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Editorial

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After the publication of three issues in 2021 (two special issues—one on 'Ecology and Religious Experience' and the other a 'Festschrift for Peggy Morgan'—in addition to our normal issue), the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* took a little break. The pandemic kept us all very busy, and it took a while to recover, but finally the 2022 issue is ready, and it demonstrates that research on religious experience continues to flourish and diversify, despite the interruptions.

This issue comes out shortly after the return of our annual conference to the campus, which represented another step back toward normality. 2022 was a very special year in Lampeter as we celebrated the 200th anniversary of Higher Education in Wales. In August 1822 the foundation stone of the first university in Wales was laid in Lampeter, now the home of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre. Our conference was therefore part of the bicentenary celebrations of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. In a significant development, due to the success of the online conference in 2021

Right to Left: Prof. Lisa Isherwood, Vice-Chair of the Alister Hardy Trust, Prof. John Harper, Vice Chancellor of the University, Prof. Medwin Hughes, Prof. Rowan Williams, Prof. Bettina Schmidt and Prof. Marta de Freitas.

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—which enabled greater access and inclusion for many interested in our field of research —the 2022 conference was held in a hybrid format. We had a large number of people tuning in online in addition to the in-person crowd on campus, reflecting the attraction of our keynote speaker—Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Wales and Canterbury—who spoke about the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich. The conference theme was 'Mystical Experiences: Past and Present.' In addition to a reflection on medieval mystics, such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, our second speaker, Prof. Lisa Isherwood, considered the ways that people who report mystical experience are treated in a clinical context today. We also discussed the complexities surrounding mystical experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, which indicated the relevance of the theme of the conference for our contemporary world.

While none of the speakers from the conference are featured in this particular issue (though hopefully they will appear in future editions), the topic of mysticism is nevertheless a central theme here, with contributions from Aaron Murly and Stefan Sencerz each offering different (though complimentary) reflections on the experience of nothingness and oneness, with an emphasis on the insights afforded by the Zen tradition. Anne Morgan's contribution—the third paper in this issue—then shifts focus to consider evidence for gender differences in the experience of Christian conversion, drawing on first-hand qualitative research interviews with Evangelical Christians and accounts from the Archives of the Religious Experience Research Centre. The final paper by Andrew Dean examines new dimensions of the eschatological imagination in the context of the 'Rainbow Bridge'—a new conceptualisation of the afterlife for pets and other non-human family members. Dean explores how the imagination is used by bereaved pet owners as a spiritual tool to gain access to non-physical realms, providing a revealing insight into the ways that changing beliefs and expectations impact extraordinary experiences.

The 2022 issue of our journal contains articles that represent the vast field of our area of research, from Jungian philosophy to anthropology, from conversion experiences to bereavement, from Buddhism to Christianity, and from experiencing ideas of nothingness and oneness to ideas about pets in the afterlife. As previous issues of the Journal have already shown, religious experience is no longer studied only within Christian contexts. The study of religious experience is now a much wider field of study, encompassing perspectives on other-than-human entities. The issue also shows the vitality of the research field, as several of the authors have recently completed their postgraduate studies within philosophy, religious studies and anthropology. The study of religious experience is indeed diverse and multi-disciplinary, a rich field that produces fascinating research projects and insights into human experiences.

We sincerely hope that you enjoy the issue!

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Reflections on Nothingness and Oneness: The Phenomenology of Religious and Mystical Experience

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Following a profound psychological event in his early adolescence, Carl Jung held with lifelong conviction that the experience of God is the most evident of all experiences (Jung, 1965, p. 92). William James made a similar, albeit milder, statement on human religiosity, to which he attributed a 'sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there," more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses"' (James, 1929, p. 58). These men were the great psychologist-philosopher-theists of the early twentieth century, and from Jung's published letters, we know of their deeply motivated discussions about the psychology of religious experience in the summer of 1909 (Adler & Jaffé, 2015, p. 531). Whatever was shared in this fortuitous meeting of minds might well have included James's transformative experiences under nitrous oxide. It is clear in later accounts of his drug-induced 'observations' that James could not help but ascribe metaphysical and religious significance to the effects of anaesthetics. The 'artificial mystic state of mind' was the only one that could bring about in James (1929, 389) a 'living sense' of genuine revelation; not so for Jung, whose autobiography showcases the exceptional frequency of his dreams, visions, and fantasies, out of which he developed his theory of archetypes and derived his most personal religious beliefs (Jung, 1965, p. 173).

Despite their cognitive differences, Jung and James shared an intuition that religiosity and mysticism are deeply related. Walter Pahnke's renowned Good Friday Experiment of 1962 gave scientific credibility to this view, by demonstrating that in religiously inclined, 'psychedelically naïve' volunteers, psilocybin—the main psychoactive compound in magic mushrooms—can facilitate 'experiences of varying degrees of depth that either are identical with, or indistinguishable from, those reported in the cross-cultural mystical literature' (Doblin, 1991, p. 13; Pahnke, 1963). More recent clinical studies of psychedelic experience also encounter these sentiments in no ambiguous terms. In one report of a study conducted at Johns Hopkins University, the researchers present a description of an experience written by a volunteer who received 20mg/70kg bodyweight of psilocybin:

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> In my mind's eye, I felt myself instinctively taking on the posture of prayer in my head. I was on my knees, hands clasped in front of me and I bowed to this force […] I only felt it, but it felt **more real than any reality I have experienced** (Barrett and Griffiths, 2017, p. 4, emphasis in original).

The volunteer's experience of a feeling 'more real than any reality' is a familiar expression to the British philosopher Walter Stace (1960b, p. 10), who found inspiration for a perennial philosophy of religion in his comparative reading of mystical texts. Stace (1967, p. 44) attributed several characteristics to mystical experience, including a sense of true revelation, corresponding neatly to James's criterion of 'noetic quality' and Pahnke's category of 'objectivity and reality' (James, 1929, p. 380; Pahnke, 1963, p. 6).

This brief and eclectic survey of ideas was for me a preliminary hint at the following thesis: that religious and mystical experience, indeed any experience, is in the first place *affective* and only derivatively cognitive or linguistic. On this view, religiosity and mysticism make salient the intrinsic and determinate *aesthetic* value of experience, which must be carefully distinguished from the indeterminate *truth* values of adjunct theologies (or atheologies) and speculative metaphysics. To be sure, agreement between reality and appearance is tacitly assumed in most ordinary events, but this approach is suspect in the extraordinary case of divine revelation (spiritual enlightenment if you prefer), for which no consensus may ever be reached. In this essay I examine what appear to be the chief counterexamples to our thesis in the philosophical literature: phenomenological *nothingness* and *nonduality*. My critical analyses of these concepts will, I hope, constitute an adequate defence.

Sartre and Nothingness

Distinctions between reality and appearance abound in modern philosophy. In *Being and Nothingness* (*L'Être et le Néant*), Jean-Paul Sartre distinguishes between knowledge and consciousness, the 'most concrete of experiences' (Sartre, 2012, p. 17). This accounts for the fallibility of judgment, such as when we mistake a stranger for a friend on the street, or when Sartre imagines a tree trunk to appear as a man watching him in the half-light. Following Heidegger, he defines consciousness in its most basic form as 'pre-ontological,' i.e., it is taken for granted before being held as an object of contemplation. Similarly, he finds that while consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, it can never become another object among what is given to it. Thus far we agree. But the ontological status Sartre grants to consciousness in light of these premises is striking—he

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defines consciousness as being 'its own nothingness'; this is the import of the 'for-itself.' Furthermore, the for-itself is a self-consciousness and *'the only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something.'* Consciousness thus defined 'transcends itself in order to reach an object, and it exhausts itself in this same positing' (Sartre, 2012, pp. 11-14). What Sartre intends to show in the first chapter of his magnum opus is that experience is not simply positive in character. We also experience a real nothingness, or non-being, latent in human experience and endowed with 'objective existence.'

Nothingness is not an uncommon philosophical idea. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Georg Hegel declared in *Faith and Knowledge* (*Glauben und Wissen*) that 'the first task of philosophy is to conceive of *absolute* nothingness.' His plain-English interpreters variably define this nothingness as 'the assertion of the absence of all determination' and 'the *immediate* absence of being as such' (McTaggart, 1910, p. 10; Houlgate, 2006, p. 278). Hegel regarded nothingness as a religious phenomenon contiguous with being, which signifies the 'infinite grief' or 'harsh consciousness of loss' in the felt absence of God (Hegel, 1977, pp. 190-191). On the other hand, Sartre situated nothingness *within* being, inferring from it the *nonexistence* of God, or at least the medieval scholastic notion of an omnipotent creator (Sartre, 2012, p. xxxiv). Heidegger also asserted the possibility of experiencing 'the nothing itself,' although rarely and fleetingly 'in the fundamental mood of *Angst*' (Heidegger, 1998, p. 88). Elsewhere still, absolute nothingness became the defining intellectual theme of the twentieth century Kyoto School philosophers, whose members were critically engaged with German idealism and Mahāyāna Buddhism (Heisig *et al.,* 2011, p. 643). Keiji Nishitani, a major representative of the school, perceived a dialectical relationship between Nietzschean nihilism and the Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* or emptiness. His masterwork *Religion and Nothingness* (*Shūkyō to wa nanika*, 1961) conveys a deeply existential perspective on the present topic: 'Absolute nothingness […] is not possible as a nothingness that is thought but only as a nothingness that is lived' (Nishitani, 1982, p. 70). The founder of the Kyoto School, Kitarō Nishida, held that nothingness is neither complimentary nor internal to being, but transcendent and inclusive of it (Waldenfels, 1966, p. 365). These disparate views illustrate how the phenomenology of nothingness has been inconsistently interpreted across atheistic, theological, and existential or soteriological systems of thought.

Although Sartre is chiefly concerned with the *experience* of nothingness, in passing he speculates about its ontology: 'Nothingness beyond the world accounts for absolute negation' (Sartre, 2012, p. 56). Phenomenologically, Sartre says that non-being is brought into the world by the for-itself, occasioned by experiences of unfulfilled expectation. I might arrive late for an appointment at a café, expecting to see the person with whom I

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arranged to meet. Should I realise 'he is not here,' says Sartre, I intuit non-being, not a mere quality of judgment. This intuition is indeed a sheer *nothing*, he insists, and we attest to this fact in ordinary language and experience. 'Do we not say, for example, "I suddenly saw that he was not there" […]?' (Sartre, 2012, p. 41). Witnessing destruction is also thought to reveal nothingness in its 'pre-judicative comprehension.' But the most profound instantiation of nothingness for Sartre arises out of the Kierkegaardian-Heideggerian experience of *Angst* (anxiety or anguish). This emotion is said to conjoin, without contradiction, the 'concrete apprehension' of nothingness and the realisation of human freedom.

The absolute nothingness of Hegel and the objective non-being of Sartre contradict our thesis that experience is principally emotional and aesthetic. Both concepts imply the possibility of an experience devoid of all determinate qualities, save for sheer non-being. While nothingness had a distinctly existential influence on these authors, reminiscent of Nishitani's (1900) 'self-overcoming of nihilism through nihilism,' our main concern relates to its phenomenology. What is an experience of sheer nothingness like? In all attempts this author fails to conceive such a thing. Ordinarily the meaning of nothing is defined in contexts of absence. This came to my attention last weekend with a joke. While preparing for a trip to our local bakery, my flatmate Ruben invited our household to place orders with him:

Ruben: OK place your orders!
I'm off [to the bakery]

10 minutes elapses

Cool! Nothing it is!
Let me know how nothing tastes when you eat your piece of nothing.

For our purposes, Ruben achieves more than a frivolous play on words. The absurdity of his statement illustrates how nothingness, or negation, signifies relative absence but never absolute, unqualified privation. Let us suppose I had asked Ruben for a croissant, but he returned from the bakery without one. The Sartrean procedure asks what influence the idea of *zero* croissants has on my immediate experience. I confess that I cannot discern a meaningful effect. In no way does the perception of absence or lack deprive my experience of the world of its intrinsic aesthetic value—I continue to feel regardless, including in this case disappointment. More generally, the realisation of unfulfilled

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expectation does not, I hold, reveal a 'pure negativity' in the being of the for-itself. A givenness of purely negative being is not given at all, but a mere statement with no conceivable referent.

