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Non-Duality

Introduction

*Have you not seen the idle man of Tao who nothing to learn and nothing to do,
Who neither discards wandering thoughts nor seeks the truth?*

–Yung Chia Hsuan Chueh (665-713)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 49).

The tenets of Zen are highly elusive. What we know of the teachings can at first seem like jokes, or masters' quick dismissals of well-intentioned questions via non sequitur. How can such a long-lived tradition, philosophy and religion be sustained with teachings that seem to teach no particular thing but to reject questions and reply with cryptic answers, and whose 'sacred' documents and teachings seem to deny their own sacredness, discouraging the reader from finding the Way therein?

First, we must pose the question, "what is Zen?" D.T. Suzuki answers, "Zen is that which makes you ask the question, because the answer is where the question arises. The answerer is no other than the questioner himself" (Suzuki, 1971: 13). Logical? To corroborate this interpretation, I offer perhaps the most definitive and uncontested explanation of Zen: "A special transmission outside the scriptures, / Not founded upon words and letters; / By pointing directly to [one's] mind / It lets one see into [one's own true] nature and [thus] attain Buddhahood" (Dumoulin 2005). This was presumably spoken by Bodhidharma, considered the very founder of Zen, and so can be seen as the most precise explanation (save mistranslation) if we are to judge Zen authority by its original lineage of teachers. We shall see later why Suzuki's answer is a rather insightful one.

Enlightenment, the Way, or 'Buddhahood' as Bodhidharma refers to it, is thus the central concern of Zen. This idea is perhaps the most elusive one of all, as Zen literature universally insists that Enlightenment is ineffable, and is only to be found and realized within oneself. Moreover, the conceptual understanding of Enlightenment is not only insufficient for its attainment, it can actively mislead and take one further from it.

Throughout this paper, we will explore the meaning of each of Bodhidharma's four statements. We'll investigate the idea of 'true nature' and 'pointing directly to one's mind,' then consider interpretations of Enlightenment, and finally, conclude with examining Bodhidharma's method – this seemingly self-defeating rejection of 'words and letters.' In doing so, we will attempt to distill the many facets of Zen to what I claim is its central, core idea: *non-duality*. We'll introduce this notion first.

Note that whether or not non-duality can be said to be *the*, or even *a*, tenet of Zen will be challenged later – this may be the result of the idea even precluding *itself* when manifested. More generally, note that many of these concepts call for the rejection of abstractions and intellectual conceptualizations, and in fact their very natures cannot fully be expressed with words (as was already mentioned with Enlightenment, and as is expressed in Bodhidharma's first two verses.) However, this does not exclude their academic and philosophical study. Words are imprecise, especially when they attempt to convey ontologies that transcend boundaries implicit by words, but they can approximate meaning to a certain degree, as long as the reader keeps their inexactitude in mind.

Non-duality

Subject and object influence each other. / Light and darkness are mutually dependent. / There is neither mind nor world to rely on, / Yet do the two interact, mutually.

–Hung Chih Cheng Chueh (1091-1157)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 83).

Duality, or discrimination, is the perception of the world as consisting of separate, independent objects. Importantly, this includes the feeling and perception of an "I" that is contained in one's mind as a distinct entity from the rest of the world. Going through our daily lives, this is most of our conventional way of viewing the world. Thus, non-duality, non-discrimination, can be understood as the non-distinction of separate objects. Which is not to say that 'everything is One,' as that itself would imply that there are separate things to be joined into One. Rather, non-duality can't quite be conceptualized as the *opposite* of duality, since that would immediately imply that the worldview of non-duality is 'different' or 'separate' from our perceived world of duality – which is of course not the case, as non-duality, by definition, does not differentiate any thing, event, or idea at all. Non-duality says that objects and events, abstract and concrete, "are

delineated, not by nature, but by human description, and that the way in which we describe (or divide) them is relative to our varying points of view” (Watts 1957: 50).

Perhaps the perspective of non-duality, in the physical world, can be demonstrated by the somewhat modern scientific argument that an organism can never be seen independently without its environment. For instance, a human is a constantly changing organism, with only a conscious awareness, a nervous system and a sense of memory to make him or her *feel* persistent or permanent. In fact, his or her physical makeup constantly changes with diet and environment. Even thoughts, abstract ideas, ‘live and die’ in only the context of his or her mind, and are otherwise immaterial. One’s ‘attachment’ to such a thought would be perceiving it as an entity on its own, rather than ‘part’ of a greater process (of which it is a part simply because it is picked out and perceived as such.) Indeed, from this perspective, the human is also *part* of his or her world and universe, rather than placed in and forced to confront it. In the same way that the earth formed from the natural, random process of the universe, and that life on it evolved by product of the earth’s resources and circumstance, human beings are also born as a product *of* the earth, and by extension, the universe. And calling humans intelligent would seem to also imply the intelligence of the system from which they were *produced*, and thus we start to see emerging what could be described as a ‘super-Self’ that is the force ‘behind,’ or ‘of,’ the universe, or simply, that *is* the Universe – that which encompasses absolutely everything without distinction (Watts, 1966: 97-99).

