Nansen's Cat:
An Examination of Zen 'Oneness'

Richard Oxenberg

If a Zen master kills a kitten, and does not hear its scream, does it make a sound?

I. A Koan

This essay is a unfoldingreflection upon a koan – of sorts – that occurred to me while reading D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*. I say "of sorts" because it is not a koan that appears in the book itself, nor is it a traditional Zen koan. Rather, it is a koan that came to me unbidden; indeed, that jumped out at me, in a rather disturbing way, during the course of my reading. I will express it thus: *If a Zen master kills a kitten, and does not hear its scream, does it make a sound?*

The more I reflected on this "koanic" riddle, the more it seemed to me to problematize the very experience of 'oneness' or 'non-duality' said to be at the heart of Zen. This essay, then, is my effort to work out these problems and their implications.

Before doing so, it will be helpful to say a bit about how koans function in the Zen tradition.

A Zen koan is a paradox or riddle that the Zen master presents to a disciple in order to conduct the disciple into a deepening awareness of truth. The disciple is not to seek an analytical or intellectual solution of the koan; rather, contemplation of the koan is to lead to an intuitive, or what we might call 'epiphanous,' realization of the koan's meaning. Such intuitive realization is to have a transformative effect on the disciple's mind and spirit. In this respect, the true 'solution' to the koan is this transformation itself, which the disciple is then asked to demonstrate to the master.

As an example, let's consider the classic Zen koan: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Of course, the paradox here is that we generally suppose that it takes two hands to clap. One hand strikes another and produces a sound that we call 'clapping.' In what way then can *one* hand clap? What sort of sound would the clapping of one hand make? This is the paradox the Zen disciple is asked to sit with. Again, a mere intellectual solution to the riddle is not what is sought. Rather, the disciple is to seek an intuitive, indeed transformative, insight into the koan's fundamental meaning, an insight that, when had, will effect a revolution in his or her orientation to life.

As Suzuki puts it: "Zen works miracles by overhauling the whole system of one's inner life and opening up a world hitherto entirely undreamt of."[1]

What is the nature of this hitherto undreamt of world? What is the inner revolution to which Zen points? As is well known, Zen is loath to describe it in conceptual terms. On the one hand, Zen maintains that it cannot be properly grasped conceptually and, on the other, that even if it could, such a conceptual understanding would be of little or no value, any more than a photograph of food would be of value to a starving person. One must experience this new orientation oneself in order to understand it and benefit from it. Indeed, it is suggested by Zen adepts that the very attempt to understand the truth conceptually can become a barrier to its realization.

In this respect, the following essay may appear to be very 'unzenlike,' for we will indeed endeavor to understand the meaning of our koan analytically or intellectually. Nevertheless, I can give something of a zenlike defense of this unzenlike approach: for my own attempts to enter into the meaning of the koan has led me to realize that an analytical or intellectual approach to understanding life and the world cannot be utterly dispensed with; not if we wish to achieve anything that might reasonably be called "enlightenment."

To see this, we will need to engage in an imaginative attempt to envision what the Zen state of enlightenment is like. We will use Suzuki's account of it for this purpose.

II. Non-Duality

At the heart of Zen enlightenment, at least as Suzuki presents, is an experience of "non-duality," that is, an experience of identity between self and other, subject and object.

In enlightenment, writes Suzuki, "one's inmost being gets purified and sees itself as it really is, not indeed as an ego standing in contrast to the not-ego, but as something transcending the opposites and yet synthesizing them in itself."[2]

Suzuki makes a point of noting that for the true Zen adept, non-duality is not a mere metaphysical concept, rather, it is a direct, unmediated, experience that leads to a "reconstruction of one's entire personality."[3] He suggests that many of us receive a taste of this in romantic love: "Through the awakening of love we get a glimpse into the infinity of things. . . When the ego-shell is broken and the 'other' is taken into [one's] own body, we can say that the ego has denied itself or that the ego has taken its first steps towards the infinite."[4]

Of course, Zen enlightenment is not an experience of romantic love, but like romantic love, it involves the breaking of the ego-shell that divides the world between self and other. If we wish to understand it, then, we might first consider the manner in which the ego makes this self-other division.

As Suzuki presents it, and as is generally said in the Zen tradition, the ego constructs the division of self and other largely through the operation of intellection or conceptuality. Rather than experience the world as it immediately presents itself to us, we experience it as mediated through our thoughts and concepts. We do this quite automatically, without noticing, and thus experience the world, not directly, but through a conceptual film that distances us from it, and indeed from ourselves: “Ever since the unfoldment of consciousness we have been led to respond to the inner and outer conditions in a certain conceptual and analytical manner,” writes Suzuki, “The discipline of Zen consists in upsetting this artificially constructed framework once for all and in remodeling it on an entirely new basis” [5]

Hence, the Zen enlightenment experience does not result from the application of new concepts to the world, but rather from a relinquishment of our conceptual approach to the world altogether. Suzuki writes, “Enlightenment is not the outcome of an intellectual process in which one idea follows another in sequence finally to terminate in conclusion or judgment. . . In judgment there is subject and predicate; in Enlightenment subject is predicate and predicate is subject; they are here merged as one, but not as one of which something can be stated, but as one from which arises judgment.”[6]

In other words, enlightenment conducts us to place in consciousness *prior to* intellection, from which intellection itself arises. It results, not from coming to understand something new about the world, but from connecting us with a more primordial region of our own consciousness than we are generally in touch with, a region prior to the distinction the mind makes between self and other; a region, indeed, hidden to ordinary consciousness due to this distinction itself.

It is just this division of self from other and subject from object, says Suzuki, that is at the core of what the Buddhist tradition calls Ignorance (*avidya*). Such Ignorance “is not merely not knowing or not being acquainted with a theory, system or law. . . In Ignorance the world is asserted as distinct from the self; that is, there are always two elements standing in opposition.”[7]

In this respect, Ignorance may be seen as an overlay upon our originally non-dual mind, with enlightenment the more primordial, more originary, mind-experience. This is why, says Suzuki, the enlightenment experience has the quality of a home-coming: “The will as actor is bent on going back to his own original abode where there was yet no dualism, and therefore peace prevailed.”[8]

What prevents our home-coming? Again, it is the dualistic nature of cognition: “As soon as cognition takes place there is Ignorance clinging to its very act. When we think we know something, there is something we do not know. The unknown is always behind the known, and we fail to get at this unknown knower, who is indeed the inevitable and necessary companion to every act of cognition.”[9]

Thus, cognition itself – subject-object cognition – has the effect of hiding us from ourselves. We become for ourselves the object of our own cognition and see ourselves as standing apart from a world that is other than us. In this way, the very act of cognition alienates us from ourselves. “Until we transcend this condition,” writes Suzuki, “there is no peace of mind, life grows unbearable.”[10]

It was the Buddha’s transcendence of such dualistic mind-activity that constituted his enlightenment: “In his search for the ‘builder’ [of our world experience], the Buddha was always accosted by Ignorance, an unknown knower behind the knowing. He could not for a long time lay his hands on this one in a black mask until he transcended the dualism of knower and known. This transcending was not an act of cognition, it was self-realization, it was a spiritual awakening and outside the ken of logical reasoning. . . The knowledge the knower has of himself, in himself – that is, as he is to himself – is unattainable by any proceedings of the intellect, which is not permitted to transcend its own condition. Ignorance is brought to subjection only by going beyond its principle."[11]

A well-known Zen koan captures the notion that enlightenment involves a return to an originary or primordial mode of consciousness. The Zen master asks the disciple: "What was your original face before you were born?" We may understand this "original face" to refer to our primordial state of consciousness prior to the division between subject and object.

