

# AWARENESS BOUND AND UNBOUND: REALIZING THE NATURE OF ATTENTION

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No wisdom can we get hold of, no highest perfection,  
No Bodhisattva, no thought of enlightenment either.  
When told of this, if not bewildered and in no way anxious,  
A Bodhisattva courses in the Tathagata's wisdom.  
In form, in feeling, will, perception and awareness  
Nowhere in them they find a place to rest on.  
Without a home they wander, dharmas never hold them,  
Nor do they grasp at them. . . .  
The Leader himself [the Buddha] was not stationed in the realm which is free from  
conditions,  
Nor in the things which are under conditions, but freely he wandered without a home:  
Just so, without a support or a basis a Bodhisattva is standing.<sup>1</sup>

Subhuti: "How is Prajnaparamita [the highest wisdom] characterized?"

Buddha: "It is characterized by non-attachment. To the extent that beings take hold of things and settle down in them, to that extent there is defilement. But no one is thereby defiled. And to the extent that one does not take hold of things and does not settle down in them, to that extent can one conceive of the absence of I-making and mine-making. In that sense can one form the concept of the purification of beings, i.e., to the extent that they do not take hold of things and do not settle down in them, to that extent there is purification. But no one is therein purified. When a Bodhisattva courses thus, he courses in Prajnaparamita."<sup>2</sup>

Do we miss the nature of liberated mind, not because it is too obscure or difficult to understand, but because it is too obvious? Perhaps, as with Poe's purloined letter, we overlook it: rummaging around hither and thither, we cannot find what we are searching for because it is in plain sight. Or, to employ a better metaphor, we look for the spectacles that rest unnoticed on our nose. Unable to see her reflection in the well, Enyadatta wanders about looking for her head. Mind seeks for mind.

Such, at least, has been a central claim of the Mahāyāna tradition. How central? This essay is an experiment to see how much insight might be gained by taking seriously and literally the many Buddhist admonitions about "not settling down in things" and the importance of wandering freely "without a place to rest." Although a few qualifications will need to be made later, my basic thesis is simple:

1. Delusion (ignorance, *saṃsāra*): attention/awareness is trapped (stuck).
2. Liberation (enlightenment, *nirvāṇa*): attention/awareness is liberated from grasping.

The familiar words “attention” and “awareness” are used to emphasize that the distinction being drawn refers not to some abstract metaphysical entity but simply to how our everyday awareness functions.<sup>3</sup> To appropriate Hakuin’s pregnant metaphor in *Zazen wasan*, the difference between Buddhas and other beings is that between water and ice: without water there is no ice, without Buddha no sentient beings—which suggests that deluded beings might simply be “frozen” Buddhas. I hope to show that this straightforward distinction is not only consistent with basic Buddhist teachings, but also gives us insight into some of the more difficult ones. Moreover, this perspective may illuminate some aspects of our contemporary life-world, including the particular challenges of modern technology and economics.

Before developing the claim above about awareness, bound and unbound, it is necessary to emphasize how widespread and important it is within the Mahāyāna tradition, being found in many other canonical and commentarial texts besides the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*. The most-quoted line from a better-known Prajñāpāramitā text, the *Diamond Sūtra*, encapsulates the central doctrine of the *Astasahasrika Sūtra* in one phrase: “Let your mind come forth without fixing it anywhere.” According to the *Platform Sūtra* of the sixth Chan patriarch Hui Neng, this verse precipitated his great awakening, and certainly his teachings make and remake the same point: “When our mind works freely without any hindrance, and is at liberty to ‘come’ or to ‘go’, we attain liberation.” Such a mind “is everywhere present, yet it ‘sticks’ nowhere.” Hui Neng emphasized that he had no system of Dharma to transmit: “What I do to my disciples is to liberate them from their own bondage with such devices as the case may need.”<sup>4</sup> Hui Hai, another Chan master who lived about a century later, elaborated on the nature of liberated mind:

Should your mind wander away, do not follow it, whereupon your wandering mind will stop wandering of its own accord. Should your mind desire to linger somewhere, do not follow it and do not dwell there, whereupon your mind’s questing for a dwelling place will cease of its own accord. Thereby, you will come to possess a non-dwelling mind—a mind that remains in the state of non-dwelling. If you are fully aware in yourself of a non-dwelling mind, you will discover that there is just the fact of dwelling, with nothing to dwell upon or not to dwell upon. This full awareness in yourself of a mind dwelling upon nothing is known as having a clear perception of your own mind, or, in other words, as having a clear perception of your own nature. A mind, which dwells upon nothing, is the Buddha-mind, the mind of one already delivered, Bodhi-Mind, Un-create [sic] Mind. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Lest we think that such a capitalized Bodhi-Mind is something other than our usual one, Huang Po deflates any delusions we may have about its transcendence:

Q: From all you have just said, Mind is the Buddha; but it is not clear as to what sort of mind is meant by this “Mind which is the Buddha.”

Huang Po: How many minds have you got?

Q: But is the Buddha the ordinary mind or the Enlightened Mind?

Huang Po: Where on earth do you keep your “ordinary mind” and your “enlightened mind”?<sup>6</sup>

A familiar corollary to such claims, therefore, is the Chan/Zen insistence that enlightenment is nothing special, just realizing the true nature of our ordinary activities:

Zhaozhou: What is the way?

Nanchuan: Everyday mind is the way (*bingchang xin shi dao*).

When Hui Hai was asked about his practice, he replied: “When I’m hungry, I eat; when tired I sleep.”

Q: And does everybody make the same efforts as you do, Master?

Hui Hai: Not in the same way.

Q: Why not?

Hui Hai: “When they are eating, they think of a hundred kinds of necessities, and when they are going to sleep they ponder over affairs of a thousand different kinds. That is how they differ from me.”<sup>7</sup>

It would be easy to cite dozens of Chan and Zen texts emphasizing the points above. Familiarity with them tends to dull our appreciation of just how radical such claims are, from an Indian perspective as much as a Western one. In European metaphysics “mind” evokes the Platonic *Nous* and Hegel’s *Geist*, the latter cunningly employing historical development to realize itself; *Brahman* has different nuances, yet its famous identification with the *ātman* (self) does not impede its transcendence. The contrast with Nanchuan’s quite ordinary *xin* is quite striking: chopping wood and drawing water, *tada* (just this)!

