

drowned out by automatic verbal re-presentation (this mouthy vortex that closes in admirably, hypnotically, from all sides but never actually arrives) by reconnecting only very briefly (after all, we are never be totally insensible unless we are sleeping) to our surroundings. We do this by closing our abstract distance just enough that sights and sounds can peep through little blinks in the eye of our self-maintaining thought (the maintaining of a “self” story is the cornerstone of abstraction, where “this and that” is prefatorily offset from “me”). But of course we can (and indeed we must) transform our ‘selves’ at exceptional times: in moments of crisis, or peak experience, when we are obliged to stand not at arm’s length from our ‘object’, but at Thoreau’s “mathematical point only”. With some formal practice in sensory awareness we might even come, more and more, to reside in these moments of clarity.

Over time (for language and the thinking mind are fundamental pieces in the human tool kit, and must be re-calibrated carefully and slowly, so they obscure as little insight as possible) I came to think of my experience on the back road as the meeting of an old friend. One who had been walking with me all along, but I had almost forgotten he was here. And so I took up my practice very deliberately, because I wanted to get to know this Friend better. I knew, beyond all the self-protecting shadows of doubt, and knowing even that these doubts would still visit me also as ‘old friends’, that the *good will* of this Friend I had rediscovered can never be truly lost, or even shaken. Because it is my own.

[TWENTY-SEVEN]

*“If your cart doesn’t move,” [Dogen] asks, “is it better to prod the cart or to prod the horse (sic)” ...everyone knows you should prod the horse ... the secular world has plenty of ways to prod the horse [meaning the mind] but “lacks any method of prodding the cart [meaning the body].” —Brad Warner<sup>2</sup>*

We get into trouble when we take our religions too literally. Our bodyminds know this at some level, but bodies are variously challenged by an uncertain world and so minds grasp at indelible truths

with various degrees of desperation. We all share this unspeakable state of religious affairs, so why then do we feel superior to “others” when they are “obviously wrong”? Is it because, whether we are God-fearing believers or open-minded philosophers, our self-assurance is ingrained in the form of deep-touch patterns laid down by a studious imitation of “proper behaviour”?

Buddhists are people too. But not taking things literally enough can actually be a problem for Zen students because, when the teachings encourage the propositional uncertainty of words, they can also undermine the more radical authority of a teacher’s deeper communication. When Dogen spoke of the bodymind,<sup>3</sup> he meant us to take this quite literally. When we train the body to sit still, and to be perfectly balanced, the mind doesn’t just follow the body’s postural enlightenment show: the mind *is* the body’s subtle gestures, habits, and training. And so it is that our continuous physical imitation of family and peers<sup>4</sup> makes “our” culture of “proper behaviour”, more probable than an outsider’s lecture on moral relativity (the view that behaviours might be wrong in one culture but right in another). A Zen teacher, on the other hand (or any good teacher really), is thoroughly confident that her unhurried pause, and her unguarded, receptive, eye contact, will speak louder than a wordy lecture on open-mindedness. A quiet mind *is* the body’s stillness, and this is why years of sitting practice can lead to self-knowledge and acceptance of others in a more direct way than any amount of counselling and argument alone.

But of course silence is not for everyone and for all times. When the need for outside help is warranted by mental or physical circumstances beyond one’s reasonable ability to control, then accepting help is the more courageous choice. For instance, the needs of a frightened child, left starving, sick and homeless in a failed-state created by economic interests outside her culture, can’t be met through self-help alone. But notice that, even here, such a desperate ‘courage to hope’ is learned or unlearned by a body’s intimate experience or non-experience of reward for effort. Thus behavioural reinforcement of selfishness or kindness ‘embodies’ believability.

## [TWENTY-EIGHT]

*... to understand religion and to affirm it are not the same but almost exactly the opposite. — Merleau-Ponty (as interpreted by Remy C. Kwant)<sup>1</sup>*

There's nothing very profound in my saying that when we experience a thing repeatedly, we reinforce habits and expectations; and when I say this conditioning is felt as the thing's fundamental 'believability' you surely understand me. But believing conceptually, relies on an additional verbal, or otherwise symbolic, reinforcement, and here something happens to our sense of certainty that will be less familiar if we haven't trained ourselves to watch for it: truth becomes a moving target that *always* evades our philosophical arrow. An example of a symbolic near miss might be found in phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Zen-like conception of thought as a "product of the body's interaction with the world it inhabits". These thought products allow us to step away from our direct experience in order to objectify it: all part of a philosopher's job.<sup>2</sup> To be fair, Merleau-Ponty knows enough to start with the body's experience as his foundation, and he even sees that it is with thought that doubt first enters in: the conviction of body experience is *denied* by the intrusion of thought. But even this truism can never be Truth, and Merleau-Ponty doesn't tell us (though perhaps he demonstrates) that without some practice at 'just sitting' upon the body's perfectly adequate foundation, thought's need for justification continues to bring more words, and thus entrenchment on a whole other level. Any philosophy that doesn't stipulate practice, excites the love of knowledge to seek postulates for its ground.

Objectivity is an unavoidable, and indeed wonderful, dimension of the human condition, but we can't really be trusted with it until we see that it's always accompanied by unspoken doubt: it never quite attains that 'sense of reality' which tells us we are awake rather than dreaming. Real confidence has no fear of being wrong, because our sense of truth depends on a fullness of experience that is-what-it-is because it's all there is. To mix phenomenological, Christian, and Buddhist teachings: objectivity

diminishes our lived experience by ‘nailing’ it to an abstract framework that pretends to satisfy our need for permanence. And we fight over this *because* it does not, by itself, inspire real confidence.

That kinaesthesia is also a sense to be reckoned with, like sight, sound, taste, smell and light touch, that it is indeed the sense of interaction, means Merleau-Ponty’s “lived body”<sup>3</sup> has no primary need of an abstract context: deep touch mani-fests context, wherein the arising of sensation *is* our totality. Thus our awareness of how the body actually feels opens up Reality wider than our symbols are ‘really’ meant to. The secondary objects, Merleau-Ponty’s thought products, guide the technologically extended mind where unarticulated intuitions cannot go, but what truth can we hope to bring into view when we boldly cut deeper and deeper with our inadequate words? In the two and a half millennia since braver words told us there was no such thing as a self, we still brutalize and kill for the selfish shadows we ‘see’ in this diminished light!

You see (sorry, the verbal traps are embedded), it’s not just the snare of words that catches us up: while pinned to our world coordinate systems, and imagining we can only look out along the x, y, and z-axes toward three dimensions of escape to infinity, we are less content than we sometimes pretend. Nor are we truly satisfied as we look toward eternity along the t-axis! (Can we really see time?) So, along with our unsatisfying vocalizations, let’s not take our talent for wordless visualization (these model realities that assure us, “seeing is believing”, at least until we find a better model) so seriously either. But let us come more fully to our senses: let us practise to climb down from our cross, one smile, one step, one breath at a time if need be, and to sit, or stand, in this dimensionless here and now. For this one moment of re-ligated (i.e. religious) experience joins every creature that ever did, or ever will, through ever-now ages, live. We won’t even imagine ‘we’ have changed. Old habits are still untouched, and we will undoubtedly find truths enough to talk about, and to hang up there on our visionary tree, for a season. Depend on it. (Really ... To watch my own still-flourishing truths come and go, all you have to do is turn the page.)