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## That Thou Art: Aesthetic Soul/Bodies and Self Interbeing in Buddhism, Phenomenology, and Pragmatism

### Abstract:

The inheritance of dualism from Plato to Descartes, and since, has impoverished the human relation with nature, the world, other humans, and other species. The division of soul and body, and its counterpart of mind and body, gave us a world we believe ourselves to be separate from and superior to other species. This self-othering standpoint has had devastating consequences socially, politically, economically, and ecologically. This essay seeks to identify some resources in the Western tradition in phenomenology and pragmatism that avoid this standpoint and bring them into conversation with some primary insights of Buddhist philosophy: interdependent arising, the not-self, and interbeing. By doing so, it is not only suggested that comparative conversations are not only useful in their own right, but they add dimensions to our experience in the world. Moreover, they offer avenues for living enriched lives in concert with the world without engaging in self-deceptive mental and comforting psychological activities of who and what we really are.<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords:

experience, *aisthēsis*, interdependent arising, “that thou art” (*tat tvam asi*), *cogito*, aesthetic perception, body, soul, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Buddha, Descartes, Plato

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1) Some of this essay originally appeared in “Body-Mind-Self-World: Ecology and Buddhist Philosophy,” *Philosophy and Culture*, July 2004, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Although similarity exists in some places throughout, this expanded version is more developed, comprehensive, and representative of a transcultural comparative undertaking. The author is grateful to the editors of *Philosophy and Culture* for their generous permission to revisit this original project.

The mind-body problem, in its most radical formulation, is a unique construction of Western philosophy and thinking. In many ways, this problematic is the impetus for and a foundation of Western psychology. The mind-body problem has its philosophical roots in Greek philosophy, especially in the thinking of Socrates and Plato, and finds its apotheosis in Descartes's *cogito*. Descartes's "Methodological Doubt" was a conceptual game – a doubting of all that could be doubted except the doubting activity itself, and the subject performing the activity of doubting. This self-reflexive activity of a doubling of doubt back on itself to eliminate doubt, that is, to give certainty its prominent position in metaphysics, provides the root for the Cartesian Circle, the conclusions of which have impoverished our relationship to others of our own species and to other species. Mind, and its mental events, rose to a rarefied and privileged status over the body and the body's relation to the material world. This self-proclaimed "real" self grew to be disengaged and disentangled from the web of life and lost its thread in life's ecumenical interweaving of the world.

Descartes's conceptual game and the consequences of his conceptual play provided the radical aftermath to Plato's thinking, especially Plato's extolling the virtues of an immortal soul. With this immortal soul came the metaphysical Being of a higher realm over the human body and its world of stones, plants, insects, animals, and the resplendent unity of landscapes that emerged from the "interbeing" of integrally related elements. These elements were in themselves "interbeings" that emerged from other types of elemental beings in a field of intersubjectivity. This term "interbeing" was coined by Thich Nhat Hanh and is useful in revealing a world unclouded by metaphysical diversion.<sup>2</sup> Following Descartes's play, the hand dealt subsequently in Western philosophy was of a very different sort. The deck was stacked against a world of intersubjectivity and interdependence and what comes up at each new draw is an objective world/reality that is an *a priori* given beyond experience and the subject. This reality was attainable only through some conceptual or empirical means, or what John Dewey called "a spectator theory of knowledge."

For Dewey, empiricists and rationalists alike believe they are exploring the nature of reality. This belief ultimately issues forth from a psychological need to control nature either through scientific means or an appeal to some transcendent search for absolute and eternal truths. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey astutely avows:

There was bequeathed to generations of thinkers as an unquestioned axiom the idea that knowledge is intrinsically a mere beholding of viewing reality – the spectator conception of knowledge. So deeply engrained was this idea that it prevailed for centuries after the actual progress of science had demonstrated that knowledge is power to transform the world, and centuries after the practice of effective knowledge had adopted the method of experimentation.<sup>3</sup>

Empiricists, from Dewey's perspective, assumed that for each idea in the mind there is a corresponding object in reality. Rationalists, on the other hand, held that the object of thought itself exists in reality. We only need to think about Descartes's ontological argument for the existence of God and be reminded of the subtitle of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*: "In which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated." Both views of the rationalists and empiricists conceive of the real thing as being fixed, certain, and static in nature and assume and project a disparity of mind and nature. These conclusions lead Dewey to his concept of "experience," which connects the human being as an organism to a dynamic movement. This dynamic movement is the natural world we inhabit and perpetually experience in spite of our metaphysical denials.

