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The Flesh of the World Is Emptiness and Emptiness Is the Flesh of the World, and Their Ethical Implications

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INTRODUCTION

Both the import of Merleau-Ponty's articulation of embodiment culminating in his later notion of the "flesh of the world" and the central tenet of "emptiness" or *śūnyatā* articulated by many schools of so-called Middle Way Buddhism are misunderstood frequently. Merleau-Ponty is mistakenly interpreted to have articulated a sense of "self" whose locus is in the body and to have restored to being either a foundation or a positivity in embodiment by shifting the grounding of self from the traditional Western focus on consciousness (or reason) to embodiment. The Middle Way Buddhist sects and schools that concentrate on emptiness are often misunderstood to be advocating a devaluation and subsequent detachment from embodiment and from the perceptual world and its enmeshment of the senses with emotion, memory, and imagination. These latter phenomena are mistakenly taken to be categorically identified by the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness as delusions of desire, egoistic concern with a past history, and fantasies of grasping that Buddhism strives to leave behind as unnecessary fetters and distortions of human life. However, both these understandings of Merleau-Ponty and Buddhist doctrine are wrong and miss the central contributions to the epistemological and ontological understanding of human existence that have been accomplished by both Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism.

The power of comparative philosophy becomes evident in examining Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment (and the flesh of the world) in light of the Buddhist understanding of emptiness or *śūnyatā*. It is through this comparison that one can see aspects implicit in both philosophies that become visible and meaningful through the comparison. Although Merleau-Ponty is at pains to decenter the notion of self, to deconstruct the kind of abstractions upon which traditional notions

of self in Western thought have been based, and to replace any notions of being with a radical notion of becoming or process, this emphasis is seen more clearly through the lens of emptiness. Although the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness asserts that once the distorting rationalizing constructions and categorizations of the ego have been wiped away, it is feeling and emotion that penetrate to the heart of each situation through compassion and the felt interconnection with all living beings, that the perceptual flux and flow that surrounds us is the true reality in which we must swim without anchor or foundation, and that this flow is one which moves spontaneously through our bodies as interwoven with the bodies of all living beings, Merleau-Ponty's ideas of embodiment and the flesh of the world make this dimension stand out more clearly. How the flesh of the world and *śūnyatā* are mutually enlightening is a fecund topic for a comparative philosophy to show its power in clarifying questions vital to human liberation.

THE FLESH OF THE WORLD IS ABOUT EMPTINESS

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "lived body," the body-subject, and his later formulations of the flesh might seem to offer an ontological foundation *in the body*, or with a more sophisticated reading, perhaps an ontological foundation *in the complex* of the body and its *Gestalt* within the perceptual field, or within its intertwining with the world taken as matter of a different sort than the tradition had known—matter laced with affective, memorial, and imaginative dimensions. The body as described in Merleau-Ponty's work is often misunderstood as a self-collecting subjectivity capable of grasping itself in its corporeality, and then opening to a dimension of perceptual significance that is prima facie revelatory. One could take as a prime example of this interpretation a sentence like the one in the introduction to *Phenomenology of Perception* that reads "We are in the realm of the truth and it is 'the experience of truth' which is self-evident. To seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to the truth."[1] Yet to make this interpretation is to miss that Merleau-Ponty has radically redefined what he means by truth, by the sense of perception, the sense of self, and the kind of evidence that counts as positive for him. If one looks further in the paragraph, the original thought is completed by these sentences: "[T]he self-evidence of perception is not adequate thought or apodictic self-evidence. The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible" (PhP xvi–xvii). For Merleau-Ponty, I cannot think the self or the world and grasp them, since they are richer than any ability of mind or understanding. As he says at the end of the introduction, their mystery is not a problem, "but their mystery defines them" (PhP xx).

For Merleau-Ponty, taking the embodiment seriously means philosophical insight must be transformed to achieve an apprehension akin to the heightened

perception of artists like Balzac, Proust, Valery, or Cézanne, whom he mentions as having faced the world with a "kind of attentiveness and wonder" and a "demand for awareness" (PhP xxi)—similar to the heart of Buddhist practice. When almost five hundred pages later at the concluding passage of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty asks how we can ever come to the answer to any of life's pressing questions, such as whether I should make this promise or risk my life for so little or give up freedom to fight for freedom, his answer on the basis of his exhaustive study of perception and embodiment is that there will never be any clear intellectual answers to even these questions, but rather only a sense that "your freedom cannot be willed . . . without willing freedom for all" and that "what is here required is silence" (PhP 456)—certainly responses resonant to the Buddhist attention to silence and the interconnection of all. Merleau-Ponty concludes that our existence lies in the act into which we throw ourselves without foundation but, for example, in answering the call of love and compassion when a person's son is caught in a fire (as described by Saint-Exupery) and there is no self and no body and no grasp of existence other than "your abode is your act itself. Your act is you. . . . You give yourself in exchange . . . . Your significance shows itself, effulgent. . . . Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him" (PhP 456). The kind of embodiment Merleau-Ponty shows us is the ability to leave behind the notion of a contained body—a corpse-body, as he calls the notion of body as object—and to see embodiment as the way we are inextricably caught up in relations with all that is, and we, our embodiment, are nothing more and nothing less.

To spontaneously do the right thing happens when we actualize our freedom as embodied beings where "freedom is always the meeting of the inside and outside" (PhP 454). This means we must clear away what obstructs our release into the flow of the world, what gives us the illusion of self-containment, and affirm what he states at the start of the work: "[T]here is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (PhP x). Again, this sense of embodiment echoes how emptiness surpasses the obstacles constructed to achieving the meeting of the inside and the outside, for there is no inside as psychic interior, nor outside as objective other. At the beginning of his thought in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty says: "We must therefore avoid saying that our body is *in* space or *in* time . . . I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them" (PhP 139–40). He ends this chapter by articulating how our body is the medium for the world as it sounds itself through us and in that sense "the body is essentially an expressive space" (PhP 146). There are no good words in Western thought and the traditional philosophical vocabulary to express this desubstantialized body taken up into the flow of the world, so Merleau-Ponty already in this book calls embodiment in relation to the world "but a hollow, a fold, which has been made and can be unmade" (PhP 215)—the kind of language he will start using exclusively at the end of his life, but already sprinkled in these early pages. Merleau-Ponty has just been struggling to

explain how when "my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue," the blue of the sky somehow "thinks itself in me" (PhP 214). This, too, is a precursor to his later central idea of "reversibility," that in perceiving the body joins up with a perception achieved cojointly by all the beings of the world.

The failure to realize how much subjectivity has been desubstantialized and decentered in Merleau-Ponty's work is continued when commentators on the later work take "the flesh of the world" or "the chiasm" of body/world in a positivistic sense that sees a becoming one of subject and object, of body and world, a sense of coincidence between the two, even though Merleau-Ponty is very clear that this is not what he intends to articulate: "The world seen is not 'in' my body, and my body is not 'in' the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. A participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelops it nor is enveloped by it definitively."[2] The relation of the body and world is one of participation, of kinship, that there are two, yet they intertwine as one—just as his repeated image of the chiasm portrays—two separate optic nerves intertwined and working as one or two strands of DNA that are one gene while they are two also. As Merleau-Ponty continues to articulate this logic, he continues: "[M]y body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other. Or rather, if as once again we must, we eschew the thinking by planes and perspectives, there are two circles, or two vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live naively, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other" (VI 138). This is the relationship Merleau-Ponty will continually try to elaborate, how there can be both oneness and two-ness, intertwining yet the uniqueness of every living being. It is that same logic of emptiness at the heart of Buddhism. It is also the same insistence that this sense will not emerge if we reify phenomena, but must be able to see them as vortical, unfolding, emerging, inseparable from all that is around them, evanescent, in flux, change, transition.

