There is Nothing

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There Is Nothing

My mind is like the autumn moon
clear and bright in a pool of jade
nothing can compare
what more can I say?
Han-shan (Snyder)

Zen is a Japanese word derived from *Chán*, a Mandarin word, derived from *Dhyāna*, a Sanskrit word defined as a method toward *samādhi*, a deep state of meditative concentration in which the words and concepts of the mind are dissolved into an empty awareness. The irony of this vast etymological complexity concluding in a definition which argues against its own necessity is certainly not unique. In fact, it reflects a very prominent aspect of the spiritual traditions of India: they are chiefly intellectual practices with the distinct goal of disbanding, or otherwise detaching, the intellect. To use a colloquialism, they appear to be attempting to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Because of this, there is something inherently paradoxical about the nature of meditative practice in nearly every Eastern tradition in which it can be found. Though the irony, etymological or otherwise, is rarely exploited directly, when sought out, its presence runs so deeply as to nearly undermine the entire premise of spiritual practice.

Yet, this serious concern for the underlying paradox of meditation need not be taken quite so seriously (‘serious’ here being used to contrast ‘lighthearted’, not ‘insincere’). Though it could be interpreted as a lethal wound to the heart of all meditative efforts, it can equally be seen as the skeleton key which unlocks the mystery of the entire practice. The question of whether we

ought to take the paradoxes of meditative practice in stern earnest and with concern, find them to be great cosmic jokes, or utilize them for our own benefit is not easily reckoned with. Resolving this complexity may very well necessitate a thorough inquiry into the existential nature of reality itself and a scrutiny, or even rejection, of some of the fundamental pillars upon which our most instinctual perspectives are founded. As intimidating as that may seem, dismantling preconceived ideas is in many ways the heart of Indian religious practice. In this essay, I'll attempt to pinpoint the nature of the apparent spiritual paradox, explore its implications in some of the various traditions of Eastern religion, and consider the possible solutions (including the outright denial of the problem's existence entirely).

The basis of Indian philosophy, from the Upanishads onward, has been the self. "In the beginning all things were Self, in the shape of personality. He looked round, saw nothing but Himself. The first thing he said was, 'It is I'." (Heehs) The word for this original Self in Sanskrit is *Ātman*, and it means 'self' in the most inclusive, overarching sense of the word. Accompanying this in duality is often the concept of *Brahman*, which means 'the universe' in the same very broad and inclusive way. Perhaps surprisingly, spiritual realization for a great majority of Hindus, Buddhists, Sufis, and countless unaffiliated gurus and spiritual seekers is the realization of the *unity* between Brahman and Ātman (though the use of these specific terms varies by tradition). Despite the necessary recognition of the both of them as separate polarities, the greatest realization for much of Indian religion is the realization of the ultimately singular, unified nature of these apparent opposites.

This unification between the self and the non-self, this 'non-dual realization', is the heart of enlightenment and the key to escaping *Samsāra*, the wheel of rebirth and suffering. Yet, from very early on, describing this realization and discussing the method of arriving at it has proved

exceptionally tricky. It can be talked about in a poetic way, and the Upanishads are largely poetry, but in a rigorously formal or logical way, or in such a way as academics and philosophers tend to scrutinize, it seems to fall short. This is because non-duality implies a wholeness and oneness that the rules of our languages find unfathomable. In order to logically discuss the non-dual, we would necessarily be saying *something* about *everything*. This proves to be rationally impossible.

Language necessitates categorization: that is, the process by which reality is divided, labeled, and grouped. To understand what an individual thing is, we must conceptually contrast it with that which it is not. That is to say, you cannot have a box unless there are things inside of it *as well as* things outside of it. You cannot say, "That chair" without there being non-chair to give credence to the concept of 'chair'. Black can never be spoken about as a concept without white. Therefore, the whole of reality as a singular thing cannot be rationally described without being in contrast to something other than it, which by its own axiom cannot exist. It is like trying to catch a net in its own webbing. It might be said, then, that the Ātman as an all-encompassing, non-dual state of reality is philosophically useless. Logically, this is so. This is the first of the two primary failures of logic and rationality to function in the context of meditative thought.

The second failure of rationality also involves the internal process of dividing things into categories, which ceases to function in another crucial when reality is understood as non-dual. The typical, intellectual thought process can be imagined as a net thrown over the entirety of the cosmos and the realm of sensual experience. It divides the world that we perceive into 'chunks', each of which can be labeled and identified in its own right. There are chairs, tables, people, cats, stars, thoughts, dreams, and sensations in the world of language. In the non-dual world, however, these distinctions cease to function on anything but a superficially practical level. The true, non-

dual nature of reality is absolutely and entirely all-encompassing.

Moksha is the ultimate end purpose of much of Indian practice. This is that all-important realization of the underlying unity of all things, internally and externally. Though Moksha, one can escape the cosmic wheel of rebirth (Samsāra) and be freed of all conventional bonds of reality. Crucially, this process takes place in a universe which is ultimately non-dual from the beginning. The distinction to make here is that the polarities are not *brought together* in an active sense, but their pre-existent non-dual reality is *realized* as having already been the case. Like all other aspects of reality, Moksha and Samsāra cease to be rationally distinguishable from one another. Seeing as the purpose of all meditative practice is the total escaping of one and the total attainment of the other, the realization that there is no distinguishing between the two in the first place is quite startling and naturally prompts a variety of responses.