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2) Thich Nhat Hanh uses the term "interbeing" throughout his work and titles of one of his books *Interbeing*. See *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*.

3) Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 112.

Plato, and later Descartes, relegated the body's perception, its *aisthēsis* in Greek, to a lower order that gave the lowest soul its greatest measure, that of appetite, of wanting more; this was the fundamental *Eros*, or life-force. The senses were disallowed as organs of truth, knowledge, virtue, or even beauty that they sought. They were rendered inferior, and unlikely candidates for anything worthwhile and virtuous or beautiful in the human realm. That which the body perceived through its organs of eyes, ears, nose, taste buds, and the feeling of its tactile whole from foot soles to head top were rendered as shadows of some greater universal Good of Platonic Form and then in the posterior form of the Christian God.

Having the scientific side as he did, Descartes's analysis had to explain our brothers and sisters in the animal world. And he actually concluded – and needed to do so following the tenets of his day and his own method – that even animals, our closest relatives who display tendencies of also having soul, were in reality cleverly constructed machines designed by a creator being, none of which greater than He could be conceived. This Creator Being gave to humans the many resplendent animals to service our many needs – and how we have exploited their service from apparel to food, to make-up subjects for our beauty ends, and medical testing so we may live longer. Descartes's version of our nearest relatives is a familiar tale that follows the archetypal pattern of the great Yahweh giving Noah what he needs after the earth's cleansing of its original sinful ways – pairs of all the animals awaiting to fulfill their teleological purposes in service to humankind.

Although most would no longer agree with Plato's vision or Descartes's ideas about animals, their influences gush through our cerebral arteries and veins still. Plato, and his most distant protégé Descartes, separated by almost two thousand years – and there are others in between and since – continue to extol Being over value, concept over sensory perception, philosophy and science over poetry and art, and mind over body. As Dewey – and there are those before him as well, such as Nietzsche – understood, we are still beguiled by the misdirected enchantments of dualism. And oddly enough, this mistaken enchantment is an artful and aesthetic one that denies souls and bodies, the soul/body.

Our word aesthetics comes to us directly from the Greek *aisthēsis*, but it has been delivered to us without an address, with just a scribbled and nearly unintelligible trace of a return address and canceled stamp. Plato wished to ban poets and artists from his perfect society, which is in itself a concept of a Being that does not “be.” To his credit, Descartes was enamored with understanding matter and the body, but the human body came to be viewed as something foreign and alien to Descartes; it was transmogrified into something exotic that demanded attention. The human body was relegated to the animal, but to the thinking being animals were nothing but cleverly constructed machines living in the machine-like universe of Newton that was inherited by Descartes. But long before Descartes, the seeds of an alien natural world were already planted psychically in ancient Greek mythology where the mismatched forms of the human and non-human animal appeared in the forms of centaurs (man-horses), sileni (man-horses), minotaurs (man-bulls), satyrs (man-goats), sirens (women-birds), sphinxes (woman-lion-birds), tritons (man-fish), and gorgons (snaky-haired winged women). Although these forms were dualistically split between the human and non-human, the ancient Greeks connected them into one the best they could, into one being, one being-in-the world. Even Pan, the greatest of all the animal-humans/human-animals, whose name means “all” or “everything,” was a whole that ultimately was divided into two by Socrates and Plato.

However, Descartes's enthrallment with matter and the body was not for aesthetic reasons, for science had already lost its lust for beauty, which in many ways it is now just beginning to recapture. The aesthetic belonged, and perhaps always belonged, to the body; belonged to the body's capacity to perceive directly; belonged to the body's capacity to perceive without the conceptual overlay Descartes inherited from Plato and acceded to us by Descartes. This conceptual overlay, which even the great Kant could not break through, is what the “aesthetic perception” of Buddhism, phenomenology, and pragmatism cautions us against.

