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LOCATING THE SELF IN KIERKEGAARD AND ZEN

George Adams

In a tale about the Zen master Hakuin and in a passage from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, we find curiously similar descriptions as to how the person of faith can respond to even the most demanding tribulations in this life with a sense of complete composure and equanimity. In each case, the response to adversity is rooted in an understanding of the nature of the self, and its relationship to the realms of finitude and ultimacy. A more careful examination of the Kierkegaardian and Buddhist perspectives reveals that these similar practical responses to worldly troubles are based on dramatically different concepts of the self. Kierkegaard locates the self in a subjective space where it is revealed as essentially unique, relational, situated, and valued. This position contrasts sharply with the Buddhist doctrine of anatman, or non-self, viewed both in terms of the early Buddhist annihilationist doctrine and the later Mahayana absolutist positions.

Introduction

In a collection of Zen tales we read of the Zen Master Hakuin, renowned throughout the land for his wisdom and purity. When a beautiful young girl in the village became pregnant, rather than betraying her lover she falsely identified Hakuin as the father of the child. Her parents, outraged at such a scandalous act, went to Hakuin to confront him with their daughter's charge, to which Hakuin merely replied, "Is that so?"

As a result of the allegation, Hakuin's reputation in the community was ruined, but he remained silent. When after its birth the baby was brought to him, he accepted it without argument and raised it well, until a year later when the girl, apparently feeling guilty about the lie she had told, confessed to her parents that the real father was not Hakuin, but rather a young man in the village. When the parents went to Hakuin to apologize for the terrible harm that they had caused him, he merely replied, "Is that so?" and returned the baby to them (Reps and Senzaki: 12-13).

In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, while describing the individual who truly understands resignation, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus writes:

Suppose the world offers the individual everything. Perhaps he accepts it, but he says: Oh, well, but this "Oh well" signifies absolute



respect for the absolute *telos*. Suppose the world takes everything away from him; he may wince, but he says: Oh well - and this "Oh well" signifies the absolute respect for the absolute *telos* (411).

In a certain sense, the attitudes displayed by Hakuin and Kierkegaard are remarkably similar: both demonstrate a profound sense of equanimity in the face of disastrous worldly circumstances, and in each case their attitude is grounded in a religious cognitive framework which puts the worldly circumstance in a larger setting, thereby allowing each to relativize the significance of the harmfulness associated with worldly troubles. Both responses can be seen as rooted in what Kierkegaard called a "dying away from immediacy," or responding to events in life through constant primary reference to a sacred reality, rather than to the temporal event that confronts one at any given moment.

And yet, upon closer examination, what is even more fascinating about a comparison of these two passages is the fact that the virtually identical practical responses to a worldly event are actually rooted in radically different religious perspectives. Both the Zen and the Kierkegaardian responses derive from specific beliefs about the nature of the self, and this self's relationship to sacred reality, but the Zen and Kierkegaardian views of the self appear to be in fundamental opposition to each other. Specifically, Hakuin responds as a Buddhist who sees the individual self as essentially a non-entity in any ontologically permanent sense, while Kierkegaard's perspective reflects his Christian belief in the self as an entity that is valued, relational, situated, and ontologically unique. In the following remarks we will examine these contrasting views of the self and explore the various ways in which they lead to a curious array of points of similarity and difference between Zen and Kierkegaard.

The Zen Buddhist Sense of Self

The Zen sense of equanimity displayed by Hakuin in the tale cited above is rooted in the Buddhist view of the self. Of course, identifying the precise nature of the Buddhist doctrine of the self is indeed a daunting task, considering that even the Buddha himself declined to elucidate on the issue when asked to do so by his disciples. The subsequent history of Buddhist thought can be seen in part as a struggle to clarify this very issue that was left unresolved by the Buddha, with different schools offering various interpretations of the true meaning of the doctrine of *anatman*, or no-self. Since we cannot even begin to explore the full range of opinions on the nature of the self found in the history of Buddhist thought, we will confine our discussion to the early teaching on the doctrine of no-self and the later Mahayana concept of *Sunyata*, or Emptiness, which became an essential part of the Zen perspective. While there are, of course, other perspectives on the nature of the self in Buddhist thought, the doctrines of *anatman* and *Sunyata* are perhaps the most fundamental and basic, and hence most representative of the overall Buddhist perspective.