Similarly, this understanding of enlightenment helps us grasp the meaning of the famous Zen koan mentioned earlier: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" We may understand 'two hands clapping' as a metaphor for the clamor the world makes due to the clash of subject and object, a clamor characteristic of our everyday experience. The 'one hand,' then, is our consciousness prior to this division. To hear 'the sound of one hand clapping,' thus, is to experience our originary consciousness prior to the division between self and other. This is the enlightenment experience itself.

Of course, to state this in words, as we are now doing, is not enlightenment, and, thus, not a true solution to the koans. We might well expect, then, that were we to submit this analysis to a Zen master we would be greeted with a loud "No!"

III. Nansen's Cat

What I would like to do now is consider the Zen enlightenment experience, as we have sketched it above, in the context of the story Suzuki tells of Nansen and the cat. This story is a well-known Zen 'mondo' – disciple-master dialogue – and is sometimes regarded as a koan in its own right. Suzuki presents it in a chapter entitled, "Practical Methods of Zen Instruction."

I will record it here in Suzuki's own words:

> When the ownership of a kitten was disputed between two parties of monks, the Master Nansen came out, took hold of the animal, and said to them, 'If you can say a word [of Zen], this will be saved: if not, it will be slain.' By 'a word,' of course, he meant one that transcended both affirmation and negation, as when Joshu was asked for 'one word of the ultimate truth.' No one made a response, whereupon Nansen slew the poor creature. Nansen looks like a hard-hearted Buddhist, but his point is: To say it *is* involves us in a dilemma; to say it *is not* puts us in the same predicament. To attain to the truth, this dualism must be avoided. How do you avoid it? It may not only be the loss of the life of a kitten, but the loss of your own life and soul, if you fail to ride over this *impasse*. Hence Nansen's drastic procedure.[12]

There are many questions we might raise with respect to this passage, but the one I would like to focus on is the most glaring one: In what way is the killing of a kitten consistent with the Zen enlightenment experience?

Clearly, Nansen kills the kitten in order to drive home some point to his disciples, although it is less than clear just exactly what the point is. Nor is it clear what sort of response Nansen was looking for from the monks. What would they have had to do to save the cat? In a follow-up to this story, we are told that later that evening, Joshu, Nansen's most advanced disciple, who was not among the monks at the time of the incident, was told of the incident by the master. Suzuki writes: "Joshu at once took off one of his straw sandals and putting it over his head began to depart. Upon this, said the master, 'What a pity you were not today with us, for you could have saved the kitten.'"[13]

From the standpoint of our ordinary understanding, Joshu's behavior seems simply absurd, and Nansen's response to it equally absurd. And there is some suggestion that the absurdity itself is part of the point; for in the Zen tradition such absurdity seems employed to express the creative freedom of the enlightened mind, which is not bound by ordinary norms of subject-object cognition or, for that matter, of social convention. If the monks had done some absurd thing in response to Nansen's challenge to them, would this have led him to spare the cat? Or is there some particular thing, or sort of thing, that they would have had to do? It's unclear.

But what is not unclear, what stands out in stark relief from all this Zen absurdity and obscurity, is a plain fact there seems to be no getting around: Nansen kills the cat.

And what strikes me as especially troublesome in all this – leading to the "koan" I began with – is that there seems to be no recognition, on the part of Master Nansen, on the part of Joshu, or, for that matter, on the part of D. T. Suzuki, that the cat has a reality unto itself that demands some consideration and respect in its own right.

In light of this, we might now ask: What *is* the cat from a Zen point of view? Is the cat to be regarded as a mere phenomenon in Nansen's mind that he should therefore feel free to do with as he likes, or is the cat to be regarded as a being unto itself, distinct from Nansen, that therefore demands consideration and respect?

What is the 'enlightened' answer to this question? Notice that if we assert that the cat is a being unto itself, this calls into question the legitimacy of the experience of non-duality that seems at the heart of Zen enlightenment, for the cat, understood as a being unto itself, is distinct from Nansen and cannot rightly be reduced to Nansen's mere experience of the cat as it appears within his own mind.

In other words, in order for Nansen to recognize the cat as a being unto itself, he must also recognize a distinction between himself and the cat, which is to say, a distinction between self and other. The being of the cat cannot be reduced to the *appearance* the cat makes in Nansen's direct experience. Nansen must acknowledge that there is that about his own direct experience that points him *beyond* his own direct experience, a beyond, indeed, that he cannot, even in principle, experience directly; in this case, the being of the cat.

This implies that there is a *duality* inherent to human experience that cannot and should not be undone, not if we are to live responsibly or even knowingly.

How might Nansen *know* that the cat is a being unto itself with an inner reality inaccessible to his own direct experience? Only through some form of subject-object cognition. Nansen would have to recognize that the world that appears to him in direct experience, what Kant calls the "phenomenal" world, is not coextensive with reality as such. He would have to recognize that the phenomenal world that appears to him subjectively is, at best, a window upon a reality that transcends his subjectivity; a world, further, that is not entirely accessible to his own consciousness and, thus, a world that he cannot simply be 'one' with, at least not in the sense presented by Suzuki.

Was it his failure to recognize this that allowed him to kill the cat without, apparently, any qualms? Does this suggest that there is something not quite right about the Zen experience of enlightenment?

We need to consider this carefully.

IV. Phenomenal Non-Dualism

To examine these questions, let us reflect upon a mode of non-dual experience that I am going to call 'phenomenal non-dualism.' Whether or not Zen non-dualism actually corresponds with phenomenal non-dualism is a question to be carefully considered. But in order to do so let us first look at some of the features of phenomenal non-dualism.

By ‘phenomenal non-dualism’ I refer to an experience of non-dualism that may result from connecting with that region of our own consciousness that is *prior* to the distinction we make between subject and object, self and other, I and not-I.

Those familiar with the phenomenological tradition in Western philosophy may notice that what I am here calling ‘phenomenal non-dualism’ bears a resemblance to what Edmund Husserl calls ‘transcendental subjectivity,’ which we can become aware of through engaging in what Husserl calls a ‘transcendental reduction.’ Husserl was not searching for mystical enlightenment when he sought to examine ‘transcendental subjectivity,’ rather he was seeking to understand the basis of cognition.

Transcendental subjectivity refers to the world *as* immediately present to, or *in*, one’s own conscious experience. One’s transcendental subjectivity, thus, includes what we ordinarily think of as both self and other. For instance, though I ordinarily take the desk I am looking at to be other than me, I can nevertheless recognize that the desk, to the extent that it appears to my looking, appears *within* my own consciousness, a consciousness I associate with myself. Thus, though I may cognitively recognize the desk to be other than me, in order for me to do so I must engage in a cognitive act through which I tell myself that the desk as it appears in my consciousness, the *phenomenal* desk, refers to a desk that exists apart from my consciousness. Apart from this cognitive act, I would not understand the desk as *other*.

