this book is a poetic reading of the dialogical philosophy of martin buber. my reading of martin buber takes me to this principal insight: god is not in heaven nor on earth. god is not above nor below. not within and not without. not in the soul or in the flesh. god is not an entity anywhere: god is the between of an i and a thou. these pages are not an academic study in the strict sense. my meditations in this book are not a literal description of buber's philosophy, for buber would never have approved of taking his words in any way other than in dialogue, buber wrote in-dialogue with the reader, and i read buber in the poetic philosophy of his words. in other words: we can say that the essential thinking in martin buber's philosophy is that the presence of god in us is always enacted as the presence of god between us. god, like love, like poetry, is a deed we do, the god-deed is actualized not in rituals or temples, but in the practices of the sacraments of the neighbor. for there is nothing we can predicate of god, but we can still meet god in the embrace of the neighbor, we meet god as we meet with one another in genuine relationship. god is not in the relationship, god is the relationship. god is no-thing, but there is nothing that isn't god in the between of an i and a thou.
will and grace
This book series is dedicated to the radical love and actions of Paulo Freire, Jesus “Pato” Gomez, and Joe L. Kincheloe.
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.
If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
will and grace

meditations on the dialogical philosophy of martin buber

hune margulies
in gratitude

to yankl the son of meir and hannah margulies.
to livshe the daughter of eugenia and benjamin zaltsman.
    my parents. my teachers. my refuge.
    may their memory be a blessing.

to amos, hadas and isaiah. my children.
    amazing ways to love and to celebrate life.

to meir margalit (margulies). my brother. my teacher. my role model.
    even though he refuses roles. for he just is.

to shirley steinberg, who made the publishing of this book possible
    through tireless friendship and wise effort.

to my publisher, the people of “sense publishers”, with gratitude
    for undertaking this project to bring my martin buber insights to the
    reading community.

a hasidic teaching asks that if we find a person that has fallen inside
a ditch, we should not lower down a ladder for him to climb up.
we should go down ourselves and climb up together with him.
to sharanrani hemady, my best friend, who by will and grace practices
this heart of love and compassion for me.
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PREFACE

on will and grace

Martin Buber spoke of the human condition as characterized by a dialogue between will and grace.

The poet philosopher Baruch Spinoza said that if we could ask an arrow flying toward a target, it would probably reply that it is his will to move from point A to point B. In other words: the flying arrow is not aware of the causes for which his actions are an effect. Therefore Spinoza argued that there is no free will, as our deeds and our emotions are determined by causes and effects. But once we understand the laws of the ultimate cause, God-nature, this understanding will give us peace and freedom from suffering.

Arthur Schopenhauer argued for a modified version of Spinoza’s determinism. He said that we are free to choose what we will, but we are not free to will what we will. That is to say: few things in life we can freely choose. We do not choose our births and our deaths, our bodies with all their needs and limitations, the effects of time, the ecological context. All has been predetermined, but we still must make choices within the framework of those limits and constraints.

The poet-therapist Viktor Frankl said that between input and reaction, there is a small window that remains open, and from this almost imperceptible space, we are still able to make a free choice. And it is that choice we make that confirms our human essence.

This is the dialogical essence of the issue of will: whether we are free or predetermined, nothing can prevent us from saying thou to the freedom, or to the predetermination. It is our thou-response to our lives on earth, as-is, that we must seek to practice. We say thou to life and thou to death. We say thou to our bodies with all their needs and limitations, and we say thou to the effects of time and to the ecological context.

Therefore grace is nothing other than our will to say thou, and our freedom to say it again. Grace is not a state of being that descends from heavens, grace is a deed we do. The deeds of grace are our abundant and incessant will to say thou to the neighbor and to all beings.
we endure for ever and we vanish in a second, and we are sacred beings not despite, but because of this. we endure for just one second and we vanish for ever, but we are children of eternity in the between of the i and the thou.

nothing in life is more fragile than our will to say thou. nothing in our lives is grace other than our deeds of thou. we will to stand in the hollowed spaces of the between of i and thou, and at that sacred moment we are holding the embrace of this amazing grace.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

will and grace: meditations on the philosophy of martin buber
in search of lost betweens

this book is a poetic reading of the dialogical philosophy of martin buber.

in this book i seek to apply buberian principles to an analysis of various issues in our personal and social lives. my attempt is to translate buber’s insights in terms of human deeds. the results of these meditations are the witnesses to my lifelong work. but these pages are not an academic study in the strict sense. these are thoughts and notes of my dialogue with the text of the writings of martin buber. my meditations in this book are not a literal description of buber’s philosophy, for buber would never have approved of taking his words in any way other than in dialogue. buber wrote in-dialogue with the reader, and i read buber in the poetic philosophy of his words. it is in this sense that these pages are faithful buberian essays.

