This Discrete Charm of *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness) and Zen in the Art of Basketball

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Teachings about *śūnyatā*-emptiness play a central role in Mahayana Buddhism. They are also among the most difficult teachings to grasp, both by those who analyze Buddhism in an intellectual way and by those who practice Buddhism (including the practice of meditation within a Buddhist context). At the same time, the game of basketball and the rituals surrounding it are sometimes hard to appreciate by those who are not already basketball aficionados. Somehow, basketball fans perceive the game only in terms of shallow entertainment in a competitive environment. Consequently, they tend to miss the philosophical, spiritual, and even mystical aspects of the game (and of sports in general). I argue in this essay that the language and rituals surrounding the game of basketball provide 'windows' to what is called by Buddhists *śūnyatā*. Thus, these language and rituals help us to understand phenomenology of meditative states as well as the related metaphysics and epistemology developed in the context of Mahayana Buddhism (especially Zen Buddhism). In turn, the language and rituals developed within the tradition of Zen help us to understand what sometimes happens on the basketball court.

Preliminaries: Early Buddhist Metaphysics

Early Buddhist texts postulate that reality consists of basic 'atomic' existents, named *dharmas*, that are grouped into five *skandhas* (literally, heaps or aggregates); namely, form or body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), mental formations and volitions (*saṃskāra*), perceptions (saṃjñā), and consciousness or awareness (vijñāna).

All schools of Buddhism also subscribe to the doctrine of dependent origination (Sanskrit *pratītyasamutpāda*; Pali *paṭiccasamuppāda*).[1] There are several different and arguably conflicting renditions of this doctrine presented in the Buddhist canon, ranging from six to twelve causal steps (*nidānas*) that indicate how a given phenomenon (*dharma* or a combination of *dharmas*) arises.[2] The core common to all schools of Buddhism

[1] As Mathieu Boisvert asserted, dependent origination is 'the common denominator of all the Buddhist traditions throughout the world, whether Theravada, Mahayana or Vajrayana' (Boisvert, 1995, pp. 6–7).

[2] The most popular version has twelve links. Most likely, it attempts to combine several other conflicting accounts. Consequently, it is doubtful that this version is fully coherent (cf. Siderits, 2007, chapter 2).

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implies that all phenomena depend on each other. As the point is expressed in *Assutavā Sutta*:

> When this is, that is.
> From the arising (*uppada*) of this comes the arising of that.
> When this isn't, that isn't.
> From the cessation (*nirodha*) of this comes the cessation of that.[3]

The teaching of dependent arising implies that phenomena are empty of the self-sufficient and eternal essences and of their own being. Rather, their nature or what they 'happen to be' is determined by a number of factors and conditions. Thus, the dependent arising took upon the label of *śūnyatā,* usually translated into English as emptiness.

The term gained prominence, especially through the Mahayana Buddhist sutras (and other texts) belonging to the canon of Perfect Wisdom (*Prajna Paramita*). To sample from one of the shortest, best-known, and most influential texts named the Heart Sutra of Perfect Wisdom (*Prajna Paramita Hridaya*):

> Form is emptiness (*śūnyatā*); emptiness is form.
> Emptiness is no other than form; form is no other than emptiness.
> Likewise, feelings, perceptions, mental formations,
> compositional factors, and consciousness are empty.
>
> In emptiness, there is no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind:
> no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, nor what the mind takes hold of.
>
> There is no birth, no death, no being nor non-being,
> no defilement, no purity, no growth or decay.

There are literally hundreds of English translations of this sutra, and virtually all of them render the crucial passages as making an assertion that there is no form (body), no mind, no senses, and so on for all phenomena and concepts.[4] This fact is faithful to both Chinese and Tibetan renditions of the text. Taken literally, and assuming that this passage

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[3] Translated from Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2005).

[4] Almost every Mahayana Buddhist temple offers a slightly different translation that is usually prepared for chanting. There are also numerous more literal scholarly translations. What is offered in the text is a compilation based on several sources. We should notice, however, that there are also questions about how the sutra should be translated and what it tells us about metaphysical, conceptual, and phenomenological issues surrounding Mahayana Buddhism. I expand on this point in the next note.

expresses important metaphysical truths, the sutra asserts that basic existents (*dharmas*), their aggregates, concepts we use to organize them, and so on and so forth are all non-existing. That is, the sutra implies that nothing is real. These apparent nihilistic connotations are troubling in at least two ways.

First, these connotations seem to contradict common sense; for it seems obvious that we have eyes, ears, and all the rest, and we use them to perceive colors, hear sounds, and so on.[5] Perhaps even more importantly, the apparent nihilistic connotations of the sutra are also existentially troubling. This is the case because we tend to worry that reaching the ultimate reality of emptiness is like falling into a hole in the universe, and that being in this state without mind, thought, consciousness, and so on is equivalent to the state of lobotomizing ourselves. And these are not pleasant feelings.

Now, supposedly, Buddhists have relatively little difficulty in grasping *śūnyatā* because for them, the concept has automatically positive connotations. In fact, however, the difficulty is not culturally bound. Historically, Buddhism has developed in a dialogue with various systems based on the authority of the Vedas (collectively classified as various forms of Hinduism). From a Buddhist point of view, all these traditions fall into a trap of *eternalism*. In particular, one of the central metaphysical components of all these systems is the concept of an eternal and unchanging *atman* (usually translated as self or soul) and the concept of eternal and perfect *Brahman* (usually understood as the Perfect or Divine state of Being or God). Atman is what endures through changes that occurring

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[5] Just few years ago, the contemporary Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh (2014), offered a significantly different translation of the Heart Sutra that renders key passages about *śūnyatā* as follows:

> That is why in Emptiness,
> Body, Feelings, Perceptions,
> Mental Formations and Consciousness
> are not separate self entities.

And the same for the eighteen realms of phenomena, the six sense organs, the six sense objects, the six consciousnesses, the twelve links of interdependent arising, and so on. Thich Nhat Hanh offers three reasons for his interpretation. First, a denial that body exists flies in the face of common sense that is embraced by Zen masters (and, we should add, by all mainstream forms of Buddhism). To use an example involving the great 13th century Vietnamese Master, Tue Trung, when a student offered his understanding of the Sutra as implying that 'there is no nose,' Tue Trung, immediately pinched and twisted the novice's nose. In great agony, the novice cried out 'Teacher! You're hurting me!' And the master responded, 'Just now you said that the nose doesn't exist. But if the nose doesn't exist, then what's hurting? Second, the Chinese patriarch who originally compiled the Heart Sutra some 2000 years ago was not sufficiently skillful in using language. Thus, he rendered the crucial fragment as 'Here, in emptiness, there is no form (i.e., bodily features)' as opposed to, 'body does not exist as a self-sufficient or an independent entity' (and the same for other phenomena, combinations of phenomena, concepts, and so on and so forth). This original mistake was perpetuated by other translators and interpreters. Third, the beginning of the sutra states that 'form (and so on) is emptiness and emptiness is form.' This implies that the sutra acknowledges that, in a sense, there is body (and so on). So, if the later part were to deny the existence of body ('here, in emptiness, there is no body' and no other phenomena), the sutra would be internally inconsistent. Thich Nhat Hanh goes as far as to challenge the famous *gatha* attributed to the 6th Patriarch of Chan Buddhism *Daijan Huineng* (638 – 713), containing phrases 'there is no Bodhi tree' and 'nothing has ever existed.' Philip Yampolsky offers, however, a very different rendition of the poem and observes that these phrases do not exist in the earliest extinct version of the sutra (Yampolsky, 1967, p. 132, note 38). If this is correct, Huineng committed no error attributed to him by Thich Nhat Hahn simply because he did not write a poem traditionally attributed to him. What is caught in the error of rendering the *Prajna Paramita* canon in apparently nihilistic terms is Buddhist interpretative tradition rather than the 6th Patriarch himself.

in our bodies and minds. The point of spiritual practice is to bring atman to harmony or unity with Brahman. (Various schools of Hinduism give different interpretations of what exactly this unity or harmony entails).

By contrast, one of the basic truths of Buddhism is the teaching of *anatman* (Sanskrit) or *anatta* (Pali), implying that there is no separate and enduring self or soul. *Śūnyatā* is an extension of this teaching. Just as there is no self, there are no separate and enduring things (or, in Buddhist terminology, both self and things are empty of 'own being'). To wit, postulating atman and Brahman is considered in Buddhism as one of two extremes: it is the error of *eternalism*. The rejection of atman, Brahman, and all things and phenomena (and accepting instead that all is emptiness) seems a form of nihilism not only to non-Buddhists, but also to Buddhists. To give but one example, the Dalai Lama observed in one of his books on interreligious dialogue the following:

> Once I spoke to an Indian Buddhist monk about the Buddhist doctrine of anatman, the theory of no-self, or no soul. He was a serious practitioner and, in fact, had taken ordination from me. When he first heard this expression, he was so uncomfortable, he was literally shivering; he simply could not relate to the concept. I had to soften the impact with further explanation. It took him a long time to truly grasp the meaning of the anatman doctrine (The Dalai Lama, 1996, p. 98).[6]

Similarly, many practitioners report knowing people, sometime close friends, who abandon practice within a Buddhist context because they perceive the tradition to be nihilistic. To wit, grasping *śūnyatā* is a general difficulty; it is a problem that transcends one's cultures and one's religious affiliations and commitments. To solve this problem, we need some tools to make this concept more accessible.[7]

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[6] Like Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism stands on the philosophical principles originally formulated in the context of *Madhyamaka*. One of the greatest *Madhyamaka* monks-philosophers Nagarjuna (c. 150–c. 250 CE), who provided very influential elucidation of the middle-way and *śūnyatā*, is considered a patron-patriarch by both the Tibetan and Zen traditions.

[7] To resolve the apparent tension between the point of view of common sense and the ultimate perspective of *śūnyatā*, Mahayana tradition interprets the *Prajna Paramita* sutras in terms of two truths. The conventional (or relative) truth implies that standard ways of perceiving and then describing reality use the 'conventional designators'; i.e., terms that are good enough for practical purposes of life. Still, these conventional truths do not fully describe what reality really is. The ultimate truth implies that everything is empty. From this ultimate point of view, the conventional ways of talking and thinking stand for nothing that is ultimately real. In turn, the point of spiritual practice is to awaken ourselves to the fact that the conventional truths and the absolute truth are just two different ways of relating to the fundamental oneness of *śūnyatā*-as-phenomena and phenomena-as-*śūnyatā* (as opposed to pointing to two different realities). The concepts of *śūnyatā* and two interrelated truths provided the foundation for the works of Nagarjuna. As he observed in his *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (24.18-19; cf. Garfield, 1995, p. 304):

> Whatever arises dependently is explained as emptiness
> Thus, a dependent designation is itself the middle way.
> There is nothing whatever that is not dependently arising.
> Therefore, nothing exists that is not empty.

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Śūnyatā as Emptiness but Not Nothingness:
Some Phenomenological Aspects of Spiritual Practice

Typical translations of Mahayana texts seem to require immediate clarifications that explain away their apparent nihilistic connotations. If this is the case, however, then why are these apparently nihilistic terminologies and modes of translation so broadly spread?