The ordinary person performs such acts automatically; it is basic to our subject-object experience of the world. Husserl developed what he called the ‘transcendental reduction’ in order to have us attend to our original subjective experience, prior to the cognitive acts through which we divide self from other. "Transcendental reduction," writes Husserl, "restricts me to the stream of my pure conscious processes and the unities constituted by their actualities and potentialities. And it seems obvious that such unities are inseparable from my ego and therefore belong to its concreteness itself."[14] Again, Husserl engaged in the ‘reduction,’ not in order to achieve enlightenment, but as a procedure for examining human cognition.

And there is a profound difference between Husserl’s transcendental reduction and what we may surmise to be the experience of Zen enlightenment. For Husserl, the transcendental reduction is a deliberate act through which we quite consciously and intentionally ‘bracket’ our ordinary self-other understanding of the world, whereas the Zen experience is not one of bracketing ordinary understanding but of somehow getting beneath it to a more primordial and – according to Zen anyway – more authentic self-awareness.

Nevertheless, in both cases we become aware that what ordinary consciousness generally takes to be ‘other’ appears, first of all and immediately, as a feature of our own consciousness, our own subjectivity. This experience of the world, and of what we generally take to be ‘other’ in the world, as immediately present to our own consciousness is what I am calling ‘phenomenal non-dualism.’

Is such phenomenal non-dualism the same as Zen non-dualism? It certainly seems to bear a resemblance to it. When Suzuki writes that Zen non-dualism involves experiencing the world without the mediation of subject-object cognition, what else can he mean than experiencing it as it appears immediately to consciousness, unfiltered by the cognitive acts that split self from other?

It might be noted, though, that even phenomenal non-dualism is not *altogether* non-cognitive. Suzuki writes, “Spiritually a state of perfect freedom is obtained only when all our egoistic thoughts are not read into life and the world is accepted as it is, as a mirror reflects a flower as flower and the moon as moon."[15] But actually a mirror doesn't reflect a flower *as* a flower; it reflects it as a colored shape. To see a flower *as* a flower is to see it as falling within a conceptual category, the category of 'flower.' This is true of anything we might see and understand. To see a desk *as* a desk, a chair *as* a chair, a pen *as* a pen, is to understand what appears to immediate sensation in terms of cognitive categories. A person who did not, or could not, apply such cognitive categories to immediate sensation would not be able to get by in the world at all. Such an entirely non-cognitive experience of the world would be more akin to Alzheimer's disease than to enlightenment.

The Zen proponent might well respond that Zen enlightenment is not a condition of ignorance with respect to cognitive categories but of freedom with respect to them. The Zen master understands as well as anyone else that flowers are seen as flowers because they fall within the cognitive category we call 'flower,' but recognizes that our cognitive understanding of the flower *as* a flower is the result of a contingent act of cognition that we are not bound by. We might think of it as anything we like, or not think of it as anything at all. Indeed, this freedom with respect to cognition might explain the apparent 'absurdism' that seems to characterize so much Zen discourse.

But is it indeed the case that the truly enlightened person can, without error, make anything that he or she likes of whatever appears in his or her direct experience?

In particular, can Nansen, without error, make anything he likes of the cat?

A philosophy of phenomenal non-dualism would suggest that he can. If I understand the being of everything I encounter to be identical to the phenomenal appearance of that thing in my own direct experience, if I acknowledge no distinction to be made between me and a world that is *other* than me, then this seems to imply that I may rightly feel free to behave in whatever way I like with respect to the things I encounter.

But is this enlightenment or narcissism?

Surely, we want to say that the cat is a being unto itself. Surely, its being cannot rightly be reduced to the way it appears in Nansen's (or anyone else's) experience of it. In order for Nansen to be properly cognizant of the cat, in order for him to be 'enlightened' with respect to the cat, he must acknowledge this, i.e., he must acknowledge a duality, a division, between himself and the cat.

Thus, no truly enlightened person could suppose reality to be non-dual at the phenomenal level. Might it nevertheless be non-dual at another level, say a metaphysical or ontological level? Yes, and we will consider this as we proceed. But Nansen cannot, without delusion, suppose that both he and the cat, as each appear in his own experience, are simply 'one.'

But now we must consider more closely whether the Zen experience of non-dualism is indeed the same as what we are calling phenomenal non-dualism. This is the next question for us to take up.

V. Zen Non-Dualism

Is the Zen experience of non-dualism equivalent to what we are calling 'phenomenal non-dualism'? Perhaps it is not. Perhaps it is non-dualism of another sort. If so, then what sort of non-dualism is it?

A review of Zen literature yields a somewhat ambiguous answer to this question. In an article entitled, "Who Is Arguing About the Cat?: Moral Action and Enlightenment According to Dogen," Douglas Mikkelson provides an account of Dogen's commentary on the story of Nansen and the cat.[16] Dogen was the founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism and lived from 1200 to 1253. I think it will be helpful to take a close look at Mikkelson's presentation of Dogen's commentary.

As Mikkelson presents it, Dogen distinguishes between:

> three kinds of mental activities: thinking, not-thinking, and without-thinking. What is meant by the first two terms are processes familiar to all of us. We can certainly think about a cat – analyze it, worry over it, decide whether or not to kill it, and so forth. We can also not think about the cat or, for that matter, anything at all; that is, we can stop the thinking process altogether. Beyond the dichotomy of thinking and not-thinking, however, can be found without-thinking.
>
> Actually, it would be more accurate to describe without-thinking as before thinking and not-thinking. . . Without-thinking encapsulates what is meant by the pre-reflective experiences of life. We might, for example, suddenly find ourselves looking at a cat. In this initial moment of without-thinking, there is only the *experience-of-looking-at-the-cat*. Only subsequent to this moment does the mental act of thinking set in, wherein there emerges the sense of a subject (oneself, or one's self) looking at an object (a cat). Thus without-thinking is a mental process prior to this emergence of self and other in everyday life. . . From without-thinking, we see things 'as they really are.'[17] (my emphasis)

What Mikkelson here calls "without-thinking" certainly sounds a good deal like what we have been calling phenomenal non-dualism: the identification of the being of things with how they appear in our "pre-reflective" consciousness, prior to the division of subject and object. It is only through such an identification that we can equate the cat "as it really is" with the "experience-of-looking-at-the-cat."

To further develop this point, Mikkelson quotes a line from Dogen's *Shobogenzo*:

> To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.[18]

And comments:

> 'Being enlightened by all things' expresses the mental activity of without-thinking wherein the 'self' (and also 'other') is 'forgotten,' because awareness of such distinctions is not present. . . From without-thinking flows the only identifiable 'reality,' namely the

> unceasing, ever-changing, impermanent unfolding of experience. From without-thinking/enlightenment, therefore, we see things as they really are.[19]

Again, what is described here sounds very much like what we have been calling ‘phenomenal non-dualism,’ where “the only identifiable reality” is the “unfolding of [one’s own] experience.”