The Pāli texts of early Buddhism do not emphasize “everyday mind” in the same way, for they often draw a strong contrast between the mind-consciousness of an ordinary worldling (*puthujjana*) and the liberated mind of an *arhat*. Yet of course there is a similar focus on not-clinging, especially in the *Salayatanavagga* (Book of the six sense bases), the third large collection of connected philosophical discourses in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, where the Buddha repeatedly teaches “the Dhamma for abandoning all”: a noble disciple should develop dispassion toward the six senses and their objects (including the mind and mental phenomena) and abandon them, even feel revulsion for them, for that is the only way to end one’s *dukkha* (suffering). “Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’” Listening to this discourse, “the minds of the thousand bhikkhus were liberated from the taints by non-clinging.”<sup>8</sup> From a Prajñāpāramitā and Zen perspective, all that is lacking in this passage is a clear recognition that the *tathatā* (thusness) of the “abandoned all” is the goal of the spiritual quest. Such a conclusion may also be inferred from the emphasis elsewhere in the Pāli *sūtras* on letting-go of the five *skandhas*, which, like the twelve

*nidānas* of *pratītya-samutpāda*, are said to encompass everything. The absence of grasping is what frees us.

### *The Nonduality of Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa*

That the Pāli emphasis on not-clinging and nonattachment does *not* include an explicit recommendation of everyday mind is one of the important differences between early Buddhism and Mahāyāna. Expressed another way, the issue at stake is how we are to understand the relationship between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. In early Buddhism the nature of *nirvāṇa* is notoriously, perhaps intentionally, obscure. Few passages attempt to characterize it except negatively: the end of *dukkha*, the end of *tanha*, the end of *avidya*—in short, *nirvāṇa* is the full negation of its opposite, the spiritual solution to *saṃsāra*. The main question is whether *nirvāṇa* refers to attaining a different reality or dimension of reality (e.g., experienced in meditative trance), or whether *nirvāṇa* refers to some different way of perceiving and living in this world, the same world we usually experience.

This ambiguity is familiar to anyone who studies early Buddhist texts. What has been less noticed is that the ambiguity of *nirvāṇa* is *ipso facto* shared by the ambiguity of *saṃsāra* (literally, “going round and round,” the cycle of birth and death). Yes, we know that *saṃsāra* is this world of *dukkha*, et cetera, but without a better understanding of *nirvāṇa*—the nature of the alternative—it is not possible to be clear about what is negated and exactly how it is negated. The basic difficulty is that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* form a conceptual duality, in which the meaning of each is dependent on the other. This means that neither can be understood on its own, without the other, just as with more familiar dualities such as big/small, success/failure, and good/evil. We do not know what “big” is unless we also know what “small” is. As the other two examples suggest, we often make such distinctions because we prefer one pole to the other, but the interdependence of the two terms makes this problematic, psychologically as well as logically: if the meaning of good is “the opposite of evil,” then we cannot know what is good until we know what is evil, and *being good* means *struggling against evil*. Preoccupation with such dualities is a good example of how our attention gets stuck, how we bind ourselves without a rope.<sup>9</sup>

This has consequences, not only for the terms *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, but for the entire Buddhist message and project, which relies on some version of the same duality: the possibility of progressing from suffering to liberation, from delusion to enlightenment. Does waking up mean that one shifts from the first to the second, or that we realize that such dualistic thinking is itself a conceptual trap?

“What do you think, Subhuti? In ancient times, . . . did the Tathagata attain anything called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind?”

“No, World-Honored One. According to what I understand from the teachings of the Buddha, there is no attaining of anything called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind.”

The Buddha said, “Right you are, Subhuti. In fact, there does not exist the so-called highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind that the Tathagata attains. . . . Why? Tathagata means the suchness [*tathatā*] of all things.” (*Diamond Sūtra*)

This implies an understanding of language that distinguishes Buddhism quite sharply from “divine revelation” religions such as the Abrahamic traditions, which are founded on the sacred word of God (as recorded in the Bible, the Qur’ān, etc.). For Buddhism any such linguistic identification is attachment, and clinging is not the spiritual solution but part of the problem. With language we construct the world, including ourselves, and it is important to realize how we deceive ourselves when we identify with any of these constructions—including Buddhist ones.

By no coincidence, the *locus classicus* for both denials—the denial that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are different, and the denial that the truth of Buddhism can be expressed in language—is the same: chapter 25 of Nāgārjuna’s *Karikas*, which deconstructs the concept of *nirvāṇa*. It concludes with one of the most celebrated verses in Buddhism: “Ultimate serenity [*siva*] is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things; no truth has been taught by a Buddha for anyone, anywhere” (25 : 24).<sup>10</sup> We are not saved by discovering any linguistic truth, for there is no such liberating truth to identify with. This demotes all Buddhist categories to *upāya* (skillful means), pointers which may be helpful but not if we take the finger for the moon. What does this imply about the distinction between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*?

There is no specifiable difference whatever between *nirvana* and *samsara*; there is no specifiable difference whatever between *samsara* and *nirvana*.

The limit [*koti*] of *nirvana* is the limit of *samsara*. There is not even the subtlest difference between the two. (25 : 19–20)<sup>11</sup>

Yet this perspective, by itself, may go too far to the other extreme, even negating the spiritual path: if there is nowhere to go, there is no way to get there, and thus no need for any spiritual practice, or for Buddhism at all. So in the same chapter Nāgārjuna also distinguishes between them: “That which, taken as causal or dependent, is the process of being born and passing on, is, taken non-causally and beyond all dependence, declared to be *nirvana*.”<sup>12</sup> There is no contradiction between this verse and vv. 19–20: the key point is that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are not different realms of existence (they share the same *koti*), but the terms refer to different ways of experiencing or “taking” this world. What more can be said about this difference? Elsewhere I have tried to characterize the different ways of perceiving causality in verse 9.<sup>13</sup> The importance of Nāgārjuna’s position for this essay is that it is consistent with the claim that *saṃsāra* is awareness bound and *nirvāṇa* is the “same” awareness liberated. One’s attention is liberated when it does not “stop at” or grasp at any particular thing, including any conceptual truth, including this one.

This helps us understand the importance of the Mādhyamika distinction between two truths: *saṃvṛti*, the everyday transactional truth, and *paramārtha*, the supreme truth, and why we need the lower truth to point to the higher truth. To claim, for example, that “*nirvāṇa* is attention unbound” seems to invite our assent: “yes, that is true!” But to commit ourselves to that proposition—to *identify* with it—would be self-contradictory and self-defeating insofar as such an identification *binds* our awareness to a particular set of concepts that we use to get a handle on the world

—a worldview which thereby retains a grip on our awareness. Yet concepts and doctrines nonetheless retain their lower-truth value as teaching devices necessary to point to the higher “truth” that nonetheless always escapes their supervision.