Another case in point: Sartre (2012, p. 50) identified 'numerous attitudes of "human reality" which imply a "comprehension" of nothingness: hate, prohibitions, regret […].' But the association of these affective terms with nothingness compromises the basic coherence of the concept. Would Sartre have characterised negative affect differently had he reconsidered the significance of human suffering? What about this familiar reality is accurately described as non-being or nihilation? On the contrary, pain as well as pleasure is an intensely definite given. To construe an unpleasant feeling as a manifestation of non-being (ergo non-feeling) is an extreme category error. Hegel's 'infinite grief' is analogous to the *Angst* that subsumes the above attitudes in Sartre's phenomenology. In either case, a logical relation between negative affect and negative being is presupposed but not explained.

Between (a) its conflicting meanings across a diverse range of philosophical treatises, (b) its explicit connections to negative emotion and judgment, and (c) the absence of a broadly intersubjective perceptual justification, nothingness appears to this author not to be a concrete apprehension of non-being. Rather it appears as an intellectual chimera, which takes the idea of absence and abstracts it beyond actual experience. In the act of description, one cannot help but implicate some positive information or other. I am inclined to think this explains a great deal about the paradoxical character of Hegelian dialectics, Sartre's 'phenomenological ontology,' Nishitani's existentialism, and Nishida's 'logic of contradictory identity,' insofar as absolute nothingness is granted a minimum of coherence at the level of direct experience. The lattermost principle of Nishida, applied to his master concept of 'absolute nothingness' (*zettai mu* 絶対無), furnishes the possibility of a more analytic critique. This will be our final investigation on nothingness and an opening for an inquiry into nonduality.

Nishida and Nonduality

Kitarō Nishida began his earliest philosophical work from the starting point of 'pure experience,' openly acknowledging the influence of James's radical empiricism in his own method. Both authors spoke to human 'intuition' as the foundation of religious belief, as opposed to reason or intellection (James, 1929, p. 436; Nishida, 1992, p. 32). They also recognised a paradoxical quality in mystical experience. James was thoroughly unconvinced by his predecessors' attempts to solve and dismiss the problem of

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nothingness,[1] 'for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge' (James, 1987, pp. 1002-1006). But Nishida would claim that there is such a bridge, not least one that establishes the 'clear existential fact' of God and the 'concrete' logical basis of religion (Nishida, 1987, p. 75; Masakatsu, 2020, p. 403). Some context is in order.

Despite several developments in his thought, Nishida continually upheld the key precept of his first book, *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū*, 1911), that 'there is no distinction between subject and object in any state of direct experience.' The subject-object relation arises only after losing the original 'unity of experience' (Nishida, 1992, pp. 31-32). This is not a static unity but a highly dynamic world of feeling and volition, without which reality can only be held abstractly. These ideas reappear in the middle and later periods of Nishida's career, as he continued to engage with the history of Western thought. His extensive reading of continental philosophy exposed him to the ruthless emphasis on logic that characterised neo-Kantianism in the late nineteenth century. And, after being accused of subjectivism, Nishida undertook the 'logicisation' (*ronrika* 論理化) of his ideas (Masakatsu, 2020, p. 398). However, the task of logicising was difficult, as direct experience would have to establish some relation to conceptual knowledge without inferring either (a) an extreme dualism of mutually independent realities, or (b) a subjectivism that denies the existence of an actual world.

In his final year, Nishida set out to clarify a solution that, to his mind, lay half-expressed in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras* of Mahāyāna Buddhism. More importantly, it was his 'concrete' response to the decidedly abstract logics of Western philosophy. The principle of this logic is 'affirmation through absolute negation' (Nishida, 1987, p. 83). Perceptive readers may recall the self-negating action of the for-itself, which thereby transcends itself to affirm the objective world as in-itself (Sartre, 2012, p. 295). But the similarities on closer inspection are few. To be sure, Nishida and Sartre both agreed with the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, against Immanuel Kant, that much of reality is given in the analysis of experience. However, Nishida's method was neither a phenomenology nor an apriorism. Rather it was a 'paradoxical' and existential logic of 'absolutely contradictory self-identity' (*zettai mujunteki jiko dōitsu* 絶対矛盾的自己同一):

[1] The question of why there is anything at all rather than nothing has been raised and debated for millennia. The Presocratic philosopher Parmenides flatly denied the proposition that 'there could have been nothing,' arguing that being is necessary *qua* eternal and indestructible. See John Burnet, 'Parmenides of Elea' in *Early Greek Philosophy* (3rd ed., 1920). More recently, the question was answered theologically by Gottfried Leibniz in the seventeenth century—God created the best possible world, i.e., one in which there is being rather than non-being. In the medieval period, the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* provoked controversies over the divine power of God. See Roy Sorensen, 'Nothingness' in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring ed., 2020). Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nothingness/.

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> The conscious act is creative without an underlying substance or ground, as the absolutely contradictory identity of space and time, of the one and the many, of object and subject (Nishida, 1987, p. 57).

Here, Nishida categorically denies the objective world external to the conscious act (e.g., Sartre's in-itself). The for-itself is also rejected, given the identity of subject and object. In short, this understanding of consciousness entails a metaphysic of extreme monism, which Nishida defined as the 'place of nothingness' (*mu no basho* 無の場所). His reference to place, or *topos*, was a complex reaction against the Aristotelian theory of substance, Kant's transcendental idealism, and the Hegelian dialectic of sublation (for Nishida, there is no 'higher synthesis' between affirmation and negation, as the tension is maintained in contradictory identity). The place of nothingness is 'the true absolute,' which 'by negating its own nothingness […] is infinitely self-affirming, infinitely creative, and is historical reality itself' (Nishida, 1987, p. 71).

What is my analytic response to Nishida? There are two primary contentions. First, he argued that experience forms a cohesive whole, therefore subject and object cannot be distinct. This does not follow. The subtle ambiguity in Nishida's reasoning can be removed by asking what precisely the cohesion relates to. Kant (1999, B130) explained the unity of experience as the way manifold sensations are 'combined' in the subject's consciousness by the power of representation. In this case, we preserve the common-sense notion that any experience is an experience *of* something. I believe Kant and Sartre correctly held—in conclusion, but not in method—this essential duality. Nishida's denial of subjectivism was mainly motivated by his certainty of an actual world. But he was also dissatisfied by the 'object logics' of Aristotle and Leibniz, whose respective theories of substance and identity appeared to ignore, or misconceive, the 'active, thinking self.' In response, he supposed a 'biconditional structure of co-origination and co-reflection' between subject and object. Strictly speaking, Nishidan monism (and Mahāyāna Buddhism generally), articulates a logic of mutual dependence or *interdependence:*

> From A, A expresses B in itself, as something expressed by A. That is, […] taking B as object, A predicates of B. But the converse is also true. It can equally be said that A is expressed in B, becomes a perspective of B's own expression (Nishida, 1987, p. 55).

I submit that social intercourse openly contradicts this point of view. Nishida presumed that A's experience of B co-originates in B's experience of A. But suppose that B is not

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yet aware of A. Then the relation is not mutual, for B is independent of A's experiencing, whereas A depends on B for the experience of B. Additionally, when two subjects do perceive one another, the foregoing theory declares that only *one* experience relates the co-reflecting subjects. In other words, A's experience of B is one and the same thing as B's experience of A. These ideas do not seem logically tenable. I propose a different view, owed largely to the doctrine of nominalism. It is trivial to say of a subject's experience that it assumes the form of *her* experience, in contrast to *this* experience, which is mine, and to that experience which is yours. The view that experience is concretely individual may explain more about its integrated character than the concept of co-reflection. Evidently, my readers do not share directly in my conscious experiences. At best, one observes and infers, somewhat imperfectly, what other subjects are feeling and thinking.

Lastly, on Nishida's nondualism: the contest he adjudicated between mutual independence and interdependence, whose outcome would decide the true logic of relations, was a false dichotomy. For this insight, philosophy is indebted to Charles Hartshorne, one of the foremost metaphysicians of the twentieth century. Hartshorne (1989, p. 104) labelled this pervasive assumption as 'the fallacy of misplaced symmetry,' and the ubiquity of 'symmetrical' thinking in world religion and early modern philosophy can hardly be overstated (see Scherbatsky, 1962, p. 7f.; Hartshorne, 1983, p. 155ff.; 1989, p. 98ff.; Nakamura, 1992, p. 436ff). On the one hand, mutual independence found expression in Cartesian dualism (mind and matter occupy different realities); Hume's 'separability principle' (whatever differs is distinguishable, and whatever is distinguishable is separable); and, according to Scherbatsky (1962, p. 14), the early Sarvāstivāda Buddhists' pluralist doctrine of *sarvam asti* ('everything exists'). On the other hand, interdependence has among its variants: Spinoza's necessitarianism[2]; Leibniz's theory of the individual as 'once and for all everything that will ever happen to him' (Leibniz, 1991, p. 12); and the *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) doctrine of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition to which Nishida belonged. The missing alternative in this conflict of extremisms is, Hartshorne submits, the moderate 'one-way,' or asymmetrical, case:

> […] interaction is a two-way relation, but it is explained as a complex of one-way actions. For example, I-now influences you a moment later, you-now influences me a moment later. Neither of these actions is strictly symmetrical (Hartshorne, 2011, p. 52)

[2] Spinoza held that, by way of natural reason, we 'perceive things […] not as contingent, but as necessary.' Corollary to this: 'Hence it follows that it is due only to imagination that we regard things, whether with respect to the past or to the future, as contingent' (*Ethics Part 2*, Prop. 44; Fullerton, 1894, p. 117ff).

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Applied to Nishida's principle of contradictory identity, space may be defined as a dimension of symmetrical relatedness, in the sense that perceptual phenomena exist as 'contemporaries' in space. However, time is a dimension of one-way relations. The subject always perceives her objects a moment later, since we do not observe any phenomenon—whether the light of a distant star, or the scourging impact of a whip—instantaneously with its occurrence.

My second and final contention bears on the double negation in the place of nothingness. Taken at face value, and on closer inspection, Nishida is arguing for the principle of explosion ('from contradiction, anything follows'). This would render his conceptual scheme into a religious dialetheism; an interpretation that appears conclusive based on the following passage in *Last Writings* (1945):

> For any religion, any true religion, when a person gains religious faith, or deliverance, there always appears a principle of the absurd, which expresses the absolutely contradictory identity of God and mankind. This principle is neither sensory nor rational. It must be the Word of God, the self-expression of the absolute. It is the creative Word itself (Nishida, 1987, p. 106).

In Nishida's mature philosophy, what is ordinarily meant by the self is transfigured into the 'action-intuition' (*kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観) of the dynamic and creative world (*sōzō-teki sekai* 創造的世界) (Ōhashi & Akitomi, 2020, p. 381). Pushed to its ontological conclusion, reality is defined paradoxically as the 'concrete universal' (Masakatsu, 2020, p. 404). What intuitions could inspire this worldview? According to my understanding, Nishida posited the nondual place of nothingness to make sense of the conflicting sentiments and passions in human life. We feel joy but also sorrow, pleasure but also pain. Not only this, but our volitions are swayed by conflicting ethical principles, and in the final analysis religion directs us to 'the matter of [our] very life and death' (Nishida, 1987, p. 82). Nishida saw what Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, p. 1027b) had contemplated two thousand years earlier as 'the existence of things that are contrary in the same body' (McMahon, 2007, p. 132).

With the utmost respect to Nishida's final existential project, which he successfully completed only two days before his death, I maintain that from mixed emotions, cognitive dissonance, and paradox, it does not strictly follow that we inhabit a dialetheic world of true contradictions. In the language of Aristotelian logic, Nishida attempted to explain why the empirical subject can and often does possess contradictory predicates. The human organism feels, on a regular basis, complex mixtures of disparate emotions, not only across its lifetime but also simultaneously. Chief examples known to the English language

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include bittersweetness and frisson (excitement and fear). The Japanese have a word (*wabi-sabi* 侘寂), derived from Zen Buddhism, to convey the melancholic affinity for the transient beauty of nature. In German, there is the concept of *schadenfreude*—the unsavoury pleasure derived from other people's suffering. These phenomena are recognised in neuroscience as affective and cognitive states of 'ambivalence.'