## A Breaking Through to An-Other Side

Western continental philosophers, such as Nietzsche and Lévinas, have enjoined us in their own ways to come face to face with the Other. The being of the Other is the byproduct of the dualistic tendencies of Western philosophy, earlier science, and the Western cultural meta-narrative that has colonized so much of the world. Lévinas views the encounter with the Other in ethical terms and Nietzsche, before him, does so with more of an aesthetic turn. In certain ways, Nietzsche's aesthetic turn is the fundamental view of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Dewey's pragmatism, and Buddhism, especially the Mahayana form of Zen. The Buddha sat in *zazen* and came face to face with the Otherness of his concepts and their play in creation of reality, in the creation of his reality. His enlightenment, his awakening, is the unveiling and disclosure of the darkness of the all-too-human conceptual slumber.

Just as Nietzsche's "Death of God," which is his prerequisite and necessary condition for the realization of becoming over-and-over-again the *Übermensch*, or the over-human, the Buddha realized that even his yogic spiritual training was a last-holding-on-to a concept: the concept of enlightenment itself and finding God or Brahman, that is, realizing one's own Brahman nature – of becoming God oneself in some ontologically substance driven way. This was all at the expense of becoming an inter-being with all the other gods and goddesses found in this world of stones, plants, insects, animals, and their earthly-celestial landscapes. "Becoming an interbeing" is the realization that we are interbeings already and that we are simply returning to our original natures.

The Buddha – the first Buddha – taught nothing, and taught us the nothing of concepts and the nothingness of their referents. The Buddha sat in meditation, but his meditation yielded far different results from those of Descartes's. As the story goes, the Buddha's sitting meditation brought about the many manifestations of his demons in the various forms of Māra's voluptuous daughters, a thousand trooped army of deformed pot-bellied mouthed devils, and then Māra himself. But Buddha Śākyamuni remained motionless and unattached to the events that swarmed and buzzed around and through him. How could the Buddha remain untouched by the demonic forces around him? And why did he continue his meditation for yet another seven days?

The answers to these questions redirect us from Descartes's meditation and his method of universal doubt. The Buddha sat and realized the specific conditions of all living beings, such as the causes of their rebirths throughout all time. Within the world, he beheld beings, all beings who were living, dying, and transmigrating to the new receptacles of future lives. In other words, Buddha Śākyamuni attained enlightenment because he had a direct experience of reality, a reality that was underneath the reality delivered by the deceptive overlay of concepts and the subsequent misconceptions they deliver that separate us from the world in which we live – the world that is our home. The ancient Greeks called this home, the world, *oikos*. It is from this word we derive the root for ecology. Ecology, literally *oikos* + *logos*, is an account of our home. Unlike the word "environment," which is from *environ* (Old French) and means that which surrounds, ecology rejects the privileged position of the human. Humans are not spectators who are at the center of a circle (*en* + *viron*) because we should be defined as beings at home in the world of all other beings. The Buddha entered a direct communion with reality, realized his own being as an inter-being, and went even beyond the concept of "unity" itself for he entered *tathatā*, thusness or suchness, of "everything ... truly as it is."<sup>4</sup>

The Buddhist analysis of phenomena continued long after the Buddha's death. What would remain constant throughout Buddhism's analysis of reality, and find its greatest expression in Zen, would be the emphasis on the world of pure experience. This world of pure experience can be achieved only by going beyond concepts

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4) Abe, *Zen and Western Thought*, 103.