Similarly to the relationship among all that is the flesh of the world, the notion of "reversibility" that is at the heart of his later ontology is never simply a reciprocity of body and world, that the two terms just swing back and forth between each other in some sort of seamless unity—that, for example, as I see the tree, the tree now sees me. Besides being an absurd anthropomorphism, this would not capture the ambiguity of perception and the way of intertwining Merleau-Ponty is expressing in a sense parallel to emptiness: "To begin with, we spoke summarily of a reversibility of the seeing and the visible, of the touching and the touched. It is time to emphasize that it is a reversibility that is always immanent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization" (VI 147). For Merleau-Ponty, there can be no coincidence, because there is neither a subject, nor an object to come together in order to coincide. This would posit a kind of substantiality, a kind of being, that the notion of "flesh of the world" is meant to undermine. As Merleau-Ponty phrases it: "There is for example no absolute flux of singular *Erlebnisse* [experiences]; there are fields and a field of fields" (VI 171). There can be no absolute flux, no absolute things, but rather there are fields, in which things, people, creatures intertwine, interweave, yet do not lose the wonder that each is each and yet not without the others—an order of a differing logic than that which can be put into substantialist language and dualistic thought. What connects or make one the things of a field? Nothing, yet everything, because in their unsubstantiality, all beings are open and caught up with all others. This is the same point that Keiji Nishitani, a Kyoto School thinker, tries to make about Buddhist concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*):

> [T]his does refer to a "unity" of subject and object such as we find it variously explained in the history of philosophic thought East and West. That is to say, we do not presuppose a separation of subject and object and then work toward their unification. The unity of the absolute near side is not the result of a process, but rather the original unity of absolute openness and absolute emptiness. Its standpoint is neither a monism or a dualism of any sort. It is the absolute one, the absolute self-identity of the absolutely two: the home-ground on which we are what *we* are in our self-nature and the home ground on which *things* are what they are in themselves.[3]

No escape into a unity, or a monism of rationality, is possible; rather, a responsiveness to all beings.

Merleau-Ponty's reversibility is not about unity, not about subjects and objects, but about how one is two and how each act of perception and expression is both mine and not-mine. Reversibility, even as asymmetrical and inexhaustible in such a way that it is not about closure and coincidence, does bring about this interweavement, as he explains later in the same passage:

> I am always on the same side of my body; it presents itself to me in one invariant perspective. But this incessant escaping, this impotency to superpose exactly one upon the other, the touching of the things by my right hand and the touching of this same right hand by my left hand, or to superpose, in the extraordinary movements of the hand, the tactile experience of a point and the "same" point a moment later, or the auditory experience of my own voice and that of others—this is not failure. For if these experiences never exactly overlap, if they slip away at the very moment they are about to rejoin, if there is always a "shift," a "spread," between them, that is precisely because my hands are part of the same body, because it moves itself in the world, because I hear myself both from within and from without. I experience—and as often as I wish—the transition and metamorphosis of the one experience into the other. (VI 148)

Merleau-Ponty continues by saying this gap between these things and people, or between people, that nevertheless are one in vision, in touch, or in speech, is not an "ontological void" but rather is a "spannedness" among all beings as of a flesh of the world.

A deeper reading of Merleau-Ponty reveals that there is no "the body" in his writings. The body as a noun, let alone as anything like substance does not exist for Merleau-Ponty. The body is "bodying." As bodying, the self that emerges as embodiment is foundationless too, always emergent among all the being of the world. Merleau-Ponty states: "He who thinks, perceives, etc. is this negativity as openness, by the body, of the world" (VI 246). Embodiment is an ongoing emergence, an upsurge, an interweavement, a kind of bringing forth that has no foundation and yet is everywhere. The flesh of the world is a denial of body or mind as substance and also of matter as substance. Merleau-Ponty states: "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance" (VI 139). Merleau-Ponty is denying that there is any foundational essence for substantiality as a source of the upsurge of perception. He is also denying that there is anything in the world that is the object of perception as some substance standing over and against it. These vortices that are body or bodying and the perceived of the world are spirals of transformation that find themselves within moments of meaning together, but are nothing outside of these effulgences, these emergences of sense. Another allied notion is the "depth" of the world: "Either what I call depth is nothing, or else it is my participation in a Being without restriction, a participation primarily in the being of space beyond every (particular) point of view. Things encroach upon one another because each is outside of the others."[4] Things are not primarily located in a Cartesian space of discrete locations and boundaries; they are caught up with one another, encroaching upon one another, enmeshed with one another through their transformations in a "movement by vibration." Further in this last published essay, "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty names embodiment as the site of "the deflagration of being": "There is a human body when, between seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place—when the spark is lit between the sensing and the sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning" (PR 163). The perceiver, through embodiment and through the senses, enters into "a fission" that is the process of embodiment as a losing of a collected experience of self to a never-ending encroachment of all things upon all things that is the primary depth of existence. So Merleau-Ponty says of vision: "Now perhaps we have a better sense of what is meant by the little verb 'to see.' Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent to myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside—the fission at whose termination, and not before, I come back to myself" (PR 186). Perceiving is not a grasping, not a capturing, but rather the body's way of losing itself in the ever-streaming blaze or fission of beings that are the field of existence and give us back ourselves as a way to be who we are with them.

Merleau-Ponty's articulation of embodiment takes us into a logic of not-one-not-two, and undermines any notion of the substantiality of body or self; it uncovers embodiment as a relation to all other beings, finds its locus in something which is neither mind nor matter, and takes ambiguity, mystery, and indeterminacy as hallmarks of apprehending what is; it further takes perception and all human apprehension and expression as a cojoint achievement with all other beings, and finds embodiment to be the entryway into a fire or fission among all beings that journeys us throughout the world as our distinct way of coming to ourselves. These ideas can be seen to make much more sense, not against the backdrop of Western thought and philosophy, but as ideas that presuppose the Buddhist concept of emptiness.

EMPTINESS (*ŚŪNYATĀ*) IS ABOUT EMBODIMENT IN MERLEAU-PONTY'S SENSE

There may be no greater articulation of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition than the widely circulated and chanted *Heart Sūtra*. For Buddhists, especially those of the Middle Way, the *Heart Sūtra* famously points toward the state of spiritual liberation achieved in emptiness as that of "No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind: No form, sound, smell, taste, touch . . . no act of sensing."[5] This might seem at odds with the path of Merleau-Ponty's thought. It could, if taken out of its proper context and understanding, be taken to be enunciating a doctrine that leaves behind the body—as does much of Western metaphysical and theological thought that relegates the body to ontological inferiority, and takes embodiment as the aspect of the human condition that must be transcended in order to achieve epistemological and spiritual clarity. Similarly, the Buddha declares in his famous "fire sermon":

> All things, O monks, are on fire. And what are these things which are on fire?
>
> The eye is on fire. Things seen are on fire. Eye vision is on fire. Impressions received by the eye are on fire. Whatever sensation is connected with the eye, is on fire.
>
> With what are these on fire?
>
> With the fire of desire, with the fire of hate and delusion; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, grief, and despair.
>
> All things are burning.
>
> The ear is on fire; sounds are on fire . . . The nose is on fire; odors are on fire . . . The tongue is on fire; tastes are on fire. . . . The mind is on fire; ideas are on fire. . . . Whatever sensation, pleasant or unpleasant, is connected with the mind is also on fire. . . .
>
> All things are burning. . . . Cultivate aversion, O monks, and be free of the fire of desire.[6]

These declarations might also seem to many to cast the body's sense perception and its concomitant emotional significance as epistemologically, as well as spiritually, delusional. They do. However, they do so by pointing to a perversion of embodiment and the perceptual life. Rather than ruling out a body-centered approach to emptiness, the *Heart Sūtra* and the Buddha's sermon are deconstructing a habitual misuse of perception and bodily experience by the mind of ego and

desire in order to clear away a truer sense of perception and embodiment that can only emerge in emptiness.

