile flickering” generated by the incessant cooperation of the senses, the mind, and the heart. The history of consciousness must include those perplexingly simultaneous organic responses as episodes in thought no less significant than episodes of system-making or scientific discovery.

This striking description is as relevant to poetics as it is to Zen. It includes a right-brain, fluid depiction of the actual flow of human consciousness, just as important as any left-brain categorization or mapping of it. A musical performance more than a lecture or court-of-law rule-book about enlightenment.

Vendler’s essay introduces us to one of the most famous poets of the 1800’s – William Wordsworth – often forgotten today, given the broad dismissal by modern poetry of anything written before the 1900’s, seeing it all as high-fallutin’ twaddle & sentiment. I find Wordsworth’s life fascinating in its early romantic innocence, raised on the hopes of the French Revolution, journeying to Paris from rustic northern England. His idealism dashed in the cruel ironies of the revolution that came to be known as the Terror. His return to England, his attempts to integrate his “pre-Revolutionary confidence and the catastrophic phase of his post-Revolutionary despair.” Perhaps not unlike many of us, in America. Wordsworth’s long poem, “The Prelude”, becomes a way to work through the travail and mysteries of a self paradoxically engaged with both inner and outer worlds. Another fellow traveler, and poet, attempting to make sense of this inscrutable *self* in a world that is itself ever evolving.

Of course, with my Zen hat on, I am drawn to such Western accounts of a *self* more-fluid than that usually described by the European tradition, and, more-actual than the

Asian mystics' propensity to disappear such a self all together. I am interested in new *linguaging*, as well as embodiment, of a more integrative approach. Like light: appearing now as particle, now as wave.

There are tremendous anthropologic-geographic variances among these diverse historical-cultural approaches to Buddhist understanding of the *self*. Now that we live in a more global society, with all of history and the lived-experience of ancestors at our finger tips, we need to better integrate such beautiful but baffling variance into a single robe. Though, perhaps, a robe of many colors.

The essayist Vendler goes on to describe Wordsworth's path through his early despair and confrontation with both the world's and his own psyche's contradictions:

In exploring the causes and consequences of that crisis, and explaining its acute influence on his growth as a poet, Wordsworth began the history of his consciousness with childhood, tracking the fragmentary episodes that influenced his mind from infancy to manhood in order to understand how his psyche was formed, consolidated, shaken, and re-formed. He marveled that all his past feelings and thoughts, however distressing, became synthesized in the adult self; how strange it is:

*that all  
The terrors, all the early miseries,  
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes,  
that all  
The thoughts and feelings which  
have been infused  
Into my mind should ever have  
made up  
The calm existence that is mine  
when I  
Am worthy of myself. Praise to  
the end!*

Such an account is perhaps a core description of a Western contemplative process, one that can bridge the meditative encounter of traditional Buddhism for the new Western Buddhist, conversant in the language and experience of a more vibrant and ornery self-sense. Wordsworth's questioning, which Vendler likens to the core questions of consciousness, serve as a similar core of doubt to the perpetual inquiry of Zen:

What did I used to have that I now lack? What has vanished, leaving me at a loss? What causes these vague blank misgivings? What is making me feel that the real world is elsewhere? Why do I feel guilty when I have not done anything wrong? ...These are the motions which, as they mature, prompt inquiry...

Inquiry akin, in its way, to the core Zen koan of: *What is your original face...*

Vendler promotes the genre of poetry as one of the best modes of inquiry into consciousness itself, more than narrative or scientific forms of discourse. In this, the poetics of Zen inquiry is a near-relative. Wordsworth's use of poetics to move backward and forward in time, as well as the fusing of interior landscapes with exterior, produce a "double exposure" that help crack open the limited, time-bound self into one that emerges as fluid as the very universe it inhabits, and is commensurate with:

This eerie double exposure—as arrested "spots" fuse past and present into a single drama—is a paradigm of the process by which moments of consciousness integrate themselves into a continuous self.

It is the experience of this "continuous self" that is also described by the Buddhist writer and psychoanalyst, Dr. Mark Epstein, in his writings. Or Stephen Batchelor, with the Western emphasis on a self in ever-fluid motion more than an absolute absence or unreality. It may indeed be true that the bicycle (as stand-in for the self), when dissembled piece-by-piece, reveals nothing at its core—still, it's a fun ride, and quite useful for getting about.

Ultimately in Zen—like Vendler, like Wordsworth—there is something more *true* in encountering the Universe in its immense creativity, rather than positing its diminution to any ultimate nihilistic emptiness. Poetry provides an avenue to its celebration as well as its excavation:

Poetry teaches how the mind of man becomes—and he reaches for an unexpected superlative—"a thousand times more beautiful" than the earth itself. Not only is the mind more beautiful, but its beauty, spiritual and materials, rises to the divine:

*What we have loved  
Others will love; and we may  
teach them how,  
Instruct them how the mind of  
Man becomes*

*A thousand times more beautiful  
than the earth  
On which he dwells, above this  
Frame of things  
(Which 'mid all revolution in the  
hopes  
And fears of Men doth still  
remain unchanged)  
In beauty exalted, as it is itself  
Of such substance and of fabric more  
divine.*

While I *am* hypnotically drawn to the ancient Chinese and Japanese immersion in the elegiac and terrifying beauties of Nature, I have always been a Westerner when it comes to seeing a similar, if not more stunning, beauty of the Human. Contemporary poetry is perhaps a language more reflective of this emergent Western Buddhist approach to *self-as-part-of-world*—rather than the European standard of standing apart from it; or, merged without characteristic in undifferentiated fusion with Nature as exemplified by the ancient East. Vendler says,

Systems are dull in their reduction of the mind's protean motions to philosophic categories—the intellect, the will, the senses: only poetry can adapt its musicality to the polyphonic strands of human response...

The poem could be called a manual of introspection, derived from a stringent practice of honesty and enunciated in a dazzling fluidity of language.

Certainly, there is as impressive an array of such spiritual systems in Indian, Chinese, Tibetan and Southeast Asian Buddhist practices, as there are in the European-American tradition in the West. Poetry, like Zen, is the necessary corollary language to such “systems”—of self & cosmos—the closest-one-comes to expression of the ephemeral. Wordsworth's poem “Home at Grasmere”, intended, Vendler says, as a preface to “The Prelude”, describes territory that is perhaps a more human reflection of Zen's *original mind* – as the self looks into itself, haunted, singing:

*Not Chaos, not  
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,  
Nor aught of blinder vacancy,  
scooped out  
By help of dreams, can breed such*

*fear and awe*  
*As fall upon us often when we*  
*Look*  
*Into our Minds into the Mind of*  
*Man, —*  
*My haunt, and the main region of*  
*my song.*

## The Universe Dreaming The Universe Into Existence

From Zen teacher Joan Sutherland's *Acequia*:

In meditation we can develop a sense of the universe as a vast act of imagination—the universe dreaming the universe into existence, image by image—and of how this happens all around us, inside us, all the time. Koans reproduce this imagining-into-existence over and over again; they evoke a world and we enter it, so that we, too—however distant in time and space—become part of the imagining.

I love Sutherland's Mahayana-inflected Buddhist sensibility expressed as a kind of Jungian linguistics: everything, we too, *a vast act of imagination*.

John Tarrant and Joan Sutherland both have a sense of “going beyond” even the vehicle, the beloved boat, of *Zen* and *Buddhism*—towards an even more universal language expressive of *wakefulness* in this maddening and marvelous Universe. While Buddhism is filled with reminders to “abandon the boat” on the far shore, letting go of any reference to Buddhism per se, it's difficult to do so when one is wedded (in the best sense of the word) to the form and beauty of a particular cultural expression—and, love for the little boat that brings one here. But implicit in the deep Zen of things, so to speak, is encounter with that which is before any particular form, one's *Original Face*, and here language begins to fail—one must find fresh ways of pointing toward it.