### *Attention Addicted*

How is our awareness bound? According to the second ariyan truth, the cause of *dukkha* is *tanha*, perhaps best translated as craving. Craving is as different from desire as push from pull: craving is the insatiability of never being able to get enough of what is sought. We often understand this as referring to physical urges—sexuality as the archetype—but focusing on the body can be problematic for two reasons. First, emphasizing our physicality perpetuates the mind-body dualism that has haunted Western culture since at least Plato; the danger is that we will understand the spiritual solution as mind (soul, etc.) transcending or dominating the body, which encourages the repressions and perversions that plague such a hierarchy. This hierarchy was also important in Śākyamuni’s India (is it therefore an Indo-European or Axial Age problem?), for according to the traditional biographies his first spiritual practice was asceticism: starving the senses, in effect. Buddhism became a revolutionary “middle way” because it emphasized mind-control (including intention-control, *cetana*) instead.

That brings us to the second reason for not focusing on the physical. Buddhism also emphasizes another cause of our *dukkha*: conceptual proliferation (*papañca*), a linguistic process that can only awkwardly be subsumed within the *tanha* of the second ariyan truth. This world is *saṃsāra* for us not only because we crave; *papañca* means that we live in a deluded fantasy of our own making, constructed out of our conceptualizing as well as our cravings. The relationship between desires and concepts becomes clearer when we see that the fundamental issue remains, again, our attention. *Saṃsāra* becomes reified as our awareness gets preoccupied with pursuing certain desires (sex and food, but also money, fame, etc.) and fixated on certain ways of understanding and perceiving the (objectified) world. Attention “dwells in” and gets stuck in particular ways of thinking and acting. Both are types of clinging, and in both cases (really, different aspects of the same process) the solution involves nonattachment.

If getting stuck is the basic issue, neither desires nor concepts are problematic in themselves. We get into trouble not because we have concepts but because we “settle down” in particular ones—not only those that support a particular self-image, but also religious dogmas or political ideologies that offer us a secure fix on the world. The solution is not to get rid of all concepts, which would amount to a rather unpleasant type of mental retardation, but to *liberate* them, as Dōgen implies in the *Sansuikyō* fascicle: to be able to move freely from one concept to another, to play with different conceptual systems according to the situation, without becoming fixated on any of them. Conceptualizing, too, can be bound and unbound.

A similar point can be made about bodily desires, including sexuality. The importance of nonattachment does not mean recommending promiscuity over mo-

nogamy (or vice versa), for the issue is not the object(s) of our affection but the relationship between one's attention and sexual drive. Perhaps this can help us to understand tantric practices, which sometimes employ forbidden activities for spiritual purposes. Sexual union is often cited as the best example of craving, and Pāli Buddhism strictly forbids monastics any genital contact, but according to the tantric tradition the energy of that urge can be used in a liberative way. Can attention retain or gain an awareness of its intrinsic non-dwelling nature, even while engaged in coitus? The normal tendency, of course, involves a future-directed and increasingly urgent focus on the release of orgasm; yet nonattached, unbound attention is not driven to go anywhere or do anything, because it has nothing to gain or lose in itself. In the urge toward climax, can one become more aware of that which does not change, does not get better or worse? Failure means becoming more enmeshed in the seductions of *saṃsāra*, the craving for pleasure that leads to more *dukkha*. Success means freedom from addiction to pleasure, which is not the same as needing to avoid it.

Yet one's attention is usually *conditioned* by what it does, and especially by those things one chooses to do. This points to the demythologized meaning of *karma*, including the revolutionary Buddhist emphasis on *cetana*, the primary role of one's intentions and volitions. The Buddha transformed earlier approaches emphasizing sacrifice and other rituals into an ethical principle by focusing on our motivations. "It is *cetana*, monks, that I declare to be *karma*. Having willed, one performs an action by body, speech and mind."<sup>14</sup> What distinguishes our actions from mere behavior is that they are *intended*. Some such understanding of *karma* is implied by *anatta*, the denial that "I" have any unchanging, hard core of substance or *svabhāva*, self-essence. My subjective sense of self is a construct, and the most important components of that construct are habitual tendencies (*sankhara*), which mold character and constitute "my" *karma*.

According to this interpretation, *karma* is not an inescapable law of the universe involving some precise calculus of cause and effect. The basic idea is simply that our actions have effects—more precisely, that our morally relevant actions have morally relevant effects that go beyond their utilitarian consequences. In the popular Buddhist understanding, the law of *karma* and rebirth is a way to get some control over what the world does to us, but I am suggesting that *karma* is better understood as a key to spiritual development: how one's life-situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of one's actions right now. *Anatta* means that my *karma* is not something I *have*, it is what "I" *am*, and what I am changes according to my conscious choices. "I" (re)construct myself by what "I" intentionally do, because "my" sense of self is a precipitate of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Just as my body is composed of the food I eat, so my character is composed of my conscious choices, constructed by my repeated mental attitudes. This implies that we are "punished" not *for* our sins but *by* them; and happiness is not the reward for virtue but virtue itself, as Spinoza claims in the last proposition of his *Ethics* (V.42). Karmically, the issue is not so much what we have done as what we have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are.

An anonymous verse sums this up quite well:

Sow a thought and reap a deed  
Sow a deed and reap a habit  
Sow a habit and reap a character  
Sow a character and reap a destiny

To become a different kind of person is to experience the world in a different way. When my mind changes, the world changes for me, and when I respond differently to the world, the world responds differently to me. Since we are not separate from the world, our ways of acting in it tend to involve reinforcing feedback systems that incorporate other people. The more I manipulate the world to get what I want, the more alienated I feel and the more alienated others feel when they realize they have been manipulated. This mutual distrust encourages both sides to manipulate more. On the other hand, the more my actions are motivated by generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom of nonduality, the more I can relax and open up to the world. The more I feel part of the world and one with others, the less I am inclined to use others, and consequently the more inclined they will be to trust and open up to me. In such ways, transforming my motivations not only transforms my own life; it also tends to affect the motivations of those around me, which is to say: my world changes.

Buddhist teachings, however, distinguish good *karma* from awakening. One's character (and destiny) may be quite positive, but that is not liberation, which involves realizing the non-dwelling nature of one's awareness. Beneficial *karma* may make it easier to practice, and insofar as one is awakened it is less likely that one will be motivated to create bad *karma*, yet the fundamental issue is not the quality of one's *karma* but freeing oneself from *karma*.

