Just This: *Soto Zen Training as a Methodology for Investigating Existential Questions*

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Abstract

Zen Buddhism is an ancient and robust tradition, which aims to investigate foundational questions around truth, self, and the nature of thought. Though it is composed of teachings and teachers, it is primarily an individual practice-based methodology. The teachings and practices are deconstructionist and antidogmatic. In this paper, I endeavor to show how it is an applied pedagogy, a how-to, rather than a system of metaphysical posits.

Preface

This paper has its origins in my experience. As a young man, I was drawn to existential questions regarding the meaning of life and the nature of reality. In the course of my education, I was exposed to higher mathematics and analytical philosophy. These two realms of academic inquiry seemed particularly suited to my personal quest to understand the nature of reality. Pure mathematics was a joy, albeit a difficult one. I was thrilled by the power and neatness of axiomatic systems, and delighted in what Yeats allegedly called “the click of a well-made box.” Starting with a handful of increasingly generalized principles and abstract language manipulation, I was able to - as students had for many centuries - discover beautiful symmetries and patterns that, somewhat miraculously, had predictive correlates in the physical world. But as much as I enjoyed my mathematical studies, I was surprised by how little my fellow budding mathematicians were interested in *why* math “worked”. Simultaneously, on the other side of the quad, I was studying analytical philosophy. Here I found intellectual companionship in the asking of *why*, but much weaker tools at our disposal. To study the progress of philosophy from, say, Hume to Rorty, is to undertake a study in lowered expectations. Far from being able to address my fundamental questions about the nature of reality and consciousness, I came to believe that philosophy was ill suited to the task. Philosophy is quite good at some things, but regarding the deepest existential questions, it seems to only be able to demonstrate its helplessness.

I left academia feeling more lost than ever. During this time, I began to sense that human culture itself seemed unmoored, and feared that humanity might be fundamentally unsuited to the high-stakes task of living harmoniously with itself and all other life on the planet. Nearly any reading of the news and human history seemed to back up this hypothesis. Perhaps due to my religious childhood in Alabama, I had regarded religion and spirituality with suspicion, a realm of fuzzy thinking and ungrounded dogma. Nevertheless, I was eventually drawn to a 10-day silent meditation retreat in the Vipassana tradition, half-humorously referred to by some participants as 'Buddhist boot camp.' I left that 10 day experience feeling thrilled. I had discovered a laboratory for probing my experience. In those 10 days, I had the space to truly look at my mind, to really slow down and listen to the movement of thought. Over the next few years I sat many more 10-day retreats, and began studying with a meditation teacher. I felt my world opening up in a way I had never expected, and began to experience some tantalizing hints at the resolution (or perhaps dissolving) of the questions that had oriented me from the start. In the fall of 2015 I moved to Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe to devote myself fully to practice. I lived and practiced there for nearly two years, running the kitchen and participating in the busy schedule of Zen training. It was an incredible education. There is a Zen saying that the purpose of Zen practice is 'to clarify the great matters of life and death.' This is no small claim, but I believe it isn't frivolously made.

When the world shut down in the Covid pandemic, I returned to academia to resume my long-abandoned degree. Feeling that the world had become overly obsessed with linear analytical thinking, I chose to study the Humanities. As I watched society become ever more obsessed with technology and profit, I felt it was important to ground in our shared humanity, what connects us to one another. That study of human culture and its artifacts has confirmed my hunch that we humans all at times feel lost and small and afraid. As the Buddha memorably observed, in what's called the First Noble Truth, we suffer. And at the same time, we have a seemingly infinite capacity for love and creativity and awe. This project is in some ways a culmination and synthesis of my lifelong interdisciplinary inquiry, and a presentation of the most promising path I've encountered along the way. In particular, I want to present nondual spiritual inquiry, with Zen as a paradigmatic example, as a pursuit worthy of the western mind.

Part I: Introduction and Thesis

In this paper, I will explore Zen Buddhisim as a rigorous methodology for the investigation of foundational existential questions. In particular, I will be looking at the Soto Zen tradition that originated in China and Japan, and which has become well established in the US. I'll begin by looking at several notable similarities between Zen training and western academia, and then consider some fundamental differences. I don't seek to claim that Zen practice is analogous to western intellectual inquiry, but rather to show how they might be complementary, albeit not entirely reconcilable.

I've chosen a handful of practices and themes that are characteristic of Zen, and will illustrate and flesh them out with Zen texts. I'll start by explaining the structure of Zen training and Dharma Transmission, before moving on to consider the practice of Meditation. These are two foundational aspects of Zen, and they offer a fascinating insight into Zen as both a cultural institution and an inquiry paradigm. I will then consider two aspects of Zen teachings, nonattachment and nonduality. These features are not separate from the practice of meditation, but I think it will be helpful to tease the themes apart, however artificially, for the sake of analysis. Next I will also talk about the importance of the relative everyday world to Zen practice and understanding. In each of these sections I will draw on early Chan poetry, Soto Zen teachings from the 13th Century, and commentaries written in the modern era. In my last section of analysis, I will draw comparisons with western academic modes of inquiry and knowing, and make the claim that Zen is deconstructive in its practices and aims at an embodied and

nonconceptual relationship to life. In my conclusion, I will consider some potential criticisms, and offer parting thoughts as to why this project is especially relevant today.

The nonparallel heterogeneity of the categories I have imposed feels somewhat forced and arbitrary. This is partly due to my limitations as an interlocutor, but is also inherent in the nature of undertaking a broad analysis of a tradition that resists easy categorization. Any mistakes in the interpretation of these subtle texts is solely my own, and I speak with no authority other than that of an enthusiastic amateur.

A Bit of Background on Sources

Zen is the Japanese name for the Buddhist tradition that originated in China, where it was known as Chan. Chan flowered in China in the Tang and Song Dynasties, and is commonly regarded as a fusion of Daoist sensibilities and Mahayana Buddhist teachings (Suzuki, 29).

The founder of Chan, Bodhidharma, is reputed to have brought "true" Buddhism to China from India. He is regarded as the First Zen Ancestor,[1] though his existence is somewhat apocryphal. Lineage is quite important in the Zen schools, and most Zen traditions trace their lineage back to Bodhidharma, and through him, back to Shakyamuni Buddha, aka Siddhartha Gautama. Buddhist scholar John Maraldo observes that though Chan and Zen lineage charts are riddled with inconsistencies and divergent branches, "one story in particular has been popularized: In the sixth century the Indian patriarch Bodhidharma (536?) brings the correct understanding of the

[1] Previously "Patriarch"

dharma to China – a nonverbal understanding achieved through sitting meditation and enlightenment, with no place for scriptural study" (Maraldo, 17).