‘Forgetting,’ then, that the nature of reality is non-dual, “the result is that the intellectually dichotomized self is placed above and over the underlying one which is true absolute Self transcending all discriminatory distinction. As this ultimate Self is above all forms of dichotomy, it is neither inner nor outer, neither metaphysical nor psychological, neither objective nor subjective” (Suzuki, 1971: 14-15). With this view, the distinct perceptions of ego, *including its own self-perception*, are ‘illusions’ – a mere convenient measuring of the world.

Of course, the conceptual understanding of non-duality is entirely different from the true *feeling* or *realization* of non-duality, as any intellectual conception relies on there *existing* an ego to intellectualize and understand. The genuine *realization* of non-duality would therefore necessarily involve the dissolution of one’s notion of ego (a somewhat meaningless phrase, as Zen maintains that one’s ego is illusory to begin with.) We will revisit this state of being when discussing Enlightenment.

Philosophy of Zen

The subject is extinguished with the object. / The object sinks away with the subject. / Object is object because of subject; / Subject is subject because of object. // Know that the two / Are originally one emptiness. / In one emptiness the two are the same, / Containing all phenomena.

–Seng Ts’an (?-606)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 27).

In maintaining the perspective of non-duality, consider the action of a person (i.e. an ego) seeing (viewing, perceiving, experiencing) an object, say an apple. As we have seen, Zen claims that the ego is rather merely a ‘concrete’ manifestation of an unseen Self (“hidden at the empirical level of self-consciousness”), and that the apple, too, is a manifestation of the Self – in other words, that the apple only exists as apple as there is some Self which ‘sees,’ or has ‘realized’ the apple (Izutsu, 1977: 22). So, in fact, the situation we began with becomes the Self ‘perceiving,’ or ‘realizing’ (i.e. what was originally the ego perceiving) its own perception (what was originally the apple, which we know is really a perception of the Self). This can be seen to result in the *concrete* manifestation of the Self’s ‘Experience,’ which itself is purely the act of Experience (Izutsu, 1977: 22). It can thus be seen that through direct realization of the ‘true nature’ of reality, i.e., non-duality, “the separation of the thinker from the thought, the knower from the known, the subject from the object, is purely abstract. There is not the mind on the one hand and it’s experience on the other, there is just a process of experience in which there is nothing to be grasped, as an object, and no one, as a subject, to grasp it” (Watts 1957: 62).

This is what I referred to earlier as the ‘dissolution of the ego.’ But the Zen view sees this collapse in every moment, everywhere, so that this realization brings Oneness with everything, in every waking moment. In this way, one is ‘released’ from *Samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, into *Nirvana*, ‘liberation,’ as the concept of ‘one’ to be birthed or die is nonexistent. Yet, words fail to represent this attainment of *Nirvana* in an accurate, non-dualistic way. The *Lankavatara Sutra* importantly reminds us that “light and shade, long and short, black and white, are relative terms, [...] and not independent of each other; as *Nirvana* and *Samsara* are, all things are not-two. There is no *Nirvana* except where is *Samsara*; there is no *Samsara* except where is *Nirvana*; for the condition of existence is not of a mutually exclusive character. Therefore it is said that all things are non-dual as are *Nirvana* and *Samsara*.” And, “those who, afraid of the sufferings

arising from the discrimination of birth-and-death (*Samsara*), seek for *Nirvana*, do not know that birth-and-death and *Nirvana* are not to be separated from one another; and, seeing that all things subject to discrimination have no reality, (they) imagine that *Nirvana* consists in the future annihilation of the senses and their fields” (Suzuki, 1932: 67).