According to Pāli Buddhism, an enlightened person does not create any new *karma* but can still suffer the consequences of past *karma*. Moggalanna, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, is said to have endured a gruesome death due to an appalling deed in a previous lifetime: murdering his parents. Less mysteriously, Angulimala renounced his career as a serial killer and quickly attained *nirvāṇa*, but later was attacked and beaten by the townspeople he had terrified.<sup>15</sup> These examples raise two issues involving what it means to be "unconditioned." The more objective issue concerns one's physical and social circumstances. Even when I realize that my attention is intrinsically free, I will still be "constrained" by my situation, which includes the expectations and images that others have of me. If I spiritually awaken in a prison, the cell doors will not magically open. "Constrained" is in scare quotes because a prison cell need not be resented by a liberated person, insofar as one's attention, liberated or not, is always limited by the forms of awareness that circumstances make available. The paradox is that to be *one with* these conditions is to experience one's awareness and life as unconditioned. The explanation of that paradox is in the lacking-nothing nature of non-clinging attention.

The more subjective aspect of karmic fruits (*phala*) is that after awakening, one's mental predispositions (*sankhara*) do not necessarily or immediately lose their attrac-

tion. A liberated smoker will not automatically lose the desire for a cigarette. A genuine awakening should make it much easier, of course, to ignore that urge, but the desire will arise. This point reflects on the long-standing debates about whether enlightenment is instantaneous or gradual, all-or-nothing or in stages. My thesis about awareness implies both: realizing the unbounded nature of one's attention may or may not be dramatic, but it happens suddenly. It is not something that *I do*, nor does it happen *to me*, for both of those ways of understanding are dualistic; rather, there is *letting go*. Of what? Not simply of whatever I am grasping, but *of grasping*. Yet habitual tendencies do not simply evaporate. One's attention still tends to assume familiar forms, and this highlights the importance of continued practice: the more gradual process of making intrinsically free awareness more effectively free. This reminds us, too, of the problem with comprehending Buddhism philosophically, or taking it as a philosophy: I can understand (and write?) all of this conceptually, without it making much difference in my daily life, in how my attention actually functions. Grasping the implications of these concepts is very different from letting-go of grasping.

So far, this discussion has avoided reference to an "object of consciousness," preferring the notion of "attention or awareness taking form." Especially in a Mahāyāna context, any mention of form evokes the central claim of the *Heart Sūtra* that "form (*rūpa*) is no other than emptiness (*śūnyatā*), emptiness no other than form." So far, too, this essay has not mentioned *śūnyatā*, largely because of the weight of baggage that accompanies this overused term. For Mādhyamaka, *śūnyatā*, the absence of self-existence, is a shorthand way of referring to the interconditionality of all phenomena, the fact that every phenomenon arises in dependence on others. In terms of my basic argument—delusion as attention bound, awakening as attention unbound—the *Heart Sūtra's* famous equation gains a somewhat different significance. Awareness unbound is *śūnya*, having no form or any other qualities of its own. More precisely, awareness, whether bound or unbound, is *śūnya*, although bound awareness is unaware of its intrinsic nature because it is too busy grasping. Attention in itself can be characterized only by its characteristiclessness: "it" is a formless, colorless nothing, or *no-thing*, which is why it can become any-thing, according to the circumstances, of course. Emptiness is not other than form because my *nothing-in-itself* attention is always assuming one or another form, not only visual and tactile ones, but also sounds, tastes, smells, thoughts, et cetera. Then perhaps the many statements in the *Heart Sūtra* that "X (the five *skandhas*, the twelve *nidanas*, etc.) is *śūnya*" are not making (or denying) an ontological claim about the nature of X-in-itself, but rather pointing out the true nature of the relationship between empty-in-itself awareness and the various forms it assumes.<sup>16</sup>

Does this give us insight into some other basic Buddhist claims? There is nothing whatsoever that needs to be attained; to be deluded is not to lack something, it is simply not to realize the nature of one's attention. This is consistent with *anatta*: the no-thing-ness of awareness is not a self. The *sense* of a self as separate from the rest of the world—the duality between subject and object—is a mental and interpersonal

construct composed of habituated ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. There is no need to get rid of the ego because it has never existed: it is a self-image that persists (although not unchanged) because feelings, intentions, and actions refer to it. The Buddhist emphasis on *anatta* implies that constant reference to this self-image is the foremost trap for our attention.

In place of the usual duality, in which consciousness becomes aware of some object or other, liberated awareness is nondual, because it *becomes* one thing or another:

There is a line a famous Zen master wrote at the time he became enlightened which reads: "When I heard the temple bell ring, suddenly there was no bell and no I, just sound." In other words, he no longer was aware of a distinction between himself, the bell, the sound, and the universe. This is the state you have to reach. . . .

Stated negatively, it is the realization that the universe is not external to you. Positively, it is experiencing the universe as yourself.<sup>17</sup>

As Dōgen famously puts it at the beginning of the *Genjō kōan*:

To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad beings. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away.<sup>18</sup>

If the self is a construct, so is the *external* world, for when there is no inside there is no outside. In the *Sokushin zebutsu* (Our mind is the Buddha) fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen described his own experience by quoting the Chinese master Yang-shan (d. 916): "I came to realize clearly that mind is nothing other than mountains, rivers and the great wide earth, the sun, the moon and the stars."<sup>19</sup> If my usual sense of separation from mountains, et cetera, is a delusion, then my nonduality with them is not something that needs to be attained. Instead, the delusion of a discrete self is to be dispelled, by realizing the non-dwelling nature of awareness.

According to the *Heart Sūtra*, all dharmas are *śūnyatā*. There is no birth and no cessation, no purity and impurity, no increase and decrease. Since my awareness is literally a no-thing in itself, the categories of purity or impurity do not apply to it. Attention does not become purer when taking the form of a Buddha-image, nor less pure when cleaning the toilet. More controversially, it does not become better when I act compassionately, or worse when I kill someone in a fit of rage. Nor does it increase or decrease, in the sense that my attention does not become greater when it assumes the form of an elephant, nor less when it becomes a fly. But no birth and no death? Does that mean that my awareness is immortal?

### *The Anxiety of Awareness*

Buddhist teachings contain many references to realizing "the unborn," beginning with two well-known passages attributed to the Buddha in the *Udāna*. In addition to the claim in the *Heart Sūtra* and many other Prajñāpāramitā *sūtras* and commentarial texts, similar statements are found in the records of many Chan/Zen masters.