What do we accomplish by interpreting ambivalence within a metaphysic of contradictory identity? For one, we deny the possibility of a genuine pluralism. Your experiences are not precisely yours, but the expressions of an all-encompassing Absolute. This monistic view is commonly ascribed to Mahāyāna Buddhism. But the paradoxical identity of all subjectivity is an original reading of dependent origination. This is Nishida's nondual place of nothingness, and it is based on the very reasonable premise that causal influence cannot obtain between mutually independent realities. Thus, there can be no sharp separation of subject and object. At this critical juncture, however, Nishida committed the fallacy of misplaced symmetry by assuming the opposite extreme of causal interdependence. He overlooked the essential asymmetry of time by defining concrete actuality as an 'absolute present,' which enfolds the infinite past and future within itself (Nishida, 1987, p. 88). Alternatively, why not take temporal process as a one-way influence of the determinate past over the partly indeterminate future? In this way, one is equipped to explain why I am influenced by, dependent on, Nishida's ideas, yet in no way is Nishida influenced by mine. I leave it to my reader whether the concept of an 'eternal now' is a greater or lesser abstraction than the linearity of time's arrow.

Plotinus and Mysticism

The furthest idea one could have from nothingness may have originated in ancient Greece. Parmenides, credited as the father of metaphysics, held 'it is not possible for what is nothing to be' (Fragments 6; Burnet, 1920, p. 174). Yet, like Nishida, he was a monist of an extreme kind. Anticipating the nondualism of Zen, he declared: 'the thing that can be thought and that for the sake of which the thought exists is the same' (Fragments 8; Burnet, 1920, p. 176). He took multiplicity for an illusion, and the subject-object distinction is a special case of this. However, far from validating nonduality as the ultimate principle, Nishida's logic of contradictory identity would have been an aberration to the Presocratics. Centuries later, Plotinus gathered from Parmenides that 'everything is contemplation' (*theōríā* θεωρία) and derives solely from the absolute (Emilsson, 1996, p. 32). Putting aside a thorough treatment of his metaphysics, Plotinus referred to this wellspring of all things as the One. However, experiences of divine union

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with the One are, he claimed, attainable only by grasping that of which 'nothing can be predicated' (§3.8.10; Gerson, 2020, p. 63). In a word, nonduality is indescribable.

William Ralph Inge is helpful in warning against elitist readings of Plotinian mysticism.[3] There is no special 'faculty' involved. Instead, there is a spiritual frame of mind that 'all possess but few use,' which enables a continuity from sense perception up to the vision of the One (Inge, 1918, p. 148). Similarly, in the monastic training of Rinzai Zen, students aim for an experience (dōriki 道力, literally 'power of the way') of nonduality that is naturally obscured within ordinary conventional experience (Hori, 2000, p. 307). Plotinus and Zen Buddhism each appeal to the utter ineffability of their respective enlightenments, but the former was not entirely consistent in this regard. For example, in the 'way of return' to the indescribable One, Plotinus took himself to 'behold a beauty of wondrous quality' while becoming 'externalised' from his body (§4.8.1.1; Gerson, 1996, p. 83). By extension, his opinion of the body was exceedingly negative. Owing to the plurality of perceptual phenomena, he regarded the aesthetic qualities derived from sensation as a 'mere charade' (Emilsson, 1996, p. 180). Superlative beauty belongs to the One, he thought, and as cause of all things, it must therefore produce the inferior 'composites' (*súnthesis* σύνθεσις) of nature.

Most aesthetes will undoubtedly oppose such a flagrant disdain for the body. Even Zen Buddhism, demanding as it is for mastery of 'spirit over matter,' perceives true beauty in the evanescence of worldly existence. The Japanese scholar of art and aesthetics Kakuzō Okakura remarked that uniformity and symmetry are 'fatal' to a healthy imagination and the Zen pursuit of perfection (Okakura, 1956, p. 70f). He would not have seen in the Plotinian One the source of all beauty, but a monument to repetition and monotony. My affective-aesthetic interpretation of experience is consistent with this view. Plotinus inherited the monistic bias of his predecessors by venerating simplicity over complexity; cause over effect; independence over dependence. Yet the richness and depth of human emotion is afforded by its contrasts, and the profound benefits of social relationships are demonstrably formed in the reciprocal influencing of self and other.

[3] Etymologists identify the Greek μυστικός (*mustikós* 'secret') among the origins of the term *mysticism*, whose earliest meaning is associated with the secret rituals of ancient Eleusis. Christianity appropriated the term to specify, among other things, the 'supremely ineffable' doctrine of the Trinity (see Bouyer, 1980, p. 42ff). Similarly, in Hinduism, the ultimate spiritual goal of *moksha*, or liberation, is 'beyond the senses, beyond understanding, beyond all expression' (*Mandukya Upanishad, Verse 7*; Stace, 1960a, p. 88). Nishida (1987, p. 106) also defined the absolute as 'neither sensory nor rational.' Plotinus anticipated all three mysticisms. The One is 'ineffable' truth, transcending sense perception, the Soul, and finally 'the majesty of Intellect' (§5.3.13.62; Gerson, 2020, p. 127).

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Conclusion

In closing, those who are perplexed by the ideas of experiencing absolute nothingness and apprehending oneness have little recourse to judge the veracity of either. The mysticism of Plotinus depends largely on the coherence of his nondualism; Nishida, as a dialetheist, depends on even less. Effectively, the uninitiated are barred from inquiry unless they should vindicate for themselves the very issues of contention! Thus, we return to our working thesis. The language of religious experience points to a transmutation or intensification of feeling that may obscure—but never annihilate—the duality of subject and object. Furthermore, these experiences reliably generate interpretive and theoretical interest. In so doing, religiosity and mysticism exert a tremendous influence over personal belief, yet the variety of ideas we have considered are neither self-evident nor mutually supportive. These investigations have led me to stand against the empirical method of religious inquiry common to William James, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Kitarō Nishida. Questions of existential importance cannot be settled by declarations of truth in terms of correspondence to observable phenomena, or by sense-destroying affirmations of true contradiction. Sartre ought to have seen, having distinguished knowledge and consciousness, that the fallibility of judgment extends no less to metaphysical abstractions. When attempting to make sense of the most profound human experiences, one appears in the final analysis to rely solely on the consistent application of concepts. Hence, I hold with Aristotle that clarity is a virtue of style. I would only add that coherence is a prerequisite for meaning.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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?

[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

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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).

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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).

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> 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).

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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.

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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. […]

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> 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

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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

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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.

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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."

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> "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.

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> 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* 大燥発) and describes it as follows:

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[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:

[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

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> 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:

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[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

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> 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

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> 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

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> 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.

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

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Conversion and Relationship with God: A Study of Gendered Experience within Christianity

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My interest in Christian conversion stems from a dissertation I completed as an undergraduate religious studies student. My paternal great grandfather, the Rev. Joseph Jenkins, was a minister in the Calvinist Methodist church. He was instrumental in initiating and developing the revival, or conversion, of thousands of individuals within Wales in 1904. Subsequent to learning about the conversion of thousands of people, I developed a fascination with the process of conversion, what this meant to people, what they experienced and the impact it had upon their lives.

My research into Jenkins' work developed into a broader interest about the nature of conversion; why does it occur, what experiences do people have, is conversion still relevant today? Parallel to my interest in conversion was an interest in gender differences, it seemed an obvious move to link gender and conversion. I wanted to explore whether women and men experience conversion differently.

The overall aim of the research was to identify whether there was a difference in the conversion experiences of women and men who converted to Christianity. In order to meet this aim, evidence of the individual experiences of women and men would need to be gathered and analysed. Therefore, a general understanding of gender based issues that exist within the Christian church would need to be established. I was interested in the stories that people had to tell, in their experiences of what had happened to them in the period prior to their conversion, what happened during the conversion and how this had subsequently changed their lives.

It was necessary to identify people who wished to take part in the research. I contacted Evangelical and charismatic churches within the south Wales area, many were supportive and agreed to place notices asking for participants from within the church. A pastor from an Evangelical church offered to ask members of his church's congregation whether they would consent to participate in the research; a small number of people agreed. In addition, two other people with links to Evangelical churches consented to take part in the research. The subsequent focus of my research conducted via interviews was on those from an Evangelical type faith. The selection of participants who were interviewed is therefore based upon a random selection, this means that no general statements or conclusions can be drawn from the evidence, it is very specific to those

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interviewed. The pastor who contacted me was a key participant as he made it possible for me to interview the others from his church.

Some of the participants were interviewed face to face, others agreed to meet via web-based video links. All participants consented to be recorded. A total of six interviews were completed. Four of the interviewees were women, ages ranged from early twenties to early sixties. Of these four, two were related to the pastor, his wife and daughter. One of the other participants' attends the pastor's church. The fourth woman attends an Evangelical church in England. Two men were interviewed, both were aged over sixty. One was the pastor from a church in the south Wales area, the other was a retired Anglican vicar whose conversion had occurred within an Evangelical church. Due to the unbalanced mix of women and men and relationship to the pastor, it must be stressed that the findings of the research cannot be generalised, and the interpretation of experience can only be based upon the direct experiences of those interviewed. Acknowledgement of this ensures validity of the research within the parameters of choices for those interviewed.

I made use of accounts from a database housed at the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) at Lampeter University. The database was compiled by Alister Hardy. He collected a range of religious experiences from people all over the world, some of these experiences are concerned with Christian conversion. I conducted a search of the database and identified the accounts from nineteen men and sixteen women, these were compiled and examined for similarities and differences between genders. The data from the RERC was placed into a spreadsheet under headings that broadly corresponded with the subjects discussed during the interviews. This made it easier to analyse as I was able to use the spreadsheet to catalogue the evidence within the accounts to correspond with the questions I had included for the interviewees.

Participants were asked to share general information about their background to include where they were brought up, their families, their age, and a little about their lives. They were asked whether their parents were religious, whether they engaged with religious practices as children, if so, was it a different religion from the one they currently practice? Were there other factors that influenced their religious practices, for example, did or do they have friends who were Christians? They were asked to describe what events led up to their conversion experience. People were asked to reflect on whether they had a religious experience. How did their conversion occur, what kind of timescale did it span? What kind of impact did their conversion have on their lives, their jobs, their relationships? Those interviewed were asked about other changes they made to their lives following conversion. In addition, interviewed participants were asked to describe their relationship with God.

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Evidence from the RERC database was collected and sorted into the following categories: the contributor's background, to include whether they were raised within a Christian family prior to their conversion; what difference did it make to their life; their description of their experience of God; did they practice Christianity following their conversion; did they include information about trauma or relevant personal experiences within their account? My aim when organising the material was to mirror the questions asked to those who were interviewed. This was not always possible as contributors had shared experiences that were relevant to them. However, the majority of evidence could be categorised according to my classifications.

This study used qualitative research as a method of exploring whether the conversion experiences of women differ from those of men. The study is specific and involved a small selection of participants and contributions to the Alister Hardy database, therefore interpretation of data within this chapter cannot be applied in a general sense to gender issues or differences.

The work of key scholars who had devised models of conversion were used as foundation from which to organise the evidence when the research had been completed. Henri Gooren's "factors influencing religious activity" (Gooren, 2010, pp. 51-52) has been used as the principal method of classification as Gooren uses a broad range of categories which covers the complex components of people's lives. The headings, based on Gooren's classification will include "social," "institutional," "individual" and "contingency." Gooren's focus was on the factors that led people to religious conversion. Gooren's work misses an essential element of the conversion paradigm, he did not include provision for the impact that conversion had on the lives of individuals. This was modelled on the work of Lewis Rambo who proposed a seven stage model which included consequences to conversion. A notable element of Rambo's model is his reflection that any examination of the difference that conversion makes to the lives of individuals will be inherently biased (Rambo, 1993, p. 142). He writes that all religious communities have their own evaluation criteria by which the religious experience will be measured. This has significance, as will be seen, for this research as the consequences of conversion are interpreted in this instance, principally from the perspective of evangelical beliefs. With regards to evangelical Christianity, this is interpreted by those who have experienced conversion by the writings in the New Testament. In light of this, a section regarding theological factors has also been included. Examples of findings have been collated below, and have been interpreted.