According to Mikkelson, Dogen takes it for granted that one who experiences the world in this way will spontaneously manifest the compassion considered a central virtue within Mahayana Buddhism. Of course, the Nansen story calls this into question. Dogen’s response is to suggest that perhaps Nansen’s enlightenment was less than complete. Mikkelson writes: “Even as [Dogen] acknowledges this enlightenment, he challenges its depth of attainment. In Dogen's mind, releasing the cat would have revealed a spiritual progress superior to Nan-chu’an’s [Nansen’s].”[20]

But it seems to me there is a more fundamental problem with the idea of “without-thinking” than can be resolved by simply suggesting that Nansen’s enlightenment was less than perfect. The cat is a being unto itself and cannot properly be reduced to the way it appears in Nansen’s, or anyone else’s, consciousness, regardless of how compassionate or uncompassionate that person may be. And it may well be that it is only through some mode of *thinking*, some cognitive *act*, that we can fully recognize this.

Indeed, there is a strange ambiguity in Dogen’s suggestion that Nansen, had he only been more enlightened, would have shown more regard for the cat. What need would there be to show regard for the cat unless the cat were a being unto itself and not a mere appearance within Nansen’s “unfolding experience”? In other words, the very fact that Dogen thinks Nansen should have shown more regard for the cat indicates that, on some level anyway, Dogen recognizes that the cat “as it really is” is *not* equivalent to Nansen’s “experience-of-looking-at-the-cat.”

VI. Agapic Non-Dualism

Perhaps, though, we can follow Dogen's very ambiguity into a more robust, and more coherent, understanding of the experience of non-duality.

To aid us in this, let us look at yet another Zen dialogue presented by Suzuki, that between Yejaku and Yenen:

> Yejaku asked Yenen, 'What is your name?' and Yenen replied, 'My name is Yejaku.' Yejaku protested, 'Yejaku is *my* name.' Thereupon said Yenen, 'My name is Yenen,' which brought out a hearty laugh from Yejaku.[21]

Suzuki comments:

> These dialogues remind one of the famous Hindu saying, '*Tat tvam asi*!' [Thou art That!], but the difference between this and 'My name is Yejaku' is that between Vedanta philosophy and Zen Buddhism, or that between Indian idealism and Chinese realism or practicalness. The latter does not generalize, nor does it speculate on a higher plane which has no hold on life as we live it.[22]

The problem with this comment, however, is that it may be only on this "higher plane" that non-dualism can legitimately be affirmed or, for that matter, experienced. On the plane of practical living, Yenen is not Yejaku and Yejaku is not Yenen (just as the cat is not Nansen); for them to suppose that each is the other from a *practical* point of view is not enlightenment but confusion.

What I would like to suggest in the following is that enlightenment involves an elevation of consciousness to a "higher plane," not a reduction of consciousness to a non-cognitive plane, despite the fact that it is often misrepresented in this way in Zen literature.

How might such "higher plane" non-dualism be experienced? To distinguish it from what we have been calling 'phenomenal non-dualism,' I will refer to it as 'agapic non-dualism.' Agape is the Christian term for divine love. Agapic non-dualism is a non-dualism rooted in an experience of divine love.

What might such an experience be like?

In his book, *Love, Power, and Justice*, Paul Tillich writes, “Love. . . drives everything that is towards everything else that is. . . Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated.”[23] Tillich’s ontology posits a primal Unity that gives rise to, but is also distinguishable from, our existence as distinct beings. At the individual level we know ourselves to be separate from one another: Nansen is not the cat and the cat is not Nansen. But, for the spiritually realized person, each separate thing is experienced as rooted in a more primordial unity and bound together in the spirit of divine love.

Dante expresses something of this in the vision of God he relates toward the end of the *Paradiso:*

> O grace abounding, through which I presumed
> to set my eyes on the Eternal Light
> so long that I spent all my sight on it!
>
> In its profundity I saw – ingathered
> and bound by love into one single volume –
> what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered.[24]

The question to consider is whether this conception of a reality united in agapic love can be anything more than a *mere* conception (or poetic exclamation). Is there a way to immediately *experience* it in a manner analogous to the Zen experience of enlightenment? Surely one of the great appeals of Zen is its promise to bring us into a direct experience of non-duality, rather than a mere intellectual or even devotional appreciation *for* it.

Suzuki writes:

> An appeal to the analytical understanding is never sufficient to comprehend thoroughly the inwardness of a truth, especially when it is a religious one. . . We must experience in our innermost consciousness all that is implied in a doctrine when we are able not only to understand it but to put it in practice. There will then be no discrepancy between knowledge and life. The Buddha knew this very well, and he endeavored to produce knowledge out of meditation; that is, to make wisdom grow from personal, spiritual, experience.[25]

What is the personal, spiritual, *experience* of agapic non-duality?

To reflect upon this, it will be helpful to consider a question we have not yet asked, but one basic to the issues we have been examining: *Why* do we seek non-duality in the first place? What is it about ‘duality’ that should make us wish to overcome it?

VII. Duality and Non-Duality

We can approach an answer to this question, I believe, by reflecting on the anxiety inherent to our individualized (separate) existence. Individualization presents us with an existential dilemma, for the individual is divided from the objective world while being, at the same time, dependent on it. We experience this objective world as both separated and separable from us. At the extreme, such separation is death. The threat of death looms before us with the force of inevitability. The desire for non-duality, then, is the desire to overcome this threat, to unite with that upon which we ontologically depend, both for our basic sustenance and our ultimate well-being.

We see a symbolic expression of this in the Garden of Eden story. Eden represents the realm of non-duality, prior to the division between “good and evil,” prior to the dread of death, where Adam and Eve are able to eat directly from the Tree of Life and live in unconflicted innocence, “naked and unashamed” (Gn. 2:25). When this is disrupted, Adam and Eve are ejected from Eden. Now they must struggle “by the sweat of their brow” to sustain themselves in an inhospitable world, a world that has become “other,” and are doomed to the inevitability of death. They now live in a world that is divided from them. They have been exiled – separated – from their ontological home.

Some modern psychologists associate this nostalgia for an ideal home with a desire for return to the womb. The womblike experience of the fetus must be one in which there is no division between subject and object. All the fetus’ needs are taken care of immediately, with no effort, no struggle, no need to reach out beyond itself or distinguish itself from its environs. Even were the fetus intellectually capable of distinguishing between subject and object, it would have no need to. In the womb all is ‘one.’ It must be a rude awakening indeed when this peaceful condition is shattered at the moment of birth.

It might be supposed by some, then, that our desire for non-duality is really a desire for return to the womb. But this would be to put things backward. Rather, it is our idealization of the womb that is a desire for non-duality. Were there no ontological desire for non-duality, the womb itself would have no appeal.

At the root of this desire for non-duality, then, is the desire to overcome the vulnerabilities of our individualized existence. We want to be united with that upon which we ultimately depend. Our vulnerability divides the world between that which is beneficial (“good”) and that which is harmful (“evil”). This duality, between the beneficial and harmful, is, I believe, the fundamental duality. All other dualities are echoes or reflections of this one.

Of course, there are an almost limitless number of ways in which things can be beneficial or harmful. A beautiful painting is beneficial in that it gratifies our aesthetic sensibilities. A satisfying meal is beneficial in a different way. An insult is harmful in that it can erode our self-confidence and sense of social standing. A tornado is harmful in a different way. If we look carefully into the ways things are meaningful for us, we find that their meanings refer, almost always, to the many varied ways in which they may benefit or harm.