The Pacific Zen approach, as I've come to understand it, is comfortable with this Jungian-inflected language of *imagination*, which koans exemplify as doorways into this world where the Absolute and the Relative meet as *us*. Joan notes that most Buddhist approaches to the inner imaginings that arise in meditation focus on two strategies: either noting with bare attention then letting it go, or, learning through concentration to stabilize the image as an object of meditation in itself. In both cases, the pejorative term *makyo* is often affixed to such imagery: untrustworthy and dangerous. Distractions to enlightenment. The koan tradition, John and Joan note, offers another possibility: *take them seriously; engage with them; see what happens*. Give the mind something to do with its own imagination, since it seems to be core to its natural functioning. Throw a dog a bone—or a painter a brush, a writer a pen.

Koans, or a poem, or any creative fragment taken contemplatively, opens a door to the

fountain of this very emergence. Rather than trying to label, distance, and in effect *control* this astounding inner world, koans and the arts become a way of working *with* the world and mind rather than *against* them. There's something beautiful, though baffling, about salmon swimming so tenaciously against the stream to find their origins, and spawn. Such effort is native to us, too—is something to enter fully, rather than attempting to turn one's salmon-mind downstream.

Whether swimming with the stream or against its currents, to realize that one is not trying to escape the stream is the greater act, not only of imagination, but reality. I see poetry as a Western version of the traditional Chinese-Japanese koan. Not that such poetry is particularly spiritual, but certain lines and verse-fragments, like a koan, can open deeply the Western heart-mind because it engages something native within. In a way, this is the Pacific Zen tributary to the larger river of American Buddhism: developing a fresh language of awakening, via the imagination as a shared communal meditative-art form. It is not koans themselves that are somehow the point of practice, it is our lives. In fact, it is when our lives become living koans that deeper practice occurs. Again, Joan says:

Our lives are the creative medium of the koan; they help us see how to participate in making the world. They also want us to understand that this is not a project of unbridled possibility. It's become commonplace to say that we create our own reality, but that's not entirely true; there's actually something much more subtle and complex going on. First of all, as we fall through this part of the universe, we discover the laws and the customs of this place, and how to engage with them. There is the world of our dreams, and there are also many autonomous things, like the second law of thermodynamics and what happens to a body that doesn't get enough food. We're bringing imagination and matter together, not imposing one on the other. We're finding out what's possible when they shape each other.

What a lovely, contemporary way of fleshing-out the Buddhist notions of the Absolute & the Relative, the One & the Many—in a more Western linguistic. Joan goes on to say:

Secondly and most fortunately, there are an almost infinite number of others engaged in this with us. The world is a co-creation, full of surprise and mad skills we never could have imagined for ourselves. It's also full of the rankest failures, the keenest betrayals, the most inexplicable acts of destruction. What an excruciating way to make a universe! And yet it's the one we've got, so far. What can we do? Come into relationship with the ways things are, explore the ways things might be, learn how to collaborate to give our best guesses a try. This is an art, and what better guide could we have than a spiritual practice that is itself an art?

As an example of how poetry can be a kind of koan, this poem by Bob Hicok, from his book, *Elegy Owed*, is a move in the right direction:

### **The heart of the soul of the gist of the matter**

In college, I stole a human heart from the anatomy lab  
and bowered it in a bird's nest that had fallen, I make  
symbols, not whales, plagues, thistles, stars  
are the moms and pops of everything  
except themselves, *inanimate's* the one word  
I'd execute by guillotine to excise the lie  
of lifeless, since bite into any bit of dirt  
or dust and you've got a gob full of electrons  
and quarks, the whole menagerie of matter's  
in there, pinging and swooping, steel's got a pulse  
as far as I'm concerned, and while I'm French  
Revolutioning my way across the lexicon, I'll nix  
*miraculous* too, for what isn't, what stone  
doesn't do a number of things I can't  
very well, avalanche and slingshot and skip  
at the shore, where compared to my one, water speaks  
with infinite mouths, and the simplest chair  
is sometimes the most mystical being  
in a room, animate with the knowledge  
of how to be wood and supportive, alive  
with the atomic breath of being, this is god,  
small g, no Bible, Koran, I stole a human heart  
from the anatomy lab in college and bowered it  
in a bird's nest that had fallen, they looked  
lost alone but thrived as partners, the dead heart  
and dead home alive with the promise of shelter

The *heart of the soul of the gist of the matter* is this very act of imagination, that occurs with each breath—even when dead heart and fallen bird's nest are my only shelter. Lost *alone*, what is fallen thrives when partnered in this journey. It is a way of *taking refuge*, in *what is*. The death of imagination is not enlightenment, but its refusal. *Alive with the atomic breath of breathing*, is what we are. Imagine that. Perhaps koan and poem alike provide a lexicon for this atomic self, a linguistics of liberation to accompany our enlightenment instruction manuals.

## This Flickering Self as Art

An all-night bout of food-poisoning reminds me of the power of the body to override the mind's centrality, to highjack the *self* I thought I was. Illness—as well as Eros, Rock & Roll, and other tidal waves of neo-cortex circumvention—leave me humbled in their wake. I am there one moment, carried away the next.

This morning, I finish reading Greg O'Brien's *On Pluto: Inside the Mind of Alzheimer's*. As his mother finally dies of the disease, he keeps writing as he begins his own slow flight to Alzheimer's "Pluto" on the outskirts of the self's solar system—the disease confirming in its inelegant way the Buddha's core premise of the ephemeral nature of *self*. It's where we're all heading, in one fashion or another—dissolving back into the universe, yet awake while body and mind unravel. To see Greg do so with such wit and humor is enlightening and endarkening both, in one stroke.

Observing this flickering *self*—whether in the throes of Alzheimer's, artistic expression, or Zen meditation—is part of the supple muscle of consciousness I suspect we're exercising in this strange "boot camp" of mortality. To stay awake as we take shape and dissolve over and again. Even as we age, become ill, die.

Oddly enough, in meditation one can literally experience the contingent-self refract like a prism, or a hurricane's chaos, into its parts—its own kind of observational dementia. Yet purposeful: to see the self in *anatta*, the kaleidoscopic ever-changing panorama of percepts rising and falling in linked association. The "insubstantiality" of a single, unwavering self. We do waver, and shift like light from point to wave and back again, endlessly. Till we end—and even then, who knows what waves continue to ripple?

In this regard, I am drawn to a *New York Review of Books* (November 19, 2015) essay entitled, "Late Francis Bacon: Spirit & Substance", by Colm Toibin. His descriptions of aging in the work of artists and writers is eloquent, with its references to the *self* both observed and expressed in this mysterious latter stage of life. The reviewer quotes the critic Edward Said, and his observations of:

the sheer strangeness of Ludwig van Beethoven's late string quartets and his last piano sonatas, their insistence on breaking with easy form, their restlessness, their aura of incompleteness...the feeling that they are striving toward some set of musical textures that have not yet been imagined

and cannot be achieved in Beethoven's lifetime. In other words, it is that these late pieces wish to represent the mind or the imagination not as it faces death but rather as it faces life, as it sets out to reimagine a life with new beginnings and new possibilities but also with the ragged sense that there might not be much time.

To face life, more than death—even with this ragged sense that time is running out, or away. The reviewer then quotes Thomas Mann:

Every piece of work is a realization, fragmentary but complete in itself, of our individuality.