and the dualistic reality promulgated by conceptualization. The Zen practitioner enters into direct communication with reality and the objects of reality. Our senses present us with a direct experience of the world. For example, when we drink a cup of tea, we have a direct experience of tea if we are mindful of drinking the tea. This experience of tea is not a conceptual experience of tea. Later, when we reflect on the experience of tea and define the experience of drinking the tea as being distinct from other experiences, such as driving a car, that original direct experience, which includes an appreciation of the warmth and other qualities of the tea's blend and preparation, is rendered by our reflection conceptually. At the moment of tasting the tea, however, there is no distinction between the taste of the tea, drinking of the tea, and the drinker of the tea. Only when a distinction is made between subject and object does the experience disappear and concepts enter.<sup>5</sup>

The dualistic development between self/world, or subject/object, is at the root of problems as disparate as our aesthetic judgments about art and the environmental crisis.<sup>6</sup> Although we hold art and science as being distinct in their natures, what is being suggested is that Buddhism's, especially Zen's, posture of non-duality is an aesthetic turn toward the inter-being of all things in an intersubjective world. The Buddhist doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which is often translated as dependent origination, is really a doctrine of interdependence, that is, the interbeing of all things. *Pratītya-samutpāda*, which is found at the core of all schools of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, denies the ontological status of any separate, distinct being defined in independent, essential, or substantial terms. All Being is interbeing. Even the human self is not really a self from this perspective. The self is really a not-self (*anātman*), that is, a being that emerges from and is conditioned constantly by other beings in the intersubjective field of all interbeing.

In *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, Husserl avoids the criticism of solipsism by focusing on the affinities between bodies in what traditional German philosophy calls *Einfühlung*, or empathy, where the other is given to us indirectly.<sup>7</sup> As David Abram writes,

In this manner, carefully describing the ways in which the subjective field of experience, mediated by the body, opens onto other subjectivities – other selves besides one's own self... The field of appearances, while still a thoroughly subjective realm, was now seen to be inhabited by *multiple* subjectivities.<sup>8</sup>

Husserl's ideas on an intersubjective field of subjectivities directly challenged the age-old belief in Western philosophy of the binary relation of subject and object and a world of objectivity. This thinking led Husserl to one of his most important and influential ideas for phenomenology. Similar to the enlightenment experience in Buddhism, *Lebenswelt*, life-world or world of lived experience, is not easily accessible to the "average person in the 'natural attitude.'"<sup>9</sup> The life-world is our world of immediate experience or our perceptual world. Life-world

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5) Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 88.

6) This discussion is borrowed from Culliney, *The Fractal Self*. See page 128.

7) As Spiegelberg says in *The Phenomenological Movement*, "The other is given to us not in direct presentation but only by way of *Appräsentation*, a process which acquaints us with aspects of an object that are not directly presented. We are familiar with this process from our acquaintance with the backside of a three-dimensional body when approaching it from its front. However, in such a case direct presentation may follow later. Not so in the case of our knowledge of others. What happens here is that when we perceive a body other than our own as 'there' rather than as 'here', we apperceive it at once as the body of an alter ego by way of an assimilative analogy with our own ego, an analogy which, however, is by no means an inference by analogy. In this process the analogizing ego and the analogized alter ego are 'paired' in a characteristic 'coupling' (*Paarung*)" (158).

8) Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 37.

9) Spiegelberg, 160.

is a world prior to our thoughts, concepts, and science of it. In fact, for Husserl, “the meaning and the great task of the natural sciences was to achieve as much objectivity as could be attained, starting from a merely subjective ground like that of the life-world.”<sup>10</sup> Husserl’s emphasis on the priority of the life-world reminds us that all of our conceptual explanations are forgetful of our participatory origin in this life-world. Or as Dewey puts it in *Experience and Nature*:

Experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience. Linked in certain ways with another object – the human organism – they are *how* things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches.<sup>11</sup>

But a seduction as strong as Māra’s daughters would entice Husserl away from the body to a transcendental ego whose active involvement through intentionality creates our experience and is the fundamental category of being; intentionality for Husserl is the structure of consciousness itself. With a very Buddha-like attitude, Merleau-Ponty, however, would reject this final enticement by identifying the ultimate experiencing self, the subjective self, with the body. Merleau-Ponty’s move would further open a horizon to other subjectivities in an intersubjective life-world.