In the context of this article, the most important explanation seems to rest in some phenomenological and psychological considerations related to deep meditative states.[8] These experiences are generally treated as 'discoveries' of the truth about the ultimate reality and tend to lead practitioners to adopt both a) certain ways of speaking about reality, and b) a metaphysical outlook corresponding to these ways of speaking. Let me explain.

Zazen practice, and especially meditation with *koans*, is conducive to leading practitioners to deep forms of *samadhi*-concentration and, hopefully, to eventual awakening. 'Joshu's dog,' the first koan from the famous thirteenth century collection named *Wúménguān* (Japanese: *Mumonkan*) is frequently assigned as the first 'break-through' case; i.e., one that is used to facilitate the initial experience of *kenshō*-awakening that is subsequently deepened by working on subsequent koans. According to this case:

> A monk asked Joshu in all earnestness, 'Does a dog have the Buddha Nature or not?' Joshu replied 'Mu!' (i.e., literally, 'no' or 'it does not').

Now, according to numerous sutras, all sentient beings have a Buddha nature, understood as an inherent ability to reach awakening and thus to realize the Buddhahood. So, why does the patriarch Joshu (Chinese: Zhàozhōu Cōngshěn, 778—897) reply that a dog does not have a Buddha nature? It seems like we encounter here a contradiction.

The point of zazen meditation is to resolve this apparent contradiction by exhausting and transcending all intellectual attempts at doing so, including thinking in such terms as 'have' or 'does not have,' and even 'dog' and 'the Buddha Nature.' This is supposed to lead to an intuitive insight into the true meaning of Joshu's *Mu*.

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[8] There are also (at least) two more formal arguments leading to adopting this (apparently) nihilistic terminology. They are based on metaphysical and semantic considerations commonly accepted by various schools of Buddhism. On this topic see, for example, Siderits (2007, esp. Chapter 7 ('Abhidharma: The Metaphysics of Empty Persons') and Chapter 9 ('Madhiamaka: The Doctrine of Emptiness') and Garfield (2002, pp. 38 – 39). For the sake of brevity, these more formal lines of reasoning are put in this essay to one side.

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Zazen practice consists, in part, in converting *Mu* (to put things metaphorically) into a 'hammer' or a 'drill' that destroys or breaks through the walls of illusion, leading a practitioner to a realization that all of us, since time immemorial, are already Buddhas.[9] Chinese patriarch Wumen Huikai (Japanese: Mumon Ekai, 1183–1260), who compiled *Mumonkan*, illustrates how intense this work can be in the following commentary:

> [C]oncentrate your whole self, with its 360 bones and joints and 84,000 pores, into *Mu,* making your whole body a solid lump of doubt. Day and night, without ceasing, keep digging into it, but don't take it as 'nothingness' or as 'being' or 'non-being.' It must be like a red-hot iron ball which you have gulped down and which you try to vomit up, but cannot. You must extinguish all delusive thoughts and feelings which you have cherished up to the present. After a certain period of such efforts, *Mu* will come to fruition, and inside and outside will become one naturally. You will then be like a dumb man who has had a dream. You will know yourself and for yourself only. Then all of a sudden, *Mu* will break open and astonish the heavens and shake the earth. […] Though you may stand on the brink of life and death, you will enjoy the great freedom. In the six realms and the four modes of birth, you will live in the samadhi of innocent play (Yamada, 1979, p. 14).

The (essentially) same process is described by the Japanese patriarch of Rinzai Zen Hakuin Ekaku (1683 – 1768) in his description of his first awakening:

> When I was twenty-four years old, I stayed at the Yegan Monastery of Echigo. ['Joshu's Mu' being my theme at the time.] I assiduously applied myself to it. I did not sleep days and nights, forgot both eating and lying down, when quite abruptly a great fixation (tai-i [literally, 'a great doubt') took place. I felt as if freezing in an ice-field extending thousands of miles, and within myself there was a sense of utmost transparency. There was no going forward, no slipping backward; I was like an idiot, like an imbecile, and there was nothing but 'Joshu's Mu.' […] Sometimes my sensation was that of one flying in the air. Several days passed in this state, when one evening a temple bell struck, which upset the whole thing. It was like smashing an ice-basin, or pulling down a house made of jade. When I suddenly

[9] To simplify matters quite a bit, there are two basic tenets of Mahayana Buddhism and Zen practice. First, we do not need to add anything new to our existence to reach awakening and become a buddha. Second, all we need to do is to dissolve illusions standing in our way of seeing that, since time immemorial, we have already been completed. These tenets can be easily understood intellectually. The problem is that no level of intellectual understanding is sufficient to reach an awakening or an intuitive insight into what these tenets really mean. If our lives are to be transformed, we need to grasp this meaning in a deeply intuitive way that transcends all intellectual ideas. Zazen practice (and other forms of meditation) may lead to this kind of a deeply transforming insight.

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> awoke again, I found I myself was Ganto (Yen-t'ou) the old master [living in the T'ang dynasty], and that all through the shifting changes of time not a bit [of my personality] was lost. Whatever doubts and indecisions I had before were completely dissolved like a piece of thawing ice. I called out loudly: 'How wonderous! How wonderous! There is no birth-and-death from which one has to escape, nor is there any supreme knowledge (*Bodhi*) after which one has to strive' (Suzuki, 1961, pp. 254 – 255).[10]

It is not unusual that, during meditative practice, practitioners may achieve many unusual mental states that are generally characterized as 'transcending words and concepts' and thus, strictly speaking, ineffable.[11] There are, nevertheless, quite a few fragments that give pretty good approximations of how things *seem to be* to someone reaching the deep levels of samadhi. Something that reoccurs in numerous such accounts is the element of ideas and things being dropped, dissolved, shattered, or falling apart. In the remainder of this section, I provide a few examples.

Kao Feng (1238-1285), a master in the later part of Sung dynasty, reached his great awakening through working on the question about the One to which all things return; namely, 'where does this One return?' Commenting on his practice, he observed the following:

> I felt as if this boundless space itself were broken up into pieces, and the great earth were altogether levelled away. I forgot myself, I forgot the world, it was like one mirror reflecting another (Suzuki, 1961, p. 253).

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[10] Still a young and inexperienced monk, Hakuin believed his awakening to be more profound that anything anyone experienced during a few centuries before. As it is part of Zen tradition, he tried to verify it with his teacher Shōju Rōjin (1642–1721). And, interestingly enough, he received a treatment that was identical to what the Vietnamese master, Tue Trung, offered to his student:

> Shōju asked him how much he knew about Zen. Hakuin answered disgustingly, 'If there is anything I can lay may hand on, I will get it all out of me.' So saying, he acted as if he were going to vomit. Shōju took firm hold of Hakuin's nose and said: 'What is this? Have I not after all touched it?' (Suzuki, 1964, p. 53)

This and similar encounters with Shōju forced Hakuin to rededicate himself to his practice. Eventually he reached a realization of such depth that he is universally recognized as one of the two most important figures of Japanese Zen.

[11] In his essay, '*Hua-t'ou*: A Method of Zen Meditation' (2012), a contemporary American scholar and Zen Buddhist, Stuart Lachs provides details of how intense certain ways of practicing with *koans* can be. Lachs focusses on a form of meditation popularized by the Chinese Zen master Ta-Hui (1089 – 1163) who was probably the first to provide a manual of why *hua-t'ou* should be practiced and how to practice it.

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A similar state of deep samadhi was experienced by the Japanese Zen master Kono Bukai Nanshinken (1863–1935), who mentioned it in the following admonishment directed to his students:

> I still remember when I was a young monk practicing in a monastery during one severe winter. I achieved a state when all disappeared. When I was walking, there was nothing at all, not even me who was walking, no path, and no pond in the monastery garden. Though I was looking, there was nothing I saw; though I was listening, there was nothing I heard. In this state of "nonperception," suddenly there was a sound of splashed water. It turned out that I fell into a pond without the slightest idea what happened. […] Only then, finally, I grabbed the pole [someone passed it to me], and people pulled me out. So, how about you? If you go that far and achieve this state of samadhi, you will not even notice it. Then you'll become the real *Mu*. Try hard! Try very hard! One who does not do it cannot be called the real man (Kono Bukai Nanshinken, 2021).[12]

Similarly, the contemporary Zen master Koun Yamada (1907–1989) had a breakthrough experience that he describes as follows:

> At midnight, I abruptly awakened. At first my mind was foggy, then suddenly that quotation flashed into my consciousness: 'I came to realize clearly that Mind is no other than mountains, rivers, and the great wide earth.' And I repeated it. Then all at once I was struck as though by lightning, and the next instant heaven and earth crumbled and disappeared. Instantaneously, like surging waves, a tremendous delight welled up in me, a veritable hurricane of delight, as I laughed loudly and wildly (Kapleau, 2000, p. 229).

Finally, an American teacher Philip Kapleau (1912 – 2004) had the following breakthrough experience during *dokusan* (a face-to-face meeting with his Zen master roshi Hakuun Yasutani):

> 'The universe is One,' he began, each word tearing into my mind like a bullet. 'The moon of Truth –' All at once the roshi, the room, every single thing disappeared in a dazzling stream of illumination, and I felt myself bathed in a delicious, unspeakable delight […] For a fleeting eternity I was alone – I alone was […] Then the roshi

[12] Kono Bukai Nanshinken, 壷庵余滴 (Koan Yoteki) quoted in "Zen no shugyo to tai ken," a monthly column in Rakudo.jp (June 15, 2021), https://rakudo.jp/「禅の修行と体験（２）」2021年06月【no-215】.html.

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> swam into view. Our eyes met and flowed into each other, and we burst out laughing […] 'I have it! I know! There is nothing, absolutely nothing. I am everything and everything is nothing!' I exclaimed more to myself than to the roshi, and got up and walked out (Kapleau, 2000, p. 253).

To wit, it is apparent that at times, from the '(non-)point of view' of a Zen practitioner engaged in deep meditation, it seems like time, space, causation, the ten thousand things and so on are all 'dropped off,' 'shattered,' or 'dissolved.' It is good to recognize, however, that these expressions describe only a phenomenology or psychology of someone being in a deep meditative state; it does not necessarily provide a correct description of what is real.

Even though the phenomenology of one's experience does not necessarily fit reality, there is nevertheless a very natural tendency to project appearances on reality itself. This tendency may lead someone to maintain that, when we conceptualize or think about the reality as *śūnyatā*, there is really no time, no space, no causation, no phenomena, no concepts used in the cognition of things, and no words that can be used to accurately describe them. This is the case because, after all, there is a very intimate connection between the state of deep samadhi that involves emptying one's mind from all ideas and preconceptions and the experience of reality as *śūnyatā*.