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Social Factors

This section includes possible influences from family members, friends or acquaintances in individuals' social network. The presence of social factors is not a prerequisite to conversion. For example, Participant 3, one of the men who was interviewed, had no friends or family who attended church or were religious. It was found that both men and women who are Christians and have had a conversion experience have friends or family who attended church or considered themselves to be religious.

Of the people who were interviewed, all participants with the exception of one were brought up in a family where religion was important and had an influence on their lives. Participant 1 describes her early childhood in Zimbabwe:

> "We grew up Greek Orthodox, but I actually went to a Christian school, so [it was] very based on the bible, on biblical principles. As a family, we didn't necessarily go to church in the same capacity as you would as a Christian, as in the Church of England […] because we lived in a very rural capacity in Zimbabwe, we would only go to the Greek Church on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter and that type of thing. I was connected to a Christian youth group."

Since joining her Church, she has become very involved within it, "In the teaching of the Word, and obviously that's been materialised into me being involved with the youth." In addition, other members of her family have been baptised, her father and sister, she describes "God really being at the centre of our whole family." Her mother died of cancer when she was 12 or 13, but prior to this, her mother had been "born again."

Participant 6 was brought up in a Christian household, his father was a pastor. He recalled being told by his mother that, "You must have your own [religious] experience." Along with other children of a similar age, he attended Christian camp when he was fourteen years old, one such meeting was, "highly charged" with emotion.

It was difficult to identify whether the individuals analysed from the RERC database had friends or family that were Christian and the extent of influence that friends, family or other social pressures had upon their conversion. This was not a specific question asked by Alister Hardy when he collected the original data, so the results are somewhat unreliable, but do give a general indication. Many of the contributors have stated whether they had a previous or existing religious background within their family. Of the nineteen men identified, twelve were brought up or influenced as children by a religious environment, one man entered the ministry and two had parents who were religious. For example, one man identifies that he was "Brought up in a "church-going" family in

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Scotland" (RERC 000574). Another man writes that he was "Born and brought up a member of the Salvation Army" (RERC 000653).

Regarding the fifteen women, nine were influenced by religion as children and one was involved in teaching Sunday school later in life. One woman describes a "strong religious background from both parents of generally Evangelical practice" (RERC 000041). She goes on to describe her religious roots as "Baptised Presbyterian (English) confirmed Anglican […] admitted communicant to Open branch of Plymouth Brethren." Another woman who contributed to the database writes: "Until I was 21, I was in the 'I'm as good a Christian as any [camp]" (RERC 000225).

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors refer to possible influences from the church or from specific people who might have had an impact. All those who were interviewed were influenced, to some degree, in their conversion to Christianity by institutional factors. Some people were able to describe what the appeal of the church was. Many of the participants identified strongly with Christian values, there was a feeling of wanting to adhere to a spiritual life. The evangelical church (although consisting of different denominations) proved a powerful factor in influencing nearly all participants. Billy Graham was an important charismatic leader who proved influential with two participants, together with the father of a third. The database contributions illustrate that men's influences, where this was expressed, included hearing a sermon; listening to a man speaking about spiritual healing. Women were swayed by listening to a bishop speaking; an eminent preacher and listening to mass. These factors are present for both genders, there was no difference perceived in the experience of women or men.

Participant 5 was brought up in a Christian environment, she recalled being told by her mother that, "Your academic studies are important, but nothing is more important than the salvation of your soul." She attended young people's meetings of all the local churches in her teenage years, she remembers listening to others giving their testimonies. Participant 3's first encounter with religion occurred as a result of a chance meeting as a teenager. He, and his friends, became engaged in conversation with some people on the street who talked to him about Jesus and asked him whether he would like to go to church. He recalls having no difficulties in his life, he had a happy and content childhood. He went to church and enjoyed the atmosphere he experienced there. The pastor gave a sermon about salvation which he listened to and was interested in. He describes the language used in the church as being "you're saved, you're born again," "a disciple, a follower of Jesus." He was given a copy of the Bible and was motivated, though he didn't

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understand why, to read it. He was influenced by Billy Graham; however, this was at a time when he already had a strong faith and belief in God.

Individual Factors

All those who were interviewed and those who contributed to the RERC database had clear personal motivations linked to their conversion. For some, this can be linked to a desire to become more spiritual, to get to know God, to strengthen existing faith. Within the examples included, there are clear instances illustrating how both women and men have had individual factors which drove them towards conversion, again there is no obvious distinction between gendered experiences.

Participant 5 spoke of how as a child she was influenced by a book she had read regarding the story of a young girl who prayed to God asking him to reveal himself. She realised that, "you don't become a Christian just because your parents are Christian […] I knew it had to be a personal experience." Participant 3 described how at a young age he was curious about life and the world, "I did start to think about God and about life, this wasn't brought on by going to Sunday school or anything, I'd never been to Sunday school."

With respect to contributions from those who shared their accounts with the RERC database, one of the men who shared his experience describes working in India in close proximity to missionaries, he bought a copy of the New Testament, read it and, "when I came to the verse, 'I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light,' I was filled with a feeling I had never had before" (RERC 000690).

A female RERC database contributor writes, "I am an artist, and I was seeking for truth from the age of 16 but I always thought that if I had any spiritual experience, I would not believe in it and would dismiss it as a delusion" (RERC 000001).

Contingency Factors

Contingency factors relate to matters that were instrumental in an individual's conversion. For example, a personal crisis, an important event which prompted, or predisposed, a Christian conversion; these are events that are in some way linked to the individual's religious experience. There is no appreciable difference between the numbers of women and men who have identifiable contingency factors to their conversion.

Participant 2 expressed that she was accused of plagiarism whilst studying at university, she said that it was a complicated situation involving a few people. She "Really felt like a criminal, I felt so guilty."

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There are many examples of narratives from contributors to the RERC database which fall into this category. One account which stands out is written by a man who worked as an officer on board a ship in the Royal Navy (RERC 000693). He describes becoming embroiled in a life of gambling, alcoholism and sex funded by theft and fraud. Eventually he was caught and discharged to prison following a court-martial. After three years, he was released from prison, and continued with his previous lifestyle. He portrays his life with his children and second wife as, "we might have appeared to have everything we desired, but, underneath the façade, all was chaos." He drank increasingly large amounts, and on occasion became violent. Ultimately, at his lowest point, he was persuaded by his sister to attend a Christian Fellowship meeting which changed his life.

There is a point of clarification which needs to be included in this section. There are many illustrations of crises or difficulties in people's lives which can be used as examples of contingency factors to conversion. They are present for both women and men. However, it cannot be claimed that they are prerequisite antecedents to conversion. There are many more examples of people who do not have contingency factors. There is no example of trauma or crises present in the lives of the other participants who were interviewed or many of those who engaged with the RERC database.

Consequences to Conversion

The participants who were interviewed and those from the RERC database are all clear that their Christian conversion experience had consequences to their lives and that, in nearly every case, this was sustained for the remainder of their lives. With respect to the subjects who contributed to the RERC database, all describe the experience as leaving them with positive changes to their lives. The men described the changes as a change in friends, thoughts, tastes, interests (RERC 000126), a changed attitude towards life (RERC 000221), increased interest in faith healing (RERC 000256). The women described the following changes, feeling loved and at peace and an absence of fear (RERC 000001), a great joy in reading the bible (RERC 000102), becoming a missionary (RERC 000225), finding peace and feeling God had a purpose for her (RERC 000250), feeling inner vitality and strength (RERC 000292). It is clear that both genders experienced a wide variety of positive outcomes. Both genders describe feeling more at peace and contented in their everyday life.

With respect to the participants who were interviewed, there is evidence that their conversion experiences had long lasting effects upon their lives, it has been instrumental in shaping change for all six individuals. Regarding the difference it made to Participant 5's life, she concedes that for many years she felt she was failing the Lord, felt like she

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was climbing a ladder and falling back down again. She describes how, over a period of time her understanding of Christ changed. She felt that she had needed to struggle, whereas in fact, Christ had already accomplished everything on behalf of human beings. She realised that her position in Christ had not changed since the day she had converted. Christ's act of dying for the sins of humanity had atoned for her sins, she declared "justification" or "just as if I had never sinned."

Theological Interpretation

Some of the people who contributed to the RERC database record the impact that conversion had upon them in terms of their understanding of the New Testament, Gospels and God. For example, one man records (RERC 005513):

> "As I read those words in the context of Paul's conversion my own conscience was pricked in a very significant way but at the same time the room where I was praying was filled with a sense of the presence of the risen Christ and I was assured that he had died for me and I could be forgiven the things in my life that I was ashamed of and that if I allowed him to come and share my life I could find an inner strength to become a different person."

A woman contributor to the RERC database writes that she realised "What it meant to be a Christian, the reason why Christ had died and the reality of sin" (RERC 000225). Another women contributor writes that she went to mass to listen to the music, "And had a sudden and completely unexpected sense of the real Presence [of God] in the Blessed Sacrament" (RERC 000366).

Many of the participants who were interviewed also interpreted their conversion experiences through the Gospels. For example, Participant 5 describes being at a weekend Christian conference for young people. She was approached by the minister and asked if she was a Christian:

> "I said no, but it's what I long for more than anything else in my life, because I know that I will not be right with God until [this happens]. I said I've never known. I've heard people give testimonies and they talk about it, but it's never happened to me."

> "He pointed me to a verse of Scripture, Philippians chapter 1:6, He who has begun a good work in you will continue it until the day of Christ Jesus, and I felt a

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> real peace and assurance from that point on. The Lord has His hand upon me, he has begun his work, because I want this."

It was very important for all of the people who were interviewed to share their understanding of what being a Christian meant. This was summed up by Participant 3 who explained during his interview what the meaning of being 'saved,' or 'born again,' or 'Christian' was. He explained that:

> "You are born again by believing in Jesus. So that the Spirit of God creates that experience and that operation of new birth on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ and the Easter story."

> "There is enough Scripture to support that Jesus died for our sins […] so that we may be forgiven and that creates a conversion."

> "The 'born again' is the same as belief, if someone genuinely believes that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour and makes confession of that and they repent then they are born again of the Spirit of God or they become a Christian."

Conversion is therefore achieved, in part, through interpretation of the Gospels as they are in the New Testament. This includes a firm belief that Jesus is a saviour and the son of God and that he died to save people from their sins; this is made possible by God. This point is noteworthy because this is the means to convert to Christianity. Seen in such a way, there is no obvious or clearly defined difference between the conversion experiences of women and men.

Both genders had a mix of life elements that can be identified as reasons for conversion, there were no clear differences between women and men. When looking at the consequences of conversion, the study found out that such experiences can have an impact on both women and men in a lasting way. There was a large amount of evidence suggesting that both women and men interpret their experiences theologically, specifically through the Gospels and New Testament.

Use of conversion models failed to identify any clear differences between the conversion experiences of women and men. It is important to take account of the fact that the data does not support general statements due to the small qualitative sample, however it does illustrate certain points as demonstrated within the text.

The purpose of this study was to explore whether there were gendered differences between the Christian conversion experiences of women and men. The hypothesis was

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that as gender plays a role in all aspects of our lives, there would be clear differences displayed in women and men's conversion experiences. It was an unexpected result that gendered experiences, at least superficially, appeared to be very similar with little to distinguish the expected differences.

Differences were identified and these have been presented below along with a theory as to why these differences were subtle and not acknowledged by those interviewed.

Further work was therefore carried out to determine other common themes in both the accounts of participants and those the Alister Hardy database, these include language, metaphors and power.

The study explored whether women and men use language in a different way, for instance whether they include specific metaphors when describing their situation or feelings. It was noted that women and men use different language and words to describe their actual conversion experiences. Differences are to be expected as demonstrated by Jennifer Coates, who writes about gendered discourse: "There is no neutral discourse: whenever we speak we have to choose between different systems of meaning, different sets of values" (Coates, 2004, p. 216). The way in which human beings speak, is based on the concept of their gender, such a paradigm is difficult to resist as it is deeply embedded in one's unconscious mind (Coates, 2004, p. 220). This section will also include examples demonstrating the manner in which, when interviewed, participants speak from an embodied perspective; that is, the language they use is physical in nature. Similarly, Coates reflects that, "gender is not just a cultural construct—it is also a physical reality" (Coates, 2004, p. 220). Within this section on language, there are common themes which have been grouped together to include sin and relationship with God.