The issue here being that the seeking of *Nirvana* as an object to escape “the conventional world of things and events is to admit that it exists in reality,” a dualistic perspective (Watts, 1957: 69). And the moment that *Nirvana* is conceived as object, it becomes necessarily distinct from *Samsara* – our standard, dualistic view of reality. So we conclude that *Nirvana* and *Samsara* are indeed One in ‘reality,’ and “what appears to be the world of form (*rupa*) is really the void (*sunya*)” (Watts 1957: 72). Hence, the famous *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra* (*Heart Sutra*) notes the funny phenomenon that “form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form” (Xuanzang). In other words, Zen claims that any sort of grasping for attainment of *Nirvana* – any desire to ‘transcend’ the world of form – is impossible, because *Nirvana* exists in and is exactly the world of form.

On this subject, Zen master Niu T’ou Fa Jun warns seekers of anything ‘real’:
 “Distinguishing between profane and sacred, / Their vexations flourish. / Splitting hairs deviates from the eternal. / Seeking the real, you give up the true” (Sheng-Yen, 1987: 36). Thus far, it may have seemed like the world of form as ‘illusion’ somehow made it *incorrect*, or not *real*, but indeed Zen does not claim this. In fact, it seems like Zen does not make any claim at all to any Truth – only that you cannot trust, or attach, to either world of *Nirvana* or *Samsara*. And when one is free of attachment and dissolves in non-duality, one ‘becomes’ Enlightened and sees the truth, that there is in fact no Truth – i.e. that neither *Samsara* or *Nirvana* is the Truth. That in fact, the Truth, and thus the nature of reality, is simply Void; it is Nothing. And yet, it contains all the phenomena of the world. The following stanza by Zen master Han Shan Te Ch’ing reflects on this beautiful idea: “Look upon the body as unreal, / An image in a mirror, the reflection of the moon in the water. / Contemplate the mind as formless, / Yet bright and pure. / Not a single thought arising, / Empty, yet perceptive; still, yet illuminating; / Complete like the Great Emptiness, / Containing all that is wonderful” (Sheng-Yen, 1987: 93).

Enlightenment

Bodhi [(awakening)] has always existed; / No need to preserve it. / Vexation has never existed; / No need to eliminate it.

– Niu T'ou Fa Jun (594-657)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 38).

You need not seek the real, / Mind originally is Buddha. / The familiar becomes remote, / The strange seems familiar. // Day and night, / Everything is wonderful. / Nothing you encounter confuses you. / These are the essentials of mind.

– Han Shan Te Ch'ing (1546-1623)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 94).

As we have seen, and as the stanzas above illustrate, Enlightenment is walking the line of absolutely no attachment and no grasping (not even of the concept of non-grasping itself) which would weigh one down to the wheel of karma, or the cycle of life and death, things and events. Zen master Pai Chang's teachings reflect this: "Now if one does not cling to what *is* and what *is not*, also to this very idea of non-clinging, and to the awareness of this idea as well, one is a great man of good counsel" (Luk, 1975: 71).

Thus, an Enlightened one acts completely accordingly with the great Self (God, Universe, *Dao*, Nothing, etc.), completely spontaneously and genuinely, and thus his or her awakening is described as 'sudden.' This is in contrast to many schools of Buddhism other than Zen, for which Enlightenment is remote, seeming to require lives of patient effort and meditation. But in Zen, awakening feels like something quite natural, "something startlingly obvious, which may occur at any moment. If it involves a difficulty, it is just that it is much too simple" (Watts, 1957: 83). This state of mind is also referred to by the state of 'no-mind,' where no thoughts or attachments impede the perfectly natural action of the individual. This is the full realization of non-duality, where there is no perceived separation between self and Self, *Nirvana* or *Samsara*, and there is no conflict of truth or reality – one simply surrenders to the flow.

Chang Chen-Chi offers an approximate description of such a state: "*Wu* [(Enlightenment)] is the direct experience of beholding, unfolding, or realizing the Mind-essence in its fullness. In essence it is illuminating yet void, serene yet dynamic, transcending yet immanent, free yet all-embracing" (Chen-Chi, 1978: 120). Yet, the limitations of language and words, which necessarily create boundaries and are unable to, for instance, precisely refer to Nothing, without meaning *something*, we know that no combination of words could properly

capture this experience. In the words of Master Tsung Kao, after an attempt at an explanation of Enlightenment: “Alas! I explain [the matter] to you in all these words simply because I am helpless! If I say in its literal sense that there is something to work with, I then betray you!” (Chen-Chi, 1978: 63).

Teaching and practice

The Way is perfect like great space, / Without lack, without excess. / Because of grasping and rejecting, / You cannot attain it. / Do not pursue conditioned existence; / Do not abide in acceptance of emptiness.

–Seng Ts’an (?-606)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 27).

Now we return to our original questions. How does one teach something which cannot be taught with words, only found within oneself? What do nonsensical, illogical, non sequitur answers have to do with training a student to Enlightenment?