The concept of the self found in early Buddhism is closely related to the broader notion of *anitya*, or the impermanence of all phenomenal reality.

The early Buddhists described reality as something in a constant state of flux, characterized by an infinite series of changes behind which existed no substantial permanent reality. While some schools argued for the real existence of atoms, even these schools agreed that the atoms were in a state of constant change, and that the larger entities that came into existence by the collections of atoms were impermanent entities whose existence as aggregates of atomic particles was only momentary.

The importance of the belief in the impermanent nature of all phenomenal reality plays a crucial role in the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha's declaration that suffering (*dukkha*) is caused by craving or desire is based on the underlying belief that any thing that we desire, by its very nature, will cease to exist at some point, thereby leaving our desire unfulfilled. Craving necessarily leads to suffering since what we crave for can never be acquired for more than a transitory moment, given the impermanence of all phenomenal reality. Similarly, liberation is brought about by non-attachment to all phenomenal realities: by ceasing to desire and form attachments to realities that are in a constant state of flux, one avoids the pain of fruitless striving and can acquire the sense of equanimity characteristic of *nirvana*. The development of a state of consciousness characterized by a mature sense of non-attachment is described in the early sutras as producing a wide range of benefits, including freedom from being affected by the "Eight Worldly Phenomena" (*atthalokaddhamma*), which are comprised of gain, loss, happiness, suffering, praise, blame, good repute and disrepute (Kalupahana: 73).

But the impermanent nature of all phenomenal reality leads to a far more radical conclusion than merely the self's inability to achieve happiness through attachment to such impermanent realities. Indeed, the very self that experiences craving and forms attachments is an impermanent reality, with no substantial existence or ontological status. This is perhaps most forcefully illustrated in the doctrine of the five *skandhas*, according to which that which we call a self or soul or ego-entity can be deconstructed into five parts, consisting of form, sensation, perception, mental activities, and consciousness (Becker: 6). Once the self is broken down into these five components, it becomes apparent that there is no entity that exists separate from these components, leading to the conclusion that there is no self, only a temporary aggregate of matter and mind which is erroneously perceived as a thing-in-itself.

This doctrine of *anatman*, or no-self, became a fundamental component of early Buddhist thought. A classic illustration of *anatman* is found in *The Questions of King Milinda*, where the Buddhist monk Nagasena is brought before the Greek King Milinda to explain the principles of Buddhism. The lengthy discourse between the two men begins with Milinda simply asking Nagasena to state his name and title, to which Nagasena responds by reminding the king that while he is known as "Nagasena," this is nothing but a word, and that "there is no permanent self involved in the matter" (40). When Milinda presses Nagasena to clarify his remarks, the Buddhist reverts to the use of the chariot analogy, demonstrating that just as what we call a "chariot" is nothing more than the collection of parts such as an axle, a harness, wheels, etc., and that when the parts are removed no chari-

ot remains, so likewise what we call the self is merely a name for the momentary collection of *skandhas*, and once these are dispersed no self remains (43-45).

In early Buddhism, given the Buddha's reported reluctance to speculate on metaphysical issues, the doctrine of *anatman* was presented independent of reference to any broader understanding of the ultimate nature of reality. This quickly changed, however, as various schools attempted to formulate a view of existence that was faithful to the *anatman* doctrine but also provided a more comprehensive description of the nature of all things. In doing so, the Mahayana schools, including Zen, moved from the early Buddhist view of the self as a temporary collection of elements to a more metaphysical concept of reality in which the self is relativized, if not annihilated, in the context of the ineffable, non-dual ultimate nature of things.