None of them emphasized it more than Bankei (1622–1693), who used the concept as his central teaching: “Since the Buddha-mind takes care of everything by means of the Unborn [*fushou*], it has nothing to do with samsara or nirvana. Seen from the place of the Unborn, both of them are like the shadows in a dream.”<sup>20</sup> His explanations of the Unborn, in simple, direct language that his lay audience could understand, support the view of attention, bound and unbound, that the present essay is arguing for. The Unborn, like the intrinsic nature of our attention, is not something that can be gained: “It’s wrong for you to breed a second mind on top of the mind you already have by trying to *become* the Unborn. You’re unborn right from the start. . . . The true Unborn has nothing to do with fundamental principles and it’s beyond becoming or attaining. It’s simply *being who you are*.”<sup>21</sup> Simply realizing the nature of your awareness.

But how does simply *being who you are* escape birth and death? A visiting monk asks Bankei: what happens when someone who believes in the Unborn dies? Is he born again or not? He responds: “At the place of the Unborn, there’s no distinction between being born and not being born.”<sup>22</sup>

Is this a satisfactory answer? Not if we see immortality as the solution to (our fear of) death. Bankei’s point is not that someone who has realized the Unborn doesn’t physically die (*Heart Sūtra*: “no old age and death, and no escape from old age and death”) but that such a person isn’t worried about birth or death. Why not? Is the Unborn a transcendental consciousness that repeatedly adopts new bodies when previous ones die?<sup>23</sup> No, for the categories of life and death, like all other characteristics, simply do not apply. In terms of this essay, liberated awareness has no reason to fear death, because no-thing has nothing to lose. We are reminded of Epictetus’ classical argument: “When we are here, death is not, and when death is here, we are not.”<sup>24</sup> Non-dwelling attention in itself lacks nothing, because there is nothing it could gain. Insofar as I crave, there is a gap between desire and fulfillment, but insofar as “I” realize the true nature of my craving-nothing attention, there is no possibility of such a gap. With nothing to gain and nothing to lose, there are no “hindrances in the mind” and nothing to fear, as the *Heart Sūtra* concludes.

Then why do we suffer (*dukkha*)? Because awareness mistakenly identifies with (sense of) self, a construct that itself identifies with the body, which is subject to pain, illness, old age, and death. Bankei offers a curious “proof” of the Unborn, to demonstrate that it is not the same as the self:

When you face me and listen to me say this, if somewhere a sparrow chirps, or a crow caws, or a man or woman says something, or the wind rustles the leaves, though you sit there without any intent to listen, you will hear and distinguish each sound. But it isn’t your self that is doing the listening, it isn’t self-power.<sup>25</sup>

The point, apparently, is that our attention is not a function of self, not an act that the self *does*, because spontaneously hearing and identifying the sparrow is an unprompted activity that escapes its agency.

Whether or not we find this argument persuasive, the distinction between attention (awareness, mind, etc.) and sense of self remains basic to Buddhism. Awareness

itself lacks nothing, but the sense of self lacks everything, because it is a delusion, in the sense that it is nothing more substantial than an ever-changing network of mental and physical processes. Such a *sense* of self can never become a *real* self, remaining shadowed by a sense of groundlessness that can never be resolved because the sense of self *is* groundless. Nevertheless, the need to feel more real, and the perpetual failure to achieve it, haunts the sense of self as a sense of *lack*. The “return of the repressed” in the distorted form of a symptom links this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we usually try to make ourselves real in the world. Groundlessness is too amorphous to come to grips with, so we experience our sense of lack as the feeling that “there is something wrong with me,” but that feeling manifests, and we respond to it, in many different ways. The tragedy is that no amount of X can ever be enough if it is not really X that we want. When we do not understand what is actually motivating us—because what we *think* we need is only a symptom of something else—we end up compulsive.

This applies not only to secular compulsions such as money, fame and sexual gratification, but also to “spiritual” pursuits, insofar as we expect that our spiritual practices will lead to an enlightenment that finally makes us (feel) more real. Enlightenment does not involve discovering a ground for our groundlessness, but realizing that our groundless, “without a support or a basis” awareness does not need any other ground. One’s awareness cannot be secured, except in the sense that, being no-thing, there is nothing to secure.<sup>26</sup> A conditioned, impermanent sense of self cannot attain immortality, yet a non-dwelling awareness can live in an eternal present.

This implies that our fundamental problem is not fearing the death of our (sense of) self but rather dreading our no-thing-ness. Solving the latter problem should also resolve the former, not because one realizes some transcendental consciousness that survives physical death to enter another body (what happens at death is not thereby determined), but because one’s non-clinging, no-thing awareness does not distinguish between being born (hoped for) and not being born (feared), as Bankei puts it. Chopping wood, drawing water, eating when hungry, resting when weary—where is the birth and death in that?

Nevertheless, there is something mysterious about the Unborn. In fact, it is fundamentally mysterious: I cannot comprehend it, cannot grasp its nature, because I *am* it. Our usual way of understanding attention and awareness assumes a tripartite epistemology: *I am aware of some thing*. *Anatta* implies that there is no such subject-predicate-object relationship, which means that “my” awareness is actually not “mine.” Then whose awareness is it? It is easy to respond “no one’s,” yet that response does not evade the deeper question: what does it mean for awareness not to be the consciousness *of* some agent? Why and how does liberated awareness assume the forms that it does? Some types of meditation (e.g., *shikan taza*) involve maintaining a “pure” attention that does not dwell on anything, but thoughts and other mental phenomena continue to arise. The sky remains clear as clouds drift through it. Where do they come from? Some such experience probably prompted the Yogācāra postulation of an *ālāya-vijñāna* unconscious, where karmic seeds

develop when conditions are appropriate. An empty, meditating awareness allows these seeds to sprout, so they can be “roasted” by not identifying with them. Instead of responding to them, one lets them go.