The *Heart Sūtra*'s classic formulation of emptiness is "Here, O Sariputa, form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness" (BS 162–63). Falling under the realm of form are supposed things as diverse as self, body, the good, the evil, the One, God, substance, soul, the other, truth, certainty, reason, happiness, self-identity, mind, life, death, and so on indefinitely, including, too, the most mundane. There will not be any way to grasp firmly any aspect of reality by any particular category and even this denial itself is foundationless, empty. These insights follow from the same interdependence we have already been exploring in Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body. A very clear and modest statement of emptiness is contained in Stephen Batchelor's commentary on Nāgārjuna's writings and his formulation of emptiness: "[H]e announces that 'contingency' is the key to understanding what it means for them [life and language] to be empty. A self, a plant, a body or a time is empty because it is incapable of being neatly circumscribed as a thing cut off from other things. Selves, plants, bodies and times are utterly contingent on the complex interplay of conditions, attributes and language with which they are not identical and from which they are not different. To know emptiness is not to negate these things but to be dumbfounded by the sheer fecundity of life."[7] There are no circumscribing forms as there are no self-contained boundaries in the way in which all beings are only found in the midst of all other beings—as embodied or material all beings are of a time and a place interwoven within a context, situated. This is emptiness, not as a loss of being, but as a gain in the intertwining or interdependence of all. Only the insecure individual's desire and the West's philosophical need for self-identity is lost as an impossible goal.

Descartes was almost driven to despair when he saw that after burning, the wax of a candle contained nothing that remained fixed until he could "see" with his mind the idea of substance, the underlying being that was not visible to his senses but that must be the stable ground underlying the perception of passing away and interdependence. In interpreting the *Heart Sūtra*, Kosho Uchiyama has the opposite feeling and realization when considering a flame burning from a candle (a famous image already used by the Buddha to articulate the insubstantiality of the self to King Melinda):

> In this respect, we are as selves quite like the flame of a candle. As wax melts near a lit wick and burns, it emits light near the tip of the candle. For the most part, this place from which the light is emitted remains the same and appears as a fixed shape; it is this seemingly unchanging shape that we refer to as flame. That which I call I is similar to the flame. Although both body and mind are an unceasing flow, since they preserve what seems to be a constant form, we refer to them as I. Therefore, actually there is no existing I as some substantial thing; there is only ceaseless flow. This is true not only of the sentient being I, it is true of all things.[8]

There is no existing I as empty, nor a candle nor flame, but that is because as a flow phenomenon, as an intertwining or enlacing, to use Merleau-Ponty's words, what they are is only caught up among other beings and their continual emergence or unfolding. Western philosophy and culture has only hearkened to the negative moment of emptiness and not its wondrous side: "To be empty of a fixed identity allows one to enter fully into the shifting, poignant, beautiful and tragic contingencies of the world. It makes possible an acute awareness of life as a creative process, in which each person is inextricably involved. Yet, despite the subjective intensity of such a vision, when attention is turned to the subject itself, no isolated observer is to be found" (VC 44–45). Although as Dōgen says, "forgetting oneself is to be awakened by all things," in the Western tradition, it is the loss of center, of foundation in a stable self, which has been striking about emptiness and not the gain of an openness to all things and a cooperation in all aspects of perception, apprehension, and expression with innumerable cojoint partners.

Buddha's fire sermon is an apt phenomenology, because the body allows itself to be used as the vehicle of ego, as the guarantor of the mind's construction of a ground, and provides seemingly a singularity needed for the illusion of self-subsistent individuality and identity. It makes embodiment into an isolated condition, cut off from a world that it then desperately craves. In *Being Bodies: Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Embodiment*, Michele Martin writes: "[T]he first way we apprehend a self is the most obvious: no distinction is made between what we think of our self and our body. . . . We also treat our body as an object that our self possesses: 'my hair,' 'my face.' And further, we also assume that a self exists because it has the body as a support: it feels like some solid basis for who we are. So, here the body plays object to our self as subject. Or the reverse could be true."[9] Put in Merleau-Ponty's terminology, this distortion of perception is the "experience error" and indicates a "second-order" or "high-altitude" approach to embodiment—a putting into perception our rational constructions such that we experience them as there in the first place. The objective, the substantive, is constructed on the basis of a more primary experience. It is this construction of a stable self that gives rise to the destructive aspects of perception, emotion, feeling, desire, and other aspects of embodiment as leading to torment and violation of others: "Fixations about self and things sustain the largely unconscious holding pattern in which we hover above the world of immediate experience. Although fixation appears to freeze the self into an undisturbed, isolated cell, the tightness of the grip spawns chaotic torrents of thoughts, images and emotions. Like squeezing the trigger of a gun or pressing a button to set off an alarm, fixations such as egoism, craving, conceit and opinionatedness erupt as proliferating streams of longings and worries" (VC 63). The clinging to a stable self and constructing the world to allow this in a subject-object dichotomy paradoxically plunges us into a helter-skelter of sensations, passions, feelings, and so on. We will return to this dimension of distorted perception when we examine the ethical implication of the notion of flesh of the world and emptiness.

Emptiness, if embraced, leads us to another experience of the body. However, it is the experience of embodiment as empty that is key to realizing the emptiness of all existence. Martin expresses this: "To understand the body as a reflection of emptiness is to know that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. . . . The body, experienced as empty form, appears though it is empty and it is empty though it appears. Its emptiness and appearance are inseparable. Since it is empty, it is not solid or real, and since it appears, it is not mere nothingness."[10] As she aptly puts it, the body in the world is like the reflection of the moon in the water. Nāgārjuna, perhaps the most articulate thinker and poet of emptiness in any Buddhist tradition, explores embodiment and emptiness in this verse:

> If my eyes cannot see themselves,
> How can they see something else?
> Were there no trace of something seen,
> How could I see at all?
>
> Neither seeing nor unseeing see.
>
> Seeing reveals a seer,
> Who is neither detached
> Nor undetached from seeing.
> How could you see,
> And what would you see
> In the absence of a seer?
>
> Just as a child is born
> From father and mother,
> So consciousness springs
> From eyes and colorful shapes.
>
> Without these eyes,
> How could I know
> Consciousness, impact,
> Feeling and thirst?
> Clinging, evolving,
> Birth, aging and death?
>
> Seers seeing sights explain
> Hearers hearing sounds
> Smellers smelling smells,
> Tasters tasting tastes,
> Touchers touching textures
> Thinkers thinking thoughts. (VC 86–87)

Nāgārjuna here articulates that only a visible can see and its vision is not *its* vision but must also be of the visible and originate in the things seen as much as

in the seeing. The seer is not behind vision, apart from it, in a consciousness or self, for example, but only emerges from the seeing. Our so-called consciousness is not ours, but arises from colors and shapes and the world of things and qualities, yet it is we who see and hear and touch and think. Yet there is only this fire lit between the seer and the seen, and between the seer himself or herself and the seen and also with all the seeing among all the visibles, and so forth for all the senses and so forth for thinking which arises from this bodily enfolding within the world. This description matches Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh of the world as articulated in *The Visible and the Invisible* in a myriad of statements similar to "he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is* of *it*" (VI 134–35).