All teachers emphasize that deep samadhi is a prerequisite for awakening and that sometimes it leads to awakening. In other words, there seems to be a deep (at least) causal connection between samadhi (understood as a deep focus of the mind that is void of all preconceptions) and the recognition of reality as *śūnyatā* (i.e., the reality that is void of self-sufficient and independently existing entities). Part of this recognition includes mental states that do not involve perceiving the world in terms of time, space, things, and so on. This recognition might explain the persisting (yet misleading) tendency to translate sutras in apparently nihilistic terms: i.e., that in *śūnyatā*, there is no form, no eye, no ear, and so on.

To sum up, putting too much emphasis on the metaphysical aspects of teaching about *śūnyatā* may be a mistake. When we treat *śūnyatā* as a metaphysical view, it implies that nothing has an eternal and unchanging self-nature. In other words, what seem to us as independent solid things are not really solid things at all, but rather processes dependent on everything else. When we treat teaching about *śūnyatā* as a semantical doctrine, the teaching implies that all concepts are complex and depend on each other, and consequently, no term refers to any simple entity. When we treat *śūnyatā* as a teaching about mind and consciousness (and especially about the consciousness of someone in a deep meditative state), it implies that one's mind is empty of

preconceptions and ideas, and this freedom allows practitioners to transcend all illusory views and the world of dukkha-suffering.[13] Clearly, *śūnyatā* implies that all things, ideas, terms, and concepts are interdependent, that all things change depending on their conditions, that no 'thing' has an inherent and independent self-nature, and that we can grasp all of this in an intuitive way by emptying our minds of all preconceptions. But it is just as clear that this is not a form of metaphysical nihilism or non-realism.

Zen in the Art of Basketball

The realization of *śūnyatā* requires at its root to transcend standard concepts and categories (that typically constrain our perceptions) and, in effect, to transcend standard ways of perceiving reality. I will argue now that many of us are already somewhat familiar with what this transcending of ordinary ways of perception entails; thus, we are already somewhat familiar with *śūnyatā*. We are familiar with it because we are directly acquainted with *śūnyatā*, even though not by this name. This is true, in particular, about the practitioners and fans of basketball (and, in fact, of all sports). In this section, I will attempt to show how the practices, expressions, and conventions developed in the context of basketball provide some pointers to (or approximations of) what Zen teachers and practitioners do when they try to realize *śūnyatā* immanent in the 'ten thousand things.'

Playing in the Zone

In his ground-breaking book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, the psychologist Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi develops a theory of getting into a state of *flow* (frequently, and more colloquially, referred to as 'being in the zone' or in the 'groove'). Csíkszentmihályi characterizes *flow* as a total absorption in whatever activity someone pursues to the effect that nothing else seems to matter, including concerns with time, food, ego-self, the apparent goals of activity, and so on (1990, pp. 15, 27). In his interview with *Wired* magazine, Csíkszentmihályi describes flow as being completely involved in an activity for its own sake:

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[13] In his illuminating essay on 'The Integrity of Emptiness,' written from a Theravada point of view, an American Buddhist monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2006) discusses teachings about emptiness contained in two major Buddha's discourses and several minor ones. He observes that, in addition to their metaphysical implications, these teachings point also to an approach to meditation, an attribute of the senses and their objects, and a state of concentration" (2006, p. 68). This integrated approach brings to our attention that emptiness is not just a metaphysical view but rather a strategic mode of perceiving and acting in the world; the mode that is conducive to the liberation from *dukkha*-suffering.

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> The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost (Geirland,1996).

To achieve a flow state, a balance must be struck between, on one hand, the challenge of the task and, on the other hand, the levels of someone's skills. If the task is too difficult, it may lead someone to give up in which case flow cannot occur. If it is too easy, it may lead someone to boredom and apathy. Thus, both skill level and challenge level must be matched and high.

Csíkszentmihályi argues that when we flow, we are not only at our happiest, but also at our most efficient. That is, flow has an instrumental value as a means to achieve some desired goals. Unfortunately, this very fact has also a tendency to undermine the autotelic nature of activity that is necessary to sustain *flow*.[14] As he observes:

> Most people are unimpressed by the fact that flow provides an optimal subjective experience, but their interest immediately perks up at any suggestion that it might improve performance. If it could be demonstrated that a fullback played harder if he was in flow, […] then they would immediately embrace the concept and make a great deal of it. This, of course, would effectively destroy the autotelic nature of the experience (1988, p. 374).

Csíkszentmihályi argues that everyone has this feeling at times. In particular, it is not an infrequent occurrence among athletes.

To illustrate this point with some examples, in the recent history of basketball, no one played more 'in the zone' than Michael Jordan. If we were to listen to basketball afficionados, when Jordan played in the zone, he was 'unconscious' and 'bad.' Indeed, he was so bad that he made some 'ridiculous' plays and did other 'crazy' and even 'unreal' things. And yet, Jordan won six championship rings, was six-times the most valuable player (i.e., was recognized as such in each of his six championship series), had ten scoring titles, earned five awards for being the regular season's most valuable player, and is generally considered as one of the most revered basketball masters of all time. What does Jordan's *flow* (or his playing in the zone) tell us about the concepts, philosophical ideas, and practices developed in the context of Mahayana (and especially Zen) Buddhism? How can *flow* help to elucidate at least some of these ideas?

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[14] By autotelic nature of activity, Csíkszentmihályi means that an agent is totally absorbed by the activity itself instead of being preoccupied with some external goals to which the activity may lead.

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'Playing in the zone' seems a basketball counterpart of what the Buddhists call *samadhi*: that is, the state of total focus and concentration. Just as a basketball player enters the zone, or plays in the zone, the practitioner of *dhyana*-meditation enters samadhi and performs various tasks in the state of samadhi. For example, to reference the Heart Sutra again, 'the Blessed One' [i.e., the Bodhisattva of Compassion, *Avalokiteshvara*] entered the samadhi that expresses the dharma of 'profound illumination.' To slightly paraphrase, the Bodhisattva entered (or was in) a mental state that Buddhists characterize as awakening to the absolute truth in its connection with the phenomenal world. This is how the Bodhisattva realized or experienced that 'all five skandhas are empty' or, again to paraphrase, that the phenomenal world is not different from the world of *śūnyatā*.

It may be tempting to say that the metaphysical aspect of Mahayana Buddhism (that everything is empty) has a basketball counterpart; this is why we sometimes say that what Jordan did was 'unreal.' The following are two analogies. Deep levels of samadhi are unusual, and so is playing in the zone. Being in samadhi allows someone to see an aspect of reality that is usually hidden while playing in the zone allows athletes to do things that are usually impossible to do when *not* in the zone.

It also seems, however, that on the 'metaphysical' interpretation of playing in the zone, the analogies are less than perfect. In the context of basketball, calling something unreal does not seem to be the expression of some deep metaphysical truth. Rather, it seems to indicate the transcendence of typical things and actions by performing something that seems beyond human abilities that sometimes take place on the basketball court.

Jordan and other basketball masters make 'unreal plays' and do 'crazy things' because what they do is not typical. Their plays and actions are not what we usually see during a game. In fact, what they do is so atypical that it defies standard categories that we use to describe human behavior. Thus, sometimes we also say that what they do is 'ridiculous' or 'crazy.' Interestingly enough, these seemingly negative adjectives are much more evocative than the usual ways of extending praise. (More on this topic shortly).

We should remember, however, the teachings about *śūnyatā* are multi-layered. In one aspect, the expression is used to point to the absence of mental and physical impediments that usually constrain our actions. In this respect, the analogies are perfect. This aspect of playing in the zone is discussed in the next section.

Psychology of Playing in the Zone

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The teachings of *śūnyatā* have both psychological and epistemic components. Someone who is awakened to *śūnyatā* has the experiences of reality that are not mediated by typical mental constraints (e.g., seeing things as things, seeing things as separate and independent of each other, seeing things as located in space and time and related to each other through causal laws, and so on). Samadhi and awakening transcend all such categories. A practitioner who reaches deep levels of samadhi 'drops' the ideas of (or thoughts about) having a body, senses, mind, and so on. The realization of reality as empty is possible only when the mind is also empty of all preconceptions and ideas. To quote Nagarjuna:

> Buddhas say emptiness
> is relinquishing opinions.
> *Believers* in emptiness
> are incurable (Batchelor, 2000, p. 103; emphasis added).

Early in my Zen practice, my teacher invited me to take a sip of tea without touching the cup with my hand or my lips. For a while, I was thinking that he might have been urging me to develop a power of telekinesis. What a laughable blunder totally missing what my teacher was really trying to do! Namely, he was inviting me to drop my preconceptions and thoughts about drinking, a cup, tea, and so on; consequently, he was inviting me to simply drink my tea in the state of samadhi, i.e., without thinking about raising a cup with my hand, touching it with my lips, or even there being a separate cup in front of me. Only when I got deeper into the meditative absorption, was I able to realize what was at stake. And only after this moment I was able to begin making a little bit of progress and to demonstrate it in action by, metaphorically speaking, raising a cup without touching it with my hand.

Of course, from a point external to my consciousness (or this stream of life-consciousness), when I was drinking my tea, I was lifting the cup with my hand and touching its edge with my lips (to use standard terms of conventional designation). That much is apparent. Fortunately, from the point of view of Zen practice, I was also able to learn (to some extent) how *not* to think of my actions and *not* to conceptualize them in such terms as 'an action,' 'drinking,' 'a cup,' or 'lips.' From the Zen point of view, dropping those concepts constituted progress.

If we approach Zen teachings and practices in this way, they have clear counterparts on the basketball court. Jordan was so great because (very frequently) he was, metaphorically speaking, 'unconscious,' 'he had no thought about playing basketball' and, indeed, 'he had no thoughts at all.' This is not to say that he was

unconscious and had no thoughts in the same sense as, say, rocks do not have thoughts. If Jordan didn't have mind and thoughts in this literal sense, he would be useless as a basketball player. What being in the zone means is, rather, that he transcended the ways of relating to reality that are typical for most of us.

Now, entering samadhi is not an all or nothing proposition. For one thing, samadhi comes in degrees (more on this topic in section 5). Furthermore, depending on its depth, samadhi may last a longer or shorter period of time. Even the most minuscule distractions can throw practitioners off, take them out of samadhi, and re-introduce self-consciousness, habitual ways of thinking, and all the rest entailed by such distractions. This is true about Zen practice and this is also true about playing in the zone. As Bill Russell observed in his biography:

> But these spells [of mystical feeling] were fragile. An injury would break them, and so would a few bad plays or a bad call by a referee. Once a referee broke a run by making a bad call in my favor, which so irritated me that I protested it as I stood at the line to take my free throws. 'You know that was a bad call, ref,' I said wearily. He looked at me as if I was crazy, and then got so angry that I never again protested a call unless it went against me. Still, I always suffered a letdown when one of those spells died, because I never knew how to bring them back; all I could do was to keep playing my best and hope. They were sweet when they came, and the hope one would come was one of my strongest motivations for walking out there (Russell 1979, pp. 177-178).

Or to quote Bulls' guard Ben Gordon:

> You lose track of time, what quarter it is. You don't hear the crowd. You don't know how many points you have. You don't think. Offensively everything is instinctive. When the feeling starts going away, it's terrible. I talk to myself and say, C'mon, you gotta be more aggressive. That's when you know it's gone. It's not instinctive anymore (*Sports Illustrated*, 2005).