In time, Chan traveled East, becoming established in other Asian Kingdoms. It was especially prominent in medieval Japan. In the 20th century, Zen continued its eastward migration, becoming established in the US. What we call Zen in the West is a broad and diverse category of lineages and practices. John Daido Loori writes, "One of the problems we face with Zen in America is that it has no continuity of tradition or standards. The Zen that arrived in this country has come from several places and cultures: from China, Vietnam, Japan, Korea. It has been taught by scores of teachers, and out of this evolved a real mixture of what is called Zen training" (Loori, 6). In this paper, I have chosen to focus on the Soto school of Zen, which alongside Renzai, are the two major Japanese schools. Unless specified otherwise, Soto is the tradition to which I am referring when I use the term Zen.

For this project, I have decided to rely almost exclusively on sources written and translated by Zen Masters, rather than by academics. A handful of primary sources form the basis of this project. I will give a brief description of these works and their authors. I think it important to note that Buddhist and Zen history is an important part of Zen training, however most contemporary scholarship casts considerable doubt on the historicity of what is called history in Zen literature. John Moraldo proposes that a more helpful term to use might be "legend." In this paper, I have attempted to sidestep

this tension by not treating historical developments but rather focusing on the texts and practices.

The earliest text I am using is *Verses on the Faith Mind*, a poem by Chinese master Seng-Ts'an. Very little is known about Seng-Ts'an, who is regarded as the Third Chinese Ancestor, other than that he lived in the 6th century CE. The primary source for information about his life is the *Transmission of the Lamp*, a biographical lineage reference compiled some four centuries after Seng-Ts'an's life. Presumably the source for these biographical sketches is an oral tradition passed down amongst monks, and thus must be regarded with some scholarly skepticism. Perhaps the most striking detail about Sent-Ts'an is that he was already in his fifth decade when he started practicing Chan. The translation I have used is by Richard C Clarke (1933-2013), and it is Clarke's revised second translation. This translation is slightly less poetic than his first published version, but I believe it is in closer alignment with the teachings. Richard C Clarke was an acknowledged Zen Master in the lineage of Hakuun Yasutani[2]. I have included this poem in the Appendix.

My second primary source is the *Shobogenzo,* a collection of writings by Eihei Dogen (1200-1253). Dogen was a Japanese monk who traveled to China to study Chan. When he returned he founded what became known as the Soto school of Zen. Dogen wrote extensively, and his writings have been widely studied and translated. *Shobogenzo* is a dizzying and exhaustive text covering all aspects of theory and

[2] Yasutani was a recognized Soto roshi, but started a new tradition he called Sanbo Kyodan. The lineages can get a bit confusing, but the important takeaway is that it's coming from a closely related place.

practice. Dogen is famously difficult, sometimes making self-evident observations and other times making outright illogical ones. In the interest of not mistaking his meaning, I have refrained from using his more challenging passages.

Another major source for this project is a book by Kosho Uchiyama (1912-1999), *Opening the Hand of Thought*. He studied western Philosophy in his early years, and was ordained as a novice monk in the Soto tradition the day Pearl Harbor was bombed (Uchiyama, xxxiii). He never left Japan, but was a keen student of the West. As Abbot of Antaiji, a meditative training center near Kyoto, he hosted many westerners who would go on to become influential Zen leaders in the US. Like a number of influential Zen masters of his generation, he saw in his western students an eagerness and receptivity that he believed was the future of the tradition. He writes that the attitude of Zen is "similar to the early American pioneer or frontier spirit. The difference is that those pioneers penetrated the western frontier in a spirit of staking private claim or possession to it. But this is not the attitude of one wishing to cultivate the frontier of universal self" (Uchiyama, *xxxv*). Uchiyama's familiarity and engagement with Western philosophy makes him particularly well suited to my inquiry. Though his writings are translated from the Japanese, this work has been done by his senior students, and thus has an additional claim to accurately reflect his teachings.

My last major source is the writings of John Daido Loori (1931-2009). Loori was abbot of the Zen Mountain Monastery in New York. Nearly all my other sources are in translation, so it's nice to include one source that is in the original English. In addition

to being an excellent writer, Loori has the uncommon distinction of being recognized as a Zen Master in both the Soto and Renzai schools. Loori's book *The Eight Gates of Zen* is a comprehensive guide to Zen training and study.

For the final section on aspects of the relationship between Zen inquiry and western intellectual inquiry, I have additionally drawn on the writings of Masao Abe, PhD (1915-2006) as collected in *Zen and Western Thought*. Dr. Abe was a professor of Buddhist Philosophy at Nara University in Japan, and spent many years teaching in the US. Dr. Abe was not a Zen master, but was an engaged and thoughtful practitioner. He was particularly interested in the intersection of Western and Buddhist philosophy.

Part II: The Form

For most serious students, Zen has primarily been practiced as a monastic tradition. For over a thousand years, aspiring students have come to live at a monastery or training center, run by a Zen master, devoting years or even decades to practice. Especially in the West, there is also a well-defined role for lay practitioners, those who have jobs and families and for whom deep Zen practice is a serious but part-time commitment.

Monastic life is not for the faint of heart. The schedule is regimented and demanding. Morning meditation begins well before dawn, and the day is highly structured. There are countless chants and ceremonies and forms to learn, and endless etiquette, including the “correct” way to eat your food and clean your bowl. Zen has a strong emphasis on meditation, work, and study, and these three things account for nearly all the hours of the day for those living at a Zen center. Zen is often regarded as the Buddhist tradition with the strongest emphasis on meditation, ando be a Zen student requires countless hours of daily meditation, meditation retreats (*sesshin*), and multi-month periods of intensive practice (*ango.*)

At the core of the training is a student-teacher relationship. A student will typically study with one primary teacher, though it is encouraged to work with multiple teachers, and many centers will host guest teachers both from the same lineage, and also from other Buddhist sects. The Soto Zen center at which I lived had a fully independent Tibetan temple (*gompa*) on the grounds, and we would frequently host

visiting Tibetan teachers and monks for talks and meals. A general Buddhist education is part of the training curriculum.

Here we see some obvious similarities to a general liberal arts core curriculum in the academic model. Both are primarily residential programs to which you must be accepted. Once accepted, they both involve multiple years of training and study.

The student teacher-relationship is quite personal, and the primary teacher should have a sense of where the student is in their practice and development (Loori, 39-40). Ideally, the teacher helps the student select what to study and practice. Though it occasionally goes off the rails, this relationship should be one of trust and mutual respect. Loori writes, “I avoid, at all costs, telling people what to do. That creates the guru syndrome, and that is not a role for a teacher in Zen” (Loori, 52). What Loori refers to as the “guru syndrome” is a situation in which the student abdicates their good sense and personal agency to a teacher. Though there are plenty of instances of this type of relationship in various spiritual traditions, including Zen, it is prone to abuse. Further, it is counter to the ethos of Zen, that a student must take responsibility and verify everything for themselves.

When a student has attained a level of realization that the Master considers equal to her own, then the student may be given “Dharma Transmission.” This is a certification that the student has attained a level of embodied realization equal to the teacher. Loori writes “the student is now able to to function as a Zen teacher or a Dharma teacher in their own right… Formal training is over… and the student is now

totally on their own" (Loori, 76). The traditional poetic image I have heard used is that the eyebrows of the student have become entangled with those of the teacher.