This lack of distinction between subject and object is also key to formlessness or emptiness insofar as seeing is not categorizable as seeing nor hearing as hearing; there is merely an enlacement of beings on all levels emerging through each other. This is expressed by Thich Nhat Hahn, when he states:

> This is the first flash of lightening. The Buddha goes directly to the heart of the prajnaparamita, presenting the principle of formlessness. He tells us that a true practitioner helps all living beings in a natural and spontaneous way, without distinguishing between the one who is helping and the one who is being helped. When our left hand is injured, our right hand takes care of it right away. It doesn't stop to say, "I am taking care of you. You are benefiting from my compassion." The right hand knows very well that the left hand is also the right hand. There is no distinction between them. This is the principle of interbeing—co-existence, or mutual interdependence. "This is because that is." With this understanding—the right hand helping the left hand in a formless way—there is no need to distinguish between the right hand and the left hand. (RM 203–4)

There is no such thing as "helping" or even the "right hand" as "helper." It is the same way that there is no "perceiving" or "thinking" or self or thinker. To embrace the formlessness of the *Heart Sūtra* and "to go beyond, way beyond"—to see that there are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and so on—is to liberate the body from metaphysical desperation (in the sense of Sartre's analysis of the isolated ego trying through its body to capture from the world a metaphysical foundation of the "in-itself"). The desperate body, the body of rationalizing perception *has* eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and consciousness with which to localize the so-called determinate properties of the world projected as set against it in order to grasp them both epistemologically and egoistically, as instantiating the values which would allow the ego's project of incorporation of them to defy the insecurity of groundlessness. To go beyond into emptiness is to refind a body within a neverending dialogue among all things that has no set basis, meaning, or goal.

The body is a primary site of the Buddha's Noble Truths that life is suffering, that suffering comes from grasping, and that suffering can be overcome. Essential to grasping is the categorization of the world into self-subsistent entities of stable

properties that begin the process of "conditioned coproduction" that transforms perception from an open contact into a labyrinth of distorted constructions that is the cause of insatiable desire and suffering. Embodiment allows itself to become a primary source of suffering, because it is also the way to transform suffering into another state of awareness and existence which ends this delusion and grasping. As Joan Tollifson states:

> Apparent embodiment in a particular perishable form, with a complex brain, is undoubtedly at the root of our illusory sense of separation from the totality.... Paradoxically, the body also offers the way home, for it is in fully meeting whatever appears as pure sensation that we discover the emptiness of form—the undivided wholeness of being that has no solidity, no boundaries, no limits—that which no word or image can capture, in which everything is included.[11]

Embodiment, if attended to and articulated from within the jostling depths of its enfolding-unfolding, its deflagration, or, as Merleau-Ponty calls it, its unwinding, its *serpentement*, articulates the world and perceptual experience as *śūnyatā*. This is what the Buddhist practitioner achieves through meditative practice of varying types—all of which focus on the heart of embodiment, its breathing, and its ways of resonating with the larger world, then embodiment is the way to cut through delusions and become empty: "[W]e find this body [the dharma body] in its coming to be and passing away compared to a diamond for its hardness, its brilliancy, and the sharpness that enables it to cut through all things."[12] The empty body opens us to the emptiness of the world, sometimes also calling "dropping off body-and-mind."

In the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty deconstructs the apparent "transcendence of the thing" when he states: "The transcendence of the thing compels us to say that it is a plenitude only by being inexhaustible, that is, by not being all actual under the look—but it promises this total actuality, since it *is there*" (VI 191). Merleau-Ponty recognizes the perceptual, the world around us does not have the actuality we seek of it, the closure we would have rather than its inexhaustibility. He continues:

> When we say that—on the contrary—the phantasm is not observable, that it is empty, non-being, the contrast with the sensible is not absolute. The senses are apparatus to form concretions of the inexhaustible, to form existent significations—But the thing is not really observable: there is always a skipping over in every observation, one is never at the thing itself. What we call the *sensible* is only the fact that the indefinite [succession] of *Abschattungen [showings, perspectives] precipitates*. (VI 192)

For Merleau-Ponty, there are not sensible objects, as much as we tend to intellectualize our experience to meet this demand, but rather series of showings, appearances, and emergences of meaning that retains its vitality and truthfulness in keeping open the promiscuity among all things and perceivers. This is also what

Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva in the *Heart Sūtra* means when he says there are "no touchables or objects of the mind, no sight-organ-elements ... no mind-conscious elements" (BS 163). There are no foundational entities outside of the process of this perceiving which is a deflagration, a consuming of all "outsides," of all sense of substance or true being. There is only *śūnyatā*, which is the ongoing transformation and relational intertwining of all beings such that they do not truly exist on their own and they do not exist as having substance or fixed form. They are the vitality and effulgence of meaning as well as its mystery and ongoing hiding in being brought fourth ceaselessly. Batchelor puts this more simply as "[e]mptiness includes the sun, moon, stars, and planets, the great earth, mountains and rivers, all trees and grasses, bad men and good men, bad things and good things, heaven and hell; they are all in the midst of emptiness" (VC 28). This insight is also expressed briefly in the Chinese Zen Master Sengcan's (d. 606) seventh-century verses: "When we return to the root, we gain the meaning/ When we pursue external objects we lose the reason/ ... Transformations going on in an empty world which confronts us/ appear real because of ignorance" (BS 172). Yet, like Merleau-Ponty, Master Sengcan cautions "be not prejudiced against the six sense objects," for it is in the wealth of perception of "the ten thousand things" that we return to meaning's "origin and remain where we ever have been" (BS 174). Like the perceiving body, what is perceived is distorted when constructed as substantial or objectified, but is equally the "home-field," as Nishitani calls the world perceived in emptiness, of the salient meaning of body/mind and all beings.

The logic that Sengcan invokes to explain the relationship that "the object is an object for the subject, the subject is a subject for the object" is the same that Merleau-Ponty seeks to articulate in avoiding either a dualism or a monism, when he uses the image of chiasm, in which there is both one and two, or rather neither one nor two, but something else. Sengcan, in denying of suchness that "there is neither 'self' nor 'other'" but also that there is not "direct identification," declares "We can only say 'not two'" (BS 174). For him, this is the origin of the sense of emptiness and its realization. Similarly Merleau-Ponty declares: "[S]tart from this, there is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside turning about one another" (VI 264). The process of embodying does not have a centered subject, nor confronts an actual world, but rather opens unceasingly onto this "not two" deflagration of being that consumes such metaphysical or personally psychological presumptions in the way the increasing realization of *śūnyatā* clears the field of such obstructing constructs. In the next sentence Merleau-Ponty identifies the sense of self and embodiment that results from seeing this "not identity, nor non-identity": "My 'central' nothingness is like the point of the stroboscopic spiral, which is who knows where, which is 'nobody'" (VI 264). Merleau-Ponty embraces the *śūnyatā* of embodiment as leading to the "no-self" of experience's root which is also the experience of a world of emptiness.

Perceptions, as they have been taken by traditional Western philosophical perspectives as either comprised by intelligible phenomena, in the sense of

rationally determinable instantiations of categories of judgment (intellectualism), or insular inputs that can be grasped in their own terms as quantifiable or as corresponding to discrete facets of brute reality (empiricism), are notions of body-within-the-world to be surpassed by either Buddhist or Merleau-Pontean analysis. Both perspectives return to a more profound, experientially open, and expressive sense of embodiment as the experiencing of the world as moving through us in returning to itself, rather than the operation and achievement of an "ego-dominated" or constructed sense of perception as the product of an abstracted rationality. The Western epistemological stances of intellectualism and empiricism are not just theories about the body and perception: they describe ways that the ego imposes obscuring dimensions onto perception. Here, Buddhism is more explicit in demonstrating that theories are embedded in ways of life that are not only destructive to the emergence of truth as uncovering, but also are the central source of needless pain and frustration in human life. However, implicit in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a sense of the liberating capacity of embodiment to not only articulate the truth of the world, but add to the meaningfulness of human existence.