The interviews illustrate that women's narratives, in particular, focus on their relationship with sin prior to converting as seen below. Participant 4 defines herself as being "Quite mixed up really." She recalls feeling "dirty" and "ashamed" of herself in the company of her Christian friends. She describes living in a house with two other friends who were "living very immoral and, I suppose, destructive lifestyles." She had a Christian friend who became concerned for her feeling she was in the middle of a:

> "[…] battle between good and evil or darkness or light or something, I was being pulled back and forth." "I'd been feeling very despairing and ashamed of myself. I know that I was a sinner and I felt like what I'd done with my life, I didn't want anyone else to know how bad I was, but God did know and I wouldn't go to heaven and the only place would be was hell."

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The women from the RERC database describe sin as: I "went to hear a bishop preach and realised why Christ had died and the reality of sin" (RERC 000225). After listening to an eminent preacher, I was "greatly moved and wept copiously" (RERC 000250). Aged nineteen she "realised she was a sinner and she needed to repent as Christ had died for her" (RERC 000292).

Of the two men who were interviewed, only one made reference to sin within his life. His conversion occurred when he was twelve. He acknowledges that, "It might sound strange that a twelve-year-old son of a minister would see himself as a great sinner but it's true in the sense that the heart doesn't have to have committed things to have the potential within it" (Participant 6). The male responders within the RERC database describe in a similar way, a "crushing sense of sin" (RERC 000256), "you cannot serve God and mammon" (RERC 000285), and regarding the way in which God can forgive sins, one man wrote of how his "understanding of how Jesus is God and can forgive sins, deepened" (RERC 000340). These examples show that there are some differences between the way in which women describe the need to be cleansed of their sin whilst men describe a requirement to abstain from sin. The next section examines the differences that exist between women and men's accounts of their relationships with God.

Participant 2 (a woman) when talking about her conversion experience describes how she "felt like Jesus Christ was almost embracing me all the way round." When asked about what her relationship with God is now, she said, "Before you were in darkness and now you are in light and you have this relationship you didn't have." "Almost like this person you never knew is […] Like having somebody that you write to over the internet, the difference is that you can actually embrace somebody in real life." "It was a mixture of relief and peace." "I felt like really light, I felt like a bird." Reflecting on what was happening prior to the experience, she states: "I think that slowly, God was working in my heart." This participant describes God using paternalistic, father- like terms. This paternalism is similar to the description used by Participant 4, below.

The women's accounts from the RERC database include the following impressions of God following their conversion experience: "Without warning God coming down to meet and envelop me, awe-inspiring, yet a completely warm and loving Father, forgiveness, giving me certainty and security"; "Perfect love, perfect peace"; "fear gone" (RERC 000001). "I felt a power outside myself," "I knew that God had spoken to me" (RERC 000079). "I have peace in my heart" (RERC 000102).

By way of comparison, of the male participants who were interviewed, Participant 3 said that his conversion was "very real, but it wasn't that I had lots of feelings, I just believed that I had become a Christian." "The moral and ethical side of me was changing

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to a Christ like figure." That is, "The nature of God is pure, good and just." In contrast, Participant 6 did feel emotion during his conversion, he "cried to the Lord"; he describes feeling a "powerful presence in my heart and [God] had heard my cry and had answered my prayer and I was forgiven"; "I had a sense of peace." Examples from the RERC database are as follows: "There was a sudden freeing within and a swift indescribable illumination of mind, so subjectively vivid that I fancied a change even in the light around me"; "An exquisite sense of relief and peace"; "A new deep belief in the existence of God" (RERC 000221).

It can be seen that there is a gendered element of giving oneself to God in a more passive way as a woman. Men do not describe God in the same way, though there is an acknowledgment that God can "flow through you." Following their religious experience, many of the RERC database accounts from both genders describe feeling peaceful and feelings of relief. Women and men refer to a belief or knowledge that God loves them; they describe Him as being more powerful than human beings. However, seen as a whole, the narratives of men tend to be less emotional. Women describe their experience in a more physical way, relating the way in which God or Jesus has touched them. For women, the evidence suggests their attachment to and dependence on God in a hetero-normative way, as a paternal or husband like figure. The men did not use similar metaphors. God helped women feel complete and enabled men to feel fulfilled. The insight confirms Tanya van Wyk's argument that "Language does not only create and shape beliefs about gender, but language also maintains it" (van Wyk, 2018). In this context, it can be seen that there is a difference in the way in which one of the female participants views God as a father like figure and the way in which one of the male participants views himself as becoming more of a Christ like figure.

Participant 6 indicated during his interview that conversion experiences are the same for both women as men, he qualified this by stating that the New Testament regarded women and men as equals, "I would take the line, if it [conversion] was different, you would expect to see a difference in the Scripture as well. Our experiences in the Scripture do match up." There are references within the New Testament which demonstrate the interviewee's statement. For example, Galatians 3.28, is a well-known text which has been used to support an argument that there is gender balance with the gospels (Crandell, 2012, p. 120), "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Ostensibly, this text appears to proffer the same rights to women and men. To contextualise this, generally when the New Testament was written, women and men were not treated as equals. Colleen Conway writes stating that during the historical time when Jesus lived, men were considered to be higher in rank than a woman (Conway, 2008, p. 15). She argues that during this period there was a strict hierarchy of

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nationalities and gender, women were ranked below all men with the exception of slaves. Therefore, although Jesus might have had relationships with women, it is doubtful that those relationships would have been based upon equality.

The interviewed participants used the bible as a means to compare experiences of gender and, despite being written over two thousand years ago, it is still, for evangelical Christians, a living document upon which they base their lives. This provides further explanation as to why gender differences are not obvious. The gendered roles of those in the New Testament mirror those adopted by the interviewed participants. These roles did not appear to be questioned by those within the church. This acceptance of gendered roles is similar to the study referenced in the literature review conducted by Davidman and Griel (1993) who interviewed women and men within Jewish families. They observed that there are differences within the traditional roles of both genders. The differences between the gendered roles of women and men will be further explored later in this chapter via the work of Judith Butler.

Gender Relationship

There are key distinctions between gender relationships which will be explored in this section. Culturally, human beings are conditioned to understand relationships between women and men in fixed ways that are linked to the environment they live in. The following are examples will from the interviews with participants which illustrate this.

When interviewed, Participant 6, a man, reflected on the differences between the genders and whether there might be differences in conversion experiences:

> "Man and woman are, though it's not politically correct to say, they are different, and I think that to think of the Lord working through our characters and the character of a woman as opposed to a man is quite legitimate. But I think there are, you might say, overriding factors, that we have souls and it is not man : man, woman : woman, or man : woman; it's human : God, or man : God, or woman : God."

Participant 6 is making a point that the most important relationship is the spiritual one that human beings have with God. He talked more of his understanding about differences between genders:

> "Certainly, you know, a woman would be naturally more tender, and a man tends to be a bit more, masculine, you know. But when you actually look into it, it

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> doesn't quite work out like that. We might express it in different ways, but it is actually talking about the same thing."

Participant 6 is referring to what, at its core is a conversion experience that is the same for women and men, in its spiritual dimension. He continues to talk:

> "Although I'm mindful if I'm speaking to a man or a woman, of the differences, but I don't actually treat them differently when it comes to the actual essentials. Because I think however it manifests, you know, in our personality, because our personalities vary anyway, let alone man : woman, we are all different. But what goes on in the heart, they are identical works."

Participant 6 has described the way in which both genders are the same in God's view, however, whilst talking, he expresses that there are differences between genders in his view:

> "I think one of the things about different roles of women and men, obviously there can be some misunderstanding of our position, we don't tend to have women pastors, we have men. But that does not mean that we don't believe in the equality of the soul, men and women. And actually, that although a woman might be different from a man, they can be crucial in a church."

> "So even though we might be different from some denominations in that, certainly, I've always valued the women in our church and very often they can be the strength of the church for various reasons."

Although participant 6 was able to recognise there is a difference between genders, overall, there was no acknowledgment that the conversion experience is different for women and men. The reason for this needs to be explored. Why is it difficult to perceive of the cultural constraints and limitations that are placed on women and men given that one lives within a cultural structure which is designed to perceive one as being either 'female' or 'male.' This is especially so as the language that is used to describe gender differences is discerned as being comprehensively logical and impartial. This point is particularly important with regard to the conversion experiences of the interviewed participants who base their frame of reference on the composition of aspects of the New Testament which focuses on a requirement to acknowledge that one is a sinner. The need

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to acknowledge sin is of such great importance that any difference in the way it is conducted is lost or ignored.

The work of Judith Butler can be used to offer an insight into the reasons for the apparent invisibility of these differences. Butler's work gives an indication as to why participants felt that their experiences were not gendered. Butler acknowledges that gender is a culturally constructed concept and provides a philosophical basis for this tenet. She explores whether gender is something which we can choose to have some control over, "a form of choice" (Butler, 1999, p. 12). Butler argues that traditionally, the position of women has been separated from "class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations," so it has been assumed and argued by feminists that women are intrinsically different to men (Butler, 1999, p. 7). She asks then whether one can take on the qualities of what is assumed to be masculine or feminine and whether gender is a choice (Butler, 1999, p. 12)? Furthermore, Butler writes that there are limits to the way in which the constructed nature of gender is perceived, this is because "these limits are always set within the terms of hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (Butler, 1999, p. 13). Butler's theory can be used to offer insight into why participants were unable to perceive a gender difference.

Butler writes that one 'performs' gender, she does not mean that one has agency within 'doing,' Butler is clear that one 'performs' without free will or insight into the gendered role one has adopted (Butler, 2004, p.1). Butler argues that the concept of 'I' is a social construct, 'I' only exists within the poststructualist theory that 'I' is a signification of language. If this is the case, then neither 'I' nor 'gender' can exist outside of language or cultural construction. Moreover, gender identity cannot precede language, this is Butler's rationale for 'doing' gender rather than 'being' a gender. The participants were unable to step outside their life or ordinary use of language.

Butler's theory demonstrates why the interviewed participants might have felt that their experiences were non gendered, in that the participants are not aware of their differences as their cultural norms are not only rooted in the present but also link to the two thousand year old New Testament.

Notably, the conversion experiences of those interviewed are interpreted directly through the New Testament; because of this, gender differences were not discernibly obvious to those who were interviewed. None of the individuals who contributed to the RERC database made any reference to gender differences within their experiences; though it must be acknowledged that this is something which Alister Hardy did not solicit. Gendered roles are so rooted in our culture that differences are not always easy to perceive as they cannot be detached from everyday life experiences.

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The interviewed participants and examples from the RERC database described their experience of conversion using language that had clear gendered differences in the way that the relationship with God is conceived. This difference is subtle and not necessarily apparent to those who are church members. Women make use of different metaphors to describe their conversion experience. They generally use language that is more paternalistic, describing God in terms of a father-like figure and experiencing their emotions in a physical manner. Both women and men find it difficult to recognise any gender differences within their conversion experience, this is because they see and describe it from a biblical perspective. Judith Butler argues that language and culture cannot be separated from gender and one has to "perform" one's gender. It is therefore impossible to step outside of a gendered experience. Women are important, but not equal to men. Therefore, their experience of conversion must be different to that of men as they maintain different cultural positions from men.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The general aim of the study was to explore whether the conversion experiences of women differ from those of men within Christianity. There was no evidence of gender based differences within conversion or relationship with God when conversion models devised by Henri Gooren or Lewis Rambo were applied to the study.

A further aim of the research was to establish why it is important to understand that there is a difference between the gendered experiences of women and men, to identify why this occurs; and to determine the impact that it has on women's lives within Christianity. As suggested by the evidence above, unexpectedly it appeared that gendered experiences, at least superficially, appeared to be very similar with little to distinguish with regard to the anticipated differences. The original hypothesis was that as gender plays a role in all aspects of our lives, there would be clear differences displayed in women and men's conversion experiences. Further analysis was conducted to establish the reasons for this apparent incongruity.