This is quite similar to doing zazen-meditation. A practitioner has control over how to sit, what to do with one's body, how to breathe air in and out, and how to use the breath to generate more intense focus on the koan (or whatever the practice may be). But entering samadhi, and especially a deeper one, is something that happens semi-spontaneously. Reaching awakening is even more 'accidental' and thus less predictable. Still, as a Zen teacher once said, what is in our control is to create conditions conducive to accidents.

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Here is another example showing how fleeting playing in the zone can be. If Jordan had any basketball weakness at all, it was his long-distance shooting; he was at best average from the three-point line. His career average (32.7%) is not great. His average during the 1991-92 campaign (a subpar 27%) was simply bad. Yet, during the first game of the 1992 finals against Portland, he turned into a marksman-assassin. He made all six of his deep-ball attempts in the first half alone which tied a finals' record for 3s in a half. 'Shots started dropping from everywhere," he said, "I started running for the 3-point line. It felt like a free throw, really' (Dodson, 2017).

Then came the famous 'shrug.' Jordan looked towards another NBA great, Magic Johnson (who was sitting at the announcers' table), and shook his head.[15] It was not an act of boastful, arrogant behavior. Rather, it was a humble acknowledgement that he himself could not believe what was happening. But, as it sometimes happens, things tend to go 'sour' when we start to think. It does not matter that our thoughts are humble and unselfish; what matters is that we have them. For, when we have them, we slightly lose our focus, start to hesitate and second guess ourselves, our movements lose the previous grace and precision, and generally, we become a bit less efficient. This one innocent shrug was enough to throw Jordan out of his zone. He attempted 4 more three-pointers in the second half and none of these shots went in. Fortunately, his team did not need them. The Bulls dominated the first game (122-89) and then proceeded to win the series (4-2).

Verbal Plays, Spars, and Tests

Zen training incorporates numerous forms of verbal spars. The tradition evolved from the practice of students traveling around when they reached a certain level of spiritual progress and testing their understanding against the wisdom of prominent teachers. (Alternatively, the teachers traveled to test the understanding of renowned monks and practitioners). These 'dharma-duels' (or duels about the truth) eventually were developed and codified into the system of Zen cases (*koans*) used by other practitioners to deepen their samadhi and to eventually reach awakening. An example may be the Case 11 ('Joshu Tests the Hermits'), from *Mumonkan*:

> Joshu went to a hermit and asked, 'Anybody in? Anybody in?' The hermit thrust up his fist. Joshu said, 'The water is too shallow for a ship to anchor.' Thereupon he left.

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15 'Michael Jordan shrugs after making six 3's in first half of 1992 Finals Game 1,' https://youtu.be/03GT8q3BCZY .

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> Again he went to a hermit's hut and asked, 'Anybody in? Anybody in?' The hermit thrust up his fist. Joshu said, 'Freely you give, freely you take away. Freely you kill, freely you give life.' He made a profound bow.
> Mumon's Commentary: Each hermit thrust up his fist *in the same way*. Why is one accepted and the other rejected? Tell me, what is the case of confusion? (Yamada, 1979, p. 63; emphasis added)

It may be tempting to say that there was some difference in their gestures of thrusting up their fists. But this is explicitly denied by Mumon in his commentary to this case where he explicitly asserts that they each raised their fists 'in the same way.' As he adds:

> Furthermore, if you can say that there is a distinction of superiority and inferiority between the two hermits, you have not yet the eye of realization. Neither have you the eye of realization if you say there is no distinction of superiority and inferiority between them (Yamada, 1979, pp. 63-64).

So, why is one hermit criticized while the other is praised? There is an alternative explanation; namely, Joshu does not really approve or disapprove of hermits (or, at least, this is not a primary goal of what he does). Rather, he is testing their understanding and confidence (including their pride and humility) by seemingly extending to them his praise and scorn. Zen Master Koun Yamada makes this point quite explicitly in his *teisho* (a formal Zen talk) on this koan:

> *We must not think that Joshu left without casting a glance at the hermit's face, however, to see his response to the abuse*. If a hermit showed any sign of having been offended or irritated even a little by the words of scorn, his practice must have been shallow indeed. If his consciousness was as steady and immovable as the fist itself, his face would not have shown even a trace of irritation (Yamada, 1979, pp. 64-65, emphasis added).

Similarly, commenting on Joshu's apparent praise, Yamada observes the following:

> Here, too, as he was leaving, *Joshu would have glanced at the hermit's face to see his response to the praise*. If the hermit showed even the slightest sign of pleasure at his words, Joshu would have discovered the degree of the hermit's state of consciousness (Yamada, 1979, p. 65, emphasis added).

In his commentary on this koan, another contemporary Zen teacher Katsuki Sekida observes the following: 'Whether or not Joshu praised or blamed them justifiably did not affect the two hermits; they were well aware of Joshu's devious methods' (Sekida, 1995, p. 52). But to make the final point, dharma duels are invariably two-way streets. As Koun Yamada observes in his commentary, 'It was like two mirrors reflecting each other. So, when Joshu was examining the hermits, they must have been examining him, too' (Yamada, 1979, p. 65).

Dharma duels have a counterpart on the court of basketball. Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of trash-talking. There are some known instances of talking trash that involve exceedingly negative and demeaning approaches, e.g., making points about someone's background or family. This kind of trash-talking is clearly beyond the pale. Fortunately, it is also a rarity.[16] Klay Thompson (the Golden State Warriors' guard), explains the unwritten rules of trash-talking as follows:

> The only time it's really crossing the line, is bringing someone's family into it or talking about race or gender or something. But when it's just bad words or some cuss words, man, that's emotions. You have to let it go and let it stay on the court (Spears, 2016).

The trash talk does not have to be, however, overtly negative or negative at all. Sometimes it is neutral. For example, the first game of the 1997 finals between the Chicago Bulls and the Utah Jazz, taking place on Sunday, June 1, was tied with just 9 seconds on the clock and the score tied, Utah power forward Karl Malone (nicknamed, 'The Mailman') was on the line ready to shoot two penalty shots. Scottie Pippen whispered to him: 'the mailman does not deliver on Sunday.' Malone missed both shots; a rarity for a player destined to make the Hall of Fame. The Bulls rebounded the ball, scored, and won the game and eventually the series. It could be that Malone's concentration was not quite deep enough. Therefore, he allowed himself to be thrown off by Pippen's seemingly innocent remark and failed to score in the clutch. This momentary lapse of concentration might have cost his team a championship.

There are also examples of positive trash-talking that may praise someone and their actions; namely, an athlete may be praised for doing something exceedingly well. The famous tennis player, John McEnroe, was skillful in using just this technique:

[16] Discussing ethical aspects of trash talking goes beyond the scope of this paper. On this topic see, e.g., Kershnar, (2015), Dixon (2018), Duncan (2019), and Johnson and Taylor (2020).

> When faced with an opponent whose forehand, for instance, was working smoothly and perfectly, McEnroe would supposedly compliment him on it as they changed sides: 'Wow, your forehand is really great today.' His opponent would then, of course, suddenly start botching easy shots in the next set (Slingerland, 2014, p. 97).

Apparently, praising someone is sometimes conducive to breaking their focus, too.

Like dharma duels, trash-talking is a two-way street. Talking the wrong kind of trash, or talking trash to the wrong person, may increase their concentration and put them in an even deeper zone as frequently happened with Jordan. Nothing seemed to motivate him more than real or perceived digs and insults. According to John Affleck, the director of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State University, 'Jordan had the rare gift of turning the slightest dig into an extraordinary source of motivation. Taunts were dares. Adversity he welcomed, in a curious way, because it could spur him to become even greater' (Siegel, 2015).

There are other similar instances involving other basketball greats. Reggie Miller is known as an exquisite marksman and also a superb trash-talker. On one occasion, while still a rookie, he tried to get into Larry Bird's head while the legend was on the free-throw line. Bird looked at him and said, 'Rook, I am the best shooter in the world? Are you trying to say something?' Then, without the slightest hesitation, he made both throws. On another occasion, Mark Aguirre and Larry Bird were guarding each other in a close game. Aguirre hit a three-point straight into Bird's face and said, 'Take a look at that!' 'Take a look at what?' Bird calmly responded and immediately hit three consecutive threes. A future Hall of Famer, Dominique Wilkins, describes, one of his early encounters with Bird was as follows:

> I was on him and he said, 'I don't know why they got you guarding me, Homes. You can't guard me.' Then, whap, he hit a 3. Then he came down again and said, 'They made a mistake putting you on me, Homes,' and he took another 3. […] Then a little while later, I came down on a break and he was backpedaling. I just went right after him. I jumped up and he tried to challenge, but I took that right through the rim. He fell and hit the basket support. He got up and said, 'I like you, rookie. You've got (guts).' I was happy for a second, and then he said, 'But I'm still going for 40 on you tonight.' […] But I got him. He only scored 39 (Bulpett, 2018).

This is almost like seeing Joshu encountering two hermits again. When Bird says that Wilkins does not belong in the league, is he really putting him down? When Wilkins says that Bird scored 'only' 39 points on him, is he really patting himself on the back?

Wilkins and Bird had numerous similar encounters. Since they both played the same small forward position, they frequently were guarding each other. Perhaps the most famous encounter took place in the Eastern conference semi-finals on May 26, 1988. Wilkins went for 47 points that day; Bird had 34, but the Celtics prevailed 118-116 and advanced. Until that game, Wilkins was known mainly as an athletic wonder, hence his nickname 'The Human Highlight Film.' After the battles with Bird, people started to notice his entire game; as he observes:

> Actually, it was because of that whole series. Before that, people just saw me as the guy who did the highlight dunks. But when we were walking off the floor after that last game, Larry came up to me and said, 'We both deserved to win this game. It's unfortunate that one of us got to go home.' That was big respect, and I've always appreciated that (Bulpett, 2018).

Many years later, commenting on these encounters and verbal spars, Wilkins observed that he would not trade them for anything in the world. 'You know why? Because those guys like Larry [Bird] and Doc [Julius Erving] and Bernard [King], they made you a better player' (Bulpett, 2018).