So in this way as well, Zen training is quite similar to western academia: there is a recognized system for acknowledging the attainment or mastery of students who may then go on to become teachers themselves. This formal structure and the established method of credentialing is the most obvious similarity between these two modes of inquiry.

Part III: Meditation

The differences between academic inquiry and Zen inquiry start to become apparent when we consider the primary practice, meditation. Meditation is called zazen in the Zen tradition. Its centrality is underscored by Dogen's observation that, "Practicing Zen is zazen" (*Art of Sitting*, 19). Meditation is an inherently nonlinguistic and interior form of inquiry, and because of this, it is resistant to many of the ways we understand and codify inquiry practices in academia. Despite this difficulty, I will attempt to make the case for why meditation is a meaningful form of inquiry. I will begin by examining the instructions for Zen meditation practice and then consider some aspects and implications.

Zen students typically begin meditation practice with a body-oriented concentration technique, counting their breaths, before progressing to a more subtle form of zazen called silent illumination, or *shikantaza*. Dogen gives some of the earliest recorded instructions for shikantaza in "Zazengi: Rules for Zazen" which was written in 1243, and which is still studied by Zen practitioners. Dogen begins this text with suggestions for choosing a comfortable cushion and maintaining a suitable space to practice. His advice is very down to earth and practical, explaining, "do not let in drafts or smoke… [the space] should be kept warm in the winter and cool in summer." He then turns to instructions for practice itself: "Set aside all involvements and let the myriad things rest." He continues, "Zazen is not thinking of good, not thinking of bad. It is not a conscious endeavor. It is not introspection" (*Art of Sitting*, 19). Here we see

Dogen is employing a strategy of naming by negation: *don't do this; neither this nor that*. This technique, sometimes called *via negativa*, is a way of pointing to that which resists explicit naming. The tendency to avoid explicit naming keeps alive a mysterious vibrancy, because we often think we know a thing when we are able to name it. This assumption of knowing is counter to the curiosity and investigative mindset crucial to the successful practice of zazen. Dogen's negatives are also a helpful pedagogical tool, because they enable practitioners to judge when they have strayed from the mark. Self-correction is especially important because, as I will later discuss in greater detail, meditation is an interior practice.

Dogen's positive instructions for zazen are to "set aside all involvements and let the myriad things rest." In shikantaza, the meditator sits with open awareness, neither suppressing thoughts nor entertaining them. This style is sometimes called "objectless" because there is no emphasis on which the meditator places their attention. John Daido Loori writes, "When you're doing shikantaza you don't try to focus on anything specifically or to make thoughts go away. You simply allow everything to be just the way it is. Thoughts come, thoughts go, and you simply watch them, you keep your awareness on them." This alert and engaged allowance is the essence of Zen, but it isn't without discipline or effort. Loori goes on to explain, "it takes a lot of energy and persistence to sit shikantaza, to not get caught up in daydreaming" (*Art of Sitting*, 138).

The technique of shikantaza advocates a subtle relationship to thoughts and thinking and it is easily and often misunderstood. Many outsiders and novice

practitioners mistake the goal to be a silent mind. But Kosho Uchiyama points out, “as long as we are alive it is only natural that various thoughts arise, even when we are doing zazen” (Uchiyama, 105). In another essay Uchiyama writes, “Trying to get rid of our thoughts is just another form of fantasy” (*Art of Sitting*, 60). He explains, “we have to clearly distinguish ‘chasing after thoughts and thinking’ from ‘ideas or thoughts merely occurring’” (Uchiyama, 49). The daydreaming that Loori cautions against is this chasing after thoughts.

Of course, all of us are familiar with the pleasures of thinking. As the Talking Heads song “Memories Can’t Wait” memorably put it, “There’s a party in my mind, and I hope it never stops.” To be doing zazen is to intentionally not participate in the party. But anyone who has ever tried to meditate for even 5 minutes knows, this doesn’t necessarily stop the music. Uchiyama explicates the meditator’s attitude by distinguishing between “thoughts occurring” and “thinking”. He writes, “thoughts ceasing to occur is not the ideal state of sitting zazen. It is perfectly natural that thoughts occur.” He goes on to explain, “Thinking of something means grasping that something with thought. However, during zazen we open the hand of thought that is trying to grasp something, and simply refrain from grasping. This is letting go of thoughts” (Uchiyama, 50). This is the essence of shikantaza.

Earlier I claimed that meditation may be considered an inquiry strategy. Having examined the technique, we can see how shikantaza is a way of directly observing the movement of thought. This dispassionate observation has a number of potential

benefits. As a practitioner becomes adept at separating their awareness from the ever-moving stream of thoughts, they are more and more able to separate their identity from their interior monologue. This is a major step, because many of us consider our identity to be deeply entwined with our thoughts. This identification with thoughts can become especially problematic when those thoughts turn negative or intrusive. But Zen teaches that the thoughts and emotions are akin to clouds and storms moving across the sky. According to Zen, a more fundamental identity is the awareness that observes thoughts and emotions. To use the traditional metaphor, our fundamental identity is the sky itself. Shikantaza is a direct place from which to observe and confirm this.

Meditative inquiry can have another epistemic result: enabling a practitioner to see how thought shapes and structures experience. Uchiyama writes, "We are constantly discriminating and dividing everything into this and that, based on our thinking. To throw out sequential thinking, not tying one phenomenon to another, is to be prior to thought. It is to be before the separation of things into *this* and *that*." Separating objects into this and that is an inherent function of language. Uchiyama continues, "When we are practicing zazen we exist before separating this moment from eternity, or subject from object. This may sound theoretical, but for a practitioner of zazen, it is not the result of reasoning; rather, zazen enables one to experience this directly" (Uchiyama, 112). What Uchiyama claims here is that the skilled practitioner directly experiences the world "prior" to the separation of subject and object. This direct experience is the meaning of nonduality, and is a major milestone along the path

of Zen practice, sometimes called *satori*. I will take up nonduality more explicitly in Section V, but we can see how major a claim this is for the significance of meditative practice. Note also Uchiyama's point that this direct perception is "not the result of reasoning." Here we see how different this methodology is from academic modes of inquiry. I will consider this difference more fully in Section VII.

So far we've considered the instructions for zazen, and some potential insights that may result from practice. Now let's consider one of the characteristics of meditation practice, its solitary nature.

Dogen writes, "There are as many minds as there are men… they negotiate the Way solely in zazen" (*Art of Sitting*, 23). This passage reminds me of something I once heard at a sesshin (a Zen meditation retreat) led by Kathy Fisher, a teacher from the San Francisco Zen Center. Sensei Fisher observed that it would be easy for a casual observer to look in the twilit zendo, and seeing neat rows of identically black-clad figures silently sitting, assume a kind of homogeneity of experience. She explained that she however considered us something more akin to an artists' colony: a grouping of individuals each engaged in their own solitary and creative pursuit. This is what I take Dogen's observation to mean. Spiritual inquiry is a solitary endeavor, even if it is practiced sometimes in community. Nowhere is that more evident than in the outward quiet of meditation.