In this respect, there is some rather bad news. Finite life, by its very nature, is subject to deterioration, decay, and annihilation. This finds one of its most striking expressions in the Buddhist legend that the young Siddhartha Gautama – destined to become the Buddha – began his spiritual quest in response to his shock at seeing an old man, a sick man, and a corpse. That which is born is naturally subject to deterioration and death. In Buddhism, this is referred to as the 'cycle of birth and death' (samsara). Given this, the underlying valence of finite life appears negative; the harmful is fated to overwhelm and defeat the beneficial.

Thus, the first of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths is: Life is "dukkha." 'Dukkha' is generally translated 'suffering,' but it means something more nuanced and basic. Life as it is ordinarily lived is an incessant struggle to secure what cannot finally be secured. An image Buddhism provides for this is that of a burning house. It is like we are trapped in a house that is burning to the ground and cannot escape. Our frenzied efforts to escape create greed, violence, despair, egoism, rage, lust for power, lust for sex, war, drug addiction, hatred, etc. All this, however, just adds more fuel to the flame; just adds to the dukkha.

At the root of dukkha, says the Second Noble Truth, is tanha, generally translated 'desire,' although, again, it means something more nuanced and basic. It is not desire as such that is the problem, but the conflict between what life desires and what the finite world is able to provide. Given the cycle of samsara, given the decay to which finite life is inevitably subject, our worldly desires are destined for frustration and defeat. It is just in this sense that desire is the root of dukkha. This dukkha-tanha complex is the 'burning house.'

Buddha is said to have found a way out of this burning house. Or, to state it more aptly, he discovered that the burning house is itself an illusion; there never was a burning house. Our sense of being trapped in a burning house is like a bad dream from which we must wake up.

What we must wake up *to* is the realization that our lives are not inherently tied to the cycle of birth and death – samsara. If we understand *birth* to signify all that ‘gives life’ (is beneficial) and *death* to signify all that deprives of life (is harmful), then we might put it this way: life in its fundamental nature is not tied to the duality of beneficial/harmful.

To realize this, not just intellectually but viscerally, is liberation from the cycle of birth and death: Enlightenment.

If we now ask *how it is* that life, in its fundamental nature, is not tied to the cycle of birth and death, we must enter into a speculative metaphysics that Buddhism, and especially Zen Buddhism, generally tries to avoid.

Nevertheless, it will be helpful for us to say something about it.

VIII. The Finite and the Eternal

Where does life itself come from? What grants us life? If we confine ourselves to what we can observe, we see that every child’s life comes from its parents. The fetus grows from a combination of the mother’s egg and the father’s sperm. In this respect, the life of the fetus is a continuation of the life of the parents. But this puts it too simply. In order for the child to grow it must eat and breathe, it must be sheltered and nurtured. The child requires food, which requires the sun and earth, the rain and air, which each arose (according to modern science) from the ‘big bang.’ In other words, every individual thing is part of the greater whole and, in some sense, made up of the greater whole. This leads to the Buddhist doctrine of *no-self*, which might be better rendered *no-isolate-self*. Nothing exists as an entirely separate, isolate, independent entity. Everything is related to everything, a part of everything, indeed, composed, in some sense, of everything.

Though each individual thing comes and goes (is born and dies), the whole of which everything is a part, and of which everything is composed, does *not* come and go. Thus, our lives, which we take to be subject to birth and death, are individualized instances of the *whole* of life, which is *not* subject to birth and death.

Expressed just this way, this is a mere metaphysical observation. The Buddha's discovery was that we can come to *know* this inwardly, come to experience our essential unity with the Whole beyond birth and death. To experience this is to 'wake up' to our true nature. This awakening liberates us from the dukkha-tanha complex.

But how does it liberate us? Are we not still subject to the duality of beneficial/harmful? Will we not still grow old, get sick, and die?

Much now depends on what we understand by 'we.'

If we step back and look at the 'big picture' we see that it is of the nature of the Whole to break up into contingent individuals, and then the nature of the individuals to desire reconnection with the Whole, through which they are sustained.

It was the Buddha's discovery – in many ways a discovery that lies at the core of all the world's great religions – that the individual can come to know itself as *united with* the Whole. This does not eliminate desire (as is sometimes said) but recontextualizes it. We no longer see ourselves as trapped in ourselves. We see ourselves as rooted in the self-sustaining Whole. As individuals, we will still grow old, get sick, and die. But we experience our deeper selves as rooted in the self-sustaining Whole that does not grow old, get sick, and die. At the deepest level, then, we are no longer enchained to the cycle of birth and death.

We see this basic insight expressed – in a variety of formulations – in all the great world religions.

At the core of Judaism is the Sh'ma: "Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-9). God is the eternal *One* out of which arises the contingent many. The many – the individuals – achieve their highest good through uniting with (loving) the One. Of course, implicit in this command is the revelation that it is *possible* to "love God with all your heart, soul, and might." In other words, there is already within us that which can come to *know* our rootedness in the eternal. The Torah makes this explicit:

> For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult to you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say, "Who will cross the sea for us to get it and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. (Deut. 30:11-14)

Jesus, in turn, speaks of the Sh'ma as the "greatest" of the commandments and supplements it with a commandment he says is "like" it, the commandment to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22: 36-40). In what way is the second command like the first? We learn this in the first epistle of John: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1Jn. 4: 7-8). To love God *is* to love your neighbor as yourself, for God is not an individual being apart from other beings, rather God is the font – the life – of *all* beings. God is the One from which the many emerge, and, as such, God's self-love is universal love. This is agapic love. To be united with God is to be united with the universal love that *is* God.

What all the great religions teach is that life, in its fundamental nature, is inexhaustible and eternal, and that our individual lives are rooted in this inexhaustible life. Since life desires life, we desire the furtherance of our individual lives. But this desire becomes a problem when we lose sight of our provenance in the eternal. Then our desire for life becomes desperate, and this desperation manifests itself in a great host of self-destructive and other-destructive attitudes and behaviors: Dukkha.

What is needed is a shift in our existential orientation, our basic sense of self. Such a shift is possible because our finite life is *already* a 'spark' of eternal life; we just don't *know* it.

Through this shift in orientation we transcend our anxious bondage to the opposition between beneficial and harmful. Such transcendence is reflected in the words of a psalm often recited at Jewish and Christian funerals: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord." The divine life is the source of "giving" (birth) and "taking away" (death), but stands beyond them. We transcend the duality of birth and death as we come to know ourselves as united with the Lord who stands beyond them.

To come to *know* this, not as an abstract possibility but in one's 'heart of hearts,' is what I am calling agapic non-duality. To come to an experience of it, is to come 'home.'

In light of this, we can see the appeal of what we have called 'phenomenal non-dualism.' It seems to resolve the duality presented to us in ordinary experience. But if it is to escape the problems we have already cited, it must be embedded within, and qualified by, a higher-order non-dualism. Let us now consider what this higher-order non-dualism – 'agapic non-dualism' – might be like *experientially*.

IX. Agapic Enlightenment

The agapic mystic experiences herself – along with the objective world revealed to her – as rooted in a transcendental Oneness (e.g., God, Brahman, Tao, etc.), a Oneness understood and experienced as the ontological power underlying and supporting her own self-world (phenomenal) experience.