Before closing this section, it is good to mention an important disanalogy between *dharma* duels and typical forms of trash-talking on the basketball court. Dharma duels (and also physical violence against Zen adepts) are typically a means to disrupt someone's habitual mental process by a way of shock. In general, the intention here is to enable the adept to grasp a deeper truth. By contrast, the aim of trash-talking seems the opposite: namely, to throw players off their game rather than to lead them to gaining deeper insight. It is true that some players might be motivated by being challenged in this way to dig deeper. Michael Jordan is frequently mentioned to be this kind of player. Whatever his adversaries might do, however, reaching exceptional performance was not the intent of their actions but rather an unintended consequence. In general, unlike it is with the case of dharma duels, the purpose of trash-talking is to make someone self-conscious rather than to spur someone to transcend self-consciousness and to 'enter the zone.'[17]

Again, however, the qualification 'in general' is in order. For, just as some analogies are imperfect, so are some disanalogies. In her wonderful essay comparing stand-up

[17] An anonymous referee for this journal brought this point to my attention. I appreciate this help and his or her numerous other comments.

comedians to Zen masters of the past, Professor of Buddhist Studies at Elon University in North Carolina, Pamela D. Winfield, brings to our attention the fact that we tend to treat Zen and Zen masters with such a reverence that we 'often fail to realize that many of these guys were really funny characters, and that much of Zen discourse is based on their witty repartee and blistering one-upmanship' (Winfield, 2018). Winfield offers numerous illustrations of this idea. Consider, for example, the 14th case from *Mumonkan* ('Nansen Cuts the Cat in Two'):

> Nansen Osho saw monks of the Eastern and Western halls quarrelling over a cat. He held up the cat and said, 'If you can give an answer, you will save the cat. If not, I will kill it.' No one could answer, and Nansen cut the cat in two. That evening Joshu returned, and Nansen told him of the incident. Joshu took off his sandal, placed it on his head, and walked out. 'If you had been there, you would have saved the cat,' Nansen remarked (Sekida, 1995, pp. 58-59).

It is obvious that Nansen (Chinese: Nanquan Puyuan, c. 749–c. 835) recognized that his monks were caught in dualistic thinking and attitudes. Thus, he attempted to snap them out of it. But what about Joshu?

It is unlikely that he tried to lead his teacher, or anyone else, to an even deeper awakening. Rather, it seems that he responded to Nansen's action with a spontaneous joke by walking out with his sandals on his head, rather than on his feet, dissolving in this way the dichotomy of life and death and the dualism in which other monks were trapped:

> We can imagine his teacher, Nanquan, cracking up as he approved of his star pupil's brilliant sight gag that cut through the tension of the live-or-die situation. Sometimes sheer silliness (not to mention a profound grasp of nondualism) is the best solution to seriousness (Winfield, 2018).

Winfield observes that unscripted banter by stand-up comedians is full of Zen-like zingers quite similar to Zen-capping phrases involving one master taking some doing or saying of another and then adding a fresh twist to it:

> For example, the 9th-century Chinese master Yunmen took up one of the most profound questions of his day, 'What is Buddha?' and irreverently blurted out, 'a dry shit-stick!' (They wiped with bamboo sticks back then, not TP). His potty humor was later capped off by Master Dongshan's (Japanese: Tozan) quip that Buddha was nothing other than the 'three pounds of flax' that he was then making

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> into a Buddhist robe. The upshot? Buddha is right before your eyes, you idiot (Winfield, 2018).

Regarding the already-mentioned question about a dog's having a Buddha nature, Winfield maintains that Joshu's answer is yet another joke dissolving the duality of yes-and-no by offering the answer that is, simultaneously, yes, no, and (in another sense) transcending yes-and-no and similar conceptual distinctions:

> It's never funny if you have to explain the joke, but basically, 'Wu' in the original Chinese [pronounced in Japanese as 'Mu'] is a double entendre literally meaning 'No' (in other words, a dog doesn't have a Buddha nature) but also indicating 'Yes' since *wu* is the Chinese word for 'emptiness,' the definition of enlightenment itself. The joke works on another level as well since the pronunciation of 'Wu!' is the Chinese onomatopoeic equivalent of 'woof!' (although the barked-out delivery got lost when it traveled to Japan) (Winfield, 2018).

Furthermore, it is a fact that openly hostile behavior may unintentionally lead someone to enter the zone on a basketball court. But, in just the same way, openly hostile and angry behavior that totally lacks compassion may lead a Zen practitioner to a deep samadhi or even awakening. Hakuin illustrates this point when describing, in his spiritual autobiography, the events leading to his great awakening:

> I was totally absorbed in my koan – never away from it for an instant. [Begging for alms] I took up a position beside the gate of a house, my bowl in my hand, fixed in a kind of trance. From inside the house, a voice yelled out, 'get away from here! Go somewhere else!' I was so preoccupied, I didn't even notice it. This must have angered the occupant, because suddenly she appeared flourishing a broom upside down in her hands. She flew at me, flailing widely, whacking away at my head as if she were bent on dashing my brains out. My sedge hat lay in tatters. I was knocked over and ended up on the ground, totally unconscious. I lay there like a dead man. […]
>
> As I came to and my eyes opened, I found that the unsolvable and impenetrable koans I had been working on – all those venomous cat's-paws – were now penetrated completely. Right to their roots. They had suddenly ceased to exist. I began clapping my hands and whooping with glee, frightening people who had gathered around to help me. […]

> I picked myself up from the ground, straightened my robe, and fixed the remnants of my hat back on my head. With a blissful smile on my face, I started, slowly and exultantly, making my way back toward Narasawa and the Shoju-an (Waddell, 1999, pp. 33-34).

To close this section, it may be useful to consider a beautiful prayer, 'Vows of the Bodhisattva's Conduct' (*Bosatsu-gyo Ganmon*), by Hakuin's chief disciple and successor, Torei Enji (1721-1792). Torei expresses in it his aspiration to practice the virtues of humility, patience, gratitude, and forgiveness, leading to the recognition that 'everything is a manifestation of the Tathagatha's truth.' In particular:

> If we should feel this way even toward insentient beings, how much more should we regard human beings in this manner. As to those who are not endowed with complete understanding, we should regard them especially with love and sympathy. Even if they should turn against us, vilify or torment us, we should consider that they are incarnate Bodhisattvas, who, with the great compassion apply skillful means to assist us in attaining liberation, extinguishing the evil deeds we have accumulated since beginningless time, on account of our obstinate attachment to false views (quoted in Lopez & Rockefeller, 1987, p. 179).

It is doubtful that these sorts of attitudes are frequent on the basketball court. Bill Russell writes in his autobiography that sometimes he would root for another team because their playing well was necessary for both teams to stay in a collective zone. Surely, such a practice is an exception. Indeed, it is so unusual that he never talked about it to his teammates.

Similarly, it is doubtful that the profoundly selfless approach exemplified by patriarch Torei is typical for most adepts of Zen. But we know that Hakuin accepted a whooping by an angry crone wielding a broom without any complaints. As a mater of fact, I am certain that he thought it to be a helpful hand provided by a compassionate bodhisattva.

Giving Praise by Seemingly Condemning Someone

According to lore, Bodhidharma (recognized as the mythical First Patriarch of Zen Buddhism) arrived from India to China in the fifth or sixth century. After the first unfruitful meeting with the emperor, he withdrew himself into the mountains where he practiced unmovable zazen-meditation for several years. Eventually, he was discovered by a

student, Dazu Huike (Japanese: Taiso Eka, 487-593), who he was able to guide to awakening. This event is a subject of the 41st case from *Mumonkan* 'Bodhidharma's Peace of Mind.' Commenting on this case, the compilator of this famous collection, *Wúmén Huìkāi* (Japanese: Mumon Ekai, 1183–1260) observes the following:

> The broken-toothed old barbarian came thousands of miles across the sea with an active spirit. It can rightly be said that he raised waves where there was no wind. In later life he had one successor, but even he was crippled in his six senses. The fools do not even know four characters (Yamada, 1979, p. 208).

The sixth Case from the same collection ('Shakyamuni Holds Up a Flower') is related to a mythical event involving the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, and one of his chief disciples, Kashyapa. According to Buddhist lore, rather than delivering a typical speech, Buddha simply raised a flower. The whole community remained silent; only Kashyapa smiled. Buddha recognized this smile as a sign of deep insight and passed to him the leadership of the Sangha (Buddhist community). Commenting on this case, *Wúmén* makes a quite disparaging remark about Buddha (who, in this context, is treated both as the founder of Buddhism and the founder of Zen):

> The golden-faced Gautama insolently suppressed noble people and made them lowly. He sells dog's flesh under the label of sheep's head. I thought there should be something of particular merit in it. … If you say that the eye treasury of the true Dharma [Truth] can be transmitted, then that is as if the golden-faced old man is swindling country people at the town gate. If you say that it cannot be transmitted, then why did Buddha say that he entrusted only Kashyapa with it? (Yamada, 1979, p. 40)

Seemingly, *Wúmén* criticizes both the First Patriarch of Zen, Bodhidharma, and even the Buddha himself. Given the Zen context, however, in fact he is praising them. But he praises them in a way that makes the Buddha and Bodhidharma more human. The point here is not to put them on a pedestal as some kind of divine beings exemplifying inaccessible ideals. Rather, it is to bring their teachings closer to us and thus allow us to follow in their footsteps.

To some extent the same approach is adopted in the context of basketball. Jordan was 'bad, really bad.' What he did was 'sick,' 'ridiculous,' and 'crazy.' This is why he is 'the shit.' (Nota bene, this last expression is not completely easy to access and appreciate by non-native English speakers. It took me some time to learn the difference

between 'shit' and 'the shit.' Yet is totally understandable to basketball fans). This is why, to reference the famous Gatorade commercial, we all try to be like Mike. And this includes every little boy learning the game as well as everyone else who has already gained some experience playing it.

4. On the Spiritual Dimensions of Sports

Eugene Herrigel's book, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, is frequently credited as one of the most influential texts both in terms of introducing Zen to the West and in terms of exploring relations between spiritual practice and sports.[18] The author, a German philosopher with strong interests in mysticism, describes in it his study of the traditional Japanese martial art of bow (*kyūdō*) under the master Awa Kenzô. Using his own training as an example, Herrigel *shows* how years of arduous activity involving the countless repetitions of the same physical form may lead someone to transcending this form. To use a bit of more contemporary terminology, eventually the 'muscle memory' starts to execute complex movements without seemingly conscious directions coming from the mind. This may lead, in turn, to performing actions that are effortless both mentally and physically. Thus, the book is frequently credited as a precursor to theories about unconscious (or subconscious) motor learning.

There are numerous criticisms of Herrigel's book. It is just as illuminating to notice what they claim as it is to recognize what they acknowledge. Some critics pointed to the fact that Herrigel was an active member of the Nazi party which, allegedly, undermines lessons taught in the book (cf. Koestler, 1960, p. 31, and Scholem, 1961, p. 96). What this criticism shows, however, is not that Herrigel failed to develop amazing powers of concentration allowing him to act in ways that transcend self. Rather, it shows merely that an adept who is successful in some aspects of spiritual training may fail miserably in other respects. Such a person may fail to understand the requirements of morality and justice and, consequently, may fail to act in a morally exemplary way.[19]

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[18] Herrigel's book was originally published by Kurt Weller, in German, in 1948, as *Zen in der Kunst des Bogenschießens*. The first English edition was published in 1953.

[19] In his influential book, Brian Daizen Victoria (2006) makes an analogous point about the involvement of Japanese Buddhis hierarchy into an imperialistic war.