Because spiritual inquiry is an inherently internal pursuit, it demands rigorous self-honesty of its practitioners. As Daido Loori explained, it takes a good deal of

energy to not get lost in daydreams. Many a meditator has passed the better part of an hour imagining a vacation in Bali, or re-doing a difficult conversation. Anyone who's ever attempted to sit with their mind knows that many times that's exactly what happens. The habits of mind are strong; most of us have spent a lifetime following our thoughts. Mental activity is internal and not outwardly visible, so there's an important role for self-accountability. The discipline comes in choosing to not continue to indulge such diversions once you become aware you've been lost in thought, but to simply return to disengaged awareness.

The solitary and internal nature of meditative practice points to a more general truth that Zen teaches. In all of life - spiritual or otherwise - each of us are always living exactly and inescapably from our unique perspective. Uchiyama writes, "To talk of being alive implies at the same time that there is a world of phenomena in which we live. We usually assume that the world existed long before we were born and that our birth is our entrance onto the stage of an already existing world" (Uchyama, 58). This is certainly the consensus view of reality. But Zen pushes back on this view. Uchiyama continues, "Within this way of thinking a fabrication is taking shape… When we look at a cup that is set down between us, we have the feeling that we are looking at the same cup, though actually that is not so." Zen is insistently radical in pointing us to recognize our inescapable subjectivity. Through close observation, Zen teachings invite us to observe that we are inescapably bound to our individual experience of consciousness and the constraints of lives. Uchiyama goes on to point out that we see the cup with

different eyes, from different angles and perspectives. “In a very rough sense, we proceed to separate the reality of the situation by entertaining the idea that we both see the same cup. This is what I mean by the fabrication of ideas.” Uchiyama goes on to extrapolate this point about the cup to the idea of the external world, which we presume exists independently of our experience of it. “[W]e end up thinking that we live and die within this world of fabrication. This is an utterly inverted way of looking at one’s life.” Uchyamama follows this observation to its radical but also radically empirical conclusion: “My true Self lives in reality, and the world I experience is one I alone can experience, and not anyone else can experience it along with me… I live out my life along with that world, and at my death the world I experience also dies” (Uchiyama, 59).

Uchiyama’s telling of the Zen perspective appears that it could easily careen into the philosophical idealism of Berkeley or the solipsistic ethics of the nihilist. Here Uchiyama cautions against falling into a philosophical trap. Uchiyama’s perspective could appear to be an ontological posit regarding the existence of “*my* world.” But Zen is more subtle, comprehensive, and rigorous than that.

Zen (and Buddhism generally,) is about seeing reality without the distortions of conceptual categories and ideas. Indeed, Uchiyama’s point is that any such posits are merely “fabrications of mind”, subtle and pervasive delusions. This is the meaning of the line from the Third Patriarch in *Verses on the Faith Mind*, “Do not search for truth; / only cease to cherish opinions.” Since truth/reality is what’s actually happening, our

cherished opinions are what keep us from apprehending the truth. The consequences of not discovering and seeing through these subtle belief structures is profound. Uchiyama cautions, “All too often, we while away our lives, creating general assumptions and ideologies out of the thoughts that arise in our minds, and, after having fabricated those ideas, we finally dissipate our life energy by living in the world we have abstracted from them” (*Art of Sitting,* 60).

The practice of Zen is a rigorously deconstructionist project. Though we’re told to meditate with no objective, deconstruction is a natural consequence of practice. By slowing down and watching the movement of thought, without engaging it positively or negatively, the meditator begins to see more clearly her patterns of thought. In daily life, thoughts occur amidst the sensory tumult of life, and they move with such rapidity that they are nearly impossible to separate out. It wasn’t until the last century that writers such as Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner shocked the western world by bringing a careful study of interior monologue and stream-of-consciousness experience to light. But all of that would have been intimately familiar to centuries of Zen practitioners. I vividly recall my first 10-day meditation retreat. I was fully identified with myself as a thinker. In the quiet space of sitting, I carefully listened to my thoughts for the first time. I was somewhat horrified to discover how repetitive and often nonsensical my thoughts were, muttering away like a drunk at a bar. Furthermore, they weren’t under my control to the extent I had always assumed. I couldn’t just turn them off, and rather than directing them, I was rather at their mercy. This observation no

longer surprises me, and it has thoroughly disabused me of the Enlightenment presumption of a mostly rational mind.

Verses on the Faith Mind states, “When the mind exists undisturbed in the Way, / there is no objection to anything in the world; / and when there is no objection to anything, / things cease to be-in the old way. / When no discriminating attachment arises, / the old mind ceases to exist.” In the silent sitting of meditation, the twisted net of belief structures can begin to unravel. And Zen teaches that as those structures of thought and belief become more transparent, reality emerges.

Seng-Ts’an writes, “The more you talk and think about it, / the further you wander from the truth. / So cease attachment to talking and thinking / and there is nothing you will not be able to know.” Here we see a clear contrast with the intellectualism that underwrites western academic ways of knowing. Meditation is the process of subtraction. It’s not possible to silence thought, indeed to attempt to do so is a profound (albeit common) mistake. Rather, we learn to not engage with it. This is the meaning of the line “cease *attachment* to talking and thinking” (emphasis mine.) Zen practice teaches that little by little, a practitioner gains a stability of awareness that can resist the trance of thought and emotion without pushing it away. But this is a process. Thought and emotion have an almost gravitational pull. When attempting to meditate, before you know it, it’s easy to be drawn into a virtual reality of thinking and imagining. This is natural and common. And for most of us, it’s the way in which we move through life. But through practice, we begin to “pop out” of the thought trance

more often, and get lost for shorter and shorter periods. Zen practice teaches that In the quiet that does not require the absence of thought, a person can witness it and begin to become aware of themselves *as* the aware space in which thought arises. Uchiyama explains, “Self is what is there before you cook it up with thought” (Uchiyama, 30). As this silent awareness becomes aware of itself, it constitutes a shift in identity, from what we might call the conditioned or identified self, to what is sometimes called i Zen “true Self.” Conditioned self, the habits of thought and emotion, happen within the awareness of true Self. One contains the other. It’s important to point out that this larger space of silent awareness is not silencing or judging the conditioned self. Indeed such attempts to control, the constant process of judging, is exclusively the domain of the thought-based self. I’ll explore this further in the next section.

Part IV: Nonattachment

One of the key themes of Buddhism and Zen is Nonattachment. This concept is beautifully illustrated in *Verses on the Faith Mind*. Seng-ts'an opens the poem declaring "The Great Way is not difficult / for those not attached to preferences." He continues, "If you wish to know the truth, / then hold to no opinions for or against anything. / To set up what you like against what you dislike / is a disease of the mind." This curious formulation implies that the holding of opinions and preferences is somehow an impediment to knowing the truth, i.e. the Great Way. Indeed, it appears to be *the* major impediment, because without it, "The Great Way is not difficult." Lest we miss this point, Seng-ts'an clarifies, "it is due to our grasping and rejecting / that we do not know the true nature of things."