THE FLESH AND EMPTINESS AS AN ETHICS OF THE HEART, PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION, AND SPONTANEOUS RIGHT ACTION

Merleau-Ponty is often said to have no articulated ethics within his ontological and epistemological analyses of the lived body or the "flesh of the world." There seem to be no norms of conduct, standards for moral action, nor uniform decision-making procedures when faced with moral dilemmas. Similarly, from a Western perspective, Buddhism (and especially Zen, Mādhyamikan, and other Middle Way Buddhist schools) can be criticized as lacking ethical discourse, not by lacking well-articulated precepts for ethical conduct, since they are more exhaustively delineated and extended in Buddhist scriptures than in many Western ethical systems, but rather because of its sense of "spontaneous right action," which would seem to mitigate against the higher authority of moral judgment, reason, and adjudication by universal principles. Kant tells us that the moral worth of an action originates from its being an act dictated by reason, judgment, and in opposition to the pull of inclinations.

Merleau-Ponty does articulate an ethics and it is similar to Buddhism's "spontaneous right action." That is why many readers of Merleau-Ponty do not see it. This approach to ethics is not recognizable as such from a traditional Western philosophical perspective, because it denies that rational decision-making, cleaving to universalizable standards of judgment, and fighting the body and its emotional vectors of immediate responsiveness to the world and other living beings are the heart of an ethical life or the source of its acts. Both Merleau-Ponty's

philosophy and Buddhist thought suggest that rather than being the epitome of the ethical life, such achievements are an inferior approach, perhaps fitting as a first step toward the ethical life, perhaps a stop-gap measure for those alienated from embodiment and its surer responsiveness to the dignity and value of all living and non-living beings, and sometimes an obstacle to the needed sensitivity and sense of one's place in the environment that is called for by the deepest ethical commitment. Both Merleau-Ponty's and Buddhist thought rely on reclaiming embodiment's access to the heart—the heart of compassion—which is the deepest source of the sense of the ethical and entails breaking the claim of the intellect to master the world according to its categories and dictates.

If this is true then, both Merleau-Ponty's and Buddhist ethics are at odds with the Kantian sense that ethical action proceeds from a sense of duty and is the result of a judgment of reason. The Kantian perspective tends to set the norm in thinking about what constitutes an ethics within traditional Western thinking. This assessment is not only Eurocentric, but besides being incorrect, it is ethically dangerous. The centrality given to reflective judgment in the ethical life is the result of a dualism that overvalues the rational and the powers of the mind, and also demonizes embodiment and its powers of emotional response. Rather than the overarching sense that should guide the ethical life, such normative ethics are an "ethics of despair." This despair stems from a pessimism about the possibilities for human transformation and community. The driving force of this misjudgment is a misunderstanding of the body. The ethics of duty owed to the self-legislation of reason can be, however, a necessary and powerful limit of aberrant behavior in an alienated society that misunderstands embodiment. It is also, in this sense, an "ethics of the last resort" without which we would be lost. Despite this cultural and historical necessity for rational, normative ethics, the more salient understanding of embodiment and emptiness in Merleau-Ponty's thought and in Buddhist thought allow for a greater augmentation of the ethical life.

If we return to the passage examined earlier in this essay in the concluding passage to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, we cannot but notice that he ends the book posing ethical questions—the key ethical questions in a person's life—and saying the notion of embodiment that has emerged from the world is the key to responding to those questions. The first part of his statement is a recognition that reason and reflection—although they might reason out our duties in a social contract, like to pay taxes or stop at the red light or honor our employment contract—cannot give adequate ethical responses to questions that (outside of any set rationalized agreement) are at the heart of life's purpose and meaning: "[F]reedom flounders in the contradictions of commitment, and fails to realize that without the roots which it thrusts into the world, it would not be freedom at all. Shall I make this promise? Shall I risk my life for so little? Shall I give up my liberty in order to save liberty? There is no theoretical reply to these questions" (PhP 456). The question of why reason is insufficient here has been answered by the preceding parts of this essay. To see the world through categories is to see a

distorted reconstruction of the world, mistakenly taken as its source and foundation. Both Merleau-Ponty and Middle Way Buddhism have allowed us to see that emptiness does not go anywhere else, there is no other realm to aspire toward for answers, meaning, or virtues, and that although indeterminate and shifting, intertwined and ungraspable, things and other people call out to us through our embodiment or body/minds to join with the significance emerging for us with others and to act to further achieve this blossoming together.

We are not separable beings and I cannot be free, or happy, or achieve well-being without all others doing so. This is why Merleau-Ponty ends the book with these lines, which follow the questions just cited:

> But there are the *things* which stand, irrefutable, there is before you this person whom you love, there are these men whose existence around you is that of slaves, and your freedom cannot be willed without leaving behind its singular relevance, and without willing freedom for all. Whether it is a question of things or of historical situations, philosophy has no function other than to teach us to see them once again more clearly, and it is true to say that it comes into being by destroying itself as a separate philosophy. But what is required here is silence, for the hero lives out his relation to men and the world. "Your son is caught in the fire, you are the one who will save him. . . . If there is an obstacle, you would be ready to give your shoulder provided only that you can charge down that obstacle. Your abode is your act itself. . . . Your significance shows itself, effulgent. It is your duty, your hatred, your love, your steadfastness, your ingenuity. . . . Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him." (PhP 456)

Merleau-Ponty makes the claim that only silence can yield an appropriate ethical response to questions of life and death and action. This is because ethical action does not depend on ideas, ideals, or aspiring toward modeled virtues, but is the way that the world reaches me through embodiment in the overwhelming compassion and empathy for others that is not a maxim, but rather is embodied in my shoulder banging into the door of the burning building. It is spontaneous right action, foundationless, yet suspended among all the beings of the world—a network of lives and beings.

It is the silence of emptiness that draws us away from the self-perception of insular interest and indifference to others into an empathy and compassion. The failure to return to the body's silence, to experience the emptiness of existence, is the heart of why some people cannot feel compassion, while those who can dwell in the silence of emptiness are open to the significance of life emerging in helping others, standing effulgent before them, intrinsically worthwhile, ultimately meaningful, even if one cannot give any rational proofs why this should be the case. Batchelor discusses the journey to realization of the eighth-century Indian monk, Śantideva, who continued Nāgārjuna's verse articulation of emptiness, but with a greater emphasis on compassion—the Bodhisattva way. He poses this question to himself why some people are not spontaneously drawn to respond to the suffering

of others. Batchelor writes: "Shantideva realizes that this is due to a deep, visceral clinging to the idea of being a separate self. As long as one is in thrall to this fixation, spontaneous concern for others will tend to be felt only for those who fall within the range of what is 'mine.' The pain of those outside this range can then be treated with indifference and even satisfaction" (VC 32). The cognitive problem that we have already seen is a cause of alienation for those who are clinging to a sense of self is also an ethical problem, since it blocks the compassion and the need to help others that underlies any set of rules of conduct and gives them their basic meaning and sense. Śantideva realizes the affective import of emptiness: "[E]mptiness not only eases the cognitive constriction of self-centeredness, it generates feelings of empathy" (VC 32).

At the core of the ethical life is facing the fear of losing the security of the sense of self that one vainly tries to achieve through clinging to an ego or stable self-subsistent identity. This may be the most important transformation—an ongoing one—that is necessary to be ethical, and yet it is unaddressed in traditional Western ethical systems. It is through the breaking through of the need for self-subsistent identity that reveals what was true all along—namely, that we are only humans as intertwined inseparably with others. The Western emphasis on agency in ethics, self-legislation, and autonomy may themselves be an ethical problem. Emptiness allows us to experience that in order for me to be good, the clinging to the sense of me is hurtful to this moral aim: "'Emptiness' is counterintuitive because it contradicts the deepest sense a person has of being 'me.' Yet, as Shantideva makes clear, emptiness does not eliminate 'me,' but transforms it. Contrary to expectation, an empty self turns out to be a relational self" (VC 33). This brings us to the heart of another approach to ethics than that of following rules through judgments: Who one is becomes *transformed* in such a way that right action, moral action, is no longer an issue, a dilemma, but is like breathing. Or another way to say this would be to say that in emptiness we are open to life itself and become more alive. This feeling of vitality and interconnection invariably is also a sense of love—that affective well-spring which the West has sought as a source of ethics, but often from which its ideas have distanced itself. Tollifson writes: "This awakening is about coming alive to what is actually happening right now. In this aliveness, the body and the whole world of form is more vibrant and present than ever before, but isn't solid anymore. The stories (and the people we apply them to) are no longer fixed. In this openness that no longer knows what everything is, there is freedom. This not knowing is love. In this open being, every moment is devotion." In opening to the capacities of embodiment, perception, and feeling as empty, we are led toward others and ethical action in a spontaneous manner inseparable from the cleared nature of perception itself.

