

Indecent Practices and Erotic Trance: Making Sense of Tantra

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When we considered the story of the Buddha's half-brother, Nanda, and his sudden transport into Indra's Heaven, we were unsettled by the end of the tale. Nanda's interest in his fiancée paled before those shining maidens, blissfully cavorting in a "Pure Land."^[1] He immediately joined the company of the Buddha's monks -- forswearing his wedding and, indeed, all the earthly joys of sex so as to save himself up for the subtle intensity of a congress that transcends the fleshly body. We wondered how pure and high-minded a vow of chastity could be that merely postponed sexual longing to a distant future.

The notion of erotic trance, however, has enabled us to understand that Nanda's mystic journey did not move him from one place to another but rather between two modes of seeing. One who has gained a certain mastery over the rise and fall of kundalini finds nothing improbable or postponed about Indra's Heaven. Trance takes place in an eternal "now" involving both body and mind, an utterly convincing vertical rupture of plane. The third eye of the brow chakra opens upon a mandala of coupled divine consorts enjoying Spontaneous Great Bliss. For a timeless moment, Nanda had been there -- as much inside Indra's Heaven as it was inside him, drawn in through his ajna chakra and impressed upon the nectar dripping down the central channel of his subtle body. Even if he was left with no way of explaining the event, its vivid truth revalued all his values. Nothing less could serve as foundation for his daily life.

A process beginning in our physiology that generates emotional and imaginal realities invested with "involuntary belief" overshadows and reinterprets human life in a mythic manner. Down through the history of humanity -- with the possible exception of the last two

or three hundred years in the West -- mythic realities have proven more comprehensive, coherent, and convincing than the space/time facts of everyday life. Furthermore, it is not simply that myth has had a greater explanatory power, nor that there is a larger reality waiting for us after death. Both body and world are turned inside out in a single inversion of awareness. The empirical world is dissolved into and replaced by a celestial mandala, the passage of temporal moments into an eternal now, our all-too-solid flesh into a tubular palace of universally valid and localizable types of ecstasy. The human being who directs attention to subtle sensations and states of consciousness that have no place in our empirical world finds another dimension of reality, one that makes sense only in the context of luminous beings, the gods of mythology.

Our climb up the diamond ladder of sexual attainment is marked by a series of reversals, each revealing a reality more hidden than the last. Opposing the mechanical, spasmodic release of external orgasm reveals the power of eros. Exploring erotic longing reveals the arbitrary character of society's rules. An antinomian stance reveals the dragon of the soul's energy as an immanent surging forth of unthinkable power. Acquainting ourselves with that serpentine power reveals that the ladder does not lie outside us but is in fact our own subtle body. Imaginal mastery of the subtle body reveals the immanence of Indra's Heaven as a Spontaneous Great Bliss that lies within the reach of anyone who takes it seriously enough to submit to its discipline. The nectar of the sahasrara chakra is both physiological and mythic, and so is the "Pure Land" of coupled divinities.

From the moment a subtle plane of human experience becomes available on the rung of carezza to its culmination in Spontaneous Great Bliss, mythic realities have progressively become more well-known and reliable. Empiricism has been replaced by myth. To ascend beyond the rung of divinized coupling, however, another sort of replacement or inversion must take place. Gyatso alludes to this when he tells us that the practice of Mahamudra has three goals: Spontaneous Great Bliss, emptiness, and the fusion of emptiness with bliss.

Because the notion of emptiness is so foreign to our everyday consciousness and even to mythic consciousness, we have avoided the topic until now. Called *shunyata* in Sanskrit, "emptiness" is the name Buddhism gives to ultimate experience. In its earliest expression, it was called the doctrine of "no-self" (*an-atman* in Sanskrit). As a first approximation of what emptiness means, we might say that just as mythic consciousness asserts and demonstrates that the physical entities of empiricism are transcended by the imaginal objects of myth, so the awareness of emptiness transcends mythic objects. No object -- either empirical or mythic -- enjoys ultimacy. Both subject and object are transcended. If in mythic consciousness, I transcend the empirical ego to discover my identity with the divine ("Thou art That"), emptiness transcends both the Thou and the That.

Although brief descriptions of emptiness are inevitably misleading, they do point us in a useful direction. One classic approach to emptiness employs the standard Hindu doctrine of three states of consciousness. The *waking state* corresponds to the subjectivity of empirical consciousness; the *dreaming state* to mythic consciousness; and *dreamless sleep* to the undifferentiated unity of shunyata (Govinda, 1969: 23).[2] Eliade explains that the practice of breath control in yoga is designed to enable the yogin "without renouncing his lucidity [to] penetrate the states of consciousness that accompany sleep" (Eliade, 1969: 56). The main disadvantage of this approach is that it seems to imply that emptiness is an extraordinary sort

of "object" that can be seen: "the rainbow-like insubstantiality and illusory nature of all phenomena" (Shaw, 1994: 24); or "a limitless sea of undifferentiated continuum" (Khanna, 1981: 30).

But Buddhism contends that emptiness is not an object at all. Rather it is "a term used to shift [our] mode of apprehending 'existence' and 'ultimate reality'" (Streng, 1967: 21). Emptiness has to do with our "manner of perceiving." Whereas mundane truth is "based on intellectual and emotional attachment," emptiness represents "a quality of life experienced in "complete indifference to the construction or cessation of 'things'" (*Ibid.*, 39). Japanese Buddhist philosopher, Keiji Nishitani, calls emptiness a return to the world of primary fact:

We usually take the world as an extended environment that envelopes us and serves as our field of behavior. And from there, as it happens, we go on to think up another, invisible world behind that first one. But neither of them is the world in its suchness. Neither of them is the world we actually live in. The very fact that we can consider our extended environment to be a world, and then think up a supersensory world behind it, happens in the first place only because we actually live in a world of primary fact (Nishitani, 1982: 127).

Nishitani implies that what we have been calling the empirical world and the persona field that comprise mundane consciousness, as well as the invisible world that serves as the object of mythic consciousness, are secondary creations. Emptiness is not something we have to go out and find; it is rather an inherent perspective we have forgotten and must come back to.

It seems maddeningly contradictory to think that Buddhists spend years of study and meditation only to "return" to "a world of primary fact." We are reminded of koans and Zen stories like the following.

Before beginning my study of Zen, when I looked out at the world I saw mountains, trees, and rivers. After three years of sitting in meditation, I no longer saw mountains, trees, and rivers. But now that I have studied Zen for thirty years and believe I have really come to understand it, when I look at the world I see mountains, trees, and rivers.

How are we to imagine the difference between the first state and the last? When "ultimate reality" is presented in *mythic* terms, symbols are employed to point to a transcendental object: Indra's Heaven; Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; the all-pervading brahman or shakti. Emptiness, however, is not a symbol that points to an object. To shift our mode of apprehension, it employs paradoxes that frustrate empirical and mythic ways of thinking. Emptiness is not a higher level of erotic trance. According to Gyatso, we first perfect erotic trance to the point of achieving Spontaneous Great Bliss. Then we enter that heightened state in the mentality of emptiness. Therefore, if we are to understand how sexual mysticism advances from the divinized rung of the ladder to that of emptiness, we will have to immerse ourselves in some of these paradoxes.

Emptiness As Primal Experience

Returning to the world of primary fact implies that we were once there but that we have left it and forgotten it so thoroughly that the very idea of returning sounds like nonsense. Nishitani says we have cut ourselves off from the world of primary fact by locking ourselves up in "the citadel of the self" (Nishitani, 1982: 9). We are utterly convinced of our separateness from the people and things around us, living an "internal life" inside our heads and peering out through the windows of our eyes at others who are likewise opaque and hidden within themselves and at objects which are "dead things." The Buddhist doctrine of "no-self" is aimed precisely at this "common sense" standpoint whereby our being a "self" cordons off the world from us, making it everything we are not. We become mere observers, set at a distance from what we observe, gathering data from our sense organs as though they were coming in over telephone wires.