Grasping and rejecting, attachment to preferences, liking and disliking, holding to opinions - all of these movements can be summed up in the foundational Buddhist teachings around desire, the Second Noble Truth. Daido Loori writes, "The Second Noble Truth… is that the cause of suffering is thirst. 'Thirst' is used here to indicate desire, clinging, holding on, craving" (Loori, 14). In Buddhist teaching, aversion is viewed as an inverted form of desire, for example, the desire to *not* experience a certain thing.

One very simple way to understand Seng-ts'an's admonition is to understand that our beliefs and desires are overlays that warp our perception. Reality is not directly influenced by our beliefs and opinions about it. So if it's truth we're after, then what's

important is what actually *is*. Dogen expresses it like this: “flowers fall even though we love them; weeds grow even though we dislike them.” This simple formulation is common sense, but also common sense that most of us resist. What we *want* to be the case has no effect on what actually *is* the case. Dogen continues, “Conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice-enlightenment is delusion. All things coming and carrying out practice-enlightenment through the self is realization” (Okumura, 1). This second part is classic Dogen, and characteristic Zen. To an outside observer, both instances, “conveying oneself toward” and “all things coming,” might look identical. But the frame of reference is inverted, and the interior relationship is quite different. The 18th Century Zen master Hakuin phrased it slightly differently in his *Song of Zazen,* “Your coming-and-going takes place nowhere else but where you are.” We can also see how this poetic view of coming-and-going aligns with Uchiyama’s observation about the irreducible subjectivity of one’s experience.

Returning to the theme of nonattachment, Seng-T’san explains, “If you wish to see the truth, / then hold no opinions for or against anything. / To set up what you like against what you dislike / is a disease of the mind.” According to Seng-T’san’s instructions, it appears that we should strive to have no opinions or preferences. But as anybody who has ever tried to have no preferences can tell you, this is not a very practical suggestion. This approach has been tried by spiritual practitioners for millennia. But as the Buddha himself discovered shortly before his own enlightenment, the path of renunciation doesn’t really work. Or as Ram Dass once observed,

monasteries are full of horny celebates. This is what Seng-T'san tries to clarify by saying, "When you try to stop activity to achieve quietude / your very effort fills you with activity. / As long as you remain in one extreme or the other, / you will never know Oneness." So what gives? Do we have to not have preferences to see reality?

As is often the case with these apparent paradoxes in Zen, the answer is both subtle and obvious. As I mentioned in the previous section, one of the first insights in meditation is that we do not control our thoughts. If we do have control, it is only of the most limited sort. This doesn't actually require a meditation retreat to demonstrate. If we had control over the arising and direction of our thoughts, then none of us would ever be plagued by runaway thinking in the middle of the night. If we had agency over our thoughts, then we could direct them to simply stop, or could at least shift them in an enjoyable direction. Needless to say, for me at least, that's not possible. So if the thinking mind is a force largely outside our control, then we don't need to identify so completely with it. This is very much analogous to the relationship with preferences. The mind has preferences, this is just biology at work. As my teacher once explained, "if you ask me if I want chocolate or pistachio ice cream, I won't just stare at you blankly." Opinions and preferences are, of themselves, not the problem. We don't even really have much control over these individual expressions of personality. The difficulty Seng-ts'an points to is that when we invest these preferences with belief and identity, we go on the roller coaster ride. Put another way, it's fine to have preferences, just try not to be attached to the outcome.

In my note on sources, I mentioned that I have used the second of Richard Clarke's translations of *Verses.* The differences between the opening lines of these two translations is very helpful to understand this point. Clarke's first translation reads, "The Great Way is not difficult / for those who have no preferences." His second version is revised to: "The Great Way is not difficult / for those not attached to preferences." This is a key difference - to not *be attached* to preferences. Just like Uchiyama's relationship between thoughts and thinking, there is an engagement, an activity of "selfing" when we believe our preferences, creating an identity from them. Loori writes, "[A]ttachment comes from the illusion that there exists a separate self, a separate entity that is distinct from all other things" (Loori, 14). Here Loori has branched off from the Four Noble Truths into the more directly Zen-inflected focus of nonduality, which I will take up in the next section.

Part V: Nonduality

One of the central claims of Zen, and Buddhism more generally, is that through practice and close observation, one may come to experience the world and self as not separate, but rather as a continuous whole. Seng-ts'an writes, "If the mind makes no discriminations, / the ten thousand things[3] are as they are, / of single essence." This assertion and aim is a common thread between all nondual traditions.

As an ontological claim, it's not difficult to make a case for the physical world being a continuous fabric. Einstein proved that matter and energy are two forms of the same thing. And at the atomic level, we are told that boundaries between things become fuzzy. And though Newtonian mechanics treated objects discreetly, more modern theories view them as occurrences within a field.

At a more human scale, we can observe that language serves a role of differentiation and individuation, slicing up the world into discrete chunks. But we can equally see that these chunks are in some sense just useful fictions. It may be advantageous to speak of a particular apple tree, and that distinction certainly means *something*, but how could a tree exist separate from the hydrological cycle, or the sun, or the bee that brought pollen to the flower of its parent? This chain can be followed back and back in a dizzying expansion, in which everything depends on everything else. This relationship is what the late Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh called *interbeing*.

[3] *The ten thousand things* is a poetic Asian expression meaning everything.

Interbeing undermines the simplistic notion of causality. Some causes are more proximal and obvious, but they too are effects which depend on an unbroken chain going back to the beginning. According to Buddhism, it might be more accurate to say that the cause of any event is everything that has ever happened. This is known as the doctrine of *dependent origination*, and is common to all Buddhist sects. This is also the meaning of the assertion that things do not have an independent existence, sometimes translated as emptiness.

So here we see the case for how the self is not separate. Uchiyama puts it this way: “Whether we realize it or not, we are always living out life that is connected to everything in the universe… The life that runs through everything in the universe is me. I don’t mean me as an ego, I mean my self in the true sense, the universal self” (Uchiyama, 14). Dogen refers to this as *jinissai jiko*, “the self that extends through everything in the universe.”

Dogen’s *Genjokoan* famously states that “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self” (Okumura, 2). Loori writes, “What happens when you forget the self? What is it that remains…? Everything remains. The whole phenomenal universe remains. The only difference is that there is no longer a separation between you and it. That is a very radical way of perceiving your life and the universe” (Loori, 18). This is the meaning of nonduality according to the Zen tradition. And as Loori makes clear in the last sentence, it’s a matter of perception. Nothing is outwardly changed, but it entails a shift in how one experiences. Thus we can

understand the Buddhist doctrine that enlightenment is always present, because it is merely seeing what is already the case without the distortion of the concept of self and other. Or as Seng-ts'an puts it, "All dualities come from ignorant interference. / They are like dreams, phantoms, hallucinations."