In Zen, one concept that became a preferred way of describing reality as a whole, or the ultimate nature of things, is *Sunyata*, or Emptiness. Deriving from a sense of reality that is rooted in a mode of consciousness that generates perceptions that are claimed to be ineffable, by definition it is a difficult and perhaps misguided task to attempt to articulate the meaning of Emptiness. Clearly not intended as a nihilistic expression, *Sunyata* is perhaps best described as a variant of the advaitic, or non-dual perception of reality, according to which the ordinary experience of reality as a complex of separate entities is invalidated. Ordinary dualistic, binary concepts of self-other, past-present, here-there, subject-object, *nirvana-samsara*, etc., are denied any substantial ontological status. Beyond this, a more positive and clear description of *Sunyata* is difficult to achieve, but for our purposes in assessing the Zen sense of self, what is quite clear is that the abiding reality of a separate ego-self clearly is not included in this perspective.

This is reflected in numerous passages in the *Diamond Sutra*, one of the most significant scriptures in the Zen tradition. In response to Subhuti's request for criteria to identify the person who has achieved enlightenment, the Buddha responds that, "If a Bodhisattva cherishes the idea of an ego-entity, a personality, a being, or a separated individuality, he is consequently not a Bodhisattva" (52).

This perspective results in a remarkable paradox: the Bodhisattva's goal is to work toward the enlightenment of all beings in the universe, yet when seen in the light of *Sunyata*, it becomes clear that there are no beings to liberate. Thus, the Buddha declares:

Let no one say the Tathagata cherishes the idea: I must liberate all living beings. Allow no such thought, Subhuti. Wherefore? Because in reality there are no living beings to be liberated by the Tathagata. If there were living beings for the Tathagata to liberate, he would partake in the idea of selfhood, personality entity, and separate individuality (64).

From a Zen perspective, however, a strictly negative characterization of the self would be inaccurate, in that it would reflect the very dualistic type of thinking that needs to be transcended. While it is inaccurate to say that a

self exists, it is equally inaccurate to say that a self does not exist. Indeed, when perceived in light of the ultimately empty nature of all things, the self both exists and does not exist, all within the context of the abiding Emptiness of all things. Sometimes this is expressed in the notion of the interpenetration of all things, in which the individual, separated status of an entity is denied, while affirming its existence as an element of the non-dual Suchness of things. Thus, Masao Abe states that,

everything in the world is real in itself; and yet, on the other hand, there is no hindrance between any one thing and any other thing - everything is equal, interchangeable, and interfusing. Thus we may say: 'Mountains are waters, waters are mountains.' It is here in this awakening in which the great negation is a great affirmation that Zen says, 'A bridge flows, whereas water does not flow,' or 'When Lee drinks the wine, Chang gets drunk'(18).

The Self in Kierkegaard

As challenging as the task may be to identify a representative position regarding the sense of the self in Buddhism in general and Zen in particular, it is an equally difficult task to establish a clear and consistent account of how Kierkegaard viewed the self, given his frequent tendency to write in an intentionally unsystematic and obscure style. Here we shall attempt to simply identify several basic themes that seem to be present whenever Kierkegaard discusses the nature of the self. These basic themes can be summarized as: 1) the self is situated; 2) the self is unique and limited; 3) the self exists in a relational mode of being; and 4) the self is a valued entity.

The situated character of the self refers to the fact that the self comes into existence in a specific spatio-temporal setting: it is not an entity which exists in a timeless realm of undefined being, but rather an entity which finds itself located in a very precise and limited place. Kierkegaard, in fact, sees an essential part of faith as the willingness to accept the givenness of where one is as an expression of the divine will. Thus, through the words of Judge William Kierkegaard declares that the believer accepts "the existence, the actuality, in which God has placed him" (Kierkegaard 1987, II: 244), and does not attempt to pursue spiritual practices that claim to offer an identity that transcends the specific and limited setting in which he exists in everyday life.

Given the situational nature of the self, it follows that the self must also exist in relation to the other beings and things that are present in the setting in which it is present. Part of the relational nature of the self involves the relationship with other finite realities, but Kierkegaard argues that "becoming a self" in the fullest sense also includes recognizing and accepting the reality of the transcendent, infinite being to which one also stands in relation. For Kierkegaard, the more one develops one's subjective awareness of reality, the more one becomes subjectively aware that reality is not confined to the gross material world, but rather also includes a real, infinite Spirit, or God. The self which denies this transcendent reality is a self which is engaged in the practice of self-delusion, since an honest exploration of what

one encounters in the depths of one's subjectivity opens up the reality of the being that transcends both one's self and the world in which the self exists. To deny God is to deny that which the self intuitively knows, and to persist in denying what the self knows is to stunt the development of the self. Hence, according to Stephan Evans, "Genuine selfhood requires that I stand before God, accepting the self I am as a gift from God and the self that I should become as a task God has set before me" (Evans: 48).