Obviously Buddhism would not have arisen in the East if the citadel self had not already been a problem there some 2600 years ago. But in the West over the last three or four centuries, it has become especially acute. Descartes formulated our imprisoned self in his *Meditations*, having determined that his own subjectivity was the beginning point of certainty ("I think, therefore, I am") and then sought to justify his knowledge of the world outside that self. Newton articulated a clockwork universe of dead objects acting upon one another according to mathematical laws of causality. We have all been born into this world that we know primarily in terms of abstract concepts worked out by rational "selves" located somewhere inside of brains that we conceptualize in terms of "hard wiring." We are suspicious of our emotions and imagination because their fuzziness and bias interfere with the clarity of our abstract concepts.

Before the seventeenth century, however, even educated Europeans were by no means so clear in distinguishing sensory knowledge and imagination. Alchemists, for example, treated their metals, salts, and liquids as spiritualized matter. They lived in a world of mystical participation with the substances in their laboratories and knew the experiments they performed in their retorts were also going on within themselves.[3] Even Isaac Newton was an alchemist; and his original conception of gravitation, the great driving force of the universe, was that all physical bodies are drawn to one another by eros -- although he had to conceal this imaginal view in order to gain acceptance for his theories (Berman, 1981: 124). C. G. Jung, who opened the field of alchemy for modern scholarship, speaks of a "great schism" that occurred in Western culture at the time that alchemy gave way to modern empirical science. Imagination was sundered from measurable and repeatable observation and fell into disrepute (Jung, *CW 14*). A naive mystical participation of subject in object and object in subject, gets us closer to the world of primary fact than abstract concepts reckoned in the citadel of the self.

Participation is self and non-self identified at the moment of experience. The pre-Homeric Greek, the medieval Englishman (to a lesser extent, of course), and the present-day African tribesman know a thing precisely in the act of identification, and this identification is as much sensual as it is intellectual. It is a *totality* of experience: the "sensuous intellect," if the reader can imagine such a thing. We have so lost the ability to make this identification that we are left today with only two experiences that consist of participating consciousness: lust and anxiety. As I make love to my partner, I immerse myself in her body, I become increasingly "lost." At the moment of orgasm, I *am* the act; there is no longer an "I" who experiences it (Berman, 1981: 76).

Berman makes it clear that *sometimes* -- even for those of us who are not accomplished Buddhists -- we have moments of leaving the citadel of the self and entering the world of primary fact. His book is not about mysticism but about the crisis of contemporary Western consciousness which prompts him to call for a "re-enchantment of the world." Nevertheless, his argument that we live in a derived world of concepts from which we must "return," echoes Nishitani's sentiments about the world of primary fact. It is also coherent with a wide-spread mystical theme according to which "enlightenment" is not some promontory we achieve by hard climbing but rather has to be "remembered." Our powerful tendency to take up residence in the fortress of the self causes us to overlook and forget moments when each of us has lived spontaneously and lost the artificial boundaries that support our subject/object dichotomy. One who is "awakened" or "enlightened," therefore, learns to recall what occurs in the gaps when the intellectual and social construction of reality falls away. By remembering, cultivating, and expanding upon these moments, we are able to live more and more of the time in the world of primary fact.[4] This gives us a powerful hint concerning the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness.

That Berman chooses to give us a brief account of orgasm as a paradigm for mystical participation,[5] not only suits our theme of "sexual attainment," but also refers to a typical sort of gap in citadel-consciousness with which we are all familiar. Its universality suggests why Tantrism has chosen sexual practice as the shorter and more direct path to enlightenment.

Our Original Countenance

Zen speaks of "dropping body-and-mind," i.e., leaving citadel-consciousness so as to find the "original countenance" we had before our birth. Nishitani says, "This original countenance is present at the point that the world *worlds*, where one's treasure house opens of itself and one can use it at will" (Nishitani, 1982: 199). His phrase, "the world *worlds*," alludes to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who argues that human existence cannot be described in terms of an isolated subject in an environment of objects. Rather, human existence is "Being-in-the-world." The world is an inseparable part of our being. The world is in us and we are in the world. When the world "worlds" (does what the world does), it reveals us to ourselves. Jung, who was intemperately hostile to what he knew of Heidegger[6] and never mentions the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness,[7] describes an experience he had in Africa which vividly illustrates the notion of "original countenance" and "the worlding of the world":

To the very brink of the horizon we saw gigantic herds of animals: gazelle, antelope, gnu, zebra, warthog, and so on. Grazing, heads nodding, the herds moved forward like slow rivers. There was scarcely any sound save the melancholy cry of a bird of prey. This was the stillness of the eternal beginning, the world as it had always been, in the state of non-being; for until then no one had been present to know that it was this world. . . . There I was now, the first human being to recognize that this was the world, but who did not know that in this moment he had first really created it.

[All this is in contrast to the "cheerless clockwork fantasy" of the Western world, which fails to understand that man] himself is the second creator of the world, who alone has given to the world its objective existence -- without which, unheard, unseen, silently eating, giving birth, dying, heads nodding through hundreds of millions of years, it would have gone on in the profoundest

night of non-being down to its unknown end. Human consciousness created objective existence and meaning, and man found his indispensable place in the great process of being (Jung, 1961: 255-6).

Jung's sense that he was the first being to recognize the world and by this means bring it into existence as a "great process of being" in which he participated certainly has all the marks of "primary fact." The world *worlds* as fodder and riverbed for the slowly streaming herds and at the same time becomes the "clearing" in which Jung's own Being-in-the-world finds its place as *Dasein* (Being-here). In this sense, his "original countenance" is revealed as the face before which the timeless primal fact of his humanity breaks through the "cheerless clockwork fantasy" of his European heritage. Evidently he felt himself brought to a new and more vital sense of life in the same moment that the world took on its eternal countenance, that state of "non-being" which was no longer a collection of objects, but the world in its "suchness," the point where everything "gathers together" and reveals a luminous and timeless oneness in which observer and observed are no longer sundered from one another. Jung lived that moment in the gap which moved the Zen master Rinzai to say, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him." [8] If the Buddha is an "other" you can meet, he blocks your way to the emptiness of your own Buddha-nature. Nishitani comments: "We have to kill the self absolutely. And to do that is also to kill the Buddha, the patriarchs, and everything else, breaking through the field where self and other are discriminated from one another and made relative to one another" (Nishitani: 1982: 263).

Jung's experience reminds me of a timeless moment that occurred one afternoon when I rode a "whalewatch" ship out of Boston Harbor into Massachusetts Bay. As I stood at the rail, a porpoise suddenly broke through the surface of the water several yards away and swooped in a lazy sine curve parallel to our vessel, arcing alternately through air and water, keeping pace with us for a while before diving out of sight. Caught by surprise, the incessant chattering of my mind was brought to a halt, and something wordless was revealed. I was confronted with pure porpoise-hood. The magnificent being before me was simply "porpoising," living its porpoise nature in its uncluttered simplicity. As it porpoised, the sea and the air were brought to presence as the playground of its undulant, effortless surging. A moment before, the air had been as absent from my consciousness as it typically is, as the taken-for-granted medium that is forgotten when we look out at the world from the citadel of the self; and the sea had merely been the uneven floor of our vessel's passage. But in the first splash of its porpoising surge, my bottle-nosed companion porpoised sea and air into existence as the complimentary fluids of porpoiseful play. As body-and-mind dropped away, I, too, was porpoised. I felt the undulating flow in my legs and trunk, the enveloping plunge and light splashing free. In that brief episode, the two of us participated in a single primal world in which subject and object dissolved. There was no time to think, no opportunity to retreat to the citadel of my self. Only long after the porpoise had disappeared did it occur to me to wonder whether that air-breathing denizen of the deep had been as much "humaned" as I had been porpoised.