Zen teaches that the practice whereby one sees through the "ignorant interference" is zazen. Seng-ts'an writes, "Let go of things as separate existences / and the mind too vanishes. / Likewise when the thinking subject vanishes / so too do the objects created by the mind." We see that in this formulation, according to Seng-ts'an, that the conceptual categories used to structure experience of the outside world are in a bidirectional reinforcing relationship with the concept of self. Seng-ts'an continues, "In this world 'as it really is' / there is neither self nor other-than-self."

It's very important to point out that Zen isn't actually making ontological assertions, rather, it is making experiential ones. The teachings, in effect, are saying, "this is how you can perceive things." That's what I mean when I call Zen training an applied pedagogy. The 12th Century Chan master Hongzhi Zhengjui describes zazen and the nonseperation it engenders poetically, "Silent and serene, forgetting words, / bright clarity appears before you… / The crane dreams in the wintry mists, The autumn waters flow far in the distance. / Endless kalpas[4] are totally empty, all things completely the same." (*Art of Sitting,* 13). In this poem, "bright clarity… all things completely the same" is something that "appears before you." And the condition for that happening is practice, to be "silent and serene, forgetting words."

[4] A *kalpa* is a Buddhist measure of deep time.

One of the most significant consequences of this nondual shift in perception is that it motivates compassion. Loori writes, “You take care of everything like you take care of yourself. In a way it is very self-centered, except the self now consumes the whole Universe. Nothing is left out” (Loori, 22). Zen says that the result of practice is to see more accurately. And a consequence of this more accurate way of seeing is that it underwrites moral behavior and compassion. Moral philosophers historically have had to jump through hoops to achieve this. They talk about the capacity to feel pain or the greatest common good. Similarly, religion exhorts its faithful to, “treat thy neighbor as thyself” without providing any tools to make that goal achievable other than fear or devotion. Zen practice, however, claims to provide a direct methodology by which one might actually hope to achieve this lofty ambition, because through Zen practice, one might actually directly perceive that thy neighbor is not separate from thyself. This direct perception and the difference in behavior it might engender is a major motivation for many, if not most, Zen students.

The perception of nonduality is one of the primary goals of Zen practice, but the ultimate goal is to be able to embody that perception. This means to move and relate in such a way that the insight of nonduality is put into practice. Put plainly, that means to treat everyone and everything as an extension of yourself.

Part VI: Coming Down the Mountain

One of the hallmarks of Zen is the importance it places on everyday relative life. This contrasts sharply with the separation of theory from lived experience that we see in, say, philosophy or literary theory. In intellectual modes of inquiry, the goal is to arrive at better or more true beliefs, however one chooses to define truth. Academic inquiry is thus, in some sense, fundamentally cut off from daily life, because it is concerned with belief rather than action. Buddhist scholar John Maraldo put it this way, "Zen struck me for its deep connection to embodied knowing and everyday life - realities I felt were neglected in the cerebral philosophy and theology I had been studying" (Maraldo, 6). In Zen, a better conceptual understanding is only as valuable as the transformation it engenders. Daido Loori explains spiritual practice and realization like this, "Our life is not simply about sitting on some mountaintop, contemplating our navel. It takes place in the world, interacting with others. The question becomes how to proceed when we are on top of the mountain. We go straight ahead, and straight ahead takes us right back down the other side" (Loori, 20).

From a Zen perspective, what matters is how clearly we perceive, and even more, how well we embody and enact that perception. Uchiyama explains, "It's not a matter of thinking correctly about life. Thinking about life simply isn't enough" (Uchiyama, 15). An insight that isn't translated into one's life is next to worthless. Loori puts it his way, "our realization functions and manifests itself in everything we do; in the way we drive a car, raise a child, maintain a relationship, grow a garden, live a life. If

our practice doesn't function there, what good is it? Why are we doing it?" (Loori, 21). This end goal is a signal difference between intellectual inquiry and Zen practice.

In the Heart Sutra, which is chanted daily at Zen temples throughout the world, there is a line: "to realize the Absolute is not yet Enlightenment." This is a curious line, because it may appear that the whole point of Zen practice is to see everything as one, ie, "to realize the Absolute." But as Loori explains, "the condition of 'self is forgotten; all things are one' does not function… You have to be able to differentiate in order to survive" (Loori, 20). Here we see that Zen is not about living in an ideal place of transcendence. "What you realize through practice is that the whole universe is one reality, that you and I are the same thing. But then we need to go further and take the next step; that is, I am *not* you and you are *not* me. Both of these facts, oneness and differentiation, exist simultaneously and interpenetrate perfectly" (Loori, 20). This is sometimes expressed with the Zen phrase, "not two, but also, not one."

Zen training is rife with apparent paradoxes. But perhaps this is more a function of the conceptual categories implicit in language rather than reality itself. Language forces us into boxes of either/or, but reality is big enough to contain both/and. In Zen, there is no such thing as an absolutely true belief even if some beliefs are more helpful than others. Seng-T'san writes, "Words! The way is beyond language…"

Part VII: Deconstruction & Embodied Truth

Zen is less about establishing metaphysical truths, and more about discovering and cultivating a different relationship to life. Zen teachings locate human difficulty with life in the thought-created structure of belief and preference. This is what Buddhist philosopher Masao Abe refers to as the ego-self. He writes, “Self-estrangement and anxiety are *not* something *accidental* to the ego-self, but are inherent to its structure. To be human is to be a problem to oneself… To be an ego-self means to be cut off from both one’s self and one’s world… [which] means to be in constant anxiety” (Abe, 6). Zen practice is about seeing through this illusory structure and disidentifying with it. Loori writes, “all the things we do in Zen Buddhist training are called *upaya*, or ‘skillful means’, ways to get us to see that the truth is already present… the truth is this very life itself” (Loori, 16).

There are two interesting concepts we can pull from Loori’s quotation. The first is the pedagogy of *upaya*. A skillful means may take any form, it can be a poem, a sutra, a dharma talk, or meditative practice. It can be the care with which someone ladles soup. It can be *anything* that serves the purpose of seeing clearly. Upaya is merely a tool. Language *can* fall into this category, being a helpful device for dislodging distortions. But as every Zen student has been reminded, “do not mistake the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself.” The finger that points is not devalued, and it’s not a problem, provided it’s not mistaken for the reality itself. The problem arises when

the concepts or teachings become confused for reality, rather than held lightly as helpful pointers.

The second noteworthy concept in Loori's quotation is that truth is identical with life itself. It's not somewhere else, not in a Himalayan cave or a dusty ancient sutra. It's this very moment. And enlightenment is this moment, perceived free of the distortion of categories, beliefs, and the endless push and pull of preferences. The enlightenment that Zen practitioners strive for is nonconceptual and embodied. Loori continues the passage cited above, "reading, understanding, or believing that the truth is this very life itself is very different from *realizing* that the truth is this very life itself." He goes on to quote Bodhidharma, who famously said "'The truth of the Buddhadharma cannot be reached by words or letters'" (Loori 16).