Kierkegaard also sees an accurate sense of the self as recognizing and accepting that the self is only a self: a very specific and limited entity, located in a specific space and time, with specific and limited qualities. Rejecting the type of spirituality that suggests that the individual self can only be experienced in its authentic fullness when it is seen as part of a larger reality (as, for instance, in the Vedantic identification of *ātman* and *Brahman*), Kierkegaard (again through Judge William) instead argues that true awareness of the nature of one's self occurs only when one "becomes conscious as this specific individual with these capacities, these inclinations, these drives, these passions, influenced by this specific social milieu, as this specific product of a specific environment" (Kierkegaard 1987, II: 251).

In the *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus looks at the human tendency to inflate the self to cosmic proportions as a sign of spiritual despair: "Every human existence that presumably has become or simply wants to be infinite, in fact, every moment in which a human existence has become or simply wants to be infinite, is despair" (30). This spiritual despair is also seen by Kierkegaard as a type of defiance, in which the self attempts to define itself as something which it is not and deny that which it is: "the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be . . . He does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his given self as his task" (Kierkegaard 1980: 68).

But while asserting that the self is a finite, specific, and limited being confined to a precise place in space and time, Kierkegaard does not in any way see this as grounds for diminishing the significance and value of the self. Quite to the contrary, he asserts that a self is that which should be supremely valued above all else. Even in its smallness and limitedness, it is nonetheless an infinitely precious entity whose existence is qualitatively valued in a manner that is different from how anything else in existence is valued. He further argues that when this unique quality of the self is recognized by the self, there results an awareness of the sense that its existence is something that should never end. That is, a self is such a unique and precious entity that in a universe governed by a good God, there must be the possibility of the eternal preservation of that self - not as some larger cosmic entity, but precisely as a limited, specific, unique being. Hence, Kierkegaard declares that the person who has acquired a true understanding of the nature of the self also develops an "infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness" (Kierkegaard 1992: 27) in the self's eternal existence.

On Locating the Self

Returning to the passages regarding the Zen monk and Kierkegaard's Climacus which opened our paper, what then can be said regarding the

broader implications of these passages for our comparison of the Kierkegaardian and Zen perspectives? Before returning specifically to those passages, however, a brief note should be made regarding certain interesting points of similarity that can be drawn out of the above analyses of the Zen and Kierkegaardian views.

Clearly, both Kierkegaard and Zen are operating from religious epistemologies which place significant limitations on the value of reason and elevate the role of an internal mode of knowing, which is neither reached nor verified solely through reason, in discerning religious truth. In each tradition, one cannot arrive at the desired spiritual subjectivity through a process of logical analysis and rational deduction. In Kierkegaard, this position is most closely associated with the widely-quoted but frequently misunderstood dictum that, "Truth is subjectivity." Kierkegaard harshly criticized those in the Christian community who sought to demonstrate the validity of Christian faith solely through a process of logical reasoning, supported by historical research and empirical observation. For Kierkegaard, religious truth was not a reality that could be "proven" or "disproven" through our ordinary external means of knowledge. Rather, the truth of God's existence (and the reality of God's nature) was something directly knowable only to the person who had entered into what he referred to as the correct "subjectivity." And what one came to know in this subjectivity, or state of consciousness, was a type of knowledge that could never be acquired through any objective pursuit of truth, no matter how complex, extensive, or sophisticated. Of course, this does not mean that reason has no function at all in religious thought and discourse: Kierkegaard recognized that reasoning must be used to communicate, or point to, the nature of the believer's subjectivity, and much of his authorship, especially in the pseudonymous works, can be seen as an attempt to rationally articulate the content of that subjectivity. As Carr and Ivanhoe remark, "The internal coherence of Kierkegaard's position and the tightness of many of his arguments demonstrate a healthy respect for reason, properly employed" (Carr and Ivanhoe 2000: 44). Still, for Kierkegaard, the means by which religious truth and knowledge of the true nature of the self are initially acquired is not reason, but rather the acquisition of a specific subjectivity from which the existence and nature of God and the self become transparent.