We may be stumbling here on what may be called 'A Paradox of Pantheism.' As a broadly metaphysical-spiritual doctrine, pantheism implies that everything is Divine and this includes both the oak tree in the garden (from a famous Zen koan) and a dry shit-stick (*kanshiketsu*, from another famous Zen koan). Supposedly, this recognition should lead someone to respectful behavior to all. From the absolute point of view, however, killing or abusing someone is just as *śūnyatā* as protecting someone's life. Thus, contrary to what we may expect, there are numerous examples of people who abuse others and then attempt to justify it by the claim that everything is 'empty' and 'unreal.' This approach exemplifies, at most, only an incomplete awakening.

Now, traditional Buddhist teachings imply that an initial insight into *śūnyatā* is not equivalent to full awakening. Thus, this initial insight must be cultivated by post-*kensho* practice, including the practice of moral precepts and virtues. Traditionally, the deep Buddhist wisdom has been treated as encompassing not only an insight (and surely not just any garden-variety shallow *kensho*) but also compassion (and other *shila*-virtues). Unfortunately, this is not to say that all Zen practitioners always practice wisdom-compassion. Such behavior does not exemplify complete awakening. As one Zen teacher said, there are no awakened people, there are only awakened activities. Abusing others and racism can hardly treated as an awaken action or disposition. I believe that all parties in the debate about Herrigel's book should recognize these points.

It is good to remember, however, that the author has never claimed to provide any insights about moral matters. To simplify matters a bit, it is a book about the virtue of self-lessness and the value of 'non-thinking' and 'effortless actions.' It is not, however, a book about the complete development of one's character, including the development of all positive character traits. So, this line of criticism does not seem fair to the lessons actually offered in his book.

Another line of criticism claims that Herrigel lacked sufficient linguistic abilities to understand his teacher's lessons. Consequently, he provided an incomplete and perhaps even misleading account of what has transpired during his training (cf. Yamada, 2001, pp. 16ff). Allegedly, this was the case about the famous event of shooting at the target hidden in the total darkness, reported by Herrigel twice (with slightly different versions of events leading to this famous shooting). In 1936 version, Herrigel explains how, no matter how hard he tried, his arrows could not reach the target located some 30 yards away. Disheartened, he asked his teacher what he needs to do:

> Awa told him, 'Thinking about hitting the target is heresy. Do not aim at it.' Herrigel could not accept this answer. He insisted that 'If I do not aim at the target, I cannot hit it.' At that point, Awa ordered Herrigel to come to the practice hall that evening (Herrigel, 1936, reported in Yamada, 2001, p. 16).

The book contains, in addition, the following exchange:

> One day I asked the Master, "How can the shot be loosed if 'I' do not do it?"
> "'It' shoots," he replied.
> "I have heard you say that several times before, so let me put it another way. How can I wait self-obliviously for the shot if 'I' is no longer there?
> "'It' waits at the highest tension."

> "And who or what is this 'It'?"
> "Once you have understood that you will have no further need of me. And if I tried to give you a clue at the cost of your own experience, I would be the worst of teachers and deserve to be sacked! So let's stop talking about it and go on practicing" (Herrigel, 1981, pp. 51-52).

Only after considerable amount of time (at least several weeks during which Herrigel made little progress), his teacher invited him to the range to demonstrate what 'selfless shooting' entails:

> The practice hall was brightly lit. The Master told me to put a taper, long and thin as a knitting needle, and placed it in the sand in front of the target, but not to switch on the light in the target stand. It was so dark that I could not even see its outlines, and if the tiny flame of the taper had not been there. I might perhaps have guessed the position of a target, though I could not have made it out with any precision. The Master 'danced' the ceremony. His first arrow shot out of dazzling brightness into deep night. I knew from the sound that it had hit the target. The second arrow was a hit, too. When I switched on the lights in in the in the target-stand, I discovered to my amazement that the first arrow was lodged full in the middle of the black, while the second arrow had splintered the butt of the first and plowed through the shaft before embedding itself beside it. I did not dare to pull the arrows out separately, but carried them back together with the target (Herrigel, 1981, p. 58).

The master Awa carefully scrutinized the arrows and, as if emerging from a deep thought, he observed what follows:

> The first shot […] was no great fit, you will think, because after all these years I am so familiar with my target-stand that I must know even in pitch darkness where the target is. That may be, I won't try to pretend otherwise. But the second arrow which hit the first – what do you make of that? I at any rate know that it is not 'I' who must be given credit for this shot. 'It' shot and 'It' made the hit. Let us know bow to the goal as before the Buddha (Herrigel, 1981, p. 59).[20]

[20] *Nota bene*, Herrigel describes the situation carefully avoiding any references to 'I' or 'self' and, instead of it, relying on the already familiar ways of representing it as 'It shoots,' 'It makes a hit,' 'It waits,' and so on.

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In his critique, Yamada supposes that this way of representing the situation might have been a matter of linguistic error on behalf of Herrigel and that, most likely, his teacher meant something analogous to the English expression 'that's it.' He notices also that, after the publication of the book, Awa was asked to explain what happened that night, including the fact that the second arrow split the first one. He answered that this specific fact was just a matter of coincidence and that he did not intend it (see Yamada, 2001, p. 18).

We should notice, however, that Herrigel practiced in Japan for five years and had numerous conversations both with his teacher and with numerous bi-lingual students. Also, he mastered archery rather quickly, achieved the 5th dan master degree, and received from Awa one of his favorite bows as a gift. Thus, commenting on the assumption that he did not understand his teacher at even most basic linguistic level, John Stevens observes that this assumption is both 'most ludicrous' and 'racist' (Stevens, 2007, p. 93).[21]

Yet another line of criticism deals not as much with what actually transpired between master Awa and Herrigel but rather with too sweeping conclusions that are sometimes drawn from their encounters. In particular, the 'Introduction' to this book is written by a well-known popularizer of Zen Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki. Suzuki asserts the all-pervading presence of Zen in all forms of Japanese culture; supposedly, all arts in Japan attempt to bring mind in contact with the ultimate:

> [T]he swordsman does not wield the sword just for the purpose of outdueling his opponent; the dancer does not dance just to perform certain rhythmical movements of the body. The mind has to be first attuned to the Unconscious. (Suzuki, 1981, p. vii).

Similarly, because archery is not practiced solely for hitting the target, the technical knowledge is not sufficient to master this art. Even the highest levels of technical skill miss something in the art that is at a very different order; namely:

> The archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull's eye which confronts him. This state of unconsciousness is realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with perfecting his technical skill. […] When this is attained, man thinks yet he does not think. He thinks like the showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like the waves rolling

[21] Cf. Stevens (2007, pp. 90-95) and King (2010) for the discussion and refutation of other similar lines of criticisms.

> on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage (Suzuki, 1981, pp. viii-ix).

It is true that while the traditional (or more typical) training of *kyudo*-archery might emphasize the aesthetic aspects of the art rather than its mystical elements, Awa's approach seems to do the opposite. Thus, D.T. Suzuki might have overstated the point that Zen deeply pervades all forms of Japanese art. Awa might have been one of a kind, and his approach might have been an outlier. But it was not beyond the scope of broadly available options. In a number of ways, his new approach, called by him *daishadokyo* (the Great Teachings of the Way of Shooting), follows very closely a traditional *kyudo* curriculum in numerous ways. Beginners usually start practicing with a rubber bow designed to develop the movements of drawing (*hassetsu*). The second step is to learn how to handle the bow without an arrow (*karabiki*) and to learn to perform *hassetsu* until full draw. After receiving permission by a teacher, students start to practice with a glove and arrow. The next steps involve learning to do the full draw with an arrow and shooting at *makiwara*, a target located only 6-7 feet away (from this distance, it is practically impossible to miss). All of this may take a period of several years and is supposed to develop some basic physical abilities. Subsequently, students receive permission to start shooting at the *mato*, targets located about 30.6 yards away.[22] As a matter of fact, other teachers emphasize the importance of sitting meditation, abdominal breathing typical for Zen sitting, cultivating *hara* (a region located few inches below one's navel), and reaching a selfless samadhi, too.[23]

Interestingly enough, virtually everybody acknowledges Awa as one of the greatest masters of the bow, as demonstrated by his numerous tournament achievements, and also as one of the great reformers and teachers of his own approach, as demonstrated by the number and quality of his first-generation students (on this topic, see 'Preface' to Stevens, 2007). Also, no one questions Awa's interest in deep meditative states. In 1920, during his forty-first year, he had an experience reminiscent of the experience *kensho* (looking into one's nature), reported sometimes in a Zen context. His close student and biographer, Sakurai, characterized this experienced as a 'great explosion' (*daibakuhatsu* 大爆発) and describes it as follows:

[22] On the topic of typical kyudo curriculum (and the usual pace of progress), see Felix Hoff, 2002.

[23] William R.B. Acker makes these points in his book, *The Fundamentals of Japanese Archery* (1937), quoted in Stevens (2007, p. 93).

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> Late one evening, the family was fast asleep, all was wrapped in silence, and all that could be seen was the moon peacefully illuminating the evening darkness. Alone, Kenzo went to the archery range and with his beloved bow and arrows quietly faced the target. He was determined. Would his flesh perish first? Would his spirit live on?
>
> No release (muhatsu 無発). Total focus (toitsu 統一). He was determined that with this shot there would be no retreat, not even so much as a single step.
> The bitter struggle continued. His body had already passed its limit. His life would end here.
>
> Finally: 'I have perished.' Just as this thought passed through his mind, a marvelous sound reverberated from the heavens. He thought it must be from heaven since never before had he heard such a clear, high, strong sound from the twanging of the bowstring and from the arrow piercing the target. At the very instant when he thought he heard it, his self (jiko 自己) flew apart into infinite grains of dust, and, with his eyes dazzled by a myriad of colors, a great thunderous wave filled heaven and earth (Sakurai, 1981, pp. 159-60; quoted in Yamada, 2001, p. 10).

After his 'great explosion,' Awa began to preach that one must 'put an entire lifetime of exertion into each shot' *(issha zetsumei)* and that one can 'see true nature in the shot' (*shari kensho* 射裡見个生). Only then, he began to refer to his approach as the Great Teachings of the Way of Shooting (*daishadokyo*) and started to describe his travels to teach archery as 'missionary work to spread a new religion.'

Treating basketball as a form of spiritual practice that leads to deep meditative states may be an outlier, too. Still, a leap from Herrigel's insights about *kyudo* to the art of basketball does not seem too unlikely. For one thing, as it is in the case of *kyudo*, basketball too requires countless repetition leading to creating appropriate bodily or 'muscle' memories. The most well-known drills are those developed by master sharp-shooters. For example, in one such drill developed by the holder of numerous shooting records, Rey Allen, he takes numerous shots from 25 different positions, many of them representing his 'sweet spots' on the basketball court. On one occasion, Allen took 305 different shots and made 224 of them (73.44%). Commenting on this drill, Shueler (2019) observed what follows:

> If you are a basketball guru like us, you know that Ray Allen is one of the best shooters to *ever* play the game! But what most players do not realize is that he spent countless hours perfecting his shot with an incredible work ethic and level of

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> preparation. His pre-practice shooting chart shows just how dedicated he was to being the best at his craft. Keep in mind, he put this work in *before* [formal] practice [with the rest of his team] even started! (Shueler, 2019)

Kyle Korver is another example of a player with amazing shooting abilities. He, too, goes through an elaborate routine before each game:

> Then it's time to shoot, and the shooting can be beautiful. It'll be the third time he shoots that day, following a shooting session at the team's shootaround and another one after the shootaround. He then has the pre-game routine and the warm-ups right before tip-off. There are four sessions in all to get his jumper right (Harper, 2015).