For Merleau-Ponty there are no last-minute appeals to a transcendental ego; the body, or the “body-subject” as he calls it, and its role in perception is exalted. By exalting the role of the body and giving it presence, Merleau-Ponty “affirms our solidarity with this physical form, [and] acknowledges[s] our existence as one of the earth’s animals.”<sup>12</sup> Merleau-Ponty follows Sartre’s initial appeal to the body, but passes over the limited horizon of the body’s social existence. For Merleau-Ponty, body becomes our access to the world and to “others” who inhabit our shared worlds. He also passes over Husserl’s thinking about the body and its world. As Spiegelberg notes on the role of Merleau-Ponty’s unifying conception of “world,” “Husserl’s philosophy is certainly not *world-centered*, even though it became increasingly *world-based* when he decided on the fresh start from the description of the *Lebenswelt*.”<sup>13</sup> World, and body, are central to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.

By giving epistemological primacy to perception, and primacy to the bodily organs of perceiving, Merleau-Ponty affords us a way back to the perceived phenomena of the life-world. Our life-world is a world of possibilities. As he writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Perceiving is pinning one’s faith, at a stroke, in a whole future of experiences, and doing so in a present which never strictly guarantees the future; it is placing one’s belief in a world.”<sup>14</sup> Believing in a world gives the world back to us. The stolen world by the interference of the conceptual, which stems from the imposition of dualism, is returned to us without a transcendent deity that gives us ideological recourse to some unknowable perfect realm of false promises and misconceptions. World, as a world-of-possibilities, rejects the metaphysical quest for certainty and for Merleau-Ponty this rejection is the abandonment of phenomenology’s Cartesian heritage found in Husserl and Sartre. World for Merleau-Ponty is a field of our experiencing, and we become a presencing that emerges in a changing world

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10) Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, Vol. 1, 162.

11) Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 4z-1.

12) Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 47.

13) Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, Vol. II, 535.

14) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 346.

of emerging “others.” Self is a network of relations and “The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself”<sup>15</sup> and our subjectivity is an “inherence in the world.”<sup>16</sup> This life-world is known through the body, and it is through the body’s gaze and the gaze of other bodies back at our bodies that avoids the snare of solipsism for Merleau-Ponty. For him, there will be no intervention of some transcendental ego, nor even a higher transcendent personalized figure because,

It is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world. Henceforth, as the parts of my body together compromise a system, so my body and the other’s are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon.<sup>17</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, as it was for Buddhism, we are inter-beings in an “interworld” (*intermonde*) of inter-subjectivity where relational selves emerge in a field of interdependent arising.

In Buddhism, *pratītya-samutpāda*, or interdependent arising, means that everything is constantly changing, impermanent, self-less, and that nothing exists separately by and of itself and everything is conditioned by other things.<sup>18</sup> This is the idea of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness in Buddhism. The Mādhyamika (Middle Way) philosopher Nāgārjuna, the most important Buddhist philosopher since the historical Buddha, put the matter this way, “Emptiness is interdependent arising.”<sup>19</sup> Emptiness refers to the absence of some inherent or intrinsic being, nature, or in the received terminology of Western philosophy, essence or substance. For Nāgārjuna, it is the absence of *svabhāva*. Masao Abe writes about Nāgārjuna’s insight like this:

In short, *svabhāva* in Nāgārjuna’s sense is a self-existing, enduring, singular substance. Such a self-existing *svabhāva* is nothing but a substantialization or reification of the concept and does not exist anywhere outside of the realm of thinking and language. In our daily lives the role of language is so great that people easily reify or substantialize the word or concept as if there is an enduring, unchanging reality corresponding to the word or concept. In other words, people often apply the universality and constancy implied in the meaning of a word to the object. Especially those who have entered the realm of metaphysics constructed through reification of concepts think that the self-existing *svabhāva* is truth, while the realm of fact is merely phenomenal.<sup>20</sup>

The unique insight of Nāgārjuna lays bare that the affirmation of a separate reality of identity – the byproduct of conceptualizing after experience – that lacks in the conditioning forces of *pratītya-samutpāda* is the greatest illusion and cause of *dukkha*, or trouble, and by extension, suffering. However, the affirmation of the not-self (*anātman*), that is, the self as an interbeing that emerges from the dynamic play of the conditioning forces of the unfolding world, is what eliminates *dukkha* and affirms life on its own terms, not the aberrational thinking of an *ātman*, a “*svabhāva* self.” This affirmation of life is to view oneself relationally, reintegrate continually, and

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15) Ibid., 474.