my reading of martin buber takes me to this principal insight: god is not in heaven nor on earth. god is not above nor below. not within and not without. not in the soul or in the flesh. god is not an entity anywhere: god is the between of an i and a thou.

it is essential to note that buber was not a religious person in the conventional sense of the term “religious.” much as in zen, buber saw scriptures and rituals not as paths to a revelation of the divine, but essentially as hindrances to the possibility of a personal i-thou relationship with the “eternal thou.” and this is also essential to understand: for buber, experiencing the presence of god should also not be understood in the conventional sense of the term “experience.” experience, in this case, is not only an inner perception or a phenomenon of the within, for the experience of god is actualized in the in-between of the relationship between person to person and between persons and all beings. our experience of god is the deed of thou.

in other words: we can say that the essential thinking in martin buber’s philosophy is that the presence of god in us is always enacted as the presence of god between us. god, like love, is a deed we do. the god-deed is actualized not in rituals or temples, but in the practice of the sacraments of the neighbor. for there is nothing we can predicate of god, certainly not existence, which itself is not a predicate. but we can
still meet god in the embrace of the neighbor. god is no-thing, but there is nothing that isn’t god in the between of an i and a thou.

god and nature are one and the same. when i sit under the mango tree, i’m sitting with god. where else should i sit? no ritual or puja is necessary to make the invisible visible. and i do know this: if a neighbor is in need, there too is where god is. for if i forget the mango tree, and if i forget the neighbor in need, where will i find the presence of her who is the mango tree and the neighbor in need? god is everywhere in the between.

i refer to these meditations as a dialogical-ecology because from buber’s perspectives the i-thou relationship applies to all realms of existence: the personal, the social and the natural. if any one realm of existence is ignored none can be fulfilled. therefore i-thou dialogue is an ecological project. or in other words: philosophy we can learn, but poetry we must be.

consider this: when i was born i did not need lenses to read the beautiful poems. but as i grew up, they became necessary. i understand that sometimes those lenses took the form of beliefs, or ideologies, or religions, or just cultural commonplaces. but now, i want to read the beautiful poems without the mediation of filters. but this non-mediating method is also a belief, and it is also an ideology and a cultural commonplace. i understand that. and yet, i’ve learned from the poets that this is true: the touch of your woman teaches you everything you need to know. and in reality there is nothing you really need to know. but we still ought to touch, and even more so, we should learn how to receive the touch. it is that simple. it is that complex.

we will never learn life unless we breathe and we touch. for love, like god, like poetry, is a deed we do. and god is a neighbor we embrace. to embrace is to say thou to all that exists. to say thou is to do the deeds of love and compassion. as the poet buber said: all real life is meeting.

we make a distinction between dialogue and interactions. we call dialogue those relationships that are based on i-thou, and we call interaction any other transaction that is based on i-it. only a dialogue is a relationship.

but it is essential to comprehend this: i-thou dialogue is both a personal and a social practice. it is about our personal ways of relationship with our own selves, with our neighbors and with the world, and it is about society’s ways of relationship with one another and with nature. dialogue has both an individual and a social dimension.

we do not begin within ourselves, nor do we begin outside of us: we begin in the between of you and me. compassion and love, like god, like poetry, are deeds we do, and those are the deeds of the between of i and thou. therefore we cannot be taught to
feel compassion for it is compassion that will teach us. we cannot be taught to love, we must let love teach us.

dialogue has a social dimension because when we interact with the neighbor as i-it, we must develop a social system that both enables and sustains i-it interactions. conversely, when we relate to the neighbor as i-thou, we must develop a social system that both enables and sustains i-thou relationships. therefore, our personal healing depends on the healing of society, and the healing of society depends on our personal healing. to attain the liberation of the self we must attain the liberation of society. and to attain the liberation of society we must attain the liberation of the self. often times we focus on the self as an entity unto it-self. we believe that the self can stand alone and apart from society. but self and society are in a dialogue that is primordial, and as such, they cannot be separated one from the other.

we must understand that the liberation of the self is an existential project of the liberated between. the liberated between is a way of relationship in society. healing cannot happen neither within nor without, but only in the between of i and thou.