This is where a poem or work of art, while but a fragment of the ephemeral-self, is also a holograph of the whole-self: in motion, never complete, but reflective of unique individuality in its shimmering reflections. Like flipping through the static pages of a book of drawings to watch a figure-in-movement emerge as a whole-fluid-motion from its disparate renderings. In this latter stage of life and art, one attempts to look back as well as forward in the ever-moving *present*; to flip the pages of one's life to feel its flow, see its patterns emerging then disappearing over and again.

Yet in reviewing this self-in-motion, backward and forward through time, one can find as the essayist does in the written works of Samuel Beckett and the artist Francis Bacon:

...the self as protean, uncertain, unsingular, ready to be doubled or shadowed, poised to move outward into a second self, or another self, or into a figure hovering near, waiting for substance.

Where the Chinese Chan Buddhist or Taoist monk peered into the *self* and saw mirrored the vastness of Nature, more than the Human, it is the West that in its meeting with Buddhist sensibility can peer into the self *as itself*, so to speak. Where the artist and psychologist live, in dialogue with the meditator—as multiple selves in the natural depths of the psyche. Perhaps in the modern West, an artistic expression of Chan/Zen meditation will be *Psyche* as much as *Nature*. In a manner akin to John Tarrant's explorations of old Greek myths and Gaelic stories in the Pacific Zen Institute tradition.

Implicit in Western Jungian and existential thought is the archetype of the *shadow*, or even *shadowy selves*, as in Walt Whitman's *I am Legion*. What traditional Buddhism can tend to see only as distraction or delusion (in its deconstructive penetration of the self), artists and writers in the West may lend poetic insight to, hence embrace rather than reject, this self that won't stand still. Not to cling to, but neither to reject—the two cautions of Buddhist practice; rather, to *embrace* in a non-dual manner, with both arms.

I sometimes sense that Western Buddhist practitioners, with the best of intentions, lean too far toward *Emptiness* in a nihilistic, monochromatic way, rather than observing and making art of the kaleidoscopic panorama of the inner life—except the Tibetans of course, who can make Catholic iconography seem downright spare and Protestant by comparison. Still, the Tibetans’ florid art reflects their own interior cultural landscape.

Western existential writers and artists—like Bacon and Beckett—do seem to find themselves leaning into a Void they too see only as vacant, rather than pregnant. The actual tonal interpretation of Buddhist *Shunyata* (*Emptiness*) is as much fertile pregnancy as existential void. Buddhism, in this regard, offers a way for the Western existentialist to experience the birth, so to speak, inherent in any void. That something arises, as mysteriously as it disappears. Over and again. Like this tricky, sinuous self—luckily. Else, existence and void would be monotone and monist in all aspects. Let’s cheer for the little inconstant bugger!

The reviewer Colm Toibin continues:

In both Beckett’s and Bacon’s work, this idea of the figure as fluid rather than, say, single or inert has its origins in necessity as much as in philosophy...

Thus these shadows, this blurring of self, at its most intense and magisterial—for example, in Bacon’s *Self-Portrait* of 1987—created a force and energy in the pictures that would strike the nervous system of the viewer more powerfully than any single, stable figure.

When we as meditators, as ordinary human beings, become more comfortable with the force and energy in our own nervous-systems of these shadow-selves, we may find *upaya*, a “skillful means” tailored for the modern era we live in. Rather than attempting to become “enlightened” as a single, stable figure, I may find myself akin to the aforementioned static-drawings as I flip myself through moments as the fluid entity I more-truly am. I may also come to know my corollary, contingent inter-relatedness with all things, as life flickers into fluid art.

## Dogen's *The Self is Definitely You* & The MOMA

In Zen Master Dogen's *Shobogenzo* – his chapter entitled “Flowers in the Sky” – he uses a traditional Japanese derogatory image: that manifest-reality is simply flowers-in-the-sky, or later in the text, a result of “cataracts in the eyes”. But Dogen loves paradox, and merely utilizes these traditional Buddhist images to turn the world, and us, upside down. Where the self, and this contingent world, is also the very Buddha we seek.

Dogen's inquiry points toward *non-dual* sight, where the world is not split into enlightenment and delusion, One and Many, where flowers and cataracts are all part-and-parcel of the whole thing—that practice should not split the world in two. The self, included. He likens us to fruit *ripening of its own accord*:

*Own* is the self, the self is definitely *you*...

which of course runs so contrary to the zealotry of the traditional Buddhist teaching of “no-self”. Still, having shown one side of the coin, Dogen then flips to the other:

*Because of being able to employ the true human with no position, it is not “I”, it is not “who” ...*

And so it goes—flipping the coin of *self* again and again, sometimes heads, sometimes tails. The same coin.

Dogen's meditations speak to this theme that enlivens me: how American Buddhism might embrace this sense of *self* that is our Western inheritance, rather than attempting its annihilation. That this very life, filled with *selves* in all our beastly mess, filled with doubt and strange moods, clarities and delusions, is the very terrain of enlightenment/endarkenment—that there is no other world to escape to. But there is Art, to give it expression.

∞

After reading Dogen, flipping his two-sided coin over and again—*self, no-self*—I head to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), which just re-opened its doors this past weekend. After sitting in traffic crammed within a two-block square (all these non-existent selves trying to find parking), I finally make it in—and with such mixed

feelings! Modern art seems to come down on the *no-self* side of the coin, but in such a dazzling manner!

The architecture of the museum is stunning, new sections entwined with the original building, now seven floors, some with outdoor balconies, one of which features the world's largest "living" wall with an array of ferns and moss. The light-wood staircases and handrails are polished so smooth I love running my hand along the railings as I ascend and descend.

But, oh my, Post-Modern art must not be my cup of tea, no matter how many times I attempt to drink it. It *is* intellectually stimulating, and I love taking-in *any* artistic endeavor—be it art, literature, music, dance—to try and put myself in the mind and soul of that creator, to experience the world through their unique artistic lens. In effect, to see through the eyes of this *bit of Universe* creating itself from itself. But if *this* is where *We as Universe* have gotten to, my-my, I think we're indeed falling apart, fragmented and awash in the effluvia of atomistic, deconstructed reality. Not unlike, perhaps, the traditional Buddhist insight into *No-Self*: that as one takes apart a bicycle, a universe, a self, there is ultimately nothing there. Taken apart, that is.

This, too, is the very (apparently non-existent) *soul* of Modern art's ethos and method. While it certainly mirrors aspects of the traditional Buddhist deconstruction of reality, still, Post-Modernism fails to see *Emptiness* as *fertile and pregnant* (which is at the heart of Buddhism), often portraying *vacancy-and-randomness* as defining this void.

In the literary world, poets and critics such as Tony Hoagland are attempting to inch our culture forward toward a Post-Modern *Humanism*—to embrace again, in a new way, some of the classic, romantic, humanistic elements of past tradition that were left shattered in pieces by modern industrialism, war, and its post-colonial awakening. As I've described in two other essays: *The Manifest Destiny of Language*, and, *Why I Love Tony Hoagland*, we've come to a cultural edge, in this modern techno-infused world, and it's a long way down. I hope we turn, not backwards, but inward again *into* the human, rather than simply dissecting and discarding our many disparate parts.

As Dogen might say, *the true human of no fixed identity is definitely you...*

Once *universe – self – bicycle* is taken apart piece by piece—with no single part found as the irreducible, true thing itself—when put back together, you can still pedal your way through this universe-aflower—cataracts and all. *See* the pregnant emptiness everywhere-apparent. It *is* something to watch!

And so, even here at the MOMA, I find semblances of a human story along one long corridor in the photography exhibits. It is a re-exhibition of a New York show decades before that was not well-received, but is now considered contemporary: black & white photos of a wide range of rich and poor, old and young, each individual posing in a room of their home, with a journaled commentary beneath the picture revealing the poignant, hopeful, despairing, naïve, brave hopes each have for their lives. Each revealing a tiny bit of universe longing to *become more*. This exhibit is where the human shows through.