In his commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita*, S. Radhakrishnan writes, "The Lord abides in the heart of every creature and when the veil of that secret sanctuary is withdrawn, we hear the Divine voice, receive the Divine light, act in the Divine power. The embodied human consciousness is uplifted into the unborn eternal."[26]

Radhakrishnan is here pointing to what the Buddha is said to have experienced in the moment of his 'awakening': that enlightenment is already within us, inherent to our basic constitution, our "Buddha-nature." But we must 'wake up' to it.

And yet this experience of the Oneness of all things is *not* an experience of the identity of all things. Each thing remains itself, distinct from others. The cat is not Nansen and Nansen is not the cat; Yenen is not Yejaku and Yejaku is not Yenen. The Unity exists on a "higher plane" (or perhaps better, a more fundamental plane) than the separateness; it does not eclipse it.

The agapic mystic, we may imagine, experiences both the Oneness and the multiplicity together, in something like the way we can look at a painting and see it as a whole while, at the same time, recognizing its distinguishable elements. Our ability to recognize the separate elements does not interfere with our experience of the painting as 'one.' We are able to step back and regard the painting in a single vision, a unifying perspective. In the case of a painting, this unifying perspective is an aesthetic one. For the agapic mystic, this unifying perspective is the spirit of agapic love itself, which Radhakrishnan calls 'the Divine.'

We might think of this by analogy with white light and the colors of the spectrum. We know that white light, when it passes through a prism, will break up into a multitude of colors. But, though we know that all the separate colors have their origin and unity in white light, we would be terribly confused if we supposed that yellow light were blue or green light red.

I suggest that the mystic is able to enter into a state in which she experiences the white light as such, an experience of unity with the divine. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart expresses something of this when he writes: "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one eye, and one seeing, and one knowing, and one love."[27]

Upon coming out of this unitive state and looking out upon the manifest phenomenal world – the 'colors' – the mystic recognizes these colors to have arisen from and be rooted in the white light. Indeed, Eckhart's quote suggests that the spiritually realized person can have both of these experiences at once, superimposed, so to speak, upon one another, such that on one level she retains something of the unitive experience of the white light, while on another she is aware of the distinct colors emerging from this white light.

However, she would also understand that at the level of the colors – the phenomenal level – she is neither able to see *all* the colors nor all of what the colors are, for at this level, she recognizes that she herself is just one of the colors. Thus, though she would experience an intimate belonging with everything and everyone she encounters – a belonging *with* others that is rooted in a belonging *to* the One – she would not make the mistake of confusing her phenomenal self with others or with the One. At the phenomenal level, she would recognize a distinction between each individual *as* individual.

In light of this, we might identify three distinct *dimensions* to the experience of agapic non-dualism: a *unitive*, a *communal*, and a *conceptual* dimension.

At the *unitive* level, the mystic experiences the Oneness of the divine as such. We might well imagine this to be something of a womblike experience, in which, at its height, one is no longer aware of a distinction between subject and object, but not because one identifies object with subject (as in phenomenal non-dualism) but because the unitive experience is an experience of absorption, in which there is no longer a sense of a separate self at all.

But even the most spiritually realized do not remain in this state of absorption. The mystic returns to an experience of herself as a separate self, to the phenomenal reality of subject and object. This is what we might think of as the 'communal level' of non-dual experience.

At the *communal* level, the mystic experiences – not an absolute union – but a *communion* of subject and object, self and other. At this level, the experience of non-duality finds its expression in compassion, loving-kindness, appreciation for beauty and harmony. The mystic is aware that both she and the world presented to her as 'object' arise from the same ultimate source. This is the level, then, of "loving one's neighbor as oneself," of seeing the divine as "all in all." Still, she does not suppose her neighbor to *be* herself, and does not suppose that her "experience-of-looking-at-her-neighbor" constitutes what her neighbor "really is." She is aware of her neighbor as a separate self who must be respected in her own right, we might even say consummately aware of this.

And just because she is aware that the world as it appears phenomenally is *not* the world as it is in itself, such non-duality will find expression in a *conceptual* (or rational) endeavor to understand the world. At the rational level, we strive to understand things in terms of what they are in themselves – i.e., in terms of their *own* ontological organization and constitution – rather than merely responding to them "without-thought" as they may appear to us in phenomenal experience. We strive to understand in order to better connect with the Whole *through* cognition, and because such understanding is necessary for creating the loving community – the community ordered to principles of love and justice – to the benefit of all.

This is the level at which we do theology, philosophy, science, etc. – the level, indeed, at which an essay such as this is written.

All these levels – including the rational and conceptual – have a place within a robust experience of, and commitment to, non-dualism. And so we must take issue with Suzuki's suggestion that it is intellection *as such* that deprives us of enlightenment. The problem is not intellection as such, but a certain 'egoic' distortion of intellection.

We might note, in passing, that these three dimensions of non-dual experience bear some relation to the Christian Trinity – where the Father corresponds with the unitive, the Holy Spirit with the communal, and the Logos with the conceptual dimensions of non-dual Oneness.

X. Zen Non-Dualism Redux

We might now ask whether the Zen experience of non-dualism is more akin to the phenomenal non-dualism we discussed in section IV, or the agapic non-dualism sketched out above. The answer may not be a simple this or that – and it may be that not all Zen 'enlightenments' are the same.

Let's recall Mikkelson's discussion of "without-thinking": "Without-thinking encapsulates what is meant by the pre-reflective experiences of life. We might, for example, suddenly find ourselves looking at a cat. In this initial moment of without-thinking, there is only the experience-of-looking-at-the-cat."

The Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, makes a similar point in his book, *Understanding the Mind*: "The realm of things-in-themselves is reality as-it-is without being distorted by our ideation and mental construction. Before ideation, before the mind begins to construct, the mind touches the ultimate dimension, the realm of suchness."[28]

And as we have seen, Suzuki says quite similar things. Indeed, it is a common theme in Zen writing that intellection, conceptuality, "ideation," prevents us from seeing things "as they really are" in their "suchness." If we could only approach our experiences "without-thinking," we are told, we would be able to see things in their 'truth.'

But this just doesn't seem right. As said previously, to see the world altogether without "ideation" would be more akin to Alzheimer's disease than to enlightenment. In fact, just a few pages after the remarks quoted above, Hanh writes, "If we learn the Buddhist method of looking deeply, using the meditation on impermanence, nonself, and interbeing or emptiness, we begin to get away from this [false] way of thinking and we have a chance to touch suchness."[29]

But "impermanence, nonself, and interbeing or emptiness" are themselves conceptual modes of understanding the world, modes of "ideation." To see the world in these terms is not to see it without ideation, or "without-thinking," but to see it in the context of one set of concepts as opposed to others.