Korver attempts to undertake a certain number of makes (instead of taking a certain number of shots), and he tries to make his shots with speed approximating the game conditions. If he slows down, he stops the routine. Again, the point is to establish and then to reinforce bodily memories that are useful in game situations. Taking his shots too slowly is not conducive to recreating game conditions.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar describes in one of his books how he was introduced to the idea of sky hook, when he was in the 5th grade of grammar school. The form went through several permutation. Then he perfected it through countless repetitions, working on it for hours each day throughout his entire career, including 20 seasons as a professional basketball player. Eventually, the shot became virtually unstoppable, and he could make it from several positions on the court (2018, pp. 102-104). According to some experts, Kareem is among the greatest basketball players of all time and his sky hook is one of the best offensive weapons in the history of NBA. Virtually the same is true about, arguably, the greatest power forward of all time, Tim Duncan, and his patented 'bank shot' (Weitzman, 2021).

Some basketball players develop borderline insane regimens involving the training of will. Korver and his practice of *misogi* provide an example. *Misogi* is the ancient Japanese idea of pushing one's body beyond its perceived physical limits to transcend these apparent limitations and experience what we are really able to do. Each year the regimen involves different elements. Korver's first *misogi* was a 25-mile stand-up paddleboard trip across the open ocean in waters infested with sharks. He had never set foot on a paddleboard before. 9 hours later, the group reached their destination bleeding

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and sunburnt. His next year *misogi* involved running underwater while carrying a heavy boulder.[24]

These forms of physical exercise are surely conducive to an excellent performance on the basketball court. They may also lead to the deep meditative states frequently reported by basketball greats. The following are a few examples of what it feels like to play 'in the zone' (all quotations from an essay from *Sports Illustrated* (2005) that, in its entirety, consists of these sorts of quotes):

> There's no feeling like it. When I went for 46 against Dallas [in 2002, with the Hawks], everything was perfect. My shoes were right. My uniform felt flawless. I was in a great rhythm. It's like a hip-hop song. You're just there grooving, swaying back and forth. You don't feel it until you hit your first shot. If that shot is what I call 'moist,' it doesn't take anything. It seems like the net doesn't even move (Jason Terry, Mavericks guard).
>
> All you see is the rim and how big it is. It's a mental thing. You're so focused on doing the same thing over and over. You just have to continue to take the same shot. The same shot, the same mechanics, it goes in. Everything is just correct. Your shot is correct. The way you're coming down is correct. Your form is correct. Everything (Eddie Jones, Magic forward).
>
> There are books you can read about how to get into that shooting zone, how to prepare yourself, but it's never something you can predict. The ball feels so light, and your shots are effortless. You don't even have to aim. You let it go, and you know the ball is going in. It's wonderful. You are hunting for the ball, hunting for a shot. It's like a good dream, and you don't want to wake up (Pat Garrity, Magic forward).
>
> It's like an out-of-body experience, like you're watching yourself. You almost feel like you don't even see the defense. Every move you make, you feel, God, that guy is slow. You're going by people. You don't even hear the regular noise you hear. It's muffled. You go to practice the next day, and you say, 'God, why can't I do that every night?' Guys have wanted to bottle that feeling' (Joe Dumars, Pistons guard, a former 'All-Star').

Now, unlike the art of archery, the art of basketball is a team rather than an individual activity; it involves other players. This opens new possibilities, but it also adds some new difficulties. The eleven-time world champion, Bill Russell, describes these possibilities and difficulties as follows:

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[24] On this topic, see the excellent feature by Charles Bethea (2014).

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> Every so often a Celtics game would heat up so that it became more than a physical or even mental game, and would be magical. That feeling is difficult to describe, and I certainly never talked about it when I was playing. When it happened, I could feel my play rise to a new level. It came rarely, and would last anywhere from five minutes to a whole quarter, or more. Three or four plays were not enough to get it going. It would surround not only me and the other team, but even the referees. To me, the key was that *both* teams had to be playing at their peaks, and they had to be competitive. The Celtics could not do it alone (Russell, 1979, p. 175).

It is striking that, for some players, it is hard to enter the zone individually; Russell reports that for him personally, it was impossible, and that to enter the zone, he needed other players:

> That mystical feeling usually came with the better teams in the league that were challenging us for the championship. […] It never started with a hot streak by a single player, or with a breakdown of one's team defense. It usually began when three or four of the ten guys on the floor would heat up; they would be the catalysts (Russell, 1979, p. 176).

This 'mystical feeling' is quite similar to zazen practice that frequently involves numerous people engaged together for days or even weeks in intense meditation. In bigger monasteries, sometimes hundreds of practitioners engage in meditation for sometimes as long as 14 hours of formal sitting daily (if we include chanting and working meditation) and additional hours of informal sitting.

Second, by any standard account, the point of any basketball game is to win. From this point of view, the players on the other team are adversaries. Yet, from the point of view of playing in the zone, these standard adversarial relations disappear:

> The feeling would spread to the other guys, and we'd all levitate. Then the game would just take off, and there'd be a natural ebb and flow that reminded you how of how rhythmic and musical basketball is supposed to be. I'd find myself thinking, 'This is it. I want it to keep going,' and I'd actually be rooting for the other team. When their players were making spectacular moves, I wanted their shots to go into the basket; that's how pumped up I'd be. I'd be out there talking to the other

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> Celtics, encouraging them and pushing myself harder, but at the same time part of me would be pulling for the other players, too (Russell, 1979, p. 176 – 177).

Russell states very clearly that he was rooting for the other team, too. He did this because he needed both teams' peak performances to be able to play in the zone and, overall, playing in the zone was more important and rewarding than anything else. In terms of the mystical aspects of basketball, he cherished playing in the zone even more than winning. Finally, from the point of view of playing in the zone, losing did not matter:

> At that special level, all sorts of odd things happened: The game would be in the white heat of competition, and yet somehow I wouldn't feel competitive, which is a miracle in itself. I'd be putting out the maximum effort, straining, coughing up parts of my lungs as we ran, and yet I never felt the pain. The game would move so quickly that every fake, cut, and pass would be surprising, and yet nothing could surprise me. It was almost as if we were playing in slow motion. During those spells, I could almost sense how the next play would develop and where the next shot would be taken. Even before the other team brought the ball inbounds, I could feel it so keenly that I'd want to shout to my teammates, 'it's coming there!'—except that I knew everything would change if I did. My premonitions would be consistently correct, and I always felt then that I not only knew all the Celtics by heart, but also all the opposing players, and that they all knew me. There have been many times in my career when I felt moved or joyful, but these were the moments when I had chills pulsing up and down my spine. (Russell, 1979, p. 177).

This, too, is somewhat similar to Zen practice. It is important to enter the practice with a strong desire to reach awakening. But, having used this desire to create a certain kind of momentum, it is just as important to forget this desire. To make real progress, someone engaged in zazen-meditation needs to put this desire aside in focus full-heartedly on his breath, koan, or whatever his practice may be.

To return to Russell again, he notices that it happened sometimes that both teams played in a collective zone until the final whistle; this mystical feeling or spell lasted until the very end of the game:

> [W]hen that happened I never cared who won. I can honestly say that those few times were the only times when I did *not* care. I don't mean that I was a good sport about it – that I'd played my best and had nothing to be ashamed of. On the five or ten occasions when the game ended at that special level, I *literally* did not care who

> had won. If we lost, I'd still be as free and high as a sky hawk. (Russell, 1979, p. 178)

As a matter of fact, some of the greatest winners de-emphasize the very idea of winning. For example, Kareem Abdul Jabbar observes what follows about his college coach, mentor, and eventually very close friend:

> The biggest misconception people have about Coach Wooden is thinking that he focused on winning. It's an easy mistake to make, because he was one of the winningest coaches in history.[25] But he didn't. In fact, he did the opposite.
> 'Asking an athlete if he likes winning is like asking a Wall Street broker if he likes money,' Coach told us. 'Sure, we want to win. I love winning. But winning isn't our goal.'
> I didn't say anything, but clearly this was sports heresy. People have been burned at stake for less (Abdul-Jabbar, 2017, pp. 220-221; cf., 2018, pp. 85-86).

When his team responded to it with disbelief, the coach explained patiently:

> 'Winning is the by-product of hard work […] The goal is hard work. The reward is satisfaction that you pushed yourself to the edge physically, emotionally, and mentally. It is my firm belief that when everyone on a team works as hard as possible until they feel that glow of satisfaction in their hearts and peace of mind, that team is prepared for anything and anyone. Then winning is usually inevitable […] It took me years to fully appreciate this lesson. As a freshman, I admired Coach's sentiment even if I thought it was too esoteric. To me, you worked hard to beat your opponents. The satisfaction was in walking off the court with the fans screaming for your team not theirs. But slowly, game by game, season by season, I started to see winning his way. Not just on the court, but off it as well' (Abdul-Jabbar, 2017, pp. 221-222).

Now, because basketball is a team sport, it imposes special requirements on the coaching staff; namely, they must prepare the team to function as a harmonious unit. Abdul Jabbar observes that:

[25] John Robert Wooden (1910 – 2010) was an American basketball coach and player. During his 12-year long career as the head coach for the UCLA Bruins, he won ten National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) national championships, including a record seven in a row. No other team has won more than four.

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> Coach emphasized teamwork over everything else. It was teams that won games, not individuals. A good team had room for individuals to rise, but their rise must lift everyone with them. That was the deal. No one on the team was a Robin to someone else's Batman. We were the Justice League, all with unique abilities, no one more special than the other.
>
> That's why Coach hated to see showboating during practice. He didn't even permit us to dunk. Practice was a work session; we ran, we drilled, we scrimmaged. We didn't experiment with showy moves (Abdul-Jabbar, 2018, p. 100).

The most winning coach in the history of basketball, Phil Jackson (who won 11 championships as a coach and two more as a player), observed that his interest in various mystical traditions (including Zen Buddhism, Sufism, and various Native American religions) not only helped him to grow up as a person but also prepared him to become a better coach:

> It took me years of practice to still my busy mind, but in the process I discovered that the more aware I become of what was going on inside me, the more connected I became to the world outside. I became more patient with others and calmer under pressure—qualities that helped me when I became a coach (Jackson, 2014, p. 52).