For the most part, though, I keep ascending each floor of the MOMA thinking the next level will finally show more heartfulness—find instead the usual artifacts of jagged geometric sculptures, floor-to-ceiling canvases of mottled or garbled paint, monochrome canvases anyone could have produced, or hairy-looking canvases with unappealing combinations of rope and fuzz, an entire white room traced with geometric crayon lines, or video installations with the stereotypical monotonous droning of a sound or single image, as though the universe had gotten stuck, the album skipping interminably on the turntable, or like a patient in the worst psychiatric backward you could imagine repeating autistic tics endlessly. Or some such beauty.

Of course, the flip-side of Dogen’s coin *is* this very same Post-Modern universe: emptiness, an aggregate of random and intertwined factors, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. I just think the Buddhism we’ve inherited is too-soaked in this side of things, as is contemporary Post-Modern culture. That we’re a bit pruned in these empty waters, could use a towel, a little sun to feel our human skin again. To not be afraid of seeing how things also cohere, make sense, demonstrate beauty. There are always two sides to this coin.

I was glad, though, in the MOMA to see, yes, the golden toilet bowl—as well as the requisite regular white porcelain urinals mounted all by themselves on a wall. While I *can* see them easily, mystically, as bits of some god’s genius, I can see them less-well as

Art. It seems more an intellectual exercise than a visceral emerging, a birth. But still, *this is it too*, I know.

Dogen is right: *the true human of no fixed identity is definitely you...*

Am I glad I went? Absolutely. Would I go again? Yes, but not soon. I return time and again to the DeYoung and Legion of Honor museums as I do to cathedrals: to worship. In much of Post-Modern Art, there is nothing to worship except humanity's own disintegration. As a Buddhist exercise, like being asked to meditate on disintegrating corpses by the Ganges, it has its place. But I sense each jangled, contorted piece of Post-Modern art attempting to *become* something worth worship. The DeYoung, for instance, has a marvelous Post-Modern art collection in which the human shines through.

Each, I know, to their own taste—and in the best Zen way, it is all *One Taste*. All Art is an expression of *original face*, even if one gives a diabolical wink now and then. Is that a cataract in my eye, or am I simply ripening?

## What Is Your Original Face Before, During & After Post-Modernism?

I order a slice of pepperoni pizza, and root beer in a classic brown glass bottle, from a tiny family shop in San Francisco's Guerrero & Valencia Street neighborhoods, carry them to Dolores Street Park with its fabulous views of downtown San Francisco. Unfold the mangled *American Poetry Review* (March/April 2016) I carry in my back pocket. The newsprint is now a little wet and dirty from the grassy hill, but is still legible. Dean Young's five new poems stare back at me, and I fall in love with *Infinitives*—a “secret” Zen poem, with its cloaked mysticism hidden just enough in post-modern fragmentation to still be “cool”. Not too overtly soulful:

### Infinitives

To pick up where Tomaz left off.  
To pick off another oniony layer  
down to the eye. To chomp.  
To walk around all day buttoned wrong.  
Light is coming from rocks, the little frog  
jumps even though he hasn't been wound up.  
Here's where the wolves before us drank.  
Too long, we have cock-blocked  
day from mating with night.  
The world is bluer than I thought.  
To be stopped at security  
for crying.  
For something wrapped in foil.  
For the soul finding its face.  
For liquid.  
I don't know if I forget  
my dreams or life more.  
To smudge out the features.  
To endure blasted.  
To drown in a raindrop.  
To nestle in a dark place  
inside the flood light.  
To contain multitudes.  
To calm the hurt animal.  
To be inside another.  
To have been there all along.

*Light is coming from the rocks*, and the soul is *finding its face* in Young's poem, which is no small feat in contemporary literature. Why? Because in this post-modern world, to say such things is to be accused of naivety, or soggy new-ageism. *Romanticism*—which smelled too much of flowers and made the world too pretty to withstand the Industrial Revolution's smoke-stacks and two world wars—still disturbs modern writers with its sincerities. To be *sincere* is to be *romantic*, hence deluded and not hip. Lack of sincerity, or irony, is the soul of the post-modern world many of us swim in, like fish blind to our own medium. That it is devoid of any actual soul, or water for that matter, is the reason for the breathless flopping about characteristic of some contemporary writing.

To be ironic, to distance oneself from pathos is certainly artistic in its way—psychologically, it has allowed our species to escape the Inquisition as well as all manner of romantic, utopian excess. Bravo! We needed to be liberated from such zealotry, however *sincere* such orientations of soul and mind are. However, to lack sincerity is to lack a measure of heart. To be heartless. Its own kind of Inquisition.

As Dean Young implies in his marvelous poem, *the world is bluer than I thought*. As in rain, or mood, or pathos. As in heart. Which these days, a poet can only sneak in through inference, or like a refugee from a war-torn country determined to carry one's heart across the border.

Modern poets, if not stuck in the old romanticisms, having leapt over the slogs and bogs of very sincere writing, are increasingly left with literatures so hermetic or fragmented as to constitute no shared world at all. To be barely discernable as human. Still, if as writers and readers we,

pick off another oniony layer  
down to the eye. To chomp.  
To walk around all day buttoned wrong...

we may still find the eye to see-with that reveals a world not only bluer, but worth biting into. Even as it leaves us delirious enough *to walk around buttoned wrong*.

What apple, or onion, did we bite into – like the original poets Eve & Adam – to get *here*? *Post-Modernism*, for anyone who cares, is partially defined as a mode of inquiry that “has at its core a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies”, perhaps akin to those two naked people who wanted to see for themselves what *the world* was about, rather

than accepting their own deity's word for it. The subsequent stories of Hebrews, Greeks and Romans are well known, filled with firm beliefs about the nature of world and self. It is our tradition, our classical inheritance in the West.

But the human psyche grew up, so to speak, and in the face of its own inventions and new sensibilities began to create the *modern* world. This modern world, given the exponential pace of change in almost all fields of knowledge, is morphing into a *post-modern* culture where any single world view gives way to more democratic, provisional ways of talking about the world. Cool, as far as it goes. *Post-Modernism* sees itself as a further instrument of *Modernism's* rejection of the traditional world views and aesthetics of the 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is a world where anything and everything may be true, equally. Hence, it is dangerous to be too sincere about one's own more narrow sensibility.

Modern society has been edging for some time now past the horse & buggy era of *tradition*—particularly after two world wars which threatened to destroy all hope for human evolution. By shedding tradition, with its uniform sincerities demanding singular allegiance, modern society continues to expand towards a more pluralistic world where no single country, language, society, religion, aesthetic, ethnicity, gender, politic is allowed to have any primary or final say about the world, the self, life itself.

Lost in this new stunning revelation, ironically, is *heart*. In Post-Modernism, one is often left to revel in the fragmented shards of a world that makes no cohesive sense—the global techno-glued-together-world of a billion pieces, shiny, but telling no particular story. What Gertrude Stein began in her Paris salon—nurturing the shattered faces and contorted bodies of Picasso, the dream-like dripping clocks and mutated bodies of Dali, even her own stuttered poetry—has continued to strip the old Victorian and Edwardian classic and romantic worlds down to their essences, where single words are compared to random atoms, as artists of all kinds de-construct the very world we've built.

Fabulous, as far as it goes. The world needed deconstructing. The Buddhists have been at it for eons, teaching *anicca*, that the world is impermanent; *anatta*, that the self is more akin to Picasso's faces, Dali's bodies, even Walt Whitman's interior "legions" than any

fixed feature of being; and *dukkha*, that we suffer in attempting to create and maintain the permanent, fixed, unchanging world that Western classical traditions have developed into such high Art.