There was evidence to show that women and men use different language to describe their conversion experiences. Gendered differences are embedded in our cultural and physical lives, so much so that they are not always obvious or discernible. There was evidence that the way in which women and men use language to describe their experience of God is different. There is a gendered element of giving oneself to God in a more passive way as a woman. Women and men refer to a belief or knowledge that God loves them; they describe Him as being more powerful than human beings. However, seen as a whole, the narratives of men tend to be less emotional. Women describe their

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experience in a more physical way, relating the way in which God or Jesus has touched them. For women, the evidence suggests their attachment to and dependence on God in a hetero-normative way, as a paternal or husband-like figure. The men did not use similar metaphors. God helped women feel complete and enable men to feel fulfilled. There is some evidence that men use different words to women, such as "crushing" and "surging," while women use words such as "certainty" and "security."

Many of those people who were interviewed asked me about what evidence I had found to support my hypothesis. One interviewed participant pointed out that there is no difference between men and women to God. However, as demonstrated by Colleen Conway, men were considered to be higher in rank than women during the historical period when Jesus was alive. The interviewed participants used the bible as a means to compare experiences of gender and, despite being written over two thousand years ago, it is still, for Evangelical Christians, a living document upon which they base their lives. This provides further explanation as to why gender differences are not obvious. The gendered roles of those in the New Testament mirror those adopted by the interviewed participants.

This section demonstrates that, spiritually, the conversion experience is the same for women as for men. However, as explained by Judith Butler, culturally, human beings are conditioned to understand relationships between women and men in fixed ways that are linked to the environment they live in. The evidence demonstrates that the power differentials between women and men are either ignored, downplayed or considered as natural.

To summarise, the study demonstrates that conversion as defined by those within Evangelical churches is interpreted directly through the gospel tradition. Therefore, when examined superficially, there is little to suggest a difference in gendered experience of conversion. However, when explored in detail it has been clearly proven that contrasts exist within the use of language and gendered roles. The difference between women and men is embedded so deeply within our culture that it is not obvious and can be difficult to recognise.

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The Rainbow Bridge: Imagining 'Animal Heaven'

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In a rapidly changing world of techno-scientific miracles, and erroneous notions that science killed religion (Saad, 2018), the lure of the afterlife has not abated, as many still yearn for an eternity in paradise (Eliade, 1984; Gardiner, 1989; Murphy, 2015). The longevity of Heaven is not just that it is a foundation of several global religions, but also that it remains in a state of flux, continually being reimagined to meet the eschatological needs of different times (McDannell & Lang, 2001). For example, and while Heaven has been the traditional destination for 'good' humans, the increased adoption of pets within countries such as the UK (Statista, 2021) has led to pets receiving greater religious consideration (Lee, 2016). As such, we should not be surprised that troublesome questions have emerged about whether pets have souls, will enter the afterlife, and if they do, what this otherworldly realm might be like for them. Problematically though, and with otherworldly phenomena being immaterial in nature (Gooder, 2011), it exists beyond our five mundane senses, leaving the faithful to traverse the limits of mind and imagine ethereal arenas (Gardiner, 1989), such as the Rainbow Bridge (Magliocco, 2018). Curiously, and while imagining the afterlife is relatively commonplace, there is little empirical understanding about how our imagination functions as an otherworldly sense, or as a means to allow the faithful to experience supernatural realities (Calvin, 1960; Root-Bernstein, 2014). Consequently, this ethnography walks a less worn religious path, asking: how do bereaved religious innovators imagine the Rainbow Bridge? Helping explain this question, the literature review starts by examining 'animal heaven' not only as a distinct pet-centric phenomenon, but in relation to more traditional notions of a utopian afterlife. Following this, attention is paid to mental experiences of the supernatural, in 'imagining the otherworldly.' Next, the ethnographic 'methodology' is detailed, before finally presenting the 'findings' and 'discussion and conclusions,' with the latter highlighting contributions to the literature, alongside areas for future research.

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Literature Review

Animal Heaven

As an otherworldly arena, Heaven has classically been examined through an anthropomorphic lens (Gardiner, 1989), privileging humanity's eschatological end over that of animals. While this has left much to understand about what future awaits animals, we should note that Heaven itself remains poorly theorised, with much disagreement about where Heaven is, what it is like, who can go there, and whether anything can be known about it during this mortal lifetime (McGrath, 2010; Walls, 1997). Exploring these issues, we quickly come to see that Heaven is embedded within a myriad of contradictory beliefs, typically being depicted as (1) the garden, (2) the house, (3) the city, (4) the kingdom, and (5) a new Earth (McGrath, 2010; Colwell, 2001). Critically though, and amongst this confusion, Walls (1997, p. 7) argued that Heaven is paradise, at least for humans:

> […] the emphasis is upon being reunited with family and friends. In its most fully developed version, heaven is essentially like this life, without, of course, the evil and suffering that mar our present happiness. Heaven thus construed would include poetry, pianos, puppies, poppies, and sex, all at their best.

Looking beyond what Heaven is like, to where it is located, advancements in astronomy have led most to reject the historic stance that Heaven exists within this universe (Gooder, 2011), meaning that we cannot use space probes, telescopes, or even our mundane senses to explore this otherworldly arena (Alston, 1989; Gardiner, 1989). Commenting on this, Mullen (1996, p. 332) said: 'language about heaven has moved from spatial to spiritual reality. Heaven is now perceived to exist only in a spiritual realm and no longer in a physical realm.' Subsequently, the mind has become the main way to experience Heaven (Davidson, 2005; Halevi, 2009), with the faithful typically scaffolding imaginary views through personal preferences, religious teachings, and popular cultural norms, while at times, attempting to induce supernatural revelation (McDannell & Lang, 2001).

With the perceived nature of Heaven continually changing over time, eschatological conflicts between personal beliefs and orthodox doctrinal teachings tend to be common (Alexander & Rosner, 2000), with one of the current contentious issues being whether animals, and in particular pets, have a place in the afterlife. For pet-centrists—as we will see throughout this study—an afterlife in Heaven without pets would be Hell. At the heart

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of this matter is the West's increasing tendency to reject older notions of animals as machine-like beasts of burden, and to reposition them as conscious family members, deserving higher levels of moral and religious respect (Zinner, 2016). As such, eschatological debates about pets are increasingly common, particularly as pet loss tends to induce intense bereavement (Becker *et al.*, 2007; Hays & Hendrix, 2008; Testoni, De Cataldo, Ronconi & Zamperini, 2017; Wright, 2018), and frequently leaves grieving individuals longing to be reunited with their pets (Carmark & Packman, 2011). When we consider that major Western religions such as Christianity rarely promise pets an eternity in paradise (Linzey & Yamamoto, 1998), we should not be surprised that the religiously inclined are keen to embrace eschatological innovation and reimagine a pet afterlife outside of orthodoxy. While little is known about the inception of the Rainbow Bridge, it seems to have emerged from the literary works of Dahm (1998) and Britton (1994), where dead pets wait to be reunited with their humans within a quasi-Christian animal paradise, i.e. the Rainbow Bridge, before travelling to the real Heaven (Magliocco, 2018). How imagination might allow the perception of this supernatural realm is explored in the following section.

Imagining the Otherworldly

As humans, we experience the physical world through mundane sensory perception (Stewart, Gapenne & Di Paolo, 2014), while mentally exploring the limits of reality via imagination (Byrne, 2007; Leslie, 1987). Importantly, and even though the human mind can imagine entire lands, peoples, and cultures, modern secular-materialist science contends that such immersive reveries—and imagination in general—are nothing more than personalised fictions (Akkach, 2001; Cohen & MacKeith, 1991; Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2006). This is unfortunate, as not only is imagination 'one of the last uncharted domains of the mind' (Byrne, 2007, p. xi), but historically, it has been the means to explore otherworldly arenas such as Heaven (Gardiner, 1989), as McGrath (2010, p. 5) argued:

> To speak of "imagining heaven" does not imply or entail that heaven is a *fictional* notion, constructed by deliberately disregarding the harsher realities of the everyday world. It is to affirm the critical role of the God-given human capacity to construct and enter into mental pictures of divine reality […]

Through this theological lens, it is possible to view mental constructions as religious forms of revelation, allowing the faithful to have experiences of otherworldly beings and

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lands (Polkinghorne, 1994). Assuming that it is possible to really imagine Heaven, the challenge is to accurately imagine what is there, rather than simply playing with fictions of mind, which in the case of the latter, would certainly fail the test of genuine knowledge. Troublingly though, our minds are hardly blank slates, nor do we live in a social vacuum bereft of discussions about otherworldly realms. As such, all individuals engaged in mental perception must negotiate memories, personal preferences, and social norms for what is considered real (Conway & Loveday, 2015; Kearney, 1998). While we may wonder how imagination moves beyond personal fantasy, it has been argued that embracing love and having the right faith (Calvin, 1960; Helm, 1998) will allow the mind's eye to open (Halevi, 2009) and imagination to accurately sense the otherworldly (Barrett, 2021; Mezei, Murphy & Oakes, 2021; Plantinga & Tooley, 2008). Even though faith is commonly derided as 'believing what you know ain't true' (Twain, 2011), Plantinga and Tooley (2008) suggest that faith is knowledge, arrived at through a correctly functioning mind, facilitated by a commitment to loving the divine. Conversely, that sin corrupts the mind, distorting imaginative perception, and creating false experiences of the otherworldly (Augustine, 1972). As we might expect though, imaginary experiences are not without epistemological issue, as such claims tend to sit outside of shared perceptual experience, which can undermine how they are viewed throughout society. Having said this, the purpose of this study is not to validate the truth of the Rainbow Bridge, or imagination as an otherworldly sense, but instead, to provide a robust account of participant experiences relating to this emerging pet eschatology. Drawing this literature review to a close, the following methodology section details how the research question was answered.

Methodology

This hybrid ethnography (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) arose from my interactions with nine pet communities, where it was apparent that pet bereavement was catalysing the adoption of a new eschatology known as the Rainbow Bridge. Seeking to better understand this eschatological innovation, I worked to become a trusted and seasoned insider (Layton, 1988; McCracken, 1998), using snowballing to construct a sample of one hundred and seventy-nine participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011), to answer the question: how do bereaved religious innovators imagine the Rainbow Bridge? Inclusion criteria mandated that all participants were (1) exploring religious beliefs about a pet afterlife via the Rainbow Bridge, and (2) actively imagining this otherworldly arena. Incoherent, unsystematised, and incomplete beliefs were not a barrier to participant inclusion, as what mattered was a participant attempting to imagine the otherworldly, rather than being able to perceive a fully functioning ethereal land. Table 1 shows the purposeful,

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pragmatic, and anonymised sample of participants that this study was built around (Wengraf, 2004):

Participant characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender:		
Male	25	14
Female	154	86
Age (years):		
18-30	11	6
31-40	38	21
41-50	45	25
51-60	31	17
61-70	27	15
71-80	21	12
Over 80	6	3
Education		
School	63	35
Bachelor's degree	77	43
Masters and above	39	22
Religion		
Atheist	0	0
Agnostic	0	0
Christian	127	71
Pagan	52	29
Cultural Christian		
No	0	0
Yes	179	100
Suffered pet bereavement		
No	0	0
Yes	179	100
Years imagining the Rainbow Bridge		
0-3	94	53
3-6	47	26
Over 6	38	21

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Overviewing table 1, we see a nearly all female sample, not only fitting with women tending to have a greater emotional attachment to animals (Kellert & Berry, 1980; Driscoll, 1992), but also being more likely to be religious (Beit-Hallahmi, 2015). With just over half of the participants being Christian and all others having been practicing Christians, this sample was considered culturally Christian, potentially using such religious beliefs to scaffold views about this world and the next (Moffat & Yoo, 2019). Importantly though, all participants argued that their previous religious experiences had initially left them with much ambiguity about pets in the afterlife, which was coupled with a strong desire to

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embrace religious innovation and reimagine an otherworldly paradise (Gardiner, 1989; Royal, Kedrowicz, & Snyder, 2016) better suited to their pets.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

After pulling this sample together, I spent just over four years developing in-depth relationships with these participants (Gould, 2006; Hamilton, Dunnett & Downey, 2012), in person and through VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies, such as Skype, WhatsApp, e-mail, and phone (Fetterman, 2010; Iacono, Symonds & Brown, 2016). All ethnographic data was collected using participant observation, including conversations, interviews, surveys, storytelling, diaries, alongside my own autoethnographic experiences (Schouten & McAlexander & Koenig, 2007). Consequently, over two thousand pages of transcripts were produced, alongside five hundred and fifty pages of fieldnotes, and three hundred and ninety-seven diary pages. Collating this data, each participant produced a mean number of eleven and a half thousand words. Where relevant I also recorded body language and shifts in intonations in relation to what was being discussed.