I have asserted that Zen teachings and practice are deconstructive. By this I mean that language and its attendant conceptual framework is viewed as an impediment to directly perceiving reality. Seng-ts'an writes, "cease attachment to talking and thinking, and there is nothing you will not be able to know." The important point here is, like is said in the instructions for shikantaza, to "cease attachment." One can helpfully use language if it's not attached to, if it's held lightly as a tool rather than mistaken for being in one-to-one relationship with reality. The attachment is the problem, not the language itself. Abe explains it like this: "Zen does not establish itself on the basis of either thinking or not-thinking, but rather *non*-thinking, which is beyond both thinking and not-thinking." Abe explains that to be exclusively grounded in

not-thinking is to be anti-intellectual, and to be exclusively grounded in thinking is to fall into “mere conceptualism.” But in this middle way, Zen “takes *non*-thinking as its ultimate ground, and thus can express itself through both thinking and not-thinking, as the situation requires” (Abe, 24).

This of course is radically different from Enlightenment ideals of a rational mind which can represent truth in language. It’s much more similar to the post-structuralist critiques of Derrida, or the contingency of Rorty. But still it is distinct because Zen teachings do not regard language to be inescapable; they assert that reality can be perceived directly. And language is part of this direct perception, it is included. But rather than being the frame of reference, it is merely another aspect of reality, expressing within the space of awareness. This direct perception, which includes language but is not constrained by it, is identical with the Zen definition of truth.

Some Objections and Concluding Thoughts

First I'd like to consider criticisms of my project. In an attempt to make general points, I've neglected large swaths of Zen practice. For starters, I've neglected huge parts of Zen practice, including: koan study[5], liturgy, chanting, precepts, posture, and mudra. Worse still, I've purposely ignored teachings about the danger of using the rational mind to attempt to apprehend or explain what can only be called ineffable. In a sense, everything I've written in this essay misses the mark. I've discussed some central themes of Zen teachings and practice, laying them out like they are linear and sequential, separable and discrete. I've done this in a well-intentioned attempt to make a case for why Zen practice is a compelling complement to intellectual inquiry, but to do so I've disregarded explicit warnings about this very activity. Seng-ts'an is direct on this point: "To seek Mind with the discriminating mind / is the greatest of all mistakes… / Don't waste your time in arguments and discussion, / attempting to grasp the ungraspable." I can only ask for forgiveness for marshaling these teachers' words against their explicit warnings.

Having stated my *mea culpa*, I'd like to turn to critiques of Zen as an institution and practice. One of the easiest criticisms of Zen stems from its inherently hierarchical structure, its patriarchal legacy, and the all-to-predictable abuse of power. There are numerous instances in which a senior teacher or abbot has engaged in inappropriate sexual relationships with students. One of the most infamous instances involved Suzuki

[5] Koan study is more characteristic of Renzai practice; shikantaza is more primary in Soto Zen.

Roshi's handpicked successor at the San Francisco Zen Center. The ensuing controversy nearly tore apart the institution, and multiple books have been written on the subject. In the aftermath of this scandal, the SFZC reorganized to ensure that there would always be multiple voices in power, and a rotation to ensure no one person stays at the top too long. (Lattin). Many other Zen organizations in the US have taken similar steps to ensure accountability.

Another criticism I find more interesting is that Zen is outdated. It originally had a good claim to be the cleanest and most elegant interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism, but over the many ensuing centuries of monastic ritual, lots of ceremony and fluff has been added. I'm reminded of a delightful old story I heard when I joined the monastery in Santa Fe. The story goes that once upon a time there was a particularly needy monastery kitten who would cry outside the door of the meditation hall when all the monks went in to meditate. The roshi ordered this particular kitten be tied up before meditation periods so it wouldn't be distracting. A year later, the Roshi passed away and the monks continued the practice of tying up the cat before meditation. Some years later the cat died, and a new kitten was brought in. The tradition of tying up the cat before meditation continued, though no one remembered the original reason. Centuries later, a monk wrote a scholarly essay on the spiritual significance of tying up a cat before meditation.

This amusing story is a classic bit of Zen oral tradition. It illustrates the point that over countless generations, it's easy for the vibrancy of a tradition to get weighed down

by empty forms. To wit, some Zen Masters have left the tradition to practice in a secular context[6], without the robes and incense and ceremony. The question many legitimately ask is what's actually helpful and necessary, and what's just medieval baggage. Furthermore, the societal structure of medieval Japan is quite different from the world we inhabit. It's perhaps unrealistic in the modern world to assume that a student has the ability to step out of their life for years to study and practice. Secular teachers of nonduality (sometimes called neo-advaita) have proliferated in the last couple decades, and many of them seem quite good. They don't have the depth of tradition that comes with say, Zen, or Nyingma, or Sufism, but neither do they have the baggage.

I choose to narrow my focus and write about Soto Zen for the sake of consistency. It is an ancient tradition, full of beautiful texts and a well-documented history. But Soto Zen is far from the only path to nondual understanding. Indeed, interest in nondual teachings and practices has exploded over the last decade, such that Mindfulness is now a household concept. Secular teachers such as Rupert Spira and Eckhart Tolle have bestselling books and millions of views on YouTube, and the supermarket checkout is lined with numerous glossy magazines extolling the virtues of Eastern wisdom traditions and practices, but without the reference to a particular tradition.

[6] My teacher, Adyashanti, is an example of this trend. He was asked to teach by his Zen teacher of 14 years, but he eschews all the Zen formality and structure, leading retreats and giving talks in a completely secular context.

So why is any of this relevant? As I write this essay, in the spring of 2023, computational large language models are beginning to use language with a fluency that rivals most humans. The newest generation of these computational models, or certainly the one that comes next, could produce an essay such as this one in the time it took me to write this sentence. It wouldn't be informed by my decades of good-faith intellectual inquiry and my decade-plus of serious spiritual practice, nor would it spring from my lifetime of relationships and my deep care for the planet and all living things. But to a reader, such an essay would likely be indistinguishable.

In an op-ed in the New York Times, Yuval Harari observes that the algorithms that underlie social media feeds represent humanity's first large-scale contact with a primitive AI. These algorithms were geared to maximize engagement, and Harari points out that the result has been to accelerate social division, fracturing democracy and undermining a consensus view of reality and facts[7]. Though we might spend years debating the nuances and multivalent factors at play, it would feel foolishly head-in-the-sand to argue that these engagement-optimized feeds haven't also led to a massive emotional and interpersonal crisis for America's youngest generations.

Harari warns that in the years to come the vastly-more-capable AI that we see emerging today might easily engulf our society in a tsunami of machine-generated content. He asks, "What would it mean for humans to live in a world where a large percentage of stories, melodies, images, laws, policies and tools are shaped by nonhuman intelligence, which knows how to exploit with superhuman efficiency the

[7] Other factors certainly contribute to this problem, but that doesn't detract from Harari's point

weaknesses, biases and addictions of the human mind…?" More troubling, its ability to interact with human-like fluency might start to take the place of actual human connections for many of society's most vulnerable members. He writes, "a curtain of illusions could descend over the whole of humanity, and we might never again be able to tear that curtain away — or even realize it is there" (Harari et al.). This is extreme language, but I don't think it's unwarranted fear mongering. One need only look at the off-the-rails conversations reporters have had with "Sydney" (Microsoft's GPT-4 chatbot) to see the potential for large-scale social manipulation.