Luckily, Buddha and Gertrude Stein (who spent time in California before landing in Paris) both have converged here, where East meets West in the new syncretisms of American Buddhism, and poetics. Where Buddhism's traditional atomistic-deconstructive sensibility meets Post-Modernism with its related atomistic-deconstructive sensibilities, both perhaps capable of pulling each other into new language—as in Dean Young's closeted mysticism:

For the soul finding its face...

To drown in a raindrop.

To nestle in a dark place  
inside the flood light.

To contain multitudes.

To calm the hurt animal.

To be inside another.

To have been there all along.

Dean Young, a stunning poet living in Texas, might certainly deny any such intended meanings. Secret agents don't let on about their true identities; but everyone has an *original face*.

Ken Wilber, my favorite integral philosopher, says one must “de-construct”, even “dis-believe” one's former limited world views—in order to *see* the more expansive, inclusive world beyond one's own belief-system borders. Deconstruction comes first, taking the machine of world and society apart to see what really makes it tick, pulling back the curtain on the wizard in Oz to see what levers he's pulling to make the whole show appear as it does. We've been doing, as a Western society, a decent job of this—even in our literatures.

This is where the Buddha's instruction to *doubt*, to *see for oneself* what constitutes mind and reality, dovetails nicely with this post-modern deconstructionist urge in culture, science and literature. Still, it seems that the Western mind, having deconstructed both personality and world, is left with the pieces of it strewn about the garage floor with no

idea how to put it all back together, without simply re-creating the old Victorian-romantic world it just demolished.

Leave it to the poets to find a way through. I've accused, so to speak, Tony Hoagland of being a closet mystic too (see *Why I Love Tony Hoagland—Towards a Post-Modern Humanism*), who has himself accused the likes of Dean Young as being secret prophets, so to speak, of a post-modern *humanism*. Deconstruction, with heart. No ancient Zen poet would cop to actually being what they are without revealing their stupidity on the spot. Zen is the language of no-language, the Zen-moment no different than ordinary moments, except you notice things more; and in the great Zen tradition of no-language, end up saying an awful lot about it. When I read Dean Young saying,

Light is coming from rocks, the little frog  
jumps even though he hasn't been wound up...

I am reminded of my own daily mysticisms, seeing that same light in the rocks and hoping nobody notices that I notice. And the little frog, akin to the Zen poet Basho's famous frog—who, in this modern age, or should I say *post-modern* age, is learning to jump into the pond again without even being “wound up” like a toy or machine.

If we keep exploring this territory as secret agents of a new post-modern humanism—where light still glints from rocks, frogs go *plop!* stirring moments of enlightenment, where drowning in raindrops becomes commonplace again—we may find ourselves rooting for humanity, rather than merely taking ourselves apart. To discover that a post-modern humanism, a post-modern mysticism even, doesn't necessarily mean a step back toward Romanticism's failed ethos, nor require us to stay in reductionist scientific pieces on our own garage floors.

Or, as Dean Young intimates,

For the soul finding its face...

In Zen language, this might be akin to the great koan,

What is your Original Face before your parents were born....

Regardless of the language, whether one's discipline be literary or spiritual, more of us than not harbor a secret: these ordinary moments of mysticism:

To be inside another.

To have been there all along.

## A True Man of No Rank

### *Pacific Zen Institute Open Mind Retreat with John Tarrant*

*Where is the true man of no rank coming and going through the portals of your body?*

—Linji

On the way to my first Open Mind Zen Retreat with John Tarrant, held at the Commonweal Center near Bolinas, I stop at the Muir Beach outlook, sit inside the “gopher holes” where soldiers in pairs stared at the Pacific Ocean through powerful telescopes for Japanese battleships during World War II. I will be sitting in my own “gopher hole” during the Zen retreat, peering through the even more-powerful scopes of this mind-body at the wide sea of consciousness, scanning for thought-enemies, at war with myself.

This “war” approach, it seems, exemplifies the fallacy Westerners often bring to Buddhist meditation, treating thoughts as enemies to be eliminated in the righteous war for liberation. The body, taken as a prisoner of this war, is made to sit for long periods in the torture chamber of the zendo. This is why, after decades of meditation practice, I am here to explore a different approach to this whole notion of enlightenment—one embodied by the Pacific Zen Institute’s guiding teacher, John Tarrant.

John, after many years as a traditional Zen student, then teacher, in the Sanbo Kyodan Zen lineage—which included the iconic Robert Aitken as a key Western transitional teacher—began to experiment with what Zen might become in this contemporary western landscape. In 1987 he founded the organization which evolved into the Pacific Zen Institute (PZI) in Santa Rosa, California, devoted to koan work and the arts. To approach the mind, and one’s life, as a friend, rather than an enemy to be pacified. To approach meditation as something you can’t fail at because it is as natural to humans, as Gary Snyder says, as soaring is to hawks and taking naps is to wolves. When meditation is used as a blunt instrument, as John will say, a hammer to the mind’s nail, the spiritual path becomes more about “fixing” than living.



The drive along the Pacific Coast toward Commonweal is its own kind of meditation—past the Green Gulch Zen farm, where a more monastic style of Zen is practiced as part of the San Francisco Zen Center network begun under the delightful Suzuki Roshi. Then, past the broad flat lagoon near Bolinas which signals the turn toward more country roads meandering much like the mind does. Finally, the last turn, past the odd gangly remnants of radio towers from another era strewn across a nearby meadow like an odd modern art display. Commonweal is a non-profit center for service and research in health and human ecology, and its smattering of old adobe homes adjacent spectacular cliffs is periodically used by PZI for its Open Mind retreats.

The retreats were begun by John Tarrant as an experiment—an alternate format to the bread and butter of most Buddhist meditation lineages: the three or seven-day silent meditation retreat. The schedule, starting early and running late over the course of three days, has plenty of formal meditation time, but also allows more freedom to wander the grounds, to read, nap, paint or write. The afternoon focus includes interpersonal and creative exercises meant to ground Zen in the communal, in the psyche, rather than holding the mind and others at bay. The retreat is “quiet” rather than silent, with opportunities for periodic conversation after the silences of the morning—all designed to cultivate a culture of awakening in the ordinary ways human beings naturally live, and interact.

Koan work is important to this community, and is used in all retreats. Not as the stereotypical inscrutable-riddle designed to drive Zen students mad-enough to break-open into enlightenment (though it could be this, too). Rather, koans are utilized in a more contemporary, almost Jungian, manner as a mischievous form of art and poetry that, like a can opener, or a great painting, or an unexpected jazz riff, work to open the mind, the heart and body. John is fond of saying *you can't do a koan wrong!* A sort of fool-proof process—one that only a true fool can master.



Upon arrival, I park and walk the stone labyrinth nestled in a forest grove adjacent the main Pacific House where the retreat is held. Moving toward the house, I spy John

Tarrant unloading zafus (Zen meditation cushions) and zabutons (the floor-mat it sits on) for the large main room in which we will spend much of our time. John knew before I came that I am a poet, as he is, based on our email exchanges. He recognizes me, is gracious and kind with a big laugh, if somewhat skittish, like a rare tiger used to solitary cover. The first evening is spent in front of a crackling fire as we begin the meditation retreat with a stretch of sitting, and a marvelous, uncanny, surprising dharma talk by John that sets the tone for the retreat. From my scribbled notes, in the journal he encourages retreat participants to bring, I record bits of his talk:

*If the description of the object in the instruction manual differs from the object, believe the object...*

John shares this, humorously, since it is already 6:45pm, and we were supposed to start at 6:30pm—but the delicious dinner session had run a bit longer than anticipated. I suspect, of course, John is also warning us about the retreat, that if our own experience differs from the traditional Zen instruction manual, better to follow our own experience than mimic what lies in some esoteric text.