Yet the West has often distrusted that the world shows its true face and therefore distrusted whether we can immediately respond to it in compassion. If the world is just our construction, then it may be constructed in self-centered or evil ways that must be rationally interrogated and revealed before we are fooled by

them. So, here at the heart of ethics, epistemology and morality cannot be separated. In this way, the differing epistemologies and ontology of Merleau-Ponty and Middle Way Buddhism can be appreciated in their ethical significance. Merleau-Ponty begins the *Phenomenology of Perception* with the criticism of empiricism and intellectualism that they fail to acknowledge the "physiognomic character of the data" with which they deal (PhP 19). He contends that "the shape of the world" is to be recognized as "the source which stares us in the face" (PhP 23). For Merleau-Ponty, it is the weave of things, others, nature, and cultures that assume a primordial face-to-face relation with us. Traditional Western philosophy has missed this face of the world because it has failed to see "an object or a body" as they "look 'gay' or 'sad,' or 'lively' or 'dreary,' or 'elegant' or 'coarse'" (PhP 23). They have missed those lines of attunement, of emotional orientation and expression of how it stands with that object or person in relation to their surrounding world by excluding "from perception the anger or the pain which I nevertheless read in a face, the religion whose essence I seize in some hesitation or reticence, the city whose temper I recognize in the attitude of a policeman or the style of a public building" (PhP 23–24). This means that in some way Western culture itself is like Schneider, the patient used as a case study of the damaged embodiment in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, who cannot recognize spontaneously the felt meaning of those who confront him, the embedded significance revealed through the lived body or the flesh of the world. For him, this is the result of the shrapnel lodged in part of his brain, but we can achieve this perceptual lack through philosophy and by our stance toward the world. The tradition from Plato through Descartes to Kant that tells us to mistrust this immediate sense of our situatedness and of others and instead to figure it out through rational judgment is asking us to proceed to live like the brain-damaged Schneider. Furthermore, the reliance of rational reassessment fosters a sedimented disbelief in perception and feeling. This, in turn, transforms embodiment from an intertwined apprehension of the whole to a manipulative disjunct with the world, so that indeed embodiment's access to the flesh of the world is restricted. We set up a vicious cycle of enclosure.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Middle Way Buddhism demonstrates how evil actions, actions that violate one's own truer being and the being of others, is really a matter of misperception, a matter of not-knowing the world as it stands before one, covered by distortion and driving one to moral violation. The Buddha's "fire sermon" is an analysis of how the body's perceptions become unperceiving by being ripped out of interconnectedness by the powers of the ego that has followed the rational, categorical mind in making discriminations to the world revealed by feeling and thereby created the craving for what is set apart and seen as desirable. What is especially telling in the Buddhist articulation of conditioned coproduction is the link between seeming ethically neutral rational categories in knowing the world that are detailed in their causal link to the arising of egoistic desires that turn embodiment's spontaneous feelings into cravings prone to self-

violation and violence toward others. From mere consciousness of the object, a process is detailed wherein positing name and form gives rise to properties and then to valuations of these properties to desires to possess them (BS 186). As Rosen Takashina has written: "Whether this heart is the Buddha heart or not is the cause which determines good or evil for us. And if we stress our ego and do not cut off the thoughts, the Buddha heart does not appear." The problem is "the knowing" that informs the heart, which skews our perceptual experience of the world and others: "The thoughts of the impure heart are topsy-turvy, for it sees reality upside down. . . . Of course the mischievous operation of the senses is not natural: their true working is not wrong. But the impure heart misuses them and only lets them work in wrong directions" (BS 139). It is the thought categories that make reality into a set of objects which are self-subsistent and also construct my being as self-subsistent that gives rise to these cravings and simultaneously blocks a truer embodied interrelatedness to other beings. Merleau-Ponty would call such a reconstitution of the open depth of embodiment, the "experience error" of high-altitude thinking.

However, in the Buddhist perspective, "the heart is not in itself two; it is only classified in these two ways according to its workings. The pure heart is the pure heart of our own nature, our natural heart which is not a whit different from the Buddha heart" (BS 141). The ethical breakthrough is not in learning the precepts and in following them as obligations from on high that dictate conduct, for this is seen as the beginner's stage that one refrains from ethical misconduct because "one feels obliged to abstain." Rather, one is to become transformed in such a way that at the level of highest ethical conduct, one follows all the precepts because "one has lost all temptation not to do so," as explained in one of the Pali commentaries (BS 72). It is then that the pure Buddha heart shows itself in spontaneous right action. This transformation of the person can only occur, however, as Takashina says, when the intellect abandons "the understanding of the discriminating impure heart, which thinks 'I' and 'my' and 'I do it'" (BS 143). It is by realizing that we are not isolated rational agencies, self-subsistent subjects confronting a world of objects, by experiencing this through Buddhist practice as bodies that we come to clear the embodied perceptual insertion in the world from misperception and violent and unethical inclination to one that is compassionate and responsive to our intertwinings with other beings. As Dainin Katagiri phrased it: "The Buddhist precepts are not moral or ethical imperatives given by someone that people must follow. They are the ground of Buddha's world . . . in the light of the teaching of impermanence . . . a kind of energy, moving, functioning, working dynamically, appearing, disappearing, always supporting our life" (RM 106–8). It is in clearing the intellect of the categories that block our experience of our insertion in this dynamic, interwoven becoming, we become ethical.

Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty, this enveloping perceptual insertion in the world is not a more superficial sense of the world or solely an absorption in

the simple tasks of solidifying egoistic identity. This perceptual insertion in the world contains layers, juxtapositions, and dimensions, which are mythic, oneiric, emotional, imaginary, and so on, in ways that riddle the nexus of tasks with other meanings, directions, and orientations, which he calls the incompossible or enjambed sense of phenomena in having depth (PhP 264–65). For example, he relates how our practical world of the sense flashes away before the power of musical space to uplift us. In the later, incomplete *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty calls this the "verticality" of the flesh. Each percept vibrates or encroaches upon dimensions of meaning within the thickness of the perceptual as "wild being" (*l'être sauvage*), and as a Buddhist might well say, Merleau-Ponty shows how a universe of meaning dances right there in any simple percept (VI 132). What is most important for ethical considerations is to note that the "verticality" of the flesh is present *in its lateral relations*, in the plane of this perceptual world, without recourse to a vertical ascent beyond the world, to some higher source.

Even in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had defined the power of embodiment's perceptual life as "this subject-object dialogue, this drawing together, by the subject, of the meaning diffused through the object, and, by the object, of the subject's intentions" (PhP 132). There is an unfolding of "the taking up of external by internal and of internal by external" (PhP 132). The reciprocity occurs, however, through the drawing together of what is different. The perception of the world is already entering a dialogue, a give and take, but one in which the perceiver is "a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it" (PhP 211). So that, even though Merleau-Ponty says that "to see a face . . . is to take a certain hold on it" (PhP 253), this hold is not to be understood as an appropriative grasping. Rather, this seeing is a gesture like reaching for the other hand *to be taken hold of, in taking hold of it* or like taking the optimal distance of dialogue with the landscape I am about to paint in order to "join the aimless hands of nature" (PhP 262), as Cézanne put it (quoted by Merleau-Ponty).