Also somewhat later I looked about and wondered whether any of the others standing at the rail had experienced what I had. Had I been the only one? Or may it have been the fact that we had all been porpoised, although only one or two of us noticed it? For this would surely reflect the Buddhist doctrine that the world of primary fact is always present for all of us. We notice it -- if at all -- only "subliminally" and are rarely able to remember it. Even while being porpoised, we hide this primary fact from our consciousness by indulging in the same old static: "Oh, look, there's a porpoise! That's not a porpoise, it's a dolphin! My, isn't he

close? He's so graceful!" Our exclamatory noise reveals a burst of excitement and energy. What *really* moves us: the porpoise as object to be photographed, or the porpoising that has invaded our being?

Emptiness And The Lucidity Of Dreamless Sleep

A number of folkloric accounts of emptiness describe it from the viewpoint of an awestruck and uninitiated outsider -- the Tibetan biography of Machig Lapdrön being an excellent example. In her previous life Machig had been a man initiated by a yogini, and her birth was attended by extraordinary signs. After years of study and practice, she was informed by a dakini that the Indian sage Topabhadra should be her consort. When she found him, however, he said he had nothing to teach her, to which she replied that the content of the teaching was of no importance; for to make a "*dharma* connection," any teaching would do. Their union produced so much light that Machig's landlady believed the house was on fire and opened the door. "She saw nothing except a room full of light and red and white spheres of light . . . She was afraid and fell into a deep sleep." Subsequently, Machig's antinomian sexual practice led to rumors that she had fallen from the ways of dharma, but in the end her evident spirituality won over her critics (Allione, 1986: 150-87).

The story begins by setting Machig apart from all ordinary women. Her birth is the culmination of many lifetimes of striving for nirvana -- both as a man and as a woman. Her transmigrating soul has been initiated by a yogini and is therefore prepared for the highest levels of sexual mysticism. This goal is announced when the mature Machig, in a state of erotic trance, encounters a dakini who assigns Topabhadra as her "dharma consort." When he says she is so advanced he has nothing to teach her, the testimony of a recognized sage is employed to verify the excellence of her spiritual state. But there is a deeper meaning to Topabhadra's words. He has nothing to teach because emptiness cannot be taught. Machig agrees. Any teaching will do, because emptiness is beyond all teaching.

Dharma is a multifaceted term in Buddhism. It refers to the cosmic law that supports the world and ourselves, the teaching of the Buddha, ethical norms ("the ways of dharma"), and the sublime "suchness" that makes every being the wondrous entity it is. The dharma-body of the Buddha stands for his eternal essence that lies beyond all representation. In this sense, a "dharma connection" between a male Buddha and a female Buddha would be a sublime union of complementary principles. The two would be uniting in their "suchness," a state beyond subject and object. The folkloric nature of the story, however, conceals the experience of the two participants. We have to depend for our information upon an outside observer, just as in the story of Nangsa Obam's union with Lama Gyaltzen.

Machig's attainment of emptiness in her ritual embrace of Topabhadra is suggested by that roomful of light that is nearly devoid of form. As she stammers before this mystery, the story-teller provides red and white spheres of light. We are face-to-face with a mystery more sublime than the union of wrathful dakinis reported by the soldiers in Nangsa's story. Our only witness is so affected that she becomes afraid and falls into a deep sleep. We are reminded of the fearful anxiety the Jewish prophets experienced in the presence of God, or the disciples of Jesus when he was transfigured bright as snow on the mountain top.[9] The landlady loses consciousness because the metaphysical event before her belongs to the realm

of dreamless sleep, and she cannot resist its pull. Like those who listen to the tale, she has not developed the yogic lucidity that would allow her to remain conscious in the face of emptiness. There is nothing there to see.

Samadhi

The emptiness of dreamless sleep suggests samadhi, the highest state of yogic consciousness, which Nishitani cites as an analogue of emptiness.

The mode of being of things in their selfness [emptiness] consists of the fact that things take up a position grounded in themselves and settle themselves on that position. They center in on themselves and do not get scattered. From ancient times, the word *samadhi* ("settling") has been used to designate the state of mind in which a man gathers his own mind together and focuses it on a central point, thereby taking a step beyond the sphere of ordinary consciousness and self-conscious mind and, in that sense, forgetting his ego. . . . The form of things as they are on their own home-ground is similar to the appearance of things in *samadhi* (Nishitani, 1982: 128).

Nishitani does not mean that emptiness is achieved only in and through samadhi, but rather that the state of awareness beyond subject and object which describes samadhi gives us a paradigmatic instance of emptiness. Samadhi is often described as a "state of ecstatic union with the object of contemplation" or as "enstasy" (Feuerstein, 1989: 11) -- not a flight *from* oneself but a sinking deeper in toward one's "original face."

The journey to samadhi involves three stages. [10] The first of these is dharana (concentration). In this state, the diffuseness of ordinary consciousness -- the many trains of thought, distractions, and concerns that tumble all over one another -- is brought to a halt; and the yogin focuses on a single object, such as the breathing process. The in-and-out of one's breath becomes the constant against which diffuse images, thoughts, and sensations "float" like motes in a sunbeam. In the next stage, dhyana (meditation proper), the yogin attains "a unified current of thought." One no longer has the experience of breathing but of "being breathed." My breathing is no longer something that "I do"; rather my breath is a river of process, an impersonal "being done" more fundamental than the "I" who observes it. Thoughts -- "Isn't this marvelous! 'I've finally done it!' or "Of course, why didn't I notice it sooner" -- are interruptions in the flow, a return to the citadel of the self.

"The mandala constructing itself before you . . . the mantra flowing like a river" (Odiar, 1997: 28), describes dhyana. In addition, it is universally claimed that the yogin "penetrates" the object of meditation and "assimilates" it (Eliade, 1969: 72). I perceive a condition of "no difference" between me, my breathing, and the universe at large. The expanding, contracting cosmos is breathing; and the breathing that breathes me is but the center of a universal process of in and out. I am not different from that. At this point, the "meditation" of dhyana fades into the "enstasy" of samadhi, where "mental activity ceases" in a "total absorption in the object of meditation" (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989). It is a "perfect forgetting of the state of meditation which precedes it" (Feuerstein, 1990). Consciousness is aware only of itself.

The process from "one-pointed concentration" through "river of thought" to "I am That," recapitulates the development of erotic trance. Entrance onto a subtle plane where everything overflows with erotic significance amounts to an involuntary slide into the concentration of

dharana. The wet spot in the bed is no longer a disgusting mess but a sanctifying substance. Nothing has meaning apart from eros, which is the background and depth dimension of all that appears. We are not distracted by cramps or the stickiness of skin upon skin. Nothing *is* for us but the world of eros. The tubular palace meditation vividly describes a form of dhyana, a river of thought moving up and down the central channel of the subtle body, unifying physiology, emotion, and imagination in a total world of process. The mandala of copulating deities that assembles itself before the third eye is also dhyana, and so is the condensed drop of bliss. But once that bliss is imprinted on the nectar so that there is no longer a difference between the bliss of Indra's Heaven and the bliss that transubstantiates our subtle body, we begin to slide over into samadhi.

When we ride the divine-impressed drop of nectar up and down the central staircase of the subtle body, our "enstasy" is still dependent on the form of an object. To step beyond that, to forget the subtle body and its contents, is to enter "formless" samadhi [11] and simply, spontaneously to *be* blissfully. Here, Indra's Heaven has been emptied of all content. We have transcended imagination and myth and entered the field of emptiness.

The image of Machig's landlady falling into a great fear and losing consciousness altogether suggests a less than blissful aspect to emptiness. The discovery that the everyday world of mountains, trees, and rivers is an arbitrary social construction, and that the citadel self is nothing but a comforting illusion: these disturbing revelations imply that we are self-deluding ghosts inhabiting a ghostly world floating above an abyss of nothingness. The replacement of that ghostly world by a mythic mandala of shining beings that convinces us with involuntary belief brings with it a sense of meaning, fulfillment, and ultimacy. We know we have "ascended" from profane consciousness, re-enchanted our lives, discovered something immeasurably "more" that had long lurked unnoticed in our body-and-mind. But when body-and-mind fall away and the world of myth dissolves as surely as our ghostly web of concepts, we find ourselves faced with nothing at all.