Working the Data

After all data was collected, it was transcribed, and read several times to create a greater awareness of emerging themes (Arnould, 1993; Lindlof, 1995). Initial analysis was undertaken within one day of data collection, with subsequent analyses taking place after three and six months (Spiggle, 1994). To help understand the data, content analysis highlighted the frequency of themes, which were contextualised against my emic understanding, and etic consideration of the literature (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006; Kottak, 2006). Ongoing attention was given to how the participants depicted different views of reality (Foucault, 1974), with ‘reflexive pragmatism’ (Alvesson, 2003, p. 14) and vignettes being used to explore multiple interpretations (Humphreys, 2005). To aid robustness, within method triangulation compared findings between participants and methods (Denzin, 1970). Finally, and to centre the participants within the research process, summary reports were prepared, with peer debriefing being used to discuss project findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

This section answers the research question: how do bereaved religious innovators imagine the Rainbow Bridge? As a starting point, consideration is made of the changing

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nature of human-pet relationships, and how pet bereavement can leave individuals 'yearning for a pet afterlife.' Following this, the process of 'imagining the Rainbow Bridge' is drawn out, highlighting how different forms of imagination are believed to allow veridical otherworldly experiences. Finally, 'the nature of the Rainbow Bridge' is explored, detailing the content of this ethereal arena.

Yearning for a Pet Afterlife

While humans and animals have forged a myriad of relationships over many millennia, it seems fair to say that there has been a paradigm shift in recent decades, resulting from the increased integration of pets into everyday family life. As we will come to see though, breaking down traditional species barriers has not only raised acute eschatological concerns about pets, but has also opened the door for religious innovators to reconsider the place of pets within the afterlife. Starting to explain these changes, Lucy (F, 62) said:

> I'd grown up with pets. Nothing too exotic, just cats and dogs. Things have changed though. I mean when I was a girl, my cats chased rats, and lived outdoors. They were workers more than anything else, and yes, we loved them in a way, but they had a job to do. It was an arm's length relationship. Losing an animal wasn't such a big deal. Of course, we were all sad when it happened, but it wasn't like today, where cats live with rats in the lap of luxury. Honestly, they live better than me [laughs]. For example, my friend got married, and her dog was her bridesmaid. [Pause]. Looking back, it seems unbelievable how fast pets became family members, taking part in everything we do. Even though I have a human family and children, my cats are my real babies. I talk to them, and they talk to me. I Play with them. Dress them. Some people think cats are dumb, but cats are smart. Have personalities. Much smarter than you and me. If you want to see pure love and devotion, get a pet. They comfort us, offer a shoulder to cry on, and love us for all our faults. The reality is that pets are pure, like angels. And I've lost a lot of friends for putting pets above humans.

Such comments were common throughout this sample, showing how pets are being reimagined as conscious, spiritual beings, and a source of continued emotional support for humans. Taking this view, we can start to see why the participants were keen to reject more historic notions of animals as mindless subordinates and were embracing their pets as key family members. Fundamental to this reconceptualisation was the juxtaposition of morally 'perfect' pets and sinful humans, most noticeable through the participants overtly

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preferring the company of pets to 'tainted' humans. As we might expect though, proselytising religious beliefs that humans are fallen beings created ongoing tensions with friends, family, and colleagues, often resulting in the participants being relegated to the periphery of social life. Having said this, and as Mia (F, 41) explained, these participants had not abandoned human relationships altogether, but were instead thriving in pet-centric communities, typically working to create rich new cultures:

> There are so many people wanting to spend time with like-minded folk, who think the same about pets as them. I did, which is why I joined a few Facebook groups mad about dogs. And a few local doggy groups in my town. You often meet the same people in these groups. Birds of a feather flock together and all that. When someone says something new, everyone hears it. These groups are a hotbed of new thinking. Smashing old ideas and rapidly sharing new ones. It was a bit crazy, as we were always sharing pictures, inventing games, and telling silly stories about our dogs. I remember one of my friends saying how her human daughter wouldn't get married. So, she had an online wedding ceremony for her dog instead. Her human daughter let her down, but her real daughter […] her dog didn't. [Pause]. Spending time like this helped us all feel more confident about making our pets proper family members. I have to say, what started as just good fun, quickly became more serious. Hmm, I remember the first time that one of our fur babies died. A cute little dog called Snowy. No warning. [Pause]. One day his mum woke up and he was dead. As his adopted aunts and uncles, it hit us pretty bad. [Pause]. I didn't organise this, but we held an online funeral, and prayed for Snowy. Even those without faith were suddenly very religious. It was my first time dealing with the animal afterlife. The Rainbow Bridge. [Pause]. Sort of like animal heaven from what I can tell. I don't think anyone is quite sure where the idea came from. There are some old books and poems or something. A lot of chatter online about this. I wasn't even sure whether people believed in this, or just told tall tales to make themselves feel better. The only thing I knew was that we all loved these stories of pets waiting in paradise for us. Not many religions offer the chance to be with our pets forever.

Operating outside of a wider social gaze, these supportive groups acted as safe innovative spaces, allowing the participants to cultivate and share preferred imaginary views of their pets, while facilitating group bonding with 'like-minded folk.' Intriguingly though, and by embracing fantastical pet-based play, imagination was frequently mixed with the mundane to explore new social realities, where pets could fill perceived gaps in

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their owner's lives, such as a participant's dog being fictionally married instead of her human daughter. Problematically though, and with pet lives tending to be relatively short, mortality often became a critical issue, increasing the drive to adopt new eschatologies better able to cope with bereavement. While grief reduction strategies typically followed anthropomorphic socio-religious rituals, such as funerals and prayers, the most noticeable eschatological innovation was adopting the Rainbow Bridge as an otherworldly pet paradise. The popularity of this pet eschatology appears to be its simplicity, i.e. offering all pets a place in paradise, and welcoming humans of all faiths to embrace this otherworldly arena. Yet, and being relatively new, the participants were initially left trying to negotiate whether the Rainbow Bridge was real or just a 'tall tale' to alleviate suffering, as Amy (F, 28) argued:

> I'd been a religious faker most my life, never taking the afterlife that seriously. Why would I? I was fit and healthy, and so was Sheba [her cat]. [Pause]. That changed overnight when Sheba died. It broke my heart, and I couldn't forget her. Couldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. [Pause]. I'd heard people saying that animals go to the Rainbow Bridge when they die, but never taken it that seriously. [Pause]. I was in a state of panic and needed her back in my life. [Pause]. I found myself reading everything I could about what happens to animals when they die. The only thing I found was the Rainbow Bridge. [Pause]. I liked that it said our pets were waiting for us and I really wanted to believe this. I just needed faith and to see her in my mind. [Pause]. Desperation makes us grab whatever we can. I was drowning in pain, and I was hoping the Rainbow Bridge would be my life raft. [Pause]. The possibility of knowing Sheba was ok blew my mind. So, I joined some Rainbow Bridge groups on Facebook and started my journey to meet her again.

Being experiential in nature, the Rainbow Bridge moves beyond the promise of a future yet to come, as being accessible through the mind, it is simply waiting for individuals to imagine their deceased pets. Within itself, this is a relatively unique eschatological proposition, and not surprisingly, potentially highly attractive for those navigating intense grief. Problematically though, learning about the intricacies of the Rainbow Bridge was no small task, but was aided by the participants joining groups committed to imagining this ethereal land, as detailed in the following section.

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Imagining the Rainbow Bridge

Even though there was a strong desire amongst the participants to meaningfully engage with the Rainbow Bridge, there was also much uncertainty about how to look beyond the mundane, and just as importantly, how to differentiate supernatural fact from fiction. Explaining the challenge of attempting to explore the supernatural, Danielle (F, 45) said:

> I knew that I wanted to learn more about the Rainbow Bridge and find a way to bring my babies back into my life. I just didn't know how to do it. I mean, I'd joined a load of online Rainbow Bridge groups. [Pause]. They were all new though. [Pause]. The Rainbow Bridge is only starting to get attention, meaning that we were all figuring stuff out back in the day. We still have huge gaps in our understanding now. So much to discover and explain. Pet death has been an undiscovered country for such a long time, and we are committed to mapping it. [Pause]. I do know that you can't just pick up the phone to the afterlife. You can't use your normal senses to communicate with the dead. I know this from being a child in a Christian church, as I was told that Heaven is ghostly. If our normal senses could see spirits, we'd see them every day. [Pause]. So, yes, in the beginning, all we had was hope. And looking for answers, we talked within our pet communities, searching for guidance and a way to see the Rainbow Bridge.

Reminding ourselves that the Rainbow Bridge is a relatively recent innovation within pet communities and has only started to gain traction over the past few years, it is not surprising that there was still much to elucidate about this 'undiscovered country.' Where possible though, the participants were keen to fill doctrinal gaps by drawing on their cultural and religious experiences and expectations, such as positioning the otherworldly as immaterial, and beyond our mundane senses. Critically however, and in taking this ontological stance, all participants rejected the use of their physical senses as a vehicle to perceive the Rainbow Bridge, and instead rapidly adopted imagination as a supernatural sense. Commenting on the operationalisation of the mind in this way, Gary (M, 30), said:

> There was an idea floating around our group that you can see the Rainbow Bridge in your mind. In your dreams. When you are lost in thought. In fact, it popped up in several other Rainbow Bridge groups at about the same time. It kind of made sense when you consider that ghosts aren't physical. [Pause]. In a way, I think that some of this idea came from having been Christians and hearing church stories

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> about looking for the supernatural within ourselves. But also, our storytelling and earlier imaginary game playing with our pets. Let me explain. [Pause]. For a few years, I'd been making up stories about my dog Benny. Playful creative stuff and all that. Mmm, then Benny died. But we continued telling stories about him in the Rainbow Bridge. We knew what he loved doing in this life and extended our stories about him into the afterlife. Soon we were all telling stories about what our dead pets were doing there. To help our creativity, we painted pictures, wrote poems, and told even bigger stories. Might sound odd, but I really believe that all those who truly love their pets can know what their pets are doing in the afterlife. [Pause]. So, I told myself stories and sometimes tried to visualise them. I didn't always see much but could always tell a story. Thing was that I always knew what Benny was doing as I felt it in my heart. I never lost my connection to him and never will. I tried seeing the Rainbow Bridge within meditation and without. All that mattered was the stories I told. Sometimes pictures appeared, and sometimes they didn't. Either way, I was building a magical land in my head. It doesn't matter if people can't see pictures. All that matters is that people can imagine it and tell their pet's story.

It seems that learning to imagine the Rainbow Bridge is an iterative act, typically starting with simple storytelling, but where possible, slowly shifting into higher levels of immersive imagery that has the potential to be considered revelation. From a functional perspective, allowing each form of imagination to hold an equal epistemological weight empowered all group members to tell stories about the afterlife, regardless of their ability to produce visual mental content. Within itself, this facilitated spiritual freedom to explore otherworldly innovation, as new Rainbow Bridge stories were rapidly told, disseminated, and collectively reworked each day. Of course, whether these imaginary stories were regarded as fictional tales, or truthful accounts of pet paradise was a critical issue, as Mitzie (F, 29) discussed:

> I know what you are thinking. Is any of this real? [Pause]. Yes, it is all real. Why? Because we want it to be. We have all suffered so much after losing our pets, and we need harmony here. We accept all positive views of the Rainbow Bridge. As long as our pets are safe, waiting for us in paradise, then the rest is not an issue. Harmony lets us build faith. Follow our hearts. We are all true believers here. Building more faith every day. Our pets would never leave us. They watch us every day. Guide us back to them. All we need do is open our hearts to them, and we will see them in the Rainbow Bridge. Once you've seen your pet or told a story about them in animal heaven you will always believe it. It grabs your heart forever. I have

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> to say that those who hurt their pets will never see the truth of any world. Love your pet. Cleanse your soul and see pet paradise. It awaits us all.