Before exploring these questions, it is important to remember that, while this paper has thus far attempted to describe the process of one’s training in Zen, and the ‘attainment’ of Enlightenment, it has done so solely with abstract concepts. It uses words that don’t quite resonate what it intends them to, such as the idea of Reality being at once ‘graspable and ungraspable,’ where, such a notion is linguistically and logically impossible – “the ungraspable when so pronounced is already grasped and here begins and ends the study of Zen” (Suzuki, 1971: 19). So, when Bodhidharma says that one must point “directly to *one’s mind*” to see “one’s *own* true nature,” rather than rely on “the scriptures” and “words and letters,” he indicates that Enlightenment is only possible if one realizes the truth within him- or herself, and that a mere conceptual understanding is meaningless. Chang Chen-Chi differentiates *understanding* and *realization*, and clarifies Zen’s view on conceptual knowledge: “To understand Zen through an intellectual approach should not be confused with the direct realization of Zen Truth. [...] What Zen objects to is not the intellection or conceptual knowledge as such, but clinging to intellection, or to conceptualization within the clinging pattern” (Chen-Chi, 1978: 118-119).

Of course, this elusive, highly personal, and nonlogical nature of Zen knowledge makes it highly difficult to transmit to others, which is why Zen literature and practices may seem confusing or esoteric. And due to the impossibility of expressing the central ideas in Zen in a

way that would be truly ‘understood’ by another, many times teachers may teach something false but that can illustrate a point well, or tell students to perform certain tasks (which of course, have nothing to do with true Enlightenment, as they’d be attached to the tasks and acting in a non-free way.) This method is known as *upāya*, an incomplete teaching that serves to guide the student to the Way. Chán scholar Bernard Faure describes this process: “the teaching of the Chán patriarch Daoxin also showed a dual structure, corresponding to the two aspects—sudden and gradual—of practice. Daoxin first establishes a whole range of mental exercises, only to negate them later in the name of ‘spontaneity.’ The point of these ‘spiritual exercises’ is to go through all mental artifacts, through the ‘conventional truths’ of *upāya*, before eventually discarding them upon reaching ultimate truth” (Faure, 1994: 53). These ‘spiritual exercises’ include practices such as the *kōan* practice or *zazen* meditation, whose purposes are to assist the student to discard all of their attachments and become liberated.

Kōan

“Listen to the sound of one hand clapping!” (Izutsu, 1977: 170).

“Once a monk asked Jōshū, ‘Tell me what is the significance of the First Patriarch’s coming from the West (i.e. What is the ultimate truth of Zen Buddhism)? / Jōshū replied, ‘The cypress tree in the courtyard!’” (Izutsu, 1977: 169).

A *kōan*, which means in Zen terminology “a special problem or theme for meditation,” is “an expression in paradoxical, shocking or baffling language, of ultimate Reality as Zen understands it” (Izutsu, 1977: 167). It, therefore, attempts to directly express the Being, or Experience, of the undifferentiated Self. Given by a master to his students and for the most part deliberately meaningless, its purpose is to confound the student at the level of discursive thinking and trigger in them an awakening to a level of existential understanding, beyond the reach of the intellect (Izutsu, 1977: 167). In other words, to break free from his or her mind and let go of any attachment to the meaning of his or her own thoughts, or the words spoken by the master for that matter.

While their constructions, language, and replies may look most absurd, in general *kōans* attempt to lead the student to ‘undifferentiated’ understanding, or the realization of non-duality, and thus sudden Enlightenment. Remember that the nature of non-duality almost immediately

precludes any sensical and accurate statement in any language. So, the purpose of the absurdity is to demonstrate the absurdity of trying to comprehend non-duality, the true nature of reality, with one's intellect. But when words are used conventionally, it is difficult for us not to garner their meaning, and thus we become fascinated with the illusion of dualism and are prone to confusion and suffering. Consider one's anxiety of 'dying,' which, from the non-dualist perspective is senseless. If it were put into dualistic terms, it could be seen as that person asking the question "what happens to my fist when I open my hand" (Watts, 1957: 64). The question's lack of meaning is simply a matter of convention of language, and yet, when considered deeply (or rather, not deeply at all), the analogy is on-point.

Zazen and Dharma

Using the mind to maintain quietude, / You still fail to leave the sickness. / Birth and death forgotten -- / This is Original Nature.

– Niu T'ou Fa Jun (594-657)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 36).