The first koan is presented, from Case 89 of the Blue Cliff Records, one of the core Zen koan collections. Paraphrased, it goes something like this...

*The Bodhisattva of Mercy and Compassion has hands and eyes everywhere, of what use are they? It's like reaching behind you for a pillow in the night. Ah, there are hands and eyes all over the body. Well, not only that. There are also hands and eyes all through the body...the entire body is hand and eye.*

Now, even for a poet, a koan can initially seem inscrutable. But as with the Deep Image poetry that Robert Bly helped develop, a koan, like a poem, can wash through like a wave, rather than explicating its meaning rationally. Taking John's suggestion to heart, that there is no way to fail a koan per se, I find myself meditating on this sense of seeing, and being seen—an intimate act, not shying from anything that one is, or that one sees in the world. Of reaching behind me for a pillow in the night, like a lover, a beloved mate—yet I am that lover. Seeing and holding all one's parts, nothing exiled, nothing held in secret. As in that wonderful Gary Young poem, where he wakes holding himself in his own arms, surprised at the tenderness.

Okay, I think, maybe I *can* do this koan thing. My book shelves at home hold quite a number of Buddhist books, but the Zen koans always seemed an enigma to me. They weren't as straightforward as The Four Noble Truths, or the Eightfold Path, with clear instructions about what to do and how to do it (admirable in maps for the spiritual journey!). But suddenly, I realize the maps take you primarily over well-traveled roads that others have made. The koans are like invitations to wander in the wild countryside of your own practice.

After the initial koan presentation and opening meditation period, John begins his dharma talk in front of the crackling fire, hair tousled, wearing his normal clothes. What a concept. Again, from my scribbled notes, he says...

*Go easy, in your attention, how you sit...then go easier still.*

*Let the mind be—make friends with it. Watch how you relate to it...bring curiosity and compassion.*

*I was exposed early on to a “Samurai” approach to meditation—for 15 years practiced “Hard Zen”, warrior-like. The traditional Rinzai strategies. Now, I’ve flipped that on its head—going easy. Resting comfortably with the body, with the mind.*

*The Japanese “props” of robes and ritual can be beautiful, but they can get in the way of a more natural and easy-going way of relating to your life. We love medieval Japanese ritual as art, but it is not the essence of Zen practice in any real, ordinary sense.*

I am reminded of a similar story from Adyashanti, another Zen-trained student-turned-teacher who, after 15 years of “hard core” Zen also began to relate practice to one's life in a more “natural” manner. Both teachers, I suspect, discovering something important for this transmission of traditional Buddhist practice to Westerners—intent as we seem to be on beating our heads bloody against the meditation wall, till finally, somehow, we hope to get “enlightened”. But more as an acquisition, a “final attainment” outside the flow of one's ordinary mind, body, life. John Tarrant and other teachers are beginning, it seems, to point practice toward the human—where we belong.

The next morning, I walk silently downstairs for the morning meditation session. The retreat is a mix of silence (in the mornings), and quiet the rest of the time, allowing for soft conversations at lunch and dinner, or walks with other retreatants. The stunning cliffs look out over the Pacific, and there is a long beach one can scabble down to via several paths. In this early dark, we engage in sessions of sitting, then walking meditation—ending with a walk to the cliffs to look out over the breaking light on the sea.

After breakfast, we spend the rest of the morning alternating between sitting and walking meditation, with a dharma talk by John. This morning’s koan-fragment:

*In the sea, ten thousand feet down, there’s a single stone. Pick it up without wetting your hands.*

John encourages us to let the koan, even a word or single image from it, come and go as it pleases in our formal meditations, and certainly, to follow us around during the day. To lunch, to the bathroom, to the sea. If the koan ignores us, or one’s mind can’t find a way to be with it, not to worry. The seed is planted. He reminds us to go easy with ourselves, emphasizing curiosity, more than striving to accomplish a particular agenda.

I find myself writing this after the meditation period, in response to the koan:

*If I am the ocean, there is no distance to the bottom of me. I can pick the stone up without ‘wetness’ because it is my very nature and not apart from me...*

It is indeed interesting to watch my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade mind want to simultaneously show John my “answer”, as well as stuff it away in my pocket, never let anyone see it. Would my Zen-grade be an “A”, or a “D-minus”? Do I get an “A” if I don’t care? What if there were no grades, here...like my undergraduate education at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Though even there, we received narrative evaluations about our performance, descriptions rather than letter grades (of course, UCSC now utilizes a grading system). In the Pacific Zen Institute’s approach, there is more interest in being curious than being right. And John keeps assuring us we couldn’t do it wrong even if we tried.

In Tarrant's groundbreaking book, *The Light Inside the Dark: Zen, Soul, and the Spiritual Life*, he says we "carry stones" because we want to exist in the world, want to be embodied. To be at home in this world, rather than attempting to escape it through meditation. This Zen sensibility is to be aware of how we alternately transcend the human condition, and then seem utterly subject to it. The alternation *is* the human condition. The conversation between these two movements constitutes our lives. It is not necessarily something to try and get out of.

As the day goes on, there are more koans, but with the added experience of quietly talking with others at lunch, as well as the introduction of small-group processes in the afternoon meant to provide an opportunity for Zen to find its way into our actual lives as human beings. I am struck by the difference, for me, from being in more traditional silent retreats where the entire focus is on one's own internal experience, where others are simply adjacent-silent-entities focused inside their own interior worlds. Which I also love—there's nothing quite like that depth of silence. But John's innovation is to cultivate this Zen sense of *wakefulness* as we interact *with* others, to cultivate a *culture* for transforming the mind through meditation, koans, conversation, and the arts.

An afternoon koan strikes me in particular. It describes Buddhas made of wood, clay, gold—yet wood can burn, clay dissolve in water, gold melt. So? There is no riddle to be solved, only what happens inside because of the koan.

As I meditate, breath slowly coming and going, the wooden Buddha is me...how I'd like to be: solid, stable. But an idol nonetheless. Wooden Buddha as a kind of stolid ego. I lacquer it, polish it—want my Buddha-ness to be dependable, beautiful. But the wood reminds me of the "compensatory personality structure" psychology speaks of, formed quite skillfully by the vulnerable, undefended young child to navigate the world's harshness. So, in the meditation (I sort of nudge the imagery of the koan along in my mind, like a boy with a donkey), I become a clay Buddha, more malleable, not as armored. But crossing the river, life's fluidity dissolves the clay Buddha in the water and I am lost. So, I become, finally, a golden Buddha—desiring to be perfect in all ways. Yet even as a golden Buddha, I am no match for the fire, and melt. Of course, each attempt to become the-Buddha-I-desire is met by life itself, with its penchant for burning, drowning, melting. In the meditation, which is full of alternating experiences of joy and sorrow through each transmutation, I begin to feel the Universe *laughing*. Not *at* me,

which I sometimes imagine. But *with* me, intimately. As the meditation ends, my mind turns mischievous, and becomes the witch in the Wizard of Oz as she cries, *I'm melting, I'm melting!* While the munchkins cheer.

As we move from meditation to discussion, John says “It’s like Churchill talking about democracy, calling it the worse form of government, except for all the rest.” That talking about your meditation is terrible; the only thing worse is not talking about it. Zen, the staunchest of the “no-words” Buddhist approach is nonetheless also the wordiest, with endless koans, poems, commentaries about what cannot be expressed in words. Of course, Zen is comfortable with paradox, so there’s no real problem. Which is one of John’s favorite expressions when helping students confront some insoluble dilemma: *so, is there really a problem here?* Spoken to cultivate a mode of inquiry, more than a pronouncement about the merits of any particular issue.