Yet there is more to the unconscious. It is not only memories and affect-traces from the past that arise unbidden into awareness. Our attention takes new, spontaneous, sometimes inexplicable forms: this is what we mean by creativity. How does that happen? Beethoven, Brahms, and Puccini, to cite only three examples, believed that their compositions were dictated or assisted by God; less explicitly religious composers spoke of being “vessels”—for what? Many other examples could be cited, of course, in the various arts. The point is that when our awareness becomes liberated, something more is involved than what we normally understand as the everyday mind of chopping wood, et cetera. In place of the Japanese term *kenshō* (lit., “seeing into one’s nature”) for one’s initial glimpse of enlightenment, some American Zen groups now refer to an “opening.” That word expresses another aspect of non-dwelling, non-grasping attention: its non-instrumental responsiveness and sensitivity to what arises, its presence. To realize that my awareness is not mine is to discover that its no-thing-ness has infinite depths. When we think about non-clinging, we usually visualize external objects and sensory phenomena, but, when attention is not always referring back to the self-image that is ego, there is also receptivity to what springs up from its own depths.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Attention-Deficit Society*

The earlier discussion of *karma* considered only the individual aspects of moral cause-and-effect, but we are social creatures subject to collective influences beyond personal agency; that is, there is also collective *karma*. Traditional understandings of *karma* and rebirth, which can understand group *karma* only by bundling individual *karma*, become implausible when applied to genocide, for example. To argue that all those who perished in Nazi concentration camps must have been reaping their karmic fruits from previous lifetimes is fatuous, to say the least. Yet there is another way to approach the issue of collective *karma*: by considering what conditions our collective awareness. How has the development of the modern/postmodern world affected human attention? Not only what we attend to, but how we attend to it. It is important to see the implications of this general discussion for some of the social issues that concern us today. The constriction or liberation of awareness is not only a personal matter. What do societies do to encourage or discourage its emancipation?

Recent media coverage suggests that our major concern about attention is the lack thereof. Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder has become a serious medical issue in the United States, originally among schoolchildren but now among young adults as well. According to the *New York Times*, the use of drugs to treat attention-deficit disorder in young adults doubled between 2000 and 2004; one percent of adults aged twenty to sixty-four now take them. In the same period, the share of children using such drugs increased from 2.8 to 4.4 percent, despite increasing concern

about their side effects.<sup>28</sup> This final section begins by considering some possible causes and implications of this phenomenon.

### *The Fragmentation of Attention*

Buddhist practice evokes images of solitary or group meditation, with distractions reduced to a minimum. The IT revolution—personal computers, the Internet, e-mail, cell phones, walkmans and iPods, et cetera—enables and often requires an unremitting connectivity that pulls us in the opposite direction, as Catie Getches writes in a recent *Washington Post* article:

All it takes is a little time alone, especially late at night, to confirm how much technology has transformed culture and how it has changed the way we relate to each other. That's because being alone is not what it used to be. These days, even momentary solitude seems like something to be avoided at all cost. And technology makes it possible: Thanks to cell phones, no one has to face that stroll down the street, the five-minute commute or the lunch line without companionship. . . .

. . . But the more technology we turn on, the more relationships we have to manage simultaneously—and the more likely we are to ask our best friends if they can hold. I have programmable phone lists and speed dial at my fingertips, and yet I feel more disconnected than ever—somehow, it's easier than ever to be two places at once but nearly impossible to, as my mom says, just "be here now." Yet being in two places at once has become strangely familiar: You don't just go out to lunch with a friend anymore. You go out to lunch with the friend and the friend's cell phone book. . . .

It's so common now to correspond by e-mail alone, it's easy to go for days without actually interacting with a real live human.<sup>29</sup>

Expressed in terms of attention: when we are aware of so many more people and so many more possibilities right now, less awareness is available for the people and things most important to us.

Consider, too, how MP3 players are changing the ways we listen to music. A century ago, you would very likely have been part of a live audience, each member having made an effort to get there for that specific event; and once you were there you were *there*, so you settled down *then* and focused on the music being performed. For me, strolling along today with my iPod, the decision to listen to any particular *selection* is never completely settled in the sense that I can always change what is playing if I become dissatisfied with it, for any reason at any time, simply by pressing a button. Like it or not, this aspect of perpetual choice is continually there, and awareness of these other possibilities tends to distract my attention from the music I am actually hearing. I must, in effect, *continually decide* to listen to this particular song.

What gives this personal example significance is that this point applies just as much to many other aspects of our lives: TV channel-surfing, a surfeit of books and DVDs (Amazon one-click orders!), video-games, surfing the Net, et cetera. I have enjoyed exploring the classical repertoire more easily, discovering obscure composers and new performers. But I've also noticed that I'm listening to fewer symphonies and more short, simple pieces—am I the only one?

Thomas Eriksen has studied this phenomenon and distilled it into a temporal principle. What we lack most now is lack of information: we are drowning in an info-glut. Our old time-habits were based on info-scarcity, hence the traditional importance of learning how to forage for it. Suddenly, like Mickey Mouse the sorcerer's apprentice, we find ourselves trying to survive an information tsunami, and the scarcest resources have become *attention* and *control over our own time*. Eriksen formalizes this relationship into a general law of the information revolution: "When an ever increasing amount of information has to be squeezed into the relatively constant amount of time each of us has at our disposal, the span of attention necessarily decreases."<sup>30</sup>

Eriksen's insight can be expanded to include the near-infinite range of consumption possibilities that also attract our attention and proliferate our cravings, giving us the following reformulation:

(same amount of time) divided by (more possibilities [info-glut + digital shopping mall])  
= shorter attention span

This way of "liberating" attention tends to scatter it. Even if we ignore for the moment the consumer alternatives, such an avalanche of information (and therefore shorter attention spans) challenges our ability to construct narratives and logical sequences, putting pressure on traditional ways of thinking that involve cause/effect and organic development. In its very form, "the World Wide Web inculcates a strong and almost reflex-like preference for heightened visual stimuli, rapid changes of subject matter, and diversity, combined with simplicity of presentation."<sup>31</sup> Sherry Turkle has noticed that some of her MIT students now reason and arrange their ideas differently: "There is this sense that the world is out there to be Googled," she says, "and there is this associative glut. But linking from one thing to another is not the same as having something to say. A structured thought is more than a link."<sup>32</sup> A cascading glut of de-contextualized signs, with an inelastic amount of attention to make them meaningful, results in association-glut. No wonder, then, that so many turn to chemicals for a little help in concentrating.

Instead of the usual warnings about clinging and attachment, we now seem to have the opposite problem: an inability to focus. Does this imply that my original thesis—liberation as awareness unbound—needs to be modified? An attention that wanders from this to that, unable to focus itself, may be no improvement over a clinging attention. Yet they are not really opposites: to jump from one perch to another is not an escape from clinging but a different type of clinging.<sup>33</sup>

### *The Commodification of Attention*

One hardly needs to emphasize the cumulative effects of television on our collective attention habits, but there is a more basic problem. For those of us in the developed (or "monetarized") world, the greatest "attention trap" is consumerism, and that involves sophisticated advertising, which has become very good at manipulating our attention. Production problems have become relatively easy to solve; the bigger challenge is motivating those who have money to spend, to keep them convinced

that the solution to their *dukkha* is their next purchase. As the pioneering advertising executive Leo Burnett (1891–1971) put it, “Good advertising does not just circulate information. It penetrates the public mind with desire and belief.” That penetration may have been lucrative for his clients, but Ivan Illich is perceptive about its spiritual consequences: “in a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves, the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy.”<sup>34</sup> Whether one is able to afford the desired product or not, one’s attention is captured.