The Crisis Of Nothingness

If emptiness is sublime, nothingness is an existential crisis. Nothingness, we might say, is the "shadow side" of emptiness. Nishitani calls it the "Great Doubt," "when self-existence, together with the being of all things turns into a single doubt" (Nishitani, 1981: 18). Surely this doubt is inextricably tangled with my own "no-self" and the "no-self" of every object I encounter. Everything, myself included, is lost. "Death and nihilism" constitute "the final frontier of [our] self-existence" (*Ibid.*, 16). When this happens, the frequently cited words of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, "*neti, neti*" ("not this, not this"), strike terror in our hearts. The Upanishad wants to direct our attention away from this empirical world of illusion to the ultimate brahman. But if the emptiness doctrine is correct and brahman, too, is empty, we are faced with the loss of all possibility of security. The "Great Doubt" which might have led to enlightenment leaves us on the brink of a "cosmic" abyss.

The fact that this line of thought is no Western-entrenched distortion of Eastern mystical practice is brought home to us by a story told by a female "Vimalananda" whom we meet in a book written by Daniel Odier, *Tantric Quest: An Encounter with Absolute Love* (1997). Having been introduced to Hinduism at home in France through a much older woman, a

painter on whom he had had an immense crush when he was only sixteen, Odier managed to get himself to India in 1968 at the age of twenty-three to take photographs for a book on Tibetan painting. No sooner had he completed his commission, however, then his cameras and all his film were stolen in a train station in New Delhi. After an extended panicky search and consultation with the police, he decided to forget about the publication project and to go in search of a spiritual teacher. Just over the border in Tibet, Kalou Rinpoche took him on as a disciple in the Mahamudra tradition and gave him the dharma name Karma Sonam Tcheupel ("One who is blessed by karma and who can seize the way") to honor the fact that his spiritual adventures had been occasioned by the "karma" of the theft in New Delhi. By the end of a year of practice, he had arrived at a very high level of mandala meditation[12]:

that state in which one desires only one thing: to remain in meditation for hours, unmoving as if fixed in the center of space; full of warmth, energy, openness; breathing deeply, regularly, and silently -- the mandala, constructing itself before you as if projected, each detail intensely present, the mantra flowing like a river, the phases of absorption following one another smoothly until the final void (Odier, 1997: 28).

It was not until 1993, however, at the age of forty-eight, that Odier finally met the Bhairavi who structured his final initiation on the Tantric path. He knew this woman only as "Devi," and reports her teachings and stories very much in the style of Svoboda's much lengthier and more exhaustive accounts of Vimalananda. As regards the disciple's potentially devastating first encounter with nothingness, Devi tells him a story from an earlier portion of her life when she was living as a kind of anchorite:

After leaving my master, I decided to go meditate in a cave, alone. Certain spots in the mountains, many days or even many weeks by foot from any village, have been known to ascetics for thousands of years, and often one becomes only one more occupant of a cave where dozens of sages have lived. Sometimes, one finds Buddhist sutras engraved in the stone, sometimes Sanskrit letters or mantras. The caves are often found in a place in the mountains that resembles a hive, and it happens sometimes that many dozen ascetics are living within the range of each other's voices. There you find Tibetans, Hindus, tantrikas -- sometimes even Chinese and monks of the Small Vehicle with their saffron robes. I've even seen Japanese monks with their straw hats and black gowns. Sometimes one of the hermits goes down to look for food. Sometimes they speak to each other as they draw water from the spring; they laugh and they dance, though the people in the village can't imagine it. Sometimes a hermit dies, and they burn him or bury him or leave him to the vultures.[13] Sometimes a hermit gets sick or is taken by what we call "the immense fear." All hermits know this or will know it one day. It is the ultimate crack in the Self, the doorway of the divine (Odier, 1997: 87-8).

Devi says no more about this "immense fear" that is "the ultimate crack in the self." She leaves us with the image of hermits innocently happy in the pursuit of their separate mystic paths until one day an existential crisis opens up a paralyzing void beneath not only the world but one's very self. The path itself is part of the comforting delusion. We are reminded of the words of the great German mystic, Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327), "Whoever is seeking God by ways is finding ways and losing God" (Colledge & McGinn, 1981: 183).

Devi's hermits very likely include some of the most earnest and devoted spiritual practitioners to be found. Their ability to laugh and dance, their tolerance of one another's separate doctrines and cultural assumptions, and the care they show one another all tell us that these are not rigid fundamentalists. In their great respect for the multiplicity of their separate paths, however, lurks the recognition that no path is "ultimate." The "immense fear" and the fact that they "all know this or will know it one day" means that they are consciously

and deliberately skating on thin ice. Apparently each of them knows -- or will one day learn -- that the holy ladder of the path will eventually crumble and that they have no alternative but to climb it in all sincerity knowing they are in for a fall. They are courting that fall, even as they live in terror of it.

In the chapters of Odier's book that follow upon this story, Devi contrives exercises for her disciple designed to open up that "crack in the self." He has to meditate alone in the forest for three days and nights, then stand naked, meditating on the edge of a cliff for another seventy-two hours; finally he is abandoned in a community of lepers. Each time he constructs for himself comforting mystical illusions much more profound and simple than his reader is apt to be capable of inventing. Each time his ladder collapses.

If the truth of human existence be known, we have no need to seek the cliffs and trees outside a remote Indian village to know this nothingness, this fall into an existential void. It can happen to us at any moment, as William James knew very well:

Whilst in this state of philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects, I went one evening into a dressing-room in the twilight to procure some article that was there; when suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence. Simultaneously there arose in my mind the image of an epileptic patient whom I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them enclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. *That shape am I*, I felt, potentially. Nothing that I possess can defend me against that fate, if the hour for it should strike for me as it struck for him. There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since. It was like a revelation; and though the immediate feelings passed away, the experience has made me sympathetic with the morbid feelings of others ever since. It gradually faded, but for months I was unable to go out into the dark alone.

In general I dreaded to be left alone. I remember wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life (Novak, 1970: 59-60).[14]

Such an existential crisis marks the end of a certain delusional way of life and opens up the possibility of emptiness as a "field of consciousness" that may be called nirvana. But we may still fall short of this mystic goal, as William James did. Although he died more than three decades before the publication of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*,[15] James' solution to his immense fear has much in common with that of the French existentialist. James chooses to "believe in my individual reality and creative power": "Life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating" (*Ibid.*, 61). The American psychologist makes the heroic choice to construct a bridge of moment-to-moment decisions over the emptiness of the void. [16] Buddhism, in contrast, would have us plumb that void to the very bottom. Nishitani says, "The reality that appears from the bottom of the Great Doubt and overturns it is none other than our "original countenance" (Nishitani, 1982: 21). The terror of nothingness, therefore, is the beginning of the wisdom of emptiness. Instead of building a bridge of fog over the abyss

of nothingness through willful choosing, Nishitani invites us to sit in the void and realize that our immense fear is but the shock of recognition that our loss of world and self is a dis-illusionment. We have cherished the old illusions so dearly that "the world of primary fact" scares us. To get beyond that dread is to see all things new, and at the same time as old as the hills.

Things Neither Exist Nor Do Not Exist; They Are Empty

We have looked at three approaches to emptiness and arrived at what seems to be three different places: the world of primary fact, the sublime objectless state of samadhi, and the crisis of nothingness. What holds them together and saves us from despair is that Zen story about mountains, trees, and rivers. The world our story-teller knew before beginning his study of Zen had undoubtedly been seen from the citadel of the self. By the second stage, when he no longer saw mountains, trees, and rivers, he must have done a great deal of work. He fails to tell us whether he was trembling in "immense fear" upon seeing the world dissolve into nothingness or whether he had learned formless samadhi. All we know is that he experienced some sort of "crack in the self" and the world as he had always known it had disappeared. Finally, when he had mastered Zen and again saw mountains, trees, and rivers, we have to think that he had arrived at the world of primary fact and his own original countenance.