We break into small groups of three, practice sharing what came up for us in the koan meditation. Some of us lean into this opportunity, others do it as though we’re being made to eat our spinach. Which is okay too. I find that I even have a title for my little koan adventure: *Tyranny of the Golden Buddha, or, The Death of the Self-Improvement Project.* The sharing is remarkable, as it forces one to bring into the world, visible, what cannot be seen but is present nonetheless. Private worlds opened, and in the process, there is community.

John gives another dharma talk. Again, my scribbled notes as he speaks in his gruff Tasmanian sailor brogue:

*Meditation often becomes a process of bullying the mind...there is another way.*

*How wonderful and strange life is, and wonderful that it is indeed strange and unknowable...to the extent we are curious, cultivate life as an ally rather than an enemy.*

*Sometimes what we call a problem might better be called just “living”.*

*Compassion is born from loss, rather than our ideas about things.*

*Tommy Dorsey: when dying, you get what you deserve whether you deserve it or not...*

*The bodhisattva path is one of participating in the world through death, taxes, sorrow, rather than seeking to escape them.*

*When things go wrong, it might be okay... (John relates his own experience with cancer, a very moving and illuminating story which can be found on the Pacific Zen Institute website).*

Tarrant says that in his training of doctors and Buddhist teachers, they are the worst at sharing their raw meditation experiences, given the ingrained training to appear to be in control most of the time. Getting rid of the “control panel” approach to meditation and living is difficult, he says, but essential in Zen. Having spent time developing the Integrative Medicine curriculum at the University of Arizona at Tucson, as well as facilitating dialogue with other Buddhist teachers, John is well-versed in the effort to appear like one has it all together.

Although meditation can indeed be described as a “design-system” for consciousness, John emphasizes “not bullying oneself” if a particular system isn’t working. For instance: *if a koan doesn’t work for you, it’s not your fault.* There is no fault, in the Pacific Zen way... just curiosity, paying attention. Following the koan where it leads, or doesn’t lead. Tough for “experts” to master.

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After quietly chatting with a group of us over lunch, John leans over and asks if I’d be willing to give a poetry reading that night. Also, to work with another retreat participant, an improvisation teacher, to craft another exercise beforehand. I was game. So after the evening meditation and dharma talk from John, we take a Zen-leap of sorts as the improv-leader warms us all up with movement exercises. Then, he and I engage in an improvisation where he acts as my comic “translator” as I, well, speak in spontaneous nonsense poetic-tongues while jumping up and down in sweeping, madcap motions to express my “poems”. The leader then “interprets” my vocalizations into English. It was indeed a bit “mad”, particularly for an espoused Zen retreat. While normally an introvert, I called upon my early childhood exposure to Pentecostal religion and “speaking in tongues”, as well as now being a poet, to carry the moment. It was hilarious and fun!

The experiment, engineered by John, reminded me of the Chan Buddhist (Chinese for

Zen) antics of some of the original masters who developed spontaneous, often outrageous conversations, poems and improvisations of their own, to evoke a moment of awakening (sometimes with a lot of hitting, thwacking, nose pulling, sort of like the old Three Stooges movies).

Then, I was up! Pulling a few poems from my books, *How Therapists Dance*, and, *The Jeweled Net of Indra*, I found myself speaking to this notion John talks about as a fellow poet, of the natural sympathies between poetry and koan work, the creative and Zen. Not a new idea, per se, given the long history in both Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen of utilizing the arts of poetry, calligraphy, painting, tea ceremony to not only gift a taste of the ephemeral Zen moment, but as a practice in-and-of itself.

For John, it's not just "spiritual" poetry that he is interested in, but poetry with an edge, old and new, giving expression to all of life. Not just the carefully-crafted spiritual moments in meditation. His silver Apple laptop contains hundreds of favorite poems, both contemporary and traditional, that he whips out at a moment's notice to highlight some point. With his slightly mumbled Tasmanian accent, he sounds like a salty sailor-bard regaling us with lyrics meant, like the old Zen master's finger pointing toward the moon, to motion toward a deeper experience of our own lives. One that perhaps we have heretofore been unable to allow, armed as we tend to be with hammers, seeing problems as nails rather than poems.

As John did with the improv-leader and me, he pulls into Open Mind retreats whatever creativity he can lay hands on—such as Kabuki theater, or body relaxation, often using the skills of others in the room. He often tells old European myths, has us then line-up in a circle based on what part of the story moved us, and like a koan, open to something in ourselves that we notice from the story. Making a connection between koan work, dream, myth, the poetry of our own lives. Anything to help us forget, for a moment, the urge to fix what we think broken. To embrace "just living", as one learns in Zen to "just sit".

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The next day the schedule is much the same—the sun rises, arcs, sets. We rise, sit, share, settle into night again.

John pulls out his grandfather's old sextant, used to navigate in the South Seas. Remembers the joy in determining by sea and star where you are—to not initially know. To discover for oneself, rather than too quickly glancing at the GPS or map to inform you of exact location. We are linked to our ancestors lives, their discoveries, but not bound by them. It's important to test the waters, discover for oneself.

*“What is Buddha?” the student asks. The teacher replies, “Who are you?”*

Zen loves questions more than answers. John references Rilke's admonition, *to live inside the questions themselves*. After more meditation, dharma talk, dialogue, one begins to feel a culture develop, the spontaneous arising of *sangha*. And rather than the blank slate of silent-others-wordlessly-toiling next to you—certainly making more progress than I, or just as certainly, appearing even more lost—something profoundly human begins to occur in the sharing.

One student, who has attended previous sessions, is mad at John for continuing to tell her: *go easy, make friends with yourself*. Another participant chimes in, jokes, *Well, there's a new Pope now, it's all different, the kinder and gentler regime!* We laugh, ponder how seeking perfection is bankrupt, yet it's what brings us to the path, drives us forward. Zen is in the dialectic of it, the dialogue of being human—yet all we want is the Golden Buddha.

I remember in a silent Vipassana retreat, how easy it is to project monolithic images, entire stories, upon fellow meditators—because they are only mirrors, do not reveal their humanness per se in the context of retreat. Here, in speaking together, humanness shines through—and something intimate is uncovered:

*The austere, controlled engineer whose life has been torn apart by divorce...*

*The quiet therapist who shares she is burning with a question from the koan: what if you reach and there is no pillow behind you?*

*The gray-haired woman feeling sad, a little lost...yet feeling kinship with “women alone at this stage of life”...*

*The man with stiff neck and clenched stomach, “trying so damn hard”...finally relaxing into the intimacy of “not knowing”...*

*The young woman who lost a lover to cancer two months ago...he was a sculptor, a Buddhist, who died with dignity...her struggle to form a life on her own once again...*

*A woman whose daughter died several years ago, and she's still inconsolable, angry...*

*So many of us here with aging parents, the "clay Buddha in the stream" bodies and memories melting away...*

*Many of us, too, with children in their 20's and 30's, how we yearn for them to find their way, yet we are still finding ours...having to let go again and again...*

*Of course, in the vulnerability of speaking, hearing comments that bug or bore; then discovering how those very comments helped someone else...*

If John has an ethos in the room, it is that *all voices* are present, welcomed at the table. He paraphrases James Hillman, the Jungian analyst: "when all the archetypes are in the room at the same time, it's a good day". Every one of us, human. Yet John's hand is expertly on the room's tiller, like his grandfather, guiding us along.