Belief was thus driven by an overwhelming desire for any positive Rainbow Bridge experiences to be true, irrespective of whether imagination was coherent, or showed visual content. Fundamental to this approach was the belief that love for a pet orientates the mind towards perceiving the Rainbow Bridge, whereas sinful behaviour corrupts any form of (im)material imagination. While all participants argued that their belief was built on faith, few were concerned that this epistemological foundation was flawed, as the emotional responses generated from imagining their deceased pets created an overwhelming desire for these experiences to be true. Examining these imaginative experiences, the next section explores how the participants commonly described the Rainbow Bridge.

The Nature of the Rainbow Bridge

As this sample increasingly claimed mental experiences of the Rainbow Bridge, it became possible to elucidate the features prevalent throughout this otherworldly arena. If for example, and as the participants contended, their experiences were true, it would make sense that broadly similar accounts would emerge, not only for the nature of this land, but how deceased pets exist there. Helping us understand these aspects, and how variability within imagined experiences was negotiated, Mark (M, 56) said:

> I don't have all the answers right now as I'm still piecing it together. [Pause]. From what I've seen, the Rainbow Bridge is as everyone says, pet paradise. Not physical. But otherworldly and beautiful. The perfect place for our animal babies to wait for us. Not the real Heaven of course, but close to it. It has everything pets want and need. What would make your pet happiest? Well sir, the Rainbow Bridge has it by the barrel load. It is a magical land of meadows, beaches, sunny days, beautiful nights, and all the toys any pet could ever want. The best food, lots of treats, and millions of beds. Y'know, these food bowls remain full of tuna and every other food a pet would want. Beds are always clean. Don't know how it works myself. Magic or something. [Pause]. The best part is that no pet is afraid, or alone. It is the perfect version of Earth. Like the Garden of Eden, before we screwed it all up. No buildings, no motorways, and everything geared towards making pets happy. [Pause]. They all play together having a wonderful time each day. It warms my heart to think of it. The relief I got from knowing my cat is there is incredible.

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> Every day I know he is safe and happy, stuffing himself with food. Sunbathing, and doing everything he loved in this life with his new friends. [Pause]. I talk about this everyday with my online friends. We are really trying to understand this place and work it out together based on what makes our pets happiest.

The Rainbow Bridge can thus be considered a co-authored pet paradise, akin to a lower Heaven or the Garden of Eden, albeit immaterial in nature. Being idyllic, it was not surprising that the Rainbow Bridge was devoid of larger scale techno-scientific structures such as buildings, roads, and commerce. Yet, this utopian pet playground was not without all modern conveniences, as it was replete with beds, toys, and food. In depicting the Rainbow Bridge this way, we see the participants following a well-trodden eschatological path, to imagine the afterlife with all the best things from this mortal life, even when paradoxical, such as pets eating meat. While moral and metaphysical inconsistencies were common throughout the Rainbow Bridge, this lack of systematisation was generally 'resolved' by the participants asserting that this (1) otherworldly reality is just this way, (2) requires more faith to understand it, or (3) there is a deeper magical process at play that is not presently understood. Importantly, what seemed to matter most to the participants was not getting bogged down with metaphysical minutiae but continuing to imagine preferred stories about their pets within this pleasant ethereal land, and where possible maintaining group cohesion. This was particularly noticeable when listening to the participants detailing the transformatory nature of the Rainbow Bridge, as Ella (F, 68) explained:

> Everyone here agrees life can be Hell on Earth for pets. The Rainbow Bridge fixes that. It purifies pet souls and prepares them for the real Heaven. No matter what cruelty they experienced during their lives on Earth, their soul bodies are restored. I've seen it. I've watched new pets arrive. The lame walk, the blind see, and youth is restored to all. It is a miracle I tell you. My rabbit Daisy became blind in her later years. I nursed her daily and she was happy. We were happy. [Pause]. It broke my heart to think of her stumbling around the Rainbow Bridge without me to help her. I couldn't cope with that. She had to be restored to full health. Otherwise, it wouldn't be paradise for either of us. [Pause]. But the Rainbow Bridge does a lot more than just fixing pets. It heals their souls. [Pause]. This world corrupts. Even animals are tainted. So, being in the Rainbow Bridge purifies them. All pets become perfect again. But when our pets die, they are released from the bondage of flesh, and can return to their true selves. Death is a return to innocence. They become true spiritual beings again. Angels, with halos and wings. Working to help pets who

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> recently died settle in and enjoy all the afterlife can offer. [Pause]. Everyone wants to think of their pet like this, so nobody disagrees. [Pause]. If we all believe the Rainbow Bridge is a better version of this life, why disagree? It hurts all of us all if we fight, so we ignore bits that we disagree with. Most is irrelevant stuff anyway.

While the notion of physical bodies constraining and corrupting the purity of the soul is an old religious theme, there was little to suggest that any participant had wanted their pets freed from the confines of flesh, even when their pet had suffered severe ill health. Having said this, all participants argued that death was a form of liberation, releasing pet spirits from the 'bondage of flesh,' in turn allowing them to achieve an angelic state with halos and wings, beyond disease and suffering. From a practical perspective, depicting pets as archetypal angels often allowed group members to simply discern the living from the dead, and adjust their storytelling accordingly, which was an increasingly important issue as more pets died. Critically though, and as Lilly (F, 61) mentioned, all participants agreed that the Rainbow Bridge was only a temporary residence for each pet:

> As you've heard many times, the Rainbow Bridge isn't the real Heaven. Everyone here knows that our pets only stay there until we die. [Pause]. And when we do, those who loved their babies join them at the Rainbow Bridge. Then we journey to Heaven together, where we can spend all eternity. If anyone abused their pet, they go to Hell. They'll be tortured forever. To sin against your pet is unforgivable. This is all part of a cosmic test, and we pass it by loving our pets. [Pause]. I've seen those who loved their pets walking with them towards Heaven. So, when you think about it, the Rainbow Bridge is about humanity's final judgement as well.

Finally, we see human and pet eschatologies intertwining within the Rainbow Bridge, where eternal salvation and damnation are reduced to the moral and spiritual treatment of pets. Through this lens, mortal life is a 'cosmic test' for all humanity, passed through loving a pet, in turn allowing the pure of heart to re-embrace their deceased pets at the Rainbow Bridge, and jointly spend an eternity in Heaven. Of course, we might wonder how individuals without pets would fare salvifically? But, and like many other areas of the Rainbow Bridge, this issue was poorly explored, and was potentially waiting further imagination.

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Discussion and Conclusions

Although humans have formed relationships with animals for over a hundred thousand years (Braje, 2011), it seems fair to say that we are in a time of great eschatological upheaval, as our societies increasingly adopt animals as pets (Statista, 2021), and reflect on whether they have a place in the afterlife (Lee, 2016; Zinner, 2016). At the heart of this issue is the conscious desire within pet-centric communities to elevate pets above the 'pejorative' classification of animal, and in so doing, overturn humanity's historic moral and religious privileges (Gardiner, 1989). While many in our societies remain unconvinced that pets are anything but animals, these participants routinely reimagined pets as quasi-perfect 'children,' capable of succeeding in familial and social roles where humans had 'failed.' Problematically though, and as we saw, blurring traditional species boundaries can easily leave individuals experiencing acute bereavement (Becker *et al.*, 2007; Hays & Hendrix, 2008; Testoni, De Cataldo, Ronconi & Zamperini, 2017; Wright, 2018), and yearning to be reunited with their deceased pets (Carmark & Packman, 2011).

When we consider that mainstream Western religions such as Christianity tend to pay little attention to animals in the afterlife (Linzey & Yamamoto, 1998), perhaps we should not be surprised that pet-centric communities are seeking to meet the eschatological needs of their times (McDannell & Lang, 2001) by imagining the Rainbow Bridge (Magliocco, 2018). For the bereaved, the appeal of the Rainbow Bridge is the simplicity of its eschatological premise, i.e. all pets are welcome, and all humans are invited to have faith, irrespective of their extant religious proclivities. Although, we might well wonder whether this will remain true as the Rainbow Bridge increases its doctrinal complexity and starts to mandate and proscribe behaviours. At present though, simplicity and poor theorisation have created a high degree of eschatological freedom for the faithful to reimagine and reshape the nature of the Rainbow Bridge. While this had the potential to enmesh individuals within ethereal uncertainty, this was rarely the case, as all individuals had a rudimentary cultural understanding of what paradise 'should' be like, allowing them to scaffold otherworldly views from previous religious teachings, common-sense views of the afterlife, and personal preferences (Davidson, 2005; Halevi, 2009). This was particularly noticeable through all participants framing the Rainbow Bridge as an immaterial paradise beyond our mundane sensory perception (Gardiner, 1989; Gooder, 2011).

Even though the religiously inclined have long argued that imagination is a vehicle to experience immaterial realities (Calvin, 1960), it is fair to say that there is still a poverty of understanding about how this mental sense is operationalised, and just as importantly,

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how supernatural fact might be differentiated from fiction. Problematically, secular-materialist cultures have increasingly complicated this issue by positioning imagination as nothing more than a fictional endeavour, leaving imagination as a disliked way of knowing the (im)material (Akkach, 2001; Cohen & MacKeith, 1991). Reflecting on why the participants drew on imagination as an otherworldly sense, it seems that many had been sensitised to this mental potential as cultural Christians (Moffat & Yoo, 2019). However, and irrespective of previous religious teachings, all participants had developed in-depth imaginary skills within their pet communities, which were well suited to exploring the Rainbow Bridge. Curiously though, these imaginative capabilities rarely extended to directly perceiving immersive Rainbow Bridge landscapes, suggesting that proficiency in this ethereal mental act requires ongoing practice (Root-Bernstein, 2014) or divine intervention (Calvin, 1960). This however rarely seemed to trouble the participants, who were more concerned about using their imaginations to disseminate pet stories at the Rainbow Bridge, and psychologically supporting those suffering from pet loss. As such, it was not surprising that Rainbow Bridge stories often focused on deceased pets becoming angels, stripped of all earthly suffering, and spending their days in pleasurable pursuits, while waiting to be reunited with their loving humans. Within itself, it often seemed that these joyous depictions helped individuals move through mourning and back into their everyday lives, committed to the belief that they will be reunited with their pets at the Rainbow Bridge, and eventually spend an eternity together in the real Heaven.

Finally, with the Rainbow Bridge still being imagined each day, it is worth speculating on the extent that that more complex eschatological and religious themes will be negotiated at a personal, community, and social level. For example, will the Rainbow Bridge remain a simple 'add on' to other religions? Promising pets a future in the afterlife, but little more? Or will it shift to a larger pet-based religion? Allowing the exploration of classical religious themes such as creation, forgiveness, redemption, damnation, as well as the role of deities, demons, and so on. With little currently known about the trajectory of the Rainbow Bridge, the following section explores the potential for future work to track such aspects.

Future Work

As this study continued, it became increasingly clear that the participants were keen to develop a deeper understanding of their Rainbow Bridge experiences, which opened the door to investigate the remaining salient research gaps. Consequently, the first area to be examined is the extent to which the Rainbow Bridge is moving beyond a 'simple' eschatology and is being developed into a fuller religion. Attention will be paid towards

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how discursive practices are deployed within these communities to either support or undermine emerging otherworldly views (Bochner & Ellis, 1995; Herrmann, 2015; Purchase et al., 2018), particularly where metaphysical inconsistencies, beliefs, and rituals are being negotiated.

The second area to be considered is the degree to which the Rainbow Bridge is an ethereal paradise exclusively for pets or might also be a temporary residence for animals more broadly. When we consider that mistreating a pet is typically regarded as an unforgivable sin within the current doctrine, there is much to understand about how the faithful demarcate what constitutes a pet and an animal, especially as a greater number of animals are imagined as pets each year. Just as importantly, we should consider how adopting beliefs in the Rainbow Bridge influences mundane attitudes towards animals and pets.

The third and last area to be explored is how this emerging doctrine is marketed to the wider public, and whether the Rainbow Bridge is gaining traction outside of those suffering from pet bereavement. Of much interest is the extent to which extant socio-cultural and religious beliefs lead individuals to adopt or reject beliefs in the Rainbow Bridge (Rogers, 2003). Finally, how discursive tactics, imagery, and storytelling impact new religious membership (Author, 2019).

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