Recently it has become more evident that attention is the basic commodity to be exploited. “The new economy is not an information or a knowledge economy. . . . It is an attention economy,” according to a writer in South Africa’s *Financial Mail*,<sup>35</sup> coining a meme that has proliferated in business circles:

The basic resource of this new economy is not something they provide us. It’s something we provide them—“mindshare,” in the charming idiom of the trade. Now ask yourself this: what if there’s only so much mind to share? If you’ve wondered how people could feel so depleted in such a prosperous economy, how stress could become the trademark affliction of the age, part of the answer might be here. (Jonathan Rowe)<sup>36</sup>

Jonathan Rowe is concerned about the commodification of what he terms *cognitive space*, the corporate response to the fact that people might sometimes be concerned about something else besides buying and consuming. This has led to “the ultimate enclosure—the enclosure of the cognitive commons, the ambient mental atmosphere of daily life,” a rapid development now so pervasive that it has become like the air we breathe unnoticed, or the contact lens that focuses our perceptions. Time and space, he argues, have already been reconstructed: holidays (including new commercialized ones such as Mother’s Day) into shopping days, the “civic commons of Main Street” into shopping malls. Now advertising is infiltrating into every corner of our conscious (and unconscious) awareness. Sports stadiums used to have ads; now renamed stadiums are themselves ads. TV shows used to be sponsored by ads; today insidious product placement makes the whole show an ad. The jewelry company Bulgari sponsored a novel by Fay Weldon that included over three dozen references to its products. A 2005 issue of the *New Yorker* did not include any ads because the whole magazine was a promotion for the retail chain Target. Children are especially vulnerable, of course, and while half of four-year-old children do not know their own name, two-thirds of three-year-olds recognize the golden arches of McDonald’s.<sup>37</sup>

In the past one could often ignore the ads, but enclosure of the cognitive commons now means that they confront us wherever our attention turns. Unless meditating in a Himalayan cave, we end up having to process thousands of commercial messages every day. And they do not just grab our attention, they exploit it:

The attention economy mines us much the way the industrial economy mines the earth. It mines us first for incapacities and wants. Our capacity for interaction and reflection must become a need for entertainment. Our capacity to deal with life’s bumps and jolts becomes a need for “grief counselling” or Prozac. The progress of the consumer economy has come to mean the diminution of ourselves.<sup>38</sup>

By manipulating the gnawing sense of lack that haunts our insecure (because groundless) sense of self, the attention economy insinuates its basic message deep into our awareness: the solution is consumption.

Who owns our attention, and who should have the right to decide what happens to it? Rowe concludes that we need a new freedom movement, to “battle for the cognitive commons. If we have no choice regarding what fills our attention, then we really have no choice at all.” From a Buddhist perspective, however, it seems doubtful that any collective social protest movement could be successful without an alternative understanding of what our attention is and what alternative practices promote more liberated attention. It is not enough to fight against billboards and Internet banner ads without also considering: what does it mean for awareness to be here-and-now, open to presence?<sup>39</sup>

To conclude, let me emphasize again that this essay is an experiment. I have tried to show that an understanding of the difference between bound and unbound awareness can be quite illuminating, but I do not mean to claim that this point by itself is enough to understand the liberation that the Buddhist path aims at. Buddhism includes many other related teachings: impermanence, nonself, interdependent origination (or non-origination), et cetera. Nevertheless, my argument implies that one of the most important issues, both for each of us individually and also collectively as a society, is this: what is our attitude toward attention/awareness? Is attention to be controlled and exploited, or cultivated and awakened? Is awareness to be valued as a means to some other end, or should we cherish its liberation as the most valuable end? The Buddhist answer to such questions is clear. What is less clear is how much of a role that answer might play in the ways our society responds to this challenge.

## Notes

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1 – *Astasahasrika Sūtra* 1 : 5–7, 10, in *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary*, trans. and ed. Edward Conze (Bollinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), pp. 9–10.

2 – *Ibid.*, 22 : 399–400, pp. 237–238.

3 – The terms “awareness” and “attention” will be used interchangeably, although neither is completely satisfactory because both have dualistic connotations: awareness is cognate with “wary (of)” and attention suggests the effort implied by “tension,” etc. But in this intellectual context their more homely, everyday meanings make them preferable to the more abstract, theoretical connotations of “mind” and “consciousness.”

4 – *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. and ed. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 133 n. 41. The Dunhuang

version that Yampolsky translates does not mention this particular line from the *Diamond Sūtra*, only that Hui Neng awakened when he heard the *sūtra* expounded to him.

- 5 – *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, trans. John Blofeld (London: Rider, 1969), p. 56.
- 6 – *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po on the Transmission of Mind*, trans. John Blofeld (New York: Grove Press, 1958), pp. 57–58. Blofeld’s translation nevertheless gives Huang Po’s teachings a transcendentalist bias. It begins: “The Master said to me: All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the One Mind, besides which nothing exists. This Mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible” (p. 29). For a critique of Blofeld’s translation, see Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 9.
- 7 – Blofeld, *Hui Hai*, pp. 95–96.
- 8 – *Salayatanavagga 28 (6)*, in *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, trans. and ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2000), p. 1143. For many other examples, see Luis O. Gómez, “Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli Canon,” *Philosophy East and West* 26 (2) (April 1976): 137–165.
- 9 – Of course, the distinction between duality and nonduality is another duality. One way to make this point is that Buddhism does not reject duality in favor of nonduality but is careful not to take bifurcations as dichotomies.
- 10 – *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā 25:24*, as translated by Mervyn Sprung in *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (Boulder: Prajña Press, 1979), p. 262. Making his own transcendentalizing gestures, Sprung translates *siva* as “beatitude” and capitalizes “truth.”
- 11 – *Ibid.*, pp. 259–260. Sprung gives “the everyday world” for *saṃsāra* and “ontic range” for *koti*. Cf. 16:9–10: “Those who delight in maintaining ‘without the grasping I will realize nirvana; nirvana is in me’ are the ones with the greatest grasping. When nirvana is not [subject to] establishment and samsara not [subject to] disengagement, how will there be any concept of nirvana and samsara?”
- 12 – *Ibid.*, 25:9, in Sprung, *Lucid Exposition*, p. 255.
- 13 – See David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 224–238.
- 14 – *Anguttara Nikaya 6.63*, in *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara Nikaya*, trans. and ed. Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi (New York: AltaMira, 1999), p. 173.
- 15 – *Majjhima Nikaya II.98 ff.*, in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. and ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 1995), pp. 710–717.