As the afternoon and evening progress, we explore the pivotal role of emotions, of feeling, in Western Zen practice. How, like a koan itself, it is the elephant in the room that we, as meditators, can't quite decide how to relate to. In traditional Asian societies, emotion tended to be expressed through the arts, or filial duty. Here, it is the elephant—large, conspicuous, and we, unable to remove or live with it in the tiny room of the body.

*Emotions are part of our negotiations with reality...*

There is much to negotiate with, and with little resolution given the relentless nature of life's seeming "indignities": losing loved ones, personal and professional failures, fading health. Having your breasts cut off so you don't die from cancer, as happened with someone in the room.

John describes how Zen entered into his own bout with cancer...the emergency room

stacked with gunshot and knifing victims, no one paying attention to him. The *suchness* of it all. Or naked in a tub while a friend helped him urinate. Or the surgeon who is also a friend, both feeling the intimacy of one's hands literally inside the other. Intimacy. To feel curious, present with exactly what is happening. Intimacy, through the rollercoaster emotions. Noticing the art of it.

*There's no distance between who you are and what is happening to you...*

If enlightenment is about anything in Zen, it is about this *intimacy*—being curious, courageous, accepting of all you're experiencing. Even your refusal of such things. And there's no one "right" version of this intimacy:

*Rilke sees the light at the Center...*

*Neruda sees the light inside of every single Thing...*

As well as the dark...

John says, *I feel so much better now that I've given up all hope!*

∞

After more meditation—sit, walk, breath breath—there is another koan: *All of it, honored one, is for you.* Can I live inside of this koan? Honored by life, rather than feeling shorted? Honoring each person and situation that comes my way. It's asking a lot...it offers everything in return. Except perhaps hope!

The question of Zen form and ritual comes up during a dharma talk. Tarrant tells a story about Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the Zen centers in Tassajara and San Francisco. The simplicity of his approach in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* would sometimes leave his new American students grasping for structure. When the students demanded some rules, he took the broom used to sweep the zendo, turned it upside down, and said "put the bristles in the air so they don't get damaged when you're done". Still, John confesses that the Pacific Zen Institute loves ritual, its art, its formal power. Not only what he loves to call "medieval Japanese ritual" with its arcane gongs, swords, garments (used more in the formal week-long *sesshins*), but also new ritual—such as a Cajun funeral, with its whisky, feasting, the body on view.

John's Zen Rule: *Here's something you should do, unless you don't...*

*If you stumble across a rule that constricts your heart: notice it. Nothing wrong with living with a constriction. Or without it.*

He mentions the story of Temple Grandin, the noted animal expert and advocate for autistic populations; though diagnosed at birth with autism, she went on to become accomplished in her fields of interest, championing the idea of “neurodiversity”. That we are all “on a spectrum” of some kind, and don’t need to be “fixed”. However, we do need to be in-tune with our needs, and though Temple could not easily tolerate human touch, she needed the touch of boundaries, and invented for herself a therapeutic “hug box” that she would place herself inside of, allowing the calibrated pressure to calm her.

It's a story about finding the forms, the rituals that allow us to be who we are.

John says that everyone has a different relationship with form, structure, ritual...particularly in the West where we tend to adopt wholesale another country's time period and culture, or rebel against any semblance of tradition. To the extent that Zen has come to America primarily, though not exclusively, through Japan (in addition to its Chinese and Korean migrations), it brings with it the trappings of an ancient island culture, with the sense that “we do things just so, or we'll kill each other on this small island!” However in America, we're a big, independent, wide open culture. Hence, Zen will find its unique expressions here, as it has elsewhere.

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One way Zen is finding new expression is certainly here, in “Koanville”, as John likes to call it. Which is every moment of our daily lives. Where koans morph from enigmatic riddles with a long list of “correct” answers, to doorways that one can walk through without failing. The retreat concludes on Sunday morning with the following koan:

*Dizang asked Fayan, “Where are you going?” and Fayan replied, “Around on pilgrimage”. Dizang asked, “What is the purpose of pilgrimage?” to which Fayan responded, “I don't know”. “Ah”, Dizang said, “Not knowing is most intimate”.*

With this, we re-enter the larger world, perhaps a little more comfortable with “not knowing”, with the intimacies it allows. The world now, inescapably, *Koanville*.

∞

After my first Open Mind retreat in Bolinas, I attended the Pacific Zen Institute’s more formal seven-day *sesshins*, held several times per year at various retreat centers in the Bay Area (as well as periodic retreats in other parts of the country). Even in the more formal meditation retreats, the Arts are woven throughout in a variety of ways. Koan paintings on the walls by fellow PZI teacher Alison, calligraphy and brush paintings by Michael, or Alesh. The use of music, the occasional jazz sax calling from the hallway early in the morning, or tabla & drums to inject something unexpected during a silent sitting, shake up the steady insistence on insularity that the mind can become lulled by. Evening sessions conclude with a unique hybrid of traditional verse and guitar-accompanied song, then a stunning series of wood clackers, brass gong, and bells rung both outside and inside the zendo. All carefully developed by PZI leaders to experiment with what a more native, homegrown practice might be that includes integration of the Arts—mirroring those time periods in ancient China and Japan where such emphasis flourished. Still, the emphasis in the *sesshins* is meditation, and lots of it.

Along with the koan work, the most profound aspect of PZI’s Zen approach for me has been the emphasis on cultivating a curiosity, even love, of the bizarre and idiosyncratic operations of the very mind that traditional meditation *tends* to want to corral, pacify, subdue. Tarrant’s orientation is to undermine the insidious layers of unrealistic perfectionism, of self-improvement despair, that is rampant in America. These may be unique to my experience, and account for my particular draw towards PZI. However, I have come to sense that what PZI is getting at with this particular emphasis of working *with*, rather than *against* the mind, underlies the pathos and quandaries that many Western meditators share. For me, they’ve appeared as:

- ξ The attempt to control, even kill, the *self*.
- ξ The obsession with fixing myself of imagined inadequacies.
- ξ The dream of a perfect state of enlightenment.

John's approach has been to undermine these tendencies, with a bit of humor, with traditional Zen shock tactics (is a poem a shock tactic?); with queries such as "is there a problem here, really?" Turning cherished beliefs on their head—my sad stories with years of psychodynamic evidence and political realities supporting them. To see what opportunities lie unseen beneath the surety of my judging mind. To look for the open space in any experience—even cancer, divorce, aging, ennui.

At heart, this Zen approach has always been grounded in the "non-dual" experience of life as a unity, a collusion and intermixing of dark and light, absolute and temporal, nirvana and samsara. It butts up against this American obsession with finding "perfection", which is really a dualistic-wish set against what is not-perfect—rather than a *wholeness* more akin to the Jungian sense that we/world/cosmos are all of one piece, one fabric. One robe.



In subsequent conversations with John about engaging in koan-work, he says *pick a koan, any koan!* So, in my typical poet manner, I found myself responding to each of the 48 koans of the *Mumonkan—The Gateless Gate*—with a poem of my own. A grand tradition in Zen. While the typical course of koan-work can take a student systematically through classics, such as *The Blue Cliff Records*, *The Gateless Gate*, *The Book of Equanimity* (or John's book, *Show Me The Rhinoceros*, already a classic), there is also an old Chinese Chan Buddhist notion that one koan may find you, become your root koan for a lifetime. Despite my polyglot love of koans and these classic collections, there is one that I chose, or that chose me: Linji's *True Man* koan. It reminds me of John Tarrant. It goes like this:

*There is a true man of no rank coming and going through the portals of your body...*

Each time I toy with the idea of attainment, lust after the *Big E* of enlightenment, I relax into the true man, of no particular status, who comes and goes as he pleases, through each portal of this very human body.