All of this sounds rather similar to Zen, where discourse about the ultimate nature of things frequently adopts a decidedly non-rational character, replete with contradictory and non-sensical assertions. In the use of koans and in the unorthodox teaching methods of the Rinzai sect, we see an intentional and explicit attempt to move the student's consciousness outside the realm of objective thought and into a specific subjectivity, or non-ordinary mode of awareness, in which the true nature of things becomes immediately apparent. From this enlightened subjectivity, seemingly absurd statements such as "*Nirvana is samsara*," and "Emptiness is form," become meaningful and clear, in spite of the contradiction that they embody at the rational level.

While we find the use of paradox and absurdity in both Kierkegaard and Zen, the similarity is a superficial one that masks substantial founda-

tional differences. In Zen, absurdity and paradox derive from the broad and all-encompassing contrast between the ordinary, dualistic perception of reality, and the enlightened perspective which sees all in the light of the pure, non-dual Emptiness or Suchness. For Kierkegaard, however, absurdity and paradox derive specifically and solely from the incarnation, or the fact that God came into existence in the form of a finite human being, at a particular time and place in history, and that our salvation is dependent on whether or not we believe that that event, for which we have no objective means of verification, actually occurred. Hence, the paradox and absurdity in Zen is based on an element not found in Kierkegaard's vision of Christian faith, and the paradox and absurdity in Kierkegaard is based on a belief that is absent in Zen.

One is also struck by the strong role of simplicity in both Zen and Kierkegaard. In Zen, we have the ideal of the quiet monk, who, though possessing the perfect wisdom and having achieved the highest levels of awareness, is content to live the quiet life of "chopping wood and carrying water." In Kierkegaard, we see a similar portrayal of the Christian believer as the one whose inner wisdom is in inverse proportion to outer displays of learning and public religiosity. As Climacus states in the *Postscript*, "True inwardness demands absolutely no outward sign," or, even more succinctly, "the less outwardness, the more inwardness" (Kierkegaard 1992: 414).¹

When we return, however, to the specific issue of the basis for equanimity, as described in the initial passages, we see two very different foundational beliefs.

Hakuin's equanimity can be seen as grounded in two basic Buddhist principles: *anatman* and *Sunyata*. To the extent that Hakuin perceives his self as merely a temporary collection of elements rather than a permanent ontological entity, any threat to that self, such as the destruction of his reputation in the story we are looking at, assumes a rather insignificant nature. Damage to the self is not something to be feared, since the self is essentially a non-entity, or, at best, a name applied to a temporary collection of elements. Hakuin's equanimity remains unshaken in the face of scandalous and false charges against him because he recognizes that there is no "Hakuin" whose reputation needs to be defended and protected. Freed from the illusion of a permanent self, he also is freed from anxiety over any threat to that self.

But Hakuin's equanimity can be interpreted as deriving not only from his awareness of the non-existence of a self, but equally from his positive awareness of the pure, non-dual, all-encompassing Emptiness that permeates all being. The troublesome transitory events that occur in the samsaric realm acquire a new meaning when seen in the reality of the Emptiness or Suchness of all things. When subject and object are no longer differentiated, there is no "other" that can threaten the "self," since both are recognized as manifestations of the non-dual Emptiness. Hakuin, resting firmly in his awareness of Emptiness, is not troubled by the false charges against him, given that they derive from a reality that is relative and transitory, and even in a sense non-existent. Resting in awareness of Emptiness, only Emptiness matters.

In contrast, we find that Kierkegaard's equanimity rests in the awareness of the self's existence in a relationship with a God, a relationship that is of ultimate importance and which provides a framework from which all other events are viewed.