16) Ibid., 471.

17) Ibid., 412.

18) Koller, *Asian Philosophies*, 167.

19) Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 24.18. For the complete text of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* see Jay L. Garfield’s *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

20) Sharma, *Our Religions*, 115.

immerse the self into the dynamic structure and flow of the spontaneous, self-generating, organismic process continuum we call world.

### Zen's Aesthetic Turn

The practice of *zazen* leads to the somewhat tautological realization that reality is reality. In other words, reality is thus, or *tathata*. Direct contact with reality for the Zen practitioner entails defeating the seductive power of allowing concepts to separate her from reality. Zen is often viewed as an adaptation of Mādhyamika and Yogacara syncretism.<sup>21</sup> Mādhyamika philosophy, especially Nāgārjuna's, is particularly important in Zen's rejection of the conceptual. As David Kalupahana writes,

For [Nāgārjuna], as for all the later Buddhist schools, a "concept" was something that conceals or covers the real nature of the object. Hence, the earlier term *sammuti* [literally "to think together," "agreement," or "convention"]<sup>22</sup> appears as *saṃvṛti*, which has a completely different connotation in the developed metaphysic. The new term is derived from *sam* and *vṛ*, "to cover," "to obstruct." The term *saṃvṛti*, unlike *sammuti*, would therefore mean "something that covers." A concept in this sense, would be like an outer shell that covers the kernel, the real nature. The so-called Ultimate Reality (*paramārtha*) comes to be concealed by the "concept" (*saṃvṛti*). It is revealed to the individual only on the development of the highest intuition. Thus, reality cannot be resolved into concepts; it is indescribable or indefinable (*anirvacanīya*, a new term coined by later Buddhists). The noumenal or the "thing-in-itself" (*tattva*) cannot be grasped by concepts.<sup>23</sup>

The term *sammuti*, the earlier term employed for concepts by Buddhists, also points to the interference of concepts in our encounter with reality. Our conventional ways, themselves products of conceptual rarefaction of our experiences, motor "the manner in which each individual, driven by his inclinations, attempts to see or grasp *what he wants to see or grasp* with the concepts."<sup>24</sup> This "agreement" of what constitutes reality inhibits our ability to directly encounter its real nature.

Although theoretically dependent on Nāgārjuna's philosophy, Zen masters do not employ his dialectical analysis. As Thich Nhat Hanh instructs us about Zen masters, "their words, acts, and looks also have the function of combating concepts, of producing crises, and of creating conditions that arrive at releasing the vision of reality."<sup>25</sup> Zen masters have developed numerous strategies to assist practitioners to have direct perceptions of reality, those unhindered by our conceptual overlay. The Zen experience of directly perceiving abolishes our dualistic tendencies. Unlike the process of conceptualizing, the act of perceiving contains both the subject and object simultaneously. As Thich Nhat Hanh says,

When the eye is opposite a flower, one can say that the eye and the flower are dharmas that can exist separately; *but when "seeing" occurs, the subject and object of the seeing exist at the same time in sensation.* The flower is not the object seen. The object of seeing is found in the seeing

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21) Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy*, 163.

22) For a discussion of this etymology see Kalupahana, 134.

23) *Ibid.*, 135.

24) *Ibid.*, 134.

25) Hanh, *Zen Keys*, 124.

itself, and cannot exist independently of the subject of the sensation... When sensation occurs, the first phase, which is contact between the physiological phenomenon (eye) and the physical phenomenon (flower), has already passed in order to arrive at the second phase, which is the sensation (seeing).<sup>26</sup>

When this experience is experienced without the discrimination of subject/object, the reality of *tathata* is revealed. This experience is essentially an aesthetic one.