consider the case of moses, as it clearly illustrates the concept of a dialogical ecology: moses knew that the slaves cannot attain personal inner liberation except within the context of a free community enjoying social, economic and political freedom. therefore rather than teach torah to his slave people, he spent his time fighting their oppressor. but note that the word “egypt” in biblical hebrew, is “mytzyrayim” which means “narrowness or constriction.” but moses’ fight against the oppressor is itself the teaching of the torah. for freedom is not of the within, nor it is of the without: freedom is of the between of i and thou. and it is for this reason that moses took the people out of the physical land of constrictions and into a physical land of promise. for moses, social freedom precedes inner freedom, and for freedom to ring across the land moses needed a land of promise in which to enact the liberation of the people.

there is no liberation that is not enacted as a community of man. there are no promised lands, there are only lands of promise. in that land of promise, the people will create a society of justice and peace, thereby becoming free to be liberated. moses did not bring the revelation to the people while still slaves in the land of constrictions, for he knew that revelation is not of the within, nor it is of the without, the revelation is of the between.

in other words: to receive a torah a people must be free, for freedom precedes any possible torah. there is much liberation in a torah, but none can be lived if the people are not free. and that which is not alive is dead.

the generation of freed slaves spent forty years in the desert and never entered the land of promise. and neither did moses, the messiah of the slaves. moses did not
CHAPTER 1

think the people were yet truly free to be liberated. consider this: the generation of freed-slaves was the one that had witnessed the most important event since the creation of the day of sabbath, that is, moses bringing to them the torah in his own hands down from the heights of mount sinai. and yet, moses knew that the people were still lacking. the people saw and heard miracles and signs and did not believe, for they did not know how to see and hear their neighbors. and that is the true dukkha of all existence.

for we must know what moses knew: a torah will never be within if it’s not in-between. true torah, like love, like god, is a deed we do. it must be enacted as ways of relationships in the community. moses knew that a people that receives the torah but does not make it a deed of in-between will never enter a land of promise. and they didn’t. and they are us: for to this day, we are still waiting in the vast wilderness.

since the days of moses we were given the poetries of thinkers like martin buber, ravindranath tagore, fernando pessoa, rumi, and many other poets of whom i write in this book. and yet, we are still not truly free to hear the words. i met their words as a child in the between of pages that smelled the magical fragrances of softcover books. now i went to meet them again. and i ask that you do too.

your life does not depend on reading true words, but true words depend on you reading them. truth always depends on the sacred deeds of meeting.

god is everywhere in the between. it is all will and grace. for god exists in the will to say thou to a being and in the grace of saying it again. we must awake to the truth that sacredness is nothing other than the will to love, and the grace to let love be our sacrament.
CHAPTER 2

GOD IS THE BETWEEN OF I AND THOU

notes and thoughts on the principles of dialogical ecology

this we know: god is not in heaven nor on earth. god is not above nor below. not within and not without. not in the soul or in the flesh. god is not an entity anywhere: god is the between of an i and a thou.

i consider dialogical ecology: dialogical ecology is the place of encounter between many existential poetries: the dialogical philosophy of martin buber, some aspects of the bodhisattva practices of zen buddhism, the practices of dhammic and religious socialism in the east and in the west, the teachings and struggles of liberation theology and its exhortations for a sacrament of the neighbor, as well as other manifestations of the fundamental buberian understanding that at the beginning it was the encounter, and all real life is meeting.

i speak of existential poetries, not of theologies, and not even of scholastic or psychological digressions into the subject of relationships. for this is my understanding of religion: religion is a misdirected poetic insight. the religious beliefs we commit to are our innermost poetic aspirations uprooted away from their original i-thou moments of inception. we redirect the verdant roots of the experiences of the poetic and replant them within the less fruitful fields of theological systems of belief.

i speak of ecology to underscore the fact that i-thou dialogue is not only a manner of interpersonal relationships, not with god or any other person. i-thou dialogue between people and with nature cannot be genuinely enacted unless the existing social system ceases the economic practices of assigning a commodity value to human life and to all beings. in that sense, i-thou dialogue is an ecological project that encompasses both the personal and the social realms of life.

we make a distinction between the ego and the self. ego is the i in the i-it interaction. self is the i in i-the thou relationships. we renounce the ego in order to free the self.

in these pages i dialogue with thinkers like martin buber, babasaheeb ambedkar, mahatma gandhi, ravindranath tagore, fernando pessoa, j.l. borges, thomas merton, rumi, antonio machado and others. at the core of these thinkers philosophies there is an understanding that the spiritual realm of life must be enacted in the ways of relationship within the community and with the environment. for the realm of the
spiritual is not separate and apart from the realm of the physical: both are one and the same.

this emphasis on the life of relationship in community has lead some of these thinkers to advocate social systems that encourage and sustain a life of dialogue. buber spoke of religious socialism and ambedkar spoke of dhammic socialism. we will