This seemingly speculative and impressionistic synthesis is actually well founded in the history of Buddhist doctrine and shows some striking parallels with Western scientific discoveries.

The basic scriptures of Buddhism are traditionally referred to as the "three baskets" (*tripitaka*): (1) the origins of the Buddhist community (sangha) and its rules of discipline, (2) the discourses supposedly spoken by the Buddha himself, and (3) the Abhidharma ("supreme dharma") writings (third century, b.c.e., to third century, c.e.). These last are comprised of philosophical and psychological arguments designed to enable the practitioner to deconstruct the profane world and attain spiritual insight or "wisdom" (*prajna*). It is here that mountains, trees, and rivers are made to disappear.

The goal of the Abhidharma literature is to teach us to analyze all our ways of knowing so as to eliminate the false assumptions that maintain the profane world (Streng, 1967: 31). Its highest aim is to reach a point where, "There is no knowledge as such, no *bodhisattva*,^[17] no path of attainment, or no being who *has* knowledge, or who *is* the *bodhisattva*, or who *proceeds* on the path" (*Ibid.*, 34). All of these things -- knowledge, *bodhisattva*, and path -- are falsely conceived as entities that really exist through the ignorance of the citadel self, which the Abhidharma seeks to undermine through the doctrine of "dependent co-origination" (*pratitya-samutpada*). None of the things we take to be entities possessing a "self" is anything other than a constantly changing agglomeration of dharmas (discrete manifestations of reality). A human being, for instance, is: "a changing conglomeration of material, mental, and psychic factors (*dharmas*) [which] interact to form the experienced world. . . . For the 'arising of existence' [the empirical world] to cease, the fabricating of ignorance must cease; and the quelling of ignorance requires spiritual insight (*prajna*)" (*Ibid.*, 30). In practice, this means that the meditator learns to see her own supposed

"individuality" as comprised of five "heaps" (*skandhas*) of dharmas: the body, the feelings, the perceptions, the emotions, and the acts of consciousness.

Anything a person may grasp at, or lean on, or appropriate, must fall within one of those five groups, which make up the *stuff* of "individuality." The *belief* in individuality is said to arise from the invention of a "self" over and above those five heaps. The belief expresses itself in the assumption that any of this is "mine" or that "I am" any of this, or that any of this "is myself." . . . When the individual, as constituted by the arbitrary lump taken from those five heaps, ceases to exist, the result is Nirvana -- the goal of Buddhism (Conze, 1959: 14).

The Abhidharma notion of "dependent co-origination" claims that everything, oneself included, is actually a fleeting lump that has no independent existence, for the invisible dharmas that comprise it are constantly being exchanged with the rest of the fleeting lumps that make up the empirical world. By eating bread, for example, the arbitrary lump that is my body temporarily incorporates dharmas that formerly belonged to grain and before that were to be found heaped together in soil and manure. All the lumps that comprise the phenomenal world are constantly exchanging dharmas with one another according to the causal law of dependent co-origination. By enlarging our vision from minutes, hours, and years to kalpas (world cycles), we see that everything depends upon everything else and "originates" or is assembled from the disintegration products of everything else. Every lump arises from other lumps and dissipates into still others.

The closest Western analogy of dependent co-origination is the cosmic vision inspired by quantum theory. The atoms of hydrogen, oxygen, iron, and the like, that we take to be the unchangeable building blocks of our empirical world, are in fact temporary conglomerations of subatomic particles. To understand this, we have to see the universe within the vast temporal context in which supernovae are gradually formed in temperatures very close to "absolute zero," where all motion ceases. At such temperatures, the repellent forces between subatomic particles are almost non-existent so that gravity can pull vast numbers of them so closely together that they burst into life as a star. Stars "create" atoms through nuclear fusion reactions that produce heat and light; and when the stars are big enough, they eventually explode as supernovae and distribute the newly formed atoms throughout a wide neighboring region -- where they can be taken up by other stars and settle out in planets. In the broad scheme of things, stars are constantly forming and dying, constituting, distributing, and destroying the entities that comprise the visible universe.[18]

The lowest temperatures of Antarctica are "hot" by the standards of outer space -- nearly four hundred Fahrenheit degrees warmer than the regions in which stars are formed. In these warmer conditions on planet Earth, relatively complicated molecules have formed through the chemical bonding of atoms. But these molecules, too, are "stable" only in the sense that they preserve a relatively constant structure through the continual exchange of components with their environment that we call "equilibrium." When these processes of exchange become sufficiently complicated and diverse that they can replicate themselves (as in the case of DNA), we begin to speak of "life." In its highest forms, life manifests unmistakable signs of mentality. But even the constitution of what we think of as a human individual -- passing in the blink of a cosmic eye through the myriad changes of conception, birth, growth, and death -- is by no means "constant" in its components. We eat, drink, breathe, and eliminate, constantly exchanging molecules with our environment.[19]

The doctrine of dependent co-origination, had it arisen in the twentieth century, would no doubt have seized upon these scientific facts to support its view that what we take to be entities-with-a-self are, in fact, nothing but temporary conglomerates behind which nothing permanent, "no self," can be found. All is change. The entities we naively take for "reality" are constantly arising and disintegrating. Wisdom resides in attending to the flux. Ignorance alone satisfies itself with "real entities."

The centrality of flux, however, is not unique to Abhidharma Buddhism and quantum mechanics. From Heraclitus in ancient Greece to A. N. Whitehead in the twentieth century, the priority of process and change over substance has been a minor theme in the philosophy of the West. In the twelfth century in the Middle East, Ibn al-'Arabi argued for impermanence and the "self-empty" nature of phenomenal entities, saying that God creates the world anew in every instant: "The ultimate reason why the world is Imagination and, like dreams, demands a hermeneutics, is to be sought in the recurrent creation, imperceptible to the senses" (Corbin, 1969: 208). A modern Sufi puts this in experiential terms: "In the constant flow of inhalation and exhalation, *and especially in the almost imperceptible pause between the two*, a vibrating model of the two worlds in which we live presents itself to us" (Sviri, 1997: 179).

The high-point of the Abhidharma school's teachings is the "wisdom" literature known as Prajnaparamita (the "Wisdom that Reaches the Other Shore," a reference to the image of Buddhism as a "raft" to us take across the "river" from samsara to nirvana). This wisdom literature, which includes the well-known *Diamond Sutra* and *Heart Sutra*, takes the doctrine of emptiness a step further. It is not only the lumps that are empty of real existence, but the dharmas that comprise them also are empty. The only thing that exists is the causal process of dependent co-origination.

This more radical standpoint of the Prajnaparamita also finds an analogy in quantum theory: namely in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle which states that we can know either the momentum or the location of an electron but not both. Our experiments determine what we find. The observer interferes with the observed in the act of observing it. This implies that the subject/object dichotomy we take for granted in the common-sense world is not justified by scientific experiment. Subject and object are mutually implicated, and there is something wrong with our common-sense assumption. It opens the possibility that Buddhism may be right. Perhaps neither the subject nor the object has a "self."