### That Thou Art

The Western take on art and the aesthetic, at least from Plato to the modern age, has served a fundamentally moral purpose. Aesthetics and the study of art have also been tyrannized by the conceptual, by those who wish to figure out art and develop criteria for aesthetic judgments. But artists themselves seem to have a different take. As Isamu Noguchi once remarked about his art making, "If sculpture is the rock, it is also the space between rocks and between the rock and a man, and the communication and contemplation between."<sup>27</sup> Art provokes different perspectives, promotes different ways of seeing the world, and brings the content of the artistic imagination into visceral experiences of viewers. Art encourages viewers to feel directly, embody different perspectives, and to experience the set of relations that make an object an object of art instead of a separate independent entity of speculation. As Dewey says in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, "the function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness."<sup>28</sup>

The Zen experience makes us realize the non-duality of all reality, how all things depend on each other for their emergence, and that the first appearance of things as independent entities is as illusory as Māra's voluptuous daughters and his army of deformed devils. In other words, nothing possesses an independent and true identity; everything is interdependent (*paratantra*). We must break through "the crust of our conventionalized and routine consciousness" to get to this interdependent reality. Buddhists call knowledge that is not based on the interdependent nature of things *vikalpa*. *Vikalpa* discriminates and does not see things within their *tathata* context. In other words, Zen is simply direct contact with reality.

What makes the enlightenment experience of Zen an aesthetic encounter with the world is that art is the human activity that most directly promotes shared experience. When having an aesthetic experience, individuals are transformed by their experiences. As Dewey voices this experience in *Art as Experience*, "the sign and the reward of that interaction between organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the conceptual borders between self and others, self and Other, is seen in its arbitrariness, as a manufactured reality of our conceptual discriminative ability to make distinctions between seer and seen, hearer and heard, between subject and object, and ultimately of self and other. Aesthetic activity is the purest form of human activity. In this regard, artists are severely egalitarian. Their art is to be appreciated by anyone and everyone; artists are gratified by all

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26) Ibid., 129–30.

27) Herrera, *Listening to Stone*, 222.

28) Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 211.

29) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 22.

who are *touched* by their art. The resonances remain with Dewey for “The expressions that constitute art are communication in its pure and undefiled form.”<sup>30</sup>

*Aisthēsis* means to perceive through the senses. Aesthetics is about perceiving through the body and the body’s organs. Although phenomenology and Buddhism do not explicitly suggest an aesthetic turn, implicit in their appeal to the body is an invocation of the aesthetic. By returning to our bodies and minds as undivided, we return to the world – our world; by returning to our bodies, we turn again to our life-worlds and the life-worlds of others. This aesthetic turn is the intention of art makers. The intention of art is a visceral experience, for it compels us to sharpen our senses; it forces us to see ourselves in different perspectives and see ourselves in relation to others. Art has the power to transform our interactions with the Other because art and the aesthetic promote participation in that which is beyond individuated states and individual selves. The aesthetic perception of Buddhism, Phenomenology, and Pragmatism engenders us to be reborn into our world, to be reborn continually in this *nirvana* world of *samsara*, in this world of finding the sacred in becoming. By advancing our understanding of the relationality of our very being-in-the-world and the inescapable intersubjective dimensions of our existence in this world is to take an aesthetic turn away from the essentialism of the *Upaniṣadic* phrase *tat tvam asi*, “that thou art,” and render it in Buddhist terms. This turning away is breaking through the identification of the individual soul being identical to some transcendent ultimate reality to a deeper one. And that reality requires a refining of our aesthetic sensibilities and perceptions so that we can begin recreating self through not-self and begin the attuning process of resonating with those faint echoes of the interdependent interbeing of not-self and our lost relatives in a missing world. For the interdependent arising world is ultimately “that thou art.”

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30) Ibid., 244. This discussion on aesthetic activity that cites Dewey is informed by David L. Hall’s and Roger T. Ames’s discussion on Dewey and democracy in *The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China*.

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