Indeed, both of these aforementioned apparent lapses in logic are responded to in a huge multiplicity of ways. It is fairly commonplace for these sorts of inquiries and paradoxes to be met with disinterest or dismissal. An Ajahn of the Thai Forest Tradition, for example, might tell an inquisitive studnt that they'd be best shutting up and sitting still under a tree, rather than brewing over intellectual confusions born of mere language and logic. A Hindu guru might make the claim that duality and non-dualism are equally useless claims and that either both are simultaneously true or neither is true (or, confusingly, that they are simultaneously both true and neither true). A contemporary Zen abbot might encourage the investigation of this illogic and contradiction in hopes to provoke a kōan-esque "great doubt" by which the linguistically unfathomable is viscerally realized anyway.

Though each of the approaches to these paradoxes has its own validity, each can be dismissed fairly readily by the very types who raise these logical and rational objections in the

first place. The Therevada Buddhists are ignoring the issue, the Hindus are using contradictory logic, and the Zen Buddhists aren't using any logic at all. The ideal for many intellectual practitioners of Indian religions would be to find a way to avoid the tight constraints of logic whilst somehow also remaining objective and rational in explaining these two contradictions. There are two major ways of doing this: the rational approach and the scientific approach.

The rational approach: in this way, the Ātman can be seen to have a similar relationship with Brahman as the vocal chords have with speech. You could speak for hours about all sorts of topics without ever explicitly mentioning the vocal chords. Though they could never at all come into conversation, they are the totality of the entire speaking process. The very essence of speech is virtually nothing apart from the vibrations of the vocal chords, and yet none of the sounds produced by them made any reference to their existence. In the same way that music is played on strings or percussion, or a voice is played on the vocal chords, the Ātman is the medium on which the world is 'played' and there need be nothing apart from it (asking what the medium is vibrating 'in' is an overly-literal interpretation of the metaphor). There are two things arising from a fundamentally singular source, neither referencing one another, and yet one can only arise from the other.

It quite naturally follows from this that Brahman and Atman, or Samsāra and Moksha, exist as two sides of the same coin: one in the same, and yet distinct (for this is 'non-dualism', not 'monism', for a reason). Though our formal logical fails to grasp this, metaphor and intuition can be utilized to paint a conceptual model of that which language refuses to grasp in its whole, unabashed state. After all, the inability of logic and rationality to sufficiently describe something should hardly be altogether surprising if logic and rationality are mere *parts* of the very thing which they are attempting to explain. It follows (ironically again) quite logically that logic itself

would not hold up to explaining the very thing of which logic itself is merely an aspect within. An element within a set cannot be expected to define its own set.

The scientific approach: the Big Bang was a single event from which all of creation was thereafter spawned. Therefore, fundamentally, there is nothing within any given human being which is not of the same essence of anything that is anywhere else, including that which seems to be empty (for the Big Bang was not the creation of matter, but of space and time as well). That initial superheated quantum material, it seems, given enough time and space, begins to develop the ability to question and consider its own nature. 'You', your mother, a rock, Jupiter, and this piece of paper all came from the same infinitely small source and have experienced no external intervention that is known to science. Though we use labels of identity in practical terms, in a rigorously scientific sense, there is no clear boundary between 'you' and anything else. If one were to attempt to draw an outline around a tree, marking definitively where the tree ends and non-tree begins, they may find this process alarmingly difficult. Especially on a molecular level, the boundaries are so fuzzy as to nearly, or perhaps truly, vanish entirely.

Even that which seems truly apart from all else, our consciousness, does not fit this model as a separate 'item'. Indeed, consciousness has very little, if any, comprehensible presence in science besides its extremely mysterious role in the observation of subatomic particles. During the birth and death of a given 'being', nothing is created and nothing is destroyed – the same energy that existed before continues to exist afterward. This absence of rigorously technical birth or death coincides with the truth of Moksha, and the inability of most people to recognize this in a real or practical way coincides with the notion of a world stuck in Samsāra. Similarly, the border between ourselves and the not-self is far blurrier than we often practically realize. Despite our skin being a commonly recognized border between the self and non-self, we exert virtually

no conscious control over the growth of our hair, the beating of our heart, the digesting of food, etc. and yet all of this occurs very much within the limits of such a conventional boundary.

If we can conceive of rational and scientific solutions to the paradoxes presented by non-dualism, what is the problem? It would appear to be, at least for our purposes, resolved. Revisiting our initial issues more closely, however, indicates otherwise. The nature of the whole of existence still cannot be *directly* discussed, despite the apparent need to do so in order to convey anything about it. Samsāra and Moksha are even more validly indistinguishable, still ruining the point or need for spiritual practice (or, alternatively, failing to explain the existence of a non-realized state). Despite finding a way to rationalize the existential nature of a non-dual existence and building scientific support for this perspective, we are unable to really discuss it or *do* anything about it. We appear to have hit a wall. Our worldview is more comprehensible and well-supported, but it's left us with nothing to say, nothing to do, and nowhere to go.