This sense of dialogical insertion within the world will be expressed more radically in *The Visible and the Invisible* where he says of the body: "[I]f it touches and sees, this is not because it would have visible before itself as objects: they are about it, they even enter into its enclosure, they are within it, they line its looks and its hands inside and outside. If it touches and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of things as the world is universal flesh" (VI 137). Although asymmetrical and incomplete, there is a mutual enfolding into each other of the perceiver and perceived. When Merleau-Ponty does give a rare and brief mention to how human gazes encounter each other in the world, at the end of the first section of *The Visible and Invisible*, he speaks of the *intermonde*—the "interworld"—"where our gazes cross and our perceptions overlap" (VI 48), which again is a reference to a lateral relation, an encroachment or enfolding among persons and with things and events where there is "an intertwining of my life with other lives, of my body with the visible things, by the intersection of my perceptual with that of others, by the blending of my duration with the other durations" (VI 49). This is the kind of coming together that can give rise to a sensitivity to others that is the deeper ethos of the moral life.

The resonating bodies of living beings are part of an enveloping sense that I can enter, not as confronting "pure individuals, individual glaciers of beings, nor essences without place and without date," but rather as an expressive site, who "have about themselves a time and a space that exist by piling up, by proliferation, by encroachment, by promiscuity." This flesh of meaning into which persons are intertwined is "of the same ontological vibration" and even with individuals of different cultures, communication is possible "through the wild region wherein they have all originated" (VI 115). This is very much parallel to what the editors of *Tricycle*, the Buddhist journal, are trying to articulate in making their readers see the sense of the five Buddhist precepts. They explain that it is problem of our minds as they have constructed reality, given our philosophical sense of the world which has informed our thinking, that there are permanent selves existing in isolation from other permanent selves, to whom we then have the burden and obligation to reach out to in care. Rather than this picture, they explain: "The 'sword of compassion' in Mahayana teachings is used to cut through the illusion of separation, of self and other, of this or that. Compassion may be understood to be the functioning of an interconnected, interdependent reality."[13] The revelations of embodiment in perception and feeling are distorted by what Merleau-Ponty would call the sedimentation of a dualistic worldview. We have failed to see in the West how this transforms us and alters our experienced reality away from an initial kind of "transitivism," as Merleau-Ponty calls it, of corporeality and feeling among young children before the age of three, for whom "there is simply no radical distinction in the child between his own hand and that of another" (PR 149). These feelings of inseparability with the embodiment, affective life, and experience of the other resurface in love, but are largely covered over by our cultural life. Yet Merleau-Ponty believes these childhood experiences remain as a source of possible reintegration with others for "childhood is never radically liquidated" (PR 138). As he says of an important moral feeling, akin to compassion: "Sympathy would emerge from this. Sympathy does not presuppose a genuine distinction between self-consciousness and consciousness of the other but rather the absence of a distinction between the self and the other" (PR 146). It is not only that Merleau-Ponty's sense of the body, and also that of the Middle Way Buddhism moves ethics from norms, reason, and judgment to the affective life of the body as compassionate, but also the nature of the body as mine and the direction of authority as coming from above are also altered, as we will explore in the next and final section.

FLESH AND EMPTINESS OPEN A HORIZONTAL ETHICAL COMMUNITY OF ALL LIVING BEINGS

The contrasting "high-altitude" approach of finding rational, universal ethical norms, the source of which is beyond the immediate perceptual realm rips us from our interwovenness in the world and not only denies us access to the world of immediately experienced compassion, but it also makes us look above ourselves for guidance in ethics, and as part of autonomy leads to not only a substantialized sense of self and embodiment, but also an atomized one. Merleau-Ponty said of such an approach that it takes persons and "transforms them into puppets which move only by springs" (VI 77). It is to be in a state that fails to experience that within embodiment the immediate sense of ethical responsibility lies in our immediate responsiveness to others as emerging from an empty being who is "but a network of relationships and these alone matter." Given his stark characterization of an ethics dictated by a higher authority as reducing humans to puppets, it could be said that for Merleau-Ponty traditional Western dualistic ethics is dangerous. This attitude is echoed in Buddhist concerns, as revealed in this discussion of the meaning of the first Buddhist precept to abstain from killing:

> In Zen and in other Mahayana traditions in East Asia, there is the tendency to translate this precept into the more unfamiliar concept of non-killing. This view emphasizes a nondualistic reality in which there is no killer and no killed. From the Mahayana perspective, all apparent separations are illusions. The meaning of life in these traditions extends beyond biological definition; maintaining a non-dual consciousness supports life, and not maintaining such awareness is considered a form of killing. (RM 113)

Such an ethical notion makes the most serious ethical transgression out of thinking of ourselves or other persons as atomized beings. This is a serious implication to consider: Is the basic framework of thinking of much Western philosophy and ethics, as well as the subject-object way people tend to live their lives, and increasingly so within consumerist culture, a kind of violence itself?

Philosophically, the move to nondualism flies in the face of the long Western tradition since Plato. He inaugurated the assessment that becoming open to the spontaneity of embodiment relegates humans to the realm of non-being, as he put it in *The Republic*. Only aspiring toward the rule of reason and its imposition upon the chaos of embodied, affective life could carry humans toward being—a state they could never achieve while embodied.[14] Yet emptiness is not an embrace of non-being, nor is Merleau-Ponty's sense of intertwining of vortices or ongoing, foundationless emergence. Rather than an opposition of being and non-being, Merleau-Ponty asserts: "A negativist thought is identical to a positivist thought, and in this reversal remains the same in that whether considering the void of nothingness or the absolute fullness of being, it in every case ignores density, depth, the plurality of planes, the background worlds" (VI 68). Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that the other person's body does present me with an absence, "but not just any absence, a certain absence and a certain difference in terms of dimensions which are from the first common to us and which predestine the other to be a mirror of me as I am of him, which are responsible for the fact that we do not have two images side by side of someone and ourselves, but one sole image in which we are both involved" (VI 83). It is an encounter which presents me with as yet unknown depths, but ones that in my own incompleteness are inseparable from others. It is very much akin to the central doctrine of Madhyamikan thought summed up as "a relationship whereby that which does exist derives its being not from itself, but from 'another.'" However, this relatedness "must transcend the polarity of self and other, without negating my deliberations and discriminations. Dependent co-arising signifies both the negation of essence and the validation of such deliberations and discriminations."[15] This identity of being and non-being, articulated by Merleau-Ponty in his descriptions of the flesh of the world and by Buddhist thinkers in articulating emptiness, is also part of how we must think of persons as each being responsible, yet each being woven into a larger fabric, as Merleau-Ponty phrases it. Embodiment is not an atomizing local phenomenon—we are of a shared body with others.

Embodiment for Merleau-Ponty is "the involvement of men in the world, and of men with one another, even if it can only be brought about by means of perceptions and acts, is transversal with respect to the spatial and temporal multiplicity of the actual" (VI 85). No person is an inviolable one, but is a many, entering into promiscuities with others. This is sacrilege to a schema which demands a metaphysically unitary essence as reflection of a Higher One. For Merleau-Ponty, the resort to a being of a higher power is to take on false evidence and to empty signification by cutting off our experience of being that is lateral and transversal, not hierarchical. To claim to have evidence from a God or higher power "is a spell cast over the world that turns our expectations into derision" and "is not only a risk of non-sense, but much worse: the assurance that things have another sense than that which we are in a position to recognize in them" (VI 94). The only metaphysics that Merleau-Ponty could make sense of was an interpretation of this embodied, engaged, perceptual life: "Metaphysical consciousness has no other objects than those of experience: this world, other people, human history, truth, culture."[16] Again, this is parallel to Buddhist nonmetaphysical stance intended by emptiness: "The term dependent co-arising as 'arising only in dependence'—without essence—allows one to inquire into the mutual relationships of all beings. In this sense, the realm of mutual relatedness, of absolute relativity, constitutes an 'absolute' otherness against selfhood and essence. Such an absolute is not a separate world apart from me, but an absolute in which my interrelated activity has absolute meaning."[17] Ethically, it is to our immediate commitments in our shared embodiment that we are called by our interdependence.