Indeed, Hanh writes: “If we look deeply enough into the teapot, we will see that it contains many phenomena – earth, water, fire, air, space, time – make this teapot. That is the interdependent nature of the teapot. A flower is made up of many non-flower elements, such as clouds, soil, and sunshine. Without clouds and earth, there could be no flower. This is interbeing. The one is the result of the all. What makes the all possible is the one.”[30]

But actually, we cannot *see* that the teapot is made of “earth, water, fire, air, space, time,” nor can we *see* that the flower is made up of “clouds, soil, and sunshine.” And we certainly can’t simply *see* the general principle that “the one is the result of the all.” We can only *know* these things, to the extent that we can, through a process of analytical, inferential, reasoning. Indeed, Hanh makes this explicit himself, in another passage: “Using the keys of impermanence and nonself, we can open the door of reality and see that the cloud does not lie outside the rose, nor does the rose lie outside the cloud. If there is no cloud, there is no rain; if there is no rain, there is no water; if there is no water, there is no rose. As the rose decomposes, the water in it evaporates and returns to the cloud. Looking deeply this way, our concepts about boundaries disappear and we can see the cloud in the rose, the rose in the cloud.”[31]

But clearly, what Hanh is here calling “looking deeply” involves a good deal of analytical, inferential reasoning. How do we know that water from the decomposing rose “evaporates and returns to the cloud”? Certainly not simply by observing the rose’s decomposition as it appears to us phenomenally. To understand how the decomposing rose helps feed the clouds requires a great deal of sophisticated, analytical, thinking about water and clouds and evaporation and how they are related.

And yet, in another place Hanh writes, “When we look at a flower directly, without thinking or memories, without comparing it, whether positively or negatively, to another flower we saw a week or a year ago, we reach the realm of the flower-in-itself.”[32]

But we could not possibly know that the flower is “made up” of “clouds, soil, and sunshine” merely by looking at it “without thinking or memories.” To see the flower “without thinking or memories” would be to see it as a mere colored shape. This would not at all be to see the “flower-in-itself” – certainly not if we mean by the “flower-in-itself” the flower as made up of “clouds, soil, and sunshine.”

So, what are we to make of this? There seems a basic incoherence in the way Zen is being presented. On the one hand, we are told that enlightenment requires “looking deeply” (mindfulness), through which we come to recognize the “interbeing” (dependent origination) of things. This clearly requires analytical reasoning, as we have seen. On the other hand, we are told that enlightenment entails looking at the world *without* analytical reasoning, without “thinking or memories.”

We are left to conclude that either Zen itself is altogether confused, or that there is indeed a valid experience underlying these rather confused presentations, but that it is not being expressed, and perhaps not being understood, in quite the best way. My tendency is to believe the latter.

XI. Suchness

To help get to the bottom of this, let us look at yet another example of “direct perception” provided by Hanh: “When perception is direct, with no discursive mentation, you reach the realm of things-in-themselves. All of us have had this kind of experience. Suppose you are deeply contemplating a beautiful, snow-covered mountain. You don't feel separate from the mountain. You are one with it in your enjoyment of it. You are the mountain, and the mountain is you. There is no subject or object. . . When we see in this way, we are in the realm of suchness."[33]

What is going on in such "peak" experiences? Or perhaps we should ask: What is *not* going on? For a moment one "forgets oneself"; one's anxious self-awareness dissolves and one allows oneself to get "lost" in the splendor of the scene. For a moment one is transported beyond the distractions of one's all but constant defensive-protective self-concern. But such an experience is not without ideation. One still understands that the mountain is a mountain and not a mere colored shape in one's visual field. Indeed, one would not be swept away by the grandeur of the mountain if one did not understand this. But one is no longer seeing through the eyes of self-interested calculation. One is no longer opposing the *object*, the mountain, to the *subject*, the self, in order to determine the extent to which the object is a benefit or a threat to the subject. Hence, our *defensive* cognition relaxes and subject and object seem to conjoin in a moment of ecstatic unity.

In other words, what has taken place here is what we might call a *motivational* shift, not a shift from thinking to "without-thinking." The enlightened person is looking at the mountain with a different *motivation* than the unenlightened person. The unenlightened person looks at the mountain, and the world, in the context of a basic project – the project of *securing* his or her existential standing in the world. From the standpoint of this project, the mountain, and indeed the world, is seen merely as a means to this end, and hence not really seen *in themselves* at all. The enlightened person, on the other hand, is able to see the mountain 'in-itself,' 'as such,' i.e., in its 'suchness.'

If we wish a glimpse into the character of enlightenment, then, we need to consider carefully the nature of this motivational shift. Ignorance of our true ontological situation gives rise to the dukkha-tanha complex. We are propelled by our ignorance to pursue existential self-reliance, but this is a futile pursuit. The very futility of it leads to a great host of self-destructive and other-destructive attitudes and behaviors. We are driven to control others and the world in our effort to establish ourselves as our own ontological basis. When this fails, we fall into despair. Thus, this "futile passion" (as the existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre calls it) is responsible for a great deal of the misery we suffer in ordinary life; "dukkha."

Enlightenment entails a fundamental shift from existential *self*-reliance to what I will call (with some hesitation) existential *God*-reliance; where by "God' I mean the ultimate power of being that gives rise to all that is, self *and* other.

I hesitate because Buddhism avoids the word "God." Buddha's discovery was that what we are here calling "God-reliance" is an inherent potentiality of human life itself, a potentiality realized once the project of self-reliance is dropped. There is no need to think explicitly of "God," and, indeed, the *idea* of God can, and often does, get in the way.

This dropping of the project of existential self-reliance is understood in Buddhism as the elimination of 'tanha,' generally translated 'desire.' Such elimination is called 'nirvana,' which literally means 'blown out.' In nirvana, the 'flame' of tanha (which has been burning down the house) is blown out.

But actually, we might better think of enlightenment as a *liberation* of desire than an elimination of it. It is not that we cease to desire. It is that our desire ceases to be self-involved and desperate. The Bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings is, of course, the expression of a desire. But it is no longer a desperate, self-involved, desire. It is now a desire in sympathy with *all* desire; a desire for the wellness of all. This is, so to speak, *divine* desire. Divine desire is desire for the good of all. In other words, it is love (*agape*).

XII. Zen Enlightenment

Once we recognize this, we are able to put many of the disparate pieces of the various accounts of Zen enlightenment together.

We can see that the doctrines of interbeing (dependent origination), impermanence (*anicca*), and non-self (*anatta*), serve a strategic purpose. They are to help us recognize that we are not ontologically independent beings; that we exist as part of the greater whole. This recognition can foster the motivational shift required for enlightenment. In itself, it will not force this shift, but it provides a framework that can support it. This framework is itself a mode of "mentation," realized through the discursive intellect. So it is not mentation *as such* that is problematic, but a certain mode of mentation. Indeed, Hanh himself recognizes this: "Even the discursive, intellectual function of our mind can help us approach the ultimate dimension, if we use it to practice mindfulness."[34] Of course, this would not be true, *could not be true*, if discursive intellectual thinking were *itself* the thing that prevents us from approaching the "ultimate dimension."

But we can also see how this motivational shift can help *calm* the intellectual mind. The unenlightened mind is engaged in a constant, frenzied, effort to figure out how to save itself, even when we are not explicitly aware of it. It is a program running constantly in the background of our psyche – a constant hum of anxiety so familiar we take it for granted. As we've said, it is a futile project, but this futility only makes the frenzy more desperate. Once the shift is made, the intellect can calm down. This allows us – finally – to relax in the moment; to "just look" at the mountains and the sky and the flowers and the teapots. There is a peaceful joy that comes of this. This seems to be what the Zen writers are referring to when they speak of approaching things "without-thinking." But this is not so much an elimination of thought as a *relaxation* of thought; a relaxation made possible by a shift in what motivates our thinking in the first place.