Zen literature seems to speak strongly against confusing Dharma (its method, practice, 'laws') with the Way itself. This has already been established, as we've seen that the Way to Enlightenment requires none other than the individual's own full realization of non-duality. This is to say, it is fully possible and would be unsurprising that an Enlightened being happened to act fully according to Dharma, but it is important to distinguish this from one's Enlightenment coming about from adherence to Dharma. The consequent effects of Enlightenment also function similarly – one will not become Enlightened simply by acting spontaneously, or being fully 'in the present,' but rather, these are symptomatic of Enlightened beings. To avoid this confusion, which may be introduced in *upāya* training (for instance, the *upāya* may make it seem like Enlightenment is attainable as an objective) some Zen masters are careful to clarify that mere adherence to Dharma will be effective only in making the student perhaps more *conducive* to seeing the Way. Pai Chang points out this misunderstanding plainly in saying, "he who thinks he can preach and can expound (the Dharma) and says, 'I am a monk, you are my disciples' speaks the language of demons" (Luk, 1975: 71).

Even for meditation, the most common and fundamental practice among the religions of the far east, Zen seems to claim that *zazen* alone won't lead to Enlightenment. As illustrated in

the verse by Niu T'ou Fa Jun above, quietude achieved through meditation is still a conscious action – an activity, an attachment – which cannot lead to any true insight. Rather, Zen maintains that Enlightenment occurs suddenly, in the blink of an eye, as Huang Po maintains, “though others may talk of the Way of the Buddhas as something to be reached by various pious practices and by sutra-study, you must have nothing to do with such ideas. A perception, sudden as blinking, that subject and object are one, will lead to a deeply mysterious wordless understanding; and by this understanding will you awake to the truth of Zen” (Blofeld, 1994). Han Shan Te Ch'ing elaborates, mentioning that these practices are just aids and will eventually fade away with Enlightenment: “Reciting mantras or contemplating mind / Are merely herbs for polishing a mirror. / When the dust is removed, / They are also wiped away.” (Sheng-Yen, 1987: 94). This verse reminds the reader that mantras and meditation are simply tools to aid in realization of *Nirvana*, and yet, it makes reference to mind being like a mirror that must be polished and its dust removed. This same concept was critiqued by Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, in the well-known story of his transmission – where, in a poetry contest of sorts for the patriarchy, he replied to a poem regarding diligently polishing and removing dust from the “mind” mirror with the following verse: “Bodhi originally has no tree, / The mirror also has no stand. / Buddha nature is always clean and pure / Where is there room for dust?” (Yampolsky, 1967: 132). Perhaps Han Shan Te Ch'ing means to embed *upāya* within his reminder to reject the Dharma as being the Way, or perhaps his teachings vary from the Sixth Patriarch's, which is indicative of the lack of rigid rules regarding teaching of Zen practice.

Conclusion

Not dying, not born, / Without form or name, / The Tao is empty and tranquil. / The myriad phenomena are equal. // What is of value? What is cheap? / Where is there shame or glory? / What is excellent or inferior? / How can there be heavy and light?

– Shih Wang Ming (6c. A.D.)

(Sheng-Yen, 1987: 11).

This paper's excursion into Zen philosophy was an attempt at seeing behind the veil of seemingly impenetrable ideas. While its teachings may seem cryptic and esoteric, its message of non-duality, when continuously applied, is at heart remarkably simple and clear. But it is also important to keep in mind that Zen transmission was heavily reliant on student/teacher

relationships. Due to variance in capacities and aptitudes, Zen masters' teachings had to be highly individualized, and thus styles vary greatly, from the most bizarre *kōans* to the clearest instructions. And yet, although Zen claims to be a “special transmission outside the scriptures with no dependence upon words and letters,” Zen monks ironically wrote the most books of any other Buddhist sect in China (Chen-Chi, 1978: 119). Furthermore, learning Zen on one's own without a master can be difficult as one can delude him- or herself into understanding without an experienced master to curb and constantly check this ‘understanding.’

As for seeking Enlightenment, we've already seen that it cannot be sought after, so reading books, no matter how fascinating, won't do one any good if Enlightenment is their goal. Here I turn to Jiddu Krishnamurti's message on becoming free from an organization and to seek truth within. I find this following statement from his speech, *Truth is a Pathless Land* extremely fitting with the Way of Zen: “I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. [...] A belief is purely an individual matter, and you cannot and must not organize it. If you do, it becomes dead, crystallized; it becomes a creed, a sect, a religion, to be imposed on others. [...] Truth cannot be brought down, rather the individual must make the effort to ascend to it” (Krishnamurti, 1929).



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