In particular, Jackson mentions three aspects of Zen that have been critical to him as a leader; namely, giving up control, trusting the moment, and living with compassion (214, pp. 52-54). Addressing the idea of living in the moment, he observes that practicing Zen not only helped him to become more acutely aware of what was happening in the present moment but also slowed down his experience of time because it diminished the tendency to rush into the future or get lost in the past (Jackson, 2014, p. 53). He stresses also that, what he found especially compelling about Buddhism was the Buddhist teaching about compassion:

> In the Buddhist view, the best way to cultivate compassion is to be fully present in the moment. 'To meditate,' said the Buddha, 'is to listen with the receptive heart.' In her book *Start Where You Are*, Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron contends that meditation practice blurs the traditional boundaries between self and others. 'What you do for yourself—any gesture of kindness, and gesture of gentleness, any gesture of honesty and clear seeing toward yourself—will affect how you

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> experience the world,' she writes. 'What you do for yourself you're doing for others, and what you do for others, you're doing for yourself.' This idea would later become a key building block in my work as a coach (Jackson, 2014, p. 54).

Jackson became famous of using various meditation and visualization sessions that he organized for his players. Their point was, among other things, to bring his teams together. He maintains, in particular, that teams who won championships were usually more cohesive and unified than the teams who lost, even if the other teams were more talented. This was the case, for example, in the championship series against Phoenix and Utah, that were both considered favorites. As Jackson observed, one of the greatest advantages of Michael Jordan was that he was so individually gifted; but the same thing was also his greatest weakness. Echoing this idea, Jordan observed in numerous interviews that originally, he did not like Jackson's coaching because, while trying to engage the other players in order to create a cohesive team, his system took the ball from Jordan's hands. He started to appreciate and even like Jackson's system more only after the Bulls started to win more as a team. Incidentally, in the series against the Lakers, leading to his first championship ring, Jordan was routinely double-teamed. His teammate Steve Kerry took the deciding shot after receiving a pass from Jordan.

Jackson also observed that some of his greatest regrets concern those of his teams who did not fully gel and consequently were beaten by theoretically less talented yet more cohesive teams. Such was the case with Jackson's Lakers, who despite being a prohibitive favorite, were nearly swept in 2005 by a more cohesive (and thus superior, even if less talented) team—the Detroit Pistons. (He discusses this issue, for example, in 'Sacred Hoops Revisited,' in the introduction to 2006 edition).

One of the most moving sections of Abdul-Jabbar's book describes one of his very last conversations with John Wooden, just months before his coached passed away. As it was the case hundreds of times before, the great basketball player tries to introduce his coach to his great passion – jazz. Thus, he brings with him a movie they plan to watch that includes a jazz soundtrack that his coach may like. Unfortunately, they cannot make DVD to work. Eventually, they give up on it. Stumbling on a new idea, Abdul-Jabbar simply ask, 'Have you ever realized that the way we played was a form of jazz? It's true, Coach. You thought us to play basketball jazz' (2018, p. 71). His coach looks over him like he is crazy, considers the idea for a while, smiles as if he likes it and asks for an elaboration, 'how so?'

> 'Well, they both require a kind of structured freedom,' I explained. You didn't teach us to run set plays with diagrams and arrows. Instead, you taught us how to react

to how to react to other players in the middle of the motion. We soloed here and there, expressed our individuality, but all within the framework of what the other players were doing. We soloed or played backup for other player, but we always played the same song, like a jazz band. We were playing in context.' 'Playing in context,' he repeated. 'I like that. How long have you been preparing this lesson, Lewis?'

'Fifty years,' I said with a grin (2018, p. 71).

Wooden agrees that it is an interesting comparison and adds that doing anything well surely requires that individuals first master the fundamentals and then learn how to react as a group without thinking about it. 'Right!,' Abdul Kareem responds and continues:

> 'Did you ever read *Zen in the Art of Archery*?'
>
> He shook his head.
>
> 'Bruce Lee told me about it back when he was working my butt off around his studio. It was written by a German philosophy Professor who studied archery under a Zen master. Basically, the idea is that through years of practice, the archer no longer thinks about the bow, the arrow, or the bull's-eye because their body takes over unconsciously.' […]
>
> 'Like muscle memory,' Coach said.
>
> 'Exactly,' I said, my voice rising with enthusiasm. 'Jazz takes place someplace beyond the conscious mind, that same place where great basketball is played.'
>
> And that's when it hit me, the bursting epiphany like the pop of old-time flashbulbs. I realized that … throughout of our fifty-year friendship, Coach and I had been playing a jazz duet of friendship' (Abdul-Jabbar, 2018, pp. 71-72).

It will be good to close this section with two extended quotes from Andrew Cooper, Ph.D. in clinical psychology, a student of Zen, and a free-lance writer on relations between mysticism, spirituality, and sports. He observes in his writings that sports involve a self-surpassing dimension of human experience that is recognized by people all over the world, regardless of culture, gender, race, or nationality:

> Its characteristics include deep concentration, highly efficient performance, emotional buoyancy, a heightened sense of mastery, a lack of self-consciousness, and self-transcendence. [A psychologist] Csikszentmihalyi calls the experience 'flow;' today's athlete calls it being in 'the zone' […] The zone is the essence and pinnacle of the athletic experience, for it reveals that, at their root, sports are a

> theater for enacting the drama of self-transcendence. Athletes and fans alike, focused as we so often are on the game of winning and losing, miss the deeper significance that is right before our eyes. But in the zone, the extraordinary capacities that lie within each individual are made manifest. To grasp this hidden dimension is to transform the very meaning of athletic play (Cooper, 1995; cf. also Cooper, 1998, pp. 38-48).

Cooper notices that, as a culture, we tend to associate spiritual epiphanies and insights with poetic revelry, profound meditation, a communion with nature, and so on:

> But it is a fact that profound and extraordinary experiences are extremely common in athletics, perhaps more so than in any other field of endeavor. The passions that athletics arouse, the physical demands they make, and the mental focus they require bring to bear our most exceptional abilities.
>
> Despite our skepticism, athletics provoke us to magic. This is the hidden dimension of sport, its secret culture. The philosopher Michael Novak wrote that, 'This is one of the great secrets of sport. There is a certain point of unity within the self, and between the self and its world, a certain complicity and magnetic mating, a certain harmony, that conscious mind and will cannot direct […] The discovery takes one's breath away' (Cooper, 1995).

Some Dis-Analogies and Conclusions

Much of this paper focused on the concept of samadhi and its counterpart of playing in the zone as well as on various methods and technics aimed at testing and potentially expanding and deepening someone's samadhi (i.e., dharma duels and some forms of trash talk). It is important to recognize, however, that Buddhism draws a difference between samadhi and the awakening to the reality of *śūnyatā*-as-phenomena and phenomena-as-*śūnyatā*. A contemporary Chan Master, Sheng-Yen, makes this point very clearly in his essay on 'Zen Meditation' by pointing to the spiritual path of Shakyamuni Buddha:

> After years of austere practice as a yogi, Shakyamuni has attained the highest level of samadhi, but he knew that his realization was still incomplete. He sat under the bodhi tree, vowing not to get up until he has fully resolved the question of death and rebirth. Only when he became enlightened, after seeing the morning star, did

> he rise. His experience became the paradigm of zazen practice (Sheng-Yen, 1988, pp. 34-35).

Furthermore, it is also good to recognize that, from a Zen point of view, there are several different stages or levels of samadhi. (And, similarly, there are also various levels and depths of awakening).

In his very interesting book, *Zen Training*, Katsuki Sekida comments on the four-fold classification of samadhi introduced by the 9th century Chinese Patriarch Linji (Japanese, Rinzai Gigen), the founder of one of two most influential schools of Zen (cf. Sekida, 1996, especially chapter 8). What we usually observe on the basketball court, and what draws us into the game, often seems to correspond to the first level of samadhi or what Linji characterizes as 'man is deprived; circumstances are not deprived.'[26] At this stage, someone is so absorbed into the circumstances that ego-self momentarily disappears. Many of us have had the experience of being so involved in the game that we literally forgot about ourselves and the passage of time. We do not remember what we were doing during the last two and a half hours. In fact, sometimes when the game is intense, we are not even aware that so much time has passed. But this is only the first stage of samadhi. By contrast, what is sometimes experienced by Chan and Zen practitioners may be a deeper stage of samadhi.

Sekida uses the term 'absolute samadhi' as roughly corresponding to what Linji characterized as 'both man and circumstances are deprived;' as he observes:

> When one is in absolute samadhi in its most profound phase, no reflecting action of consciousness appears. […] Ultimately the time comes when one comes to notice nothing, feel nothing, hear nothing, see nothing. This state of mind is called 'nothing.' But it is not vacant emptiness. Rather it is the purest condition of our existence. […] When you come out of absolute samadhi, you find yourself full of peace and serenity, equipped with strong mental power and dignity. You are

[26] Linji classification is typically interpreted along two complementary dimensions. Each progressive state of samadhi represents a deeper level of concentration. For example, the condition of both the man and the circumstances 'being depraved' is understood as deeper than the condition of only man but not circumstances 'being depraved.' In addition, samadhi at each level may be realized at a more or less deep level. For example, a 'man' in 'a man is depraved' may be understood as a phenomenal self or as some deeper spiritual and/or religious construct. Thus, a samadhi may suspend or dissolved various (and progressively more profound) conceptualizations of 'self.' This way of reading Linji follows the classical analyses offered by Huang Po (1958).

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> intellectually alert and clear, emotionally pure and sensitive. You have the exalted condition of a great artist (Sekida, 1996, pp. 94-95).[27]

Now, an argument can be made that even the first level of samadhi (something most of us are familiar with) is not different in nature but only in degree from the absolute samadhi. In other words, it is already an experience of *śūnyatā,* even if this experience is relatively shallow and rudimentary. In turn, the absolute samadhi is a deeper experience of emptiness. But even the absolute samadhi is not the same condition as *kensho*-awakening to the identity of form-and-emptiness. Rather, absolute samadhi is a condition conducive to such awakening and necessary if this awakening is to be deep and lasting. To quote Sekida again:

> [It is] the condition Hakuin Zenji called 'the Great Death.' The experience of this Great Death is no doubt not common in the ordinary practice of zazen among most Zen students. Nevertheless, if you want to attain genuine enlightenment and emancipation, you must go completely through this condition, because enlightenment can be achieved only after once shaking off our old habitual way of consciousness (Sekida, 1996, p. 94).

Clearly, there are other steps on the path of Zen that go far beyond the first relatively simple stages of samadhi.

Still, assuming that a relatively shallow samadhi is identical (in nature even if not in degree) to a deeper samadhi and that a deeper samadhi is somehow similar to awakening, having even a shallow experience of samadhi helps us to understand the path followed in Zen practice. Thus, through the participation (as players and afficionados) in the game of basketball (and in other sports), we can gain some intuitive insight about where Zen practice and its path leads. In turn, this may spark a better understanding that, in reality, there is nothing scary about following this path to deep samadhi to its full fruition and awakening to the reality of emptiness-as-phenomena and, specifically, that this reality has nothing to do with nothingness. Thus, we can gain some insight into the fact that Buddhism is not nihilistic, that Buddhist philosophy is not a form of unconstrained non-realism, and that emptying one's mind may lead to an awakening to the full richness, beauty, and perhaps even the divine nature of the world. And that is this discrete charm of *śūnyatā* that we can discover through the love of basketball.

[27] In section 3, we discussed examples of Zen practitioners who, before awakening, reached this level of samadhi.

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