Threads In The Cloth

Even more radically, we cannot determine whether the electron is matter (a particle) or energy (an unimaginable flux). In most general terms, the electron of a particular atom is described as a "cloud of probabilities" which only "collapses" into behaving like an entity (matter) when we perform an experiment that requires it to respond as a particle. Otherwise, it is pure energy, pure "vibration" (flux). [20] These facts of scientific experimentation suggest that the universe might be pure energy and that our sensory faculties simply require it to appear as a collection of entities with substance. If so, we are presented with the sort of cosmic vision Muktananda reports from a moment when subject and object were transcended in samadhi. Corresponding to the physicists' vibrating energy-continuum, Muktananda sees

"pure consciousness" (chiti):

The Light pervaded everywhere in the form of the universe. I saw the earth being born and expanding from the Light of Consciousness, just as one can see smoke arising from a fire. I could actually see the world within this conscious Light, and the Light within the world, like threads in a piece of cloth, and the cloth in the threads. Just as a seed becomes a tree, with branches, leaves, flowers, and fruit, so within Her own being Chiti becomes animals, birds, germs, insects, gods, demons, men, and women. I could see this radiance of Consciousness, resplendent and utterly beautiful, silently pulsing as supreme ecstasy within me, outside me, above me, below me. . . . In this condition the phenomenal world vanished and I saw only pure radiance" (Muktananda, 1978: 183).

The analogy between quantum mechanics and dependent co-origination has two parts. The particle-physicists' project to isolate the fundamental building blocks of matter parallels the early Abhidharma's effort to analyze all entities into their component dharmas. The further experimental discovery, however, that the particles themselves represent unique occurrences when an observer (or some other phenomenal "lump") has caused an energy cloud of probabilities to collapse, corresponds to the Prajnaparamita position that the dharmas themselves are empty.

"Wisdom" in both the *Abhidharma* and the *Prajnaparamita* writings meant "looking at things as they are." However, whereas the *Abhidharma* had tried to see the nonsubstantiality of things by seeing the factors that composed them, the *Prajnaparamita* maintained that the factors themselves were empty of independent reality, and that the notions of "path," "*dharma*," or "Buddha" were meaningless if they designated entities with particular and unique characteristics (Streng, 1967: 84).

Buddhist philosophy, therefore, progressed from the original insight that I, the observer, am empty of a self to the view that both I and the object I observe are empty because we are all comprised of invisible dharmas locked in a causal process of dependent co-origination. Then the dharmas were declared to be empty, and there was nothing left but the causal process. The logical next step was taken by the great Buddhist systematizer, Nagarjuna, who declared dependent co-origination itself to be empty. There is no causal link between the "things that appear." Rather dependent co-origination "becomes the form for expressing the phenomenal 'becoming' as the lack of any self-sufficient, independent reality" (Streng, 1967: 63).[21] "Emptiness simply becomes; it is not the end of a 'becoming process'" (*Ibid.*, 65).

Nagarjuna,[22] who lived in the second and third centuries of the common era, founded the Madhyamika school of Buddhism. *Madhyamika* means "middle teaching" and can be summarized in three statements that comprise the paradox of emptiness. *It is not true that things exist*: with this statement, Nagarjuna undermines naive empirical consciousness. *It is not true that things do not exist*: with this he rejects naive nihilism.[23] *What is true is that all things are empty*: this is the "middle" position between empiricism and nihilism. Emptiness is not a symbol or word used to signify the ultimate (Streng, 1967: 142). All names, including "dependent co-origination," and all entities, including the dharmas, are empty. Even a word like nirvana, although useful to indicate complete spiritual release, does not point to anything that can be "grasped" (*Ibid.*, 69). Indeed, Nagarjuna is famous for his declaration that nirvana and samsara are the same. We cannot build a raft to take us across the "river" from the everyday world of samsara and enter the sublime world of nirvana. That river does not exist. Nirvana is precisely the world of samsara, but lived in a different manner (*Ibid.*, 145). "Emptiness" represents a shift in attitude that brings about spiritual

release. "The difference between *nirvana* and *samsara* applies only to the conventional norms for truth, for ultimately both of them are empty (*sunya*)" (*Ibid.*, 75).

When Nagarjuna claims that all things are empty, he does not mean that they do not exist in the world of everyday consciousness or that the true state of reality is some sort of blank. "Rather there is only one state of existence: that things rise and dissipate through dependent co-origination" (*Ibid.*, 146-7). By analogy, it might be argued that when Ibn al-'Arabi claims that God recreates the world in every moment, he means that what we see as a constant field of objects is actually the rapid arising and dissipating of an entire world under the control of a Creator. The Abhidharma eliminated the Creator and left us with invisible dharmas assembling and dissipating according to dependent co-origination. The Prajnaparamita, however, saw things more along the lines of A. N. Whitehead: the "actual entities" which constitute the world are not substances but rather momentary "durations" within a continual but hierarchically arranged process (Whitehead, 1969). Nagarjuna's radical move of calling that cosmic process itself empty takes us beyond the world of quantum mechanics as well as that of Whitehead. However, to push the quantum physics analogy to the very end, we might paraphrase Nagarjuna as follows. *Things neither exist* (as sub-atomic particles) *nor do not exist* (as an energy continuum); *they are empty*, that is, they satisfy all our profane requirements but block our way to spontaneity, freedom, and enlightenment. This means that to experience them as "empty" is to experience them in spontaneity, freedom, and enlightenment. This is what Nishitani calls the "field of emptiness," where we live in the world of primary fact.

Neither Empirical Proof Nor Mythic Belief But Primary Fact

In profane consciousness, when we look out at the world from the citadel of the self, we see mountains, trees, and rivers -- all the beings that make up the Many that constitutes the empirical world. If the question of the One occurs to us at all, we think that perhaps there may be a Creator, undivided in himself, who made this multiplicity; or we may prefer to think that the world itself is one, Gaia, the living organism whose vitality is expressed in mountains, trees, and rivers. If we leave the profane sphere, however, and enter sacred consciousness, the reality of mountains, trees, and rivers is apt to suffer. We may think that these Many are finite and temporal, merely the boards of that passing stage upon which we are to work out our eternal salvation so that our soul may be rewarded in an eternal bliss-filled Indra's Heaven. Alternatively, we may think, along with the Upanishads, that those mountains, trees, and rivers are illusory, the play of Maya, who fascinates us with her dance and keeps us in a state of ignorance (*avidya*). According to this perspective, the only thing that is real is the eternal brahman (or shakti), invisible to profane eyes but apparent to the eyes of mysticism. All these possibilities confirm the words of Nishitani: "We usually take the world as an extended environment that envelopes us and serves as our field of behavior. And from there, as it happens, we go on to think up another, invisible world behind this first one."

Muktananda's vision of chiti, the light-filled goddess of consciousness, however, is a good deal more subtle than any of these possibilities. For him, both the One and the Many are real. Furthermore, they are not opposed to one another but two expressions of the same reality which is simultaneously unitary and multiple: "I could actually see the world within this

conscious Light and the Light within the world, like threads in a piece of cloth and the cloth in the threads." Because there is no cloth without thread and no thread not woven into cloth, the One and the Many are not separate; and neither is more "real" than the other. Such a perspective is essential to Tantrism, where access to the One is based upon that privileged member of the Many which is my own body. Tantrism, therefore, opposes Hindu "non-dualism," which says only the One is real, while the Many are an illusion.

Since Nagarjuna, however, Buddhism has declared the One and the Many to be neither in existence nor not in existence, but empty. Thus, although a Buddhist Tantrika may well be capable of a vision resembling Muktananda's and would perhaps be inclined to identify the "light of consciousness" as an imaginal impression of dependent co-origination, neither the One nor the Many is fixed in "ultimacy." To attribute ultimacy to the cosmic light of chiti would amount to asserting the existence of the invisible world we "think up" as lying behind and lending reality to the extended environment of the Many. It would be just another thing to "grasp" -- albeit a large and numinous thing. It would maintain our illusory security in the citadel of the self, and block our access to the world of primary fact.

Dropping body-and-mind and entering the world of primary fact, does not preclude a unifying vision of oneness. It simply means that in that "middle position" between subject and object that we occupy in the world of primary fact there is no "object" that is privileged as the One. Rather oneness is a quality that constantly comes to presence whenever we live the field of emptiness. Jung perceived this, for example, as he gazed upon the world "for the first time" and became its "creator." The streaming herds, nodding in their timeless suchness, brought an entire world into being -- earth and sky, grass and breeze, the eternal flow of life and death -- and precisely not as something exceptional but in its day-in-and-day-out naturalness as primary fact.