Kierkegaard argues that the self really does exist, and it exists at every moment in a relationship with a being that stands over against it. Indeed, it is a relationship that exists even when the self, consciously or unconsciously, attempts to deny it. Kierkegaard sees the person without faith as burdened with the task of interpreting his life in an immanent context, or with reference only to other worldly realities. The person of faith, however, while fully acknowledging the existence of the finite world, and indeed (like a bodhisattva), choosing to remain fully immersed in it, nonetheless views everything that happens in the finite world in the context of the God-relationship. Hence, worldly afflictions, as well as worldly gains, are radically relativized by being cast in the context of the person's God-relationship. Kierkegaard is saying that selves are real, and real events, sometimes of a quite terrible nature, happen to selves. But the self who is assaulted by life's woes can bear them with equanimity, because their meaning and value are always viewed in the context of the self-God relationship, which ultimately is the only thing that matters.

Kierkegaard neither denies the existence of the self nor the realm of finite multiplicity in which the self resides. But he suggests that anything that happens to the self in that samsaric realm can be handled with equanimity if the person is firmly grounded in a constant awareness of his relationship with God.

A possible reconciliation of the Zen and Kierkegaardian positions on the self might be offered on the grounds that Zen does not really deny the existence of the self in a categorical sense. To make such a denial would reflect the very dualistic thinking that Zen rejects. Rather than asserting that a self does not exist, Zen asserts both that a self exists and does not exist, or that it is neither the case that a self exists nor that a self does not exist. To make any naive declaration about phenomenal reality which reflects the dualism of is and is-not or being and non-being is to speak in a manner that is foreign to the Zen sense of the non-dual Emptiness or Suchness, of which no descriptive statement can accurately be made.

But for Kierkegaard, such ambiguity about the nature of the self is simply not acceptable. To him, the self's reality is so significant that there can be no equivocation or qualification in discussing its nature. When the individual enters into the subjectivity that is characteristic of genuine faith, the reality of the self as itself (that is, as a finite and limited, but real entity) is encountered, as is the self's relationship to another being, or God. In this subjectivity one encounters a self whose existence and importance are such that there is no possible modification of the self, whether through diminution to non-existence or through expansion into a metaphysical absolute. To Kierkegaard, the Buddhist position that there both is and is not a self cannot be accepted, since the self's existence in the subjectivity of faith is real in the fullest and most uncompromising sense.

What then can be said regarding the reconciliation of the Kierkegaardian and Zen positions? Clearly they share much in common: the limitations of

reason as a means to knowledge of the ultimate; the use of paradox and the absurd; and, above all, the importance of entering the subjective realm to discover spiritual truth. And clearly, both the Kierkegaardian and Zen perspectives can lead to virtually identical ways of managing practical challenges in everyday life, as illustrated in our opening passages

And yet, each party is clearly basing its position on knowledge found in a different subjective space. Both look to the realm of subjectivity, but each locates the truth about the nature of the self in a different mode of awareness. The Zen practitioner locates valid knowledge in a subjective space which reveals a self that lacks reality; the Kierkegaardian believer, operating from a different subjective space, discovers a self that exists in a relationship to a God. Both perspectives point to something (a self) that can be discovered through a specific path (in Zen, through meditation and study; in Christianity, through faith, prayer, and worship), but each tradition seems to identify a different subjectivity as the place where the true nature of the self is located. Zen values an internal space from which the self appears to be an insubstantial entity, while Kierkegaard directs us to a different location in the realm of subjective awareness, where one discovers not just a self, but a self-in-relation to a God. Hence, Kierkegaard and Zen both locate the truth about the self internally, but at different specific internal locations, or subjectivities. Each is grounded in a subjectivist epistemology, but each epistemology points to a different subjective space as the place where the true nature of the self can be found.

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NOTES

1. This is not to suggest, of course, that the role of external moral behavior is unimportant in either Buddhism or Kierkegaard. In Buddhaghosa's classic systematic compendium of the Buddhist dharma, the *Visuddhimagga*, morality (sila) is identified as the first, necessary step in the path toward nirvana, followed by concentration (samadhi) and wisdom (panna). In the *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard observes that "fruits," or external acts of kindness, are a necessary part of Christian faith.

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