Cue the moment of realization. For it seems not only quite natural, but in fact absolutely fundamental, that there *could* be nothing for you to do in the sense that the 'you' doing it is an individual, independent self. The search for something to say or do, or for some practice to perform to attain realization, is like attempting to get one's vocal chords to vibrate in a way that affirms their own existence – as though every vibration didn't do so. It is like attempting to demonstrate the existence of a drum through the music played on it. The very desire for something to do and somewhere to go, in and of itself, negates the very notion of the Ātman as Brahman. Though this response might be regarded as apathetic or dismissive, what it does is shed light on the fact that the existence of these paradoxes is actually a *fundamenta*l part of the yoga. It is, rather than a barrier to the way of realization, the trap door leading straight to it.

The Buddha, Adi Shankara, Kabīr, Ramana Maharshi and thousands of other gurus have constantly emphasized, as one of the most absolutely fundamental aspects of meditation, the abandonment of desires. As the 'finger pointing to the moon' is merely a signpost for a thing entirely apart from it, perhaps the teaching instilled in this direction is not as direct and simple as it seems. Rather, when one attempts to get rid of desires, what is one actually doing if not desiring not-desiring? If Ātman is Brahman, inseparable and indistinguishable, who is there to attain enlightenment? Is the world is non-dual, what difference is there between Moksha and the wheel of rebirth? And yet the Buddha says, "Strive on diligently." The gurus implore their students to dedicate their entire lives to performing a task which seems impossibly self-defeating. It is time that we consider the possibility that this this is *the point*, rather than a paradox.

This is the 'skeleton key' approach: that all realization can be attained simply by realizing that there is nothing to attain and no one to attain it – and that the only reason why one might object to this is out of a sort of spiritual greed. If even realization and the abandonment of suffering are set aside, and there are no desires whatsoever, not for Moksha or the visceral realization of the self as Ātman, what about this very moment *isn't* Moksha? The very practice of seeking it out is what keeps it at bay. The teachings themselves paint a picture of a self-defeating task and then ask that it be done. "You, yourself, realize that you are not yourself," or, "Intentionally perform effortless actions," or, "Wake up to the fact that there is nobody to wake up and nothing to wake up to." Frustratingly impossible.

It is commonplace for spiritual seekers to say that they intellectually understand that they are the ultimate Self, but that they simply cannot *feel* it, viscerally. "I understand it, but what must I do to *feel* it?" Here I propose that the very nature of this question implies an unwillingness to feel it. This line of questioning is made in order to obtain a yoga, a way of practice, so that it

can be practiced as a means of attaining something. The will to attain something kills the point; the motivation ruins the project. Others may go so far as to wish to practice unenjoyably so as to properly suffer before they allow themselves realization (for it is a rather fundamental idea of our society that only effort and work are rewarded, and the greatest reward must thus require the greatest effort).

This self-defeating snag is the postponement, or the "fear", of Moksha. So attached to the role of the individual self and thoroughly convinced of it as being *not* already sufficiently Enlightened, any notions implying that Moksha is *already* obtained simply will not do. This position can only be taken by someone who is still caught in the web of desire and attachment. Therefore if you feel as though you must suffer in equal part to obtain realization, or if you feel as though you'd like to be on the way to a great personal spiritual attainment, that can be arranged. An Ajahn or an abbot or a guru will be glad to instruct you in performing a range of self-disciplinary practices of an increasingly frustrating nature until you are face-to-face with a genuine self-defeating, impossible paradox. Then, most stagnate and get bogged down in intellectual traps. Others, though having satisfactorily suffered, having disciplined enough, having exhaustingly focused all of their attachment and conceptualizing in one place, might finally *give up* the attempt. Here, by finally throwing their hands in the air and announcing that they quit, the practitioner might find that they have just abandoned their last source of delusion: the attempt to escape it. "My heart's not the same as yours," Han-shan says. "If your heart were like mine, you'd get it and be right here." (Snyder)

We set out to discover how it could be possible that at the core of a philosophy that preaches the desperate need for realization, there is nothing to attain, nowhere to go, nothing to do, and nobody to do it. In finding a paradox in this, we mistook the finger for the moon. We

mistook the need for realization as an actual, literal need and not as simply the medicine by which the guru cunningly cures an ailment. It is not a description of the healthy state itself, but the means by which one can arrive at it. The guru, after all, does not come to the seeker to preach the need to practice. It is by coming to the guru, feeling the need to practice, that one demonstrates the ailment which the guru can remedy. Zen did not originate the kōan; all practice is kōan work. As soon as you believe you are not enlightened, you aren't. As soon as you feel the need to practice to obtain Moksha, you need to practice. In the very same way, as soon as you realize there's nothing to realize, there isn't.

"They searched and searched, searched some more --
it just kept disappearing.
After all that search, when they couldn't find it,
they gave up and said, "Beyond."
Kabīr (Heehs)

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