Only absolute emptiness is the true no-ground (*Ungrund*). Here all things -- from a flower or a stone to stellar nebulae and galactic systems, and even life and death themselves -- become present as bottomless realities. They disclose their bottomless suchness. True freedom lies in this no-ground (Nishitani, 1982: 34).

When a thing becomes present as a "bottomless reality," it is no longer an object known, defined, and categorized by a subjective "self." In the "no-self" which comes to presence when the citadel self is abandoned, our human existence interpenetrates with and belongs to the same primal factuality as each thing encountered. And that thing, too, is not cut off from any other thing. Each zebra brings the zebra herd to presence; the zebra herd reveals the valley floor and its waving grasses as well as the sky and the lion lurking in a clump of trees. The whole is present in each individual thing, as the worldhood of the world becomes so evident that Jung struggles to find adequate language for it -- finally coming up with that paradoxical notion that he is its "creator."

Moses And The Burning Bush

Nishitani links this sort of experience to Christian imagery, "The Christian must be able to pick up a single pebble or blade of grass and see the same consuming fire of God and the same pillar of fire, hear the same thunderous roar, and feel the same 'fear and trembling' that Moses experienced" (*Ibid.*, 39). The Christian or Jew will find something peculiar in this passage. For the fact that demolished Moses' citadel self and reduced him to "fear and trembling" was the nature of that fire that took possession of the bush. The bush was on fire, but it was *not* consumed. All "empirical" expectations belonging to the citadel self were overturned. Furthermore, there was nothing "mythic" in that event -- in the sense of some ancient and privileged narrative referring to an ultimate and invisible world lying behind this one. The fire that did not consume brought the bush itself to presence in such a primal fashion that Moses was moved to step out of his sandals. The world itself was manifest in its sacredness as primary fact. Again and again the Bible articulates the epiphany of primary fact in terms of shining and burning, as a brightness that excludes all conceptualization. Primary fact breaks through and burns away our concepts without burning up the facts themselves. It enables them to appear for the first time, as though the world were "creating itself" in its multiplicity and oneness before our eyes. Nishitani says, "[W]hen a thing *is*, the world *worlds*" (*Ibid.*, 159).

Within the sphere of Christian thought, Meister Eckhart seems to have come the closest to articulating a doctrine of emptiness, for he says that we must "turn away from ourselves" ("no-self") and no longer be "content with" Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (those mythic conceptions). Rather, we must penetrate all the way to the "ground of God" which is also the "ground of the soul" (Colledge & McGinn, 1981: 198). That this amounts to an attainment of the world of primary fact, where each thing reveals everything else, is implied in several passages. "Only that heart is pure which has annihilated everything that is created" (*Ibid.*, 56), because to hold onto the Creator and his creation is to remain in the conceptual world of the citadel self. When we give up that limited standpoint, everything reveals everything else: "Whoever knew but one creature would not need to ponder any sermon, for every creature is full of God and is a book" (McGinn, *et. al.*, 1986: 259).

An empty spirit is one that is confused by nothing, attached to nothing, has not attached its best to any fixed way of acting, and has no concern whatever in anything for its own gain, for it is all sunk deep down into God's dearest will and has forsaken its own (*Ibid.*, 248).

Whereas the citadel self always encloses itself in a small sphere separate from everything else, the "no-self" of primal experience is not enclosed but finds its center everywhere -- in every tree, every mountain, every river, every porpoise, and every zebra. Jung alludes to this primal reality when he says of the "self" of his psychology -- as opposed to the ego -- that its center is everywhere and its circumference nowhere (e.g., *CW 6*: ¶791; *CW 11*: ¶229). Nishitani applies the same ancient paradox both to the individual's "no self" and to each thing that appears. In the world of primary fact, nothing is "enclosed"; everything, including ourselves, interpenetrates everything else without bounds or limits. When every being is the center, no circumference can be located.

On the field of *sunyata*, *the center is everywhere*. Each thing in its own selfness shows the mode of being of the center of all things. Each and every thing becomes the center of all beings and, in that sense, becomes an absolute center. This is the absolute uniqueness of things, their reality (Nishitani, 1982: 146).

This interpenetration of everything in everything else is, furthermore, not restricted to spatial relations. It is not merely the valley floor and the sky that are brought to presence by the streaming herds. "Silently eating, giving birth, dying, heads nodding through hundreds of millions of years," they also gather up the vastness of history in a single moment. "On the field of emptiness, all time enters into each moment of passing time from one moment to the next" (Nishitani, 1982: 161).

Nishitani introduces this idea with quotations from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, [24] which illustrate the field of emptiness with the image of a magician who conjures up in a single "fleeting instant" a series of worlds, each of which may seem to last hours, weeks, or hundreds of years. Each time, everything is there: "cities and hamlets, wells, rivers, and seas, sun and moon, clouds and rain, palaces and houses." In that single "now," highly detailed worlds, together with their elapsing time, are simultaneously present.

What this passage says is that in a fleeting instant, in the twinkling of an eye, the temporal span of a whole day or a hundred years appears phantasmally, and this phantasm is the day or the hundred years in actuality. At the same time, since the phantasmal span is revealed here in its suchness, this actual instant does not cease to be this actual instant. . . . [B]ecause in the field of sunyata each time is bottomlessly in time, all times enter into each time (*Ibid.*, 160-61).

With this example Nishitani makes explicit a theme that has been lurking unacknowledged in all the instances of primary fact that we have considered. A *magician* makes worlds appear in which hundreds of years are simultaneously present in a single "now" and every one of those worlds is centered in a single zebra, porpoise, or tree. Who is this magician, if not our own imaginal capacity? When the body-and-mind of our citadel self falls away, we lose the conceptual structure of our subject/object dichotomizing and no longer rely upon our theological presuppositions whereby an invisible world is "thought up" to give traditional meaning to what lies before us. But more than our eyes and ears is involved. If the world of the first day of creation is brought to presence in this "now" as well as the hundreds of millions of years of nodding heads, giving birth, and dying, imagination has spontaneously leapt in to fill the gap. If a bush bursts into flame but is not consumed, the evidence of our sensory eyes is being filled out by something more subtle.

Emptiness And The Ground Of Imagination

What a strange paradox. The Buddhist doctrine that began by emptying out both the profane world and Indra's Heaven in a grand "surpassing," ends by restoring them -- albeit not as distinct worlds that have been "thought up" but rather as inseparable dimensions of primary fact. When the lucidity of what appears burns away all our citadel concepts so as to be manifest in its suchness, an entire world and all of time comes to presence in every pebble and every blade of grass. Furthermore, when we relinquish our grasp upon brahman, shakti, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, the suchness of primary fact gleams with the bottomless ground that inspired the stories of those mythic beings. Meister Eckhart agrees, "The 'now' in which God made the world is as near to this time as the 'now' in which I am presently speaking, and the last day is as near to this 'now' as the day that was yesterday" (Colledge & McGinn, 1981: 256).

The myth of God's making the world and giving it a destiny to be realized on the "last day" enters into every moment and reveals it as "just what it is." While theology and myth "think up" a Supreme Being and tell us a story designed to explain our extended environment, the field of emptiness reveals the ground of that story in every primary fact. If the story of God's jealous rulership has been "thought up" to structure our ethical norms, emptiness shows us every being and every act luminously gathering within itself the bottomless harmony presupposed by those norms. Emptiness turns us away from spinning out stories to account for things and directs our attention to the primary suchness that originally inspired them. In every moment, the "arising" of creation and the "dissolution" of the last day is evident in the depth of what appears.