- 16 – This approach tries to evade the ontological controversies that preoccupy much of Buddhist philosophy, while benefiting from their basic insights: the Mādhyamaka emphasis on not “settling down” with any concepts, and the Yogācāra realization that a dualistic grasper/grasped epistemology is inadequate for describing the experience of liberated awareness.
- 17 – Yasutani Haku’un, in Philip Kapleau, ed., *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1966), pp. 107, 137.
- 18 – *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, trans. and ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), p. 70.
- 19 – As quoted in Kapleau, *Three Pillars of Zen*, p. 205.
- 20 – *The Unborn: The Life and Teaching of Zen Master Bankei*, trans. Norman Waddell (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. 56.
- 21 – Ibid., p. 123; translator’s italics.
- 22 – Ibid., p. 121.
- 23 – Realizing Bankei’s Unborn might encourage the conclusion that one has awakened to such a Transcendental Mind. Is that how belief in Brahman, etc., arose?
- 24 – Epictetus’ *Letter to Menoecus*, in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.
- 25 – Waddell, *The Unborn*, p. 58. The same argument is repeated on p. 35, to prove that “in the Unborn, all things are perfectly resolved,” for “you were listening by means of the Unborn.”
- 26 – This sheds light on a famous passage: “When the gods . . . seek a bhikkhu who is thus liberated in mind, they do not find [anything of which they could say]: ‘The consciousness of one thus gone is supported by this.’ Why is that? One thus gone, I say, is untraceable here and now” (*Majjhima Nikaya* I.140, in *Middle Length Discourses*, pp. 233–234).
- 27 – According to many Mahāyāna texts and teachers, the primary concern that arises in awakened awareness is compassion for others. One spontaneously wants to help those who are suffering, and in particular to help beings realize the true nature of their awareness. Bodhisattvas traditionally vow to save all sentient beings, that is, beings that “have” awareness. Compassion is also important in Pāli Buddhism, of course, but apparently without the same assumption of spontaneity; there seems to be more emphasis on the need to cultivate it. Is this more consistent with the non-dwelling emptiness of truly liberated awareness, which has no characteristics of its own—not even compassion? How can we understand this difference of emphasis?
- Perhaps the familiar *Heart Sūtra* equation is helpful here. “Form is no other than emptiness” emphasizes the lacking-nothing quality of truly awakened awareness, which needs nothing and needs to do nothing because it is, in itself,

nothing. “Emptiness is form,” stressed by Mahāyāna, has some other implications. For attention to awaken to its own nature is to wake up from preoccupation with one’s own *dukkha* only to become that much more aware of the world’s *dukkha*. Since we are social beings, liberated emptiness becomes more sensitive to the forms of others, most of whom are not aware of the true nature of their own awareness. Insofar as our awareness is not separate from the world, compassion in some form or other would seem to be inevitable. Nonduality means that the liberation of attention does not detach us from the world but enables us to be more responsive to our circumstances.

- 28 – Gardiner Harris, “Use of Attention-Deficit Drugs is Found to Soar Among Adults,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/15/health/15/disorder.html> (accessed September 16, 2005). No doubt the lobbying of pharmacological companies has also been a factor in this increase.
- 29 – “Wired Nights: In the 24-Hour Universe, There’s No Winding Down,” *Washington Post*, Sunday, October 17, 2004, p. B1.
- 30 – Thomas Eriksen, *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), pp. 19–22, 69.
- 31 – Lorne Dawson, “Doing Religion in Cyberspace: The Promise and the Perils,” *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 30 (1) (February 2001): 3–9, at p. 7.
- 32 – Quoted in Oliver Burkeman and Bobbie Johnson, “Search and You Shall Find,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2005.
- 33 – Another Buddhist perspective on modern technology is offered by Peter Her shock in *Inventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age* (State University of New York Press, 1999).
- 34 – Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), online at [http://todd.cleverchimp.com/tools\\_for\\_conviviality/](http://todd.cleverchimp.com/tools_for_conviviality/) (accessed May 3, 2006). In one of his last papers, “Guarding the Eye in the Age of Show” (2000), Illich traces “the route on which the image mutated to the point of becoming a trap for the gaze. . . . An ethics of vision would suggest that the user of TV, VCR, McIntosh [*sic*] and graphs protect his imagination from overwhelming distraction, possibly leading to addiction.” He contrasts the earlier tradition of ocular *askesis*: “During the Middle Ages and well into modern times, it dealt primarily with protecting the heart from distracting or destructive images. The question that is profoundly new today is a different one: How can I eschew not pictures, but the flood of shows?” (<http://homepage.mac.com/tinapple/illich/> [accessed August 26, 2005]).
- 35 – The *Financial Mail* quotation is from Jonathan Rowe, “Carpe Callosum,” *Adbusters*, November/December 2001 (no page number). For Michael Goldhaber, “obtaining attention is obtaining a kind of enduring wealth, a form

of wealth that puts you in a preferred position to get anything this new economy offers" (*The Attention Economy and the Net*, [http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue2\\_4/goldhaber/](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue2_4/goldhaber/) [accessed September 25, 2005]). See also Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001), and the online discussion of it at [http://www.alamut.com/subj/economics/attention/attent\\_economy.html](http://www.alamut.com/subj/economics/attention/attent_economy.html) (accessed September 25, 2005).

- 36 – Rowe, "Carpe Callosum" [Latin, "seize the brain"]. The rest of this section summarizes Rowe's argument.
- 37 – The references to children are from Jonathan Freedland, "The Onslaught," in *The Guardian* <http://media.guardian.co.uk/site/story/0,14173,1600020,00.html> (accessed October 25, 2005). The other examples cited in this paragraph, except for the special *New Yorker* issue, are mentioned by Rowe.
- 38 – Rowe, "Carpe Callosum." This does not amount to an argument for Marxism. For Buddhism, capitalism and Marxism share the same delusion insofar as they imply that there is an economic (or technological) solution to human *dukkha*.
- 39 – Any consideration of social implications should, of course, include the effects of the political process on our collective awareness: "The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of political importance: the growth of democracy; the growth of corporate power; and the growth of propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy" (Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk out of Democracy* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997], p. 3). See, for example, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002). A Buddhist-informed analysis, however, is beyond the bounds of this already long essay.

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