We find confirmation for this understanding of enlightenment in one of the most iconic of Zen stories:

A monk asks the Zen master, Joshu, "How do I achieve enlightenment?" Joshu says, "Have you eaten your breakfast?" The monk replies, "Yes, I have." Joshu says, "Then go wash your bowl."

The point of the story is that the monk's anxious striving after enlightenment is itself a barrier to enlightenment. The great Zen irony is that salvation comes from realizing that you don't need to be saved. There is nothing to *do*, just to undo. We are already, indissolubly, part of the whole, we just don't know it. We come to know it, not by learning something new, but by dropping our frenetic endeavor to save ourselves. But, of course, this is far more easily said than done; to really achieve it requires a revolution in our basic sense of self and our fundamental existential motivations, which are both largely unconscious. So in another sense there *is* something to do. We must do the undoing. We can find this paradox expressed again and again throughout the Zen tradition.

And finally, we can understand how this motivational shift yields an experience of 'oneness,' of 'non-duality.' The unenlightened person experiences the world as a battleground between the I and the not-I. The I needs to secure itself. In order to do so, it must control the not-I, both to ward off threats from the not-I and to satisfy its needs through the not-I. It is this futile project that creates for the I, the ego, an experience of anxious 'duality.' When the shift to enlightenment occurs, this sense of duality dissolves. It is not that one can no longer distinguish between self and other. It is that one no longer feels under siege by 'otherness.' One now feels bonded with everything else. One's basic experience of the world shifts from duality to unity. One has stepped off the samsaric treadmill. One experiences what St. Paul calls, "the peace beyond all understanding."

What we find in the Zen tradition are a lot of playful expressions of this sense of joyful 'oneness.' Yenen and Yejaku call each other by one another's names. It is enlightened play; a joyful celebration of their liberation from the life of self-other embattlement.

Our conclusion is that Zen enlightenment, Zen non-dualism, is indeed a variation on agapic non-dualism, although it is too frequently mischaracterized, often by Zen proponents themselves, as a version of what we have called phenomenal non-dualism.

XIII. The Kitten's Scream

We return, then, to the 'koan' that launched our inquiry:

If a Zen master kills a kitten, and does not hear its scream, does it make a sound?

Our answer, of course, is yes, it makes a sound whether the master hears it or not – and, beyond this, that a master who fails to hear the kitten's scream would not be a true master.

So, then, what are we to make of the story of Nansen and the cat, the story of the master who kills a kitten because his disciples fail to 'speak a word of Zen'?

In an attempt to defend this story, Suzuki writes: "The Zen method of training its followers thus appears so altogether out of reason and unnecessarily inhuman. But the master's eyes are always upon the truth absolute and yet attainable in this world of particulars. If this can be gained, what does it matter whether a thing known as precious is broken and an animal sacrificed?"[35]

What does it matter? It matters to the animal, and, therefore, *must* matter to anyone who experiences a 'oneness' with the animal.

So how are we to read this story? There is some indication that the story is not the record of an actual event, but a tradition passed down in order to illustrate a point.

Indeed, Suzuki tells another story that seems an exact parallel to this one, except with a precious mirror taking the place of the cat:

> While Kyozan. . . was residing at Tohei. . . his master Isan. . ., both of whom were noted Zen masters, sent him a mirror accompanied with a letter. Kyozan held forth the mirror before a congregation of monks and said: "O monks, Isan has sent here a mirror. Is this Isan's mirror or mine own? If you say it is Isan's, how is it that the mirror is in my hands? If you say it is mine own, has it not come from Isan? If you make a proper statement, it will be retained here. If you cannot, it will be smashed in pieces." He said this for three times, but nobody even made an attempt to answer. The mirror was then smashed.[36]

Here we don't have the problem of worrying over the mistreatment of an animal and so, perhaps, can see the intended lesson more easily. A mirror, of course, is that through which one sees oneself. To ask 'to whom does the mirror belong?' might be read as a way of asking, 'to whom should we see *ourselves* as belonging?' Should we see ourselves as rooted in ourselves, our individualities, or as rooted in the whole, the One? To see ourselves as rooted in ourselves is to see ourselves through the eyes of duality. To see ourselves as rooted in the One is to see ourselves through the eyes of non-duality. If we cannot make a "proper answer," our understanding of ourselves, our self-image, will be shattered, fragmented.

We might read the Nansen story similarly. Here the kitten represents innocence, peace, warmth, unsullied life. The monks are fighting over to whom it should belong, and this fighting itself destroys innocence, peace, warmth, unsullied life. If the monks cannot rise above their fighting to "speak a word of Zen," of agapic non-duality, the kitten will be destroyed.

But, in this case, the story doesn't work, because it is the *master* who destroys the kitten, when it should be the master who saves the kitten (as Dogen, apparently, believed). Whereas the mirror can be treated as a symbol, the kitten may not be treated as a symbol, at least not as a *mere* symbol, because the kitten is a sentient being, a being unto itself, who therefore must be treated with care and respect. So the master's killing of the kitten makes him *not* a master, and in this way the story defeats itself.

And this failure of the story leads to a misreading of the message, to such a degree that as notable a Zen personage as D. T. Suzuki can say of the violent slaying of the kitten: What does it matter?

So, we must reject this story as a failed parable. We can find many such failed parables in the literature of religion. This is one.

Indeed, perhaps the most enlightened way to read this story is not to try to justify Nansen, but to see ourselves as the kitten – the kitten who is *not seen* by the monks, or Nansen, or Joshu, or even D. T. Suzuki; the kitten who experiences the peril and pain that drives us onto the spiritual path to begin with; the kitten whose suffering at the hands of ignorance, alienation, and error, in whatever trappings of sanctity they may appear, must inspire us on to an ever deepening commitment to the discovery of agapic truth within ourselves.

Perhaps, after all, this is the best way to read this story, and even, perhaps, to speak a true "word of Zen."

Notes

[1] Suzuki, D.T., *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961), 268.
[2] Ibid., 143.
[3] Ibid., 67.
[4] Ibid., 17.
[5] Ibid., 261.
[6] Ibid., 68.
[7] Ibid., 128.
[8] Ibid., 131.
[9] Ibid., 128.
[10] Ibid., 129.
[11] Ibid., 129.
[12] Ibid., 276.
[13] Ibid., 277.
[14] Husserl, Edmund, *Cartesian Meditations* (Klumer Academic Publishers, The Netherlands, 1995), 88.
[15] Suzuki, 140.
[16] Mikkelson, Douglas, "Who Is Arguing About the Cat?: Moral Action and Enlightenment According to Dogen," in Philosophy *East & West*, Volume 47, Issue 3, July, 1993.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Suzuki, 298.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Tillich, Paul, *Love, Power, and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 25.
[24] Dante, *Paradiso*, translated by Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 301.
[25] Suzuki, 81.
[26] Radadhakrishnan, S., *The Bhagavadgita* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 32-33.
[27] As quoted in Suzuki, p. 126. Note that Suzuki quotes this in the original German. This is my translation.
[28] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Understanding Our Mind* (Berkeley, Parallax Press, 2006), 128.
[29] Ibid., 133.
[30] Ibid., 82.
[31] Ibid., 162.
[32] Ibid., 151.
[33] Ibid., 132.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Suzuki, 277.
[36] Ibid.