Modern physics, in its struggle with the paradoxical results of its experiments, has also been struck by the fact that each thing may be the center of everything. Some have proposed that the universe be understood on the model of a hologram; for in a holographic image each part contains the whole. For example, that holographic eagle in flight that adorns every VISA card: if we were able to cut off the very tip of the largest feather on its left wing and had an apparatus for magnifying it, we would be able see the whole bird and the background sector of sky in that tiny speck.[25] The principle of "non-locality" in quantum mechanics implies that every subatomic particle contains the entire universal order. The world is not the sum of its parts. Rather each part sums up the All, but not in the form of a static whole like the image on a credit card. It is not frozen like a snapshot but dynamic, a "holomovement." Since every subatomic particle reflects the whole of the universe, it also contains all of time -- from the Big Bang down through the present moment and on into the future.[26]

As an invisible "folded-up" or "implicate" order lying behind the "explicate" world of profane consciousness, holomovement alludes to the mystery of the world of primary fact, but has none of its immediacy. In this regard, it resembles Indra's Heaven. Only when it can shed its "thought up" quality as the invisible world of ultimacy and come to presence spontaneously when the citadel self has been abandoned, will it appear as primary fact. Emptiness occurs only when pretense and the drive for precision have been abandoned. Free of dogma and concept jealously gathered and refined by the citadel self, the world of primary fact is at once sensory and imaginal but above all spontaneous, arising and dissipating in each unpremeditated moment.

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1. "Pure Lands": Iconographically represented aspects of the awakened state of mind in the stage before nirvana; in folk belief, geographically localized places of bliss (Fischer-Schreiber, *et.al.*, 1989). The story of Nanda, although evidently a folk-tale, evokes the more profound perspective of the Buddhist practitioner.
 2. Govinda's schema is somewhat oversimplified. According to the Mundakya Upanishad, there are four levels of consciousness. The fourth, *turiya*, would more properly be assigned as an equivalent of emptiness. We will discuss this later. For now, Govinda's description will suffice.

3. Jung frequently quotes the alchemical dictum, "*Ars totum requirit hominem*" (The art [of alchemy] demands the whole man [be involved in the work]) (e.g., Jung, *CW 12*: ¶ 6). The seventeenth century alchemist, Gerhard Dorn, warned that the practitioner would never succeed in making the "One" (the Philosophical Stone, the goal of the work) without first becoming "one" himself (Jung, *CW 14*: ¶ 753).
4. Daniel Odier's guru (to be described later on) says, "Without prior experience of awakening, no asceticism, no practice, no meditation bears fruit. Without awakening experience, there is no source, and since all of Tantric *sadhana* consists of returning to the source, one wanders, not knowing where to go. . . . Look into yourself deeply. Think about your childhood, your adolescence. An awakening experience is found there. No being exists on earth who hasn't had this fundamental experience" (Odier, 1997: 51).
5. Berman says "participation," not "mystical participation." I choose the latter phrase not only to be more specific, but also to allude to the writings of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl who describes "primitive mentality" with this phrase. He means that certain objects and events in ordinary life open upon a mythic world of "collective representations" to which the dichotomies of Western thinking do not apply (cf. Lévy-Bruhl, 1966).
6. In a letter to a graduate student in philosophy, Jung writes: "Heidegger's *modus philosophandi* is neurotic through and through and is ultimately rooted in his psychic crankiness. His kindred spirits, close or distant, are sitting in lunatic asylums, some as patients and some as psychiatrists on a philosophical rampage" (Adler, 1973: 331).
7. Although he usually asserted the gurus of India were too philosophically unsophisticated to know that there can be no experience if the experiencer (the ego) is overcome, less than a month before his death he remarked to Chilean journalist Miguel Serrano: "I have just finished reading a book by a Chinese Zen Buddhist. And it seemed to me that we were talking about the same thing, and that the only difference between us was that we gave different words to the same reality" (Serrano, 1968: 100). An analogous point might be mentioned. In his study of mandalas spontaneously painted by his patients, Jung notes that the center is typically left empty -- a striking contrast with the traditional mandalas of the Hindus and Buddhists, which generally place a divinity at the center. Jung believes that this indicates that God is a problem for us Westerners. Perhaps it also suggests that we are closer to an intuition of emptiness than we know. Compare this with the discussion of the crisis of nothingness that appears later in this chapter.
8. Rinzai Gigen: the Japanese name for the Chinese Ch'an (Zen) master, Lin-chi I-hsüan, ninth century, c.e. (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989). Rinzai wrote: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him; if you meet a patriarch, kill him; if you meet a sage, kill him; if you meet your father or mother, kill them; if you meet your relatives, kill them. Only then will you obtain liberation and dwell in complete emancipated freedom, without getting emotionally caught up in things" (quoted in Nishitani, 1982: 262-3).
9. "And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (Mk 2: 1-3).
10. These three steps are collectively referred to as *samyama* ("constraint," Nishitani's "settling" and "centering") (Eliade, 1969: 69-70).
11. There are two forms of *samadhi*: *savikalpa-samadhi* (enstasy supported by the *form* of a meditation object) and *nirvikalpa-samadhi* (formless enstasy). *Vikalpa* can be translated as "form"; *sa* means "with"; *nir* means "without" (Feuerstein, 1990).
12. Note that this is a rather different impression of the discipline than Stephen Beyer's (1973) account, cited in our previous chapter, of the monk's strenuous effort deliberately to compose the mandala before his mind's eye.
13. Presumably the disposition of the body is chosen according to the religious tradition in which the dead hermit lived. Parsees, for example, expose the corpses of the dead on towers to be devoured by vultures. Vultures embody the spiritualizing potential of death for Zoroastrians, ancient Egyptians, and a large number of American Indian cultures.

14. Quoting *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 6. This story also appears in James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where it is attributed to a "Frenchman." However, in a letter to the French translator of *Varieties*, James admits that it is his own experience.
15. James died in 1910. Sartre's *L'être et le néant* was published in 1943.
16. This, at any rate, has been the standard interpretation of James' experience. In fact the dating of these passages is unclear, and it may well be that James' experience of nothingness followed upon the failure of his proto-existentialist heroics, Cf. Louis Menand, "William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient." *New York Review of Books XLV*(20) (December 17, 1998): 81-93.
17. *Bodhisattva*: one who has renounced taking the final step into enlightenment until all sentient beings have been saved; the ideal to be attained in the Mahayana, "Great Vehicle" Buddhism, to which the Abhidharma and Madhyamika schools belong.
18. I cannot recommend a more comprehensive or lucid description than Lee Smolin's *The Life of the Cosmos* (1997).
19. A very readable and full presentation of these processes may be found in Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life* (1996).
20. This view is presented in nearly every book on the "new physics." A very accessible one is Fred Alan Wolf, *Taking the Quantum Leap* (1989).
21. This philosophical development strangely parallels (albeit in a more radical manner) the development in English philosophy from Locke through Berkeley to Hume. After Locke had said all we can know is the mind, the series of thoughts that flow through it, and the causal connections between them, Berkeley eliminated the mind and Hume the causal connections, leaving us only with a flow of ideas connected by temporal contiguity.
22. The legend of Nagarjuna's origins is suggested by his name: one who was born under a certain tree (*arjuna*) and taught by serpents (*naga*). *Arjuna*, meaning "white," is also the name of the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which consists in the teachings given to him by his guru and charioteer, Krishna (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989). Another Nagarjuna is a legendary figure in Indian alchemy (D. G. White, 1996). These two Nagarjunas are often confused and presented as a single sage.
23. As well as dualistic Vedanta whereby the empirical world is merely an illusion.
24. *Avatamsaka Sutra*: literally, the *Sutra of the Garland of Buddhas*, which teaches that buddha, mind, and all sentient beings are one and the same." The oldest extant text is a Chinese translation dating from the fifth century, c.e. (Fischer-Schreiber, *et. al.*, 1989).
25. Unfortunately, the smaller the fragment of the original hologram, the less defined the image it bears.
26. The main advocate of this view is David Bohm in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1983). A very readable popularization may be found in Talbot (1992).