In *La Nature*, Merleau-Ponty further articulates how the intertwining of the flesh, of the visible and the invisible, and of the *Ineinander* of the sensible is a *chiasmatic relatedness to animality*. There is a "lateral union of humanity and ani-

mality,"[18] and the human corporeal schema is seen as an incorporation of relations with the world such that "I see through the eyes of the others . . . the world."[19] However, it is not only through the eyes of other humans that I see, but as flesh there is a "circuit of the visible and with the world" that Merleau-Ponty says is an "*Einfuhlung* with the world, with things, with animals, with other bodies that is comprehensible with this theory of the flesh."[20] As entering an unfolding of the world which has depths and dimensionalities wherein perception is the lining of the dream or the dreamlike sense of the waking (the oneiric) and where the dream is the other side of perception, Merleau-Ponty is able to show where both animals and humans are situated within the world in the unfolding of sense that intertwines between both and with the verticality of matter itself, not as an inert substance, but as part of a circulation of sense. As Merleau-Ponty is able to articulate that life on this planet is not built up from the inert to the mechanical to the spiritual, but rather begins with the decentering swirl on all levels of animate and inanimate life in a denser, more plural sense, the sense of transcendence as standing beyond one's own limits of understanding is not to a higher realm, but rather within a circulation of planetary sense. As Merleau-Ponty concludes toward the end of *La Nature*, "the relation between humans and animals is not a hierarchical relation but a lateral one" and the outcome of seeing the human body as insertion into flesh is to "see a relationship of intercorporeity with the biosphere and all animality."[21] This is not only an epistemological and ontological insight, but is also a new sense of the human in relation to the planet as an ethical community. This is the kind of insight that has long been embodied in the spirit of the ethical Buddhist life, when the Buddha in his "great going forth" from the palace stopped in the fields and came to his first great insights into the compassion for all living beings:

> There he saw the soil being ploughed, and its surface, broken with the tracks of the furrows, looked like rippling water. The ploughs had torn up the sprouting grass, scattering tufts of grass here and there, and the land was littered with tiny creatures who had been killed and injured, worms and insects, and the like. The sight of all this grieved the prince as deeply as if he had witnessed the slaughter of his kinsmen. He observed the ploughmen, saw how they suffered from the wind, sun and dust, and how the oxen were worn down by the labor of the drawing. And in the supreme nobility of his mind, he performed an act of supreme pity. He then alighted from his horse and walked gently and slowly over the ground, over come with grief. (BS 42)

This passage is unparalleled in the scriptures of the world for the depth of grief of its spiritual leader for even worms and insects, oxen, and all living beings. It is the sense of our interrelatedness with all living beings that informs the first Buddhist vow when members of the Sangha—the community that is seen as much a treasure as the Buddha and the truth of Buddhist insight, the Three Refuges—vow to become enlightened, not for the sake of their own souls or integrity, not for the good of Buddhists or even humanity, but "for the sake of all living beings."

Merleau-Ponty's articulation of language and of community as found within the "flesh of the world" leads him away from an anthropocentrism that has long dominated the so-called Western tradition of philosophy and, even more destructively, of ethics. The relationship of the face-to-face is first of all with the world, an enveloping world of the body, of flesh, as a dynamic unfolding within the sensible. It is not that the particularly human excellence of the reflective, the abstract, and the categorical cannot enlarge the scope of our homeland, but if Merleau-Ponty's new ontology, informed by a new ontology of nature, is to be taken seriously, then they are not its primordial ground. If we are part of a circulation of sense of which we are not the author, the arbiter, or the highest expression, but one very fascinating and powerful expression in certain distinct avenues, it is not warranted to center decisions of right and wrongful action on our specific rational dicta. To appeal to a judge of "higher authority" of immaterial origin who returns us to this earth from a vantage above it, where we are its central focus and application within this material realm, flies in the face of the world presented to us as flesh, and we as of it. It is a metaphysical belief in some other realm that gives certain of our thoughts foundational status as reflective of this nonevidential revelation.

Given the current historical context of massive alienation from the earth, from embodiment, from the sense of emptiness that reveals the interdependence of all beings, the ethics of appeal to a higher authority has a moral efficacy in prohibiting the continued alienated manipulation of others as alien objects in a setting of indifference. Our faulty traditional dualistic ontology of subject versus object, matter versus spirit, and self versus others has brought us to this dire situation that the reality of other humans is not always accessible to people. The experience of embodied subjects laterally related to other humans, animals, and objects within a world, given an alienated construction of experience, may seem far-fetched. Against this background, the voice of authority may speak against the voices of consumerism, crass materialism, and individualism to which a certain misunderstanding of the body, mind, and self have transported us. To be brought up short in the sort of commonplace exploitation of others, which can lead to violence, is laudatory.

The insertion in the flesh of the world, a prolongation of perception seen as having vertical depths of feeling, imagining, memory, and so on, leads to a different sense of kinship, one akin to the long-ago articulated Buddhist sense of compassion and one that speaks to us in our animality as embodied creatures capable of spontaneous acts of graceful connection. In this ethos, there is a transformation of the relationship between people and within the person that wells up from the world and overruns multiple levels of expression and action. On November 23, 1946, shortly after the ravages of World War II, with its incomprehensible violence toward all others, Merleau-Ponty addressed the *Société francaise de philosophie* to present the main idea of his work and ended with a reflection on the possibility of ethics (PR 12–27). He stated that "nothing guarantees us that morality is possible . . . but even less is there any fatal assurance that morality is impossible" (PR

26). For himself, Merleau-Ponty stated, he found the remedy to skepticism and pessimism was "here as everywhere else the primacy of perception." He did not think that a rationality separated from experience was the answer. He said the Christian God, which of course would also be true of the Hebrew God, offered believers "another side of things," but for him, it was necessary that "the other side of things be visible in the environment in which we live" (PR 27). The primacy of perception is not an ethically neutral phenomenon. As Merleau-Ponty eloquently phrased it: "If, on the contrary, as the primacy of perception requires, we call what we perceive 'the world,' and what we love 'the person,' there is a type of doubt concerning man, and a type of spite, which becomes impossible" (PR 26–27). In other words, the kinship felt within the depths of the perceptual, within the movements of the flesh, brings us to a sense of community for which radical hate and violence toward others becomes undermined and impossible in our transformation from within this sensibility.

The call to authority is with us to stay for the foreseeable future, and with the current dominant ontologies embedded in cultures based on consumption and domination, it is a necessary restraint on violation and also a prod to more relational openness. However, many of us believe that in the longer run, it is necessary for the planet's welfare and greater thriving to cultivate an appreciation of the sense of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty articulated, for only then can we enter into nonhierarchical and dialogical relations with all living and even non-living beings on this planet. There is something wrong with an ethics that bases itself on the sense that we have a unique calling above the destiny of the rest of the planet, and a falsity about its underlying ontology. Reason is an undeniable excellence, but it does not endow us with an exclusive status of spiritual worth represented by notions of soul or personhood or intrinsic value. The Buddhists have long demonstrated all living and non-living beings can only be treated compassionately—together—or, as Merleau-Ponty rightly states, the flesh of the world is fragile.