Attention has always been our most precious individual commodity, and we now live in an attention economy. Decades of psychological research has been harnessed and tweaked by the big data experiment in which we are collectively participating. This understanding of our preferences and biases has been weaponized to make it harder and harder to look away from the screens we now carry everywhere. In the digitally-mediated environment, it will become increasingly difficult to discern our interactions with fellow humans from those with non-human intelligence. In this brave new world, the ability to unhook from screens and keep some distance from the seductive capabilities of language might become more important, even imperative, than we might have dreamed even a few years ago.

I'll admit, I spend more hours reading the news and online forums than I do in meditation. I'm as addicted to my screens and feeds as anyone I know. But in all my reading, I haven't seen many compelling arguments for how to face the myriad crisis

that seem to be overtaking humanity. I wrote this paper to share what has seemed most promising: Generations of Zen practitioners promise that there is a clarity and wisdom that can emerge in silence. They tell us that direct contact with reality is possible. Not some checked-out transcendence, but rather a very real engagement with what is. I propose we might be wise to investigate their claims.

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APPENDIX

Verses on the Faith Mind (Hsin-Hsin Ming)

by Seng-ts'an, translated by Richard C Clarke

The Great Way is not difficult
for those not attached to preferences.
When not attached to love or hate,
all is clear and undisguised.
Separate by the smallest amount, however,
and you are as far from it as heaven is from earth.

If you wish to know the truth,
then hold to no opinions for or against anything.
To set up what you like against what you dislike
is the disease of the mind.

When the fundamental nature of things is not recognized
the mind's essential peace is disturbed to no avail.
The Way is perfect as vast space is perfect,
where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess.

Indeed, it is due to our grasping and rejecting
that we do not know the true nature of things.
Live neither in the entanglements of outer things,
nor in ideas or feelings of emptiness.
Be serene and at one with things
and erroneous views will disappear by themselves.

When you try to stop activity to achieve quietude,
your very effort fills you with activity.
As long as you remain attached to one extreme or another
you will never know Oneness.
Those who do not live in the Single Way
cannot be free in either activity or quietude, in assertion or denial.

Deny the reality of things
and you miss their reality;
assert the emptiness of things
and you miss their reality.
The more you talk and think about it
the further you wander from the truth.
So cease attachment to talking and thinking,
and there is nothing you will not be able to know.

To return to the root is to find the essence,
but to pursue appearances or “enlightenment” is to miss the source.
To awaken even for a moment
is to go beyond appearance and emptiness.

Changes that seem to occur in the empty world
we make real only because of our ignorance.

Do not seek for the truth;
Only cease to cherish opinions.

Do not remain in a dualistic state;
avoid such easy habits carefully.
If you attach even to a trace
of this and that, of right and wrong,
the Mind-essence will be lost in confusion.
Although all dualities arise from the One,
do not be attached even to ideas of this One.

When the mind exists undisturbed in the Way,
there is no objection to anything in the world;
and when there is no objection to anything,
things cease to be— in the old way.
When no discriminating attachment arises,
the old mind ceases to exist.
Let go of things as separate existences
and mind too vanishes.

Likewise when the thinking subject vanishes
so too do the objects created by mind.

The arising of other gives rise to self;
giving rise to self generates others.
Know these seeming two as facets
of the One Fundamental Reality.
In this Emptiness, these two are really one—
and each contains all phenomena.
If not comparing, nor attached to “refined” and “vulgar”—
you will not fall into judgment and opinion.

The Great Way is embracing and spacious—
to live in it is neither easy nor difficult.
Those who rely on limited views are fearful and irresolute:
The faster they hurry, the slower they go.
To have a narrow mind,
and to be attached to getting enlightenment
is to lose one’s center and go astray.
When one is free from attachment,
all things are as they are,
and there is neither coming nor going.

When in harmony with the nature of things, your own fundamental nature,
and you will walk freely and undisturbed.
However, when mind is in bondage, the truth is hidden,
and everything is murky and unclear,
and the burdensome practice of judging
brings annoyance and weariness.
What benefit can be derived
from attachment to distinctions and separations?

If you wish to move in the One Way,
do not dislike the worlds of senses and ideas.
Indeed, to embrace them fully
is identical with true Enlightenment.

The wise person attaches to no goals
but the foolish person fetters himself or herself.
There is one Dharma, without differentiation.
Distinctions arise from the clinging needs of the ignorant.
To seek Mind with the discriminating mind
is the greatest of mistakes.

Rest and unrest derive from illusion;
with enlightenment, attachment to liking and disliking ceases.
All dualities come from ignorant inference.
They are like dreams, phantoms, hallucinations—
it is foolish to try to grasp them.
Gain and loss, right and wrong; finally abandon all such thoughts at once.

If the eye never sleeps,
all dreams will naturally cease.
If the mind makes no discriminations,
the ten thousand things
are as they are, of single essence.
To realize the mystery of this One-essence
is to be released from all entanglements.
When all things are seen without differentiation,
the One Self-essence is everywhere revealed.
No comparisons or analogies are possible
in this causeless, relationless state of just this One.

When movement stops, there is no movement—
and when no movement, there is no stopping.
When such dualities cease to exist
Oneness itself cannot exist.
To this ultimate state
no law or description applies.

For the Realized mind at one with the Way
all self-centered striving ceases.
Doubts and irresolutions vanish

and the Truth is confirmed in you.
With a single stroke you are freed from bondage;
nothing clings to you and you hold to nothing.
All is empty, clear, self-illuminating,
with no need to exert the mind.
Here, thinking, feeling, understanding, and imagination
are of no value.
In this world “as it really is”
there is neither self nor other-than-self.

To know this Reality directly
is possible only through practicing non-duality.
When you live this non-separation,
all things manifest the One, and nothing is excluded.
Whoever comes to enlightenment, no matter when or where,
Realizes personally this fundamental Source.

This Dharma-truth has nothing to do with big or small, with time and space.
Here a single thought is as ten thousand years.
Not here, not there—
but everywhere always right before your eyes.
Infinitely large and infinitely small: no difference,
for definitions are irrelevant
and no boundaries can be discerned.
So likewise with “existence” and “non-existence.”

Don’t waste your time in arguments and discussion
attempting to grasp the ungraspable.

Each thing reveals the One,
the One manifests as all things.
To live in this Realization
is not to worry about perfection or non-perfection.
To put your trust in the Heart-Mind is to live without separation,
and in this non-duality you are one with your Life-Source.

Words! Words!
The Way is beyond language,
for in it there is

no yesterday,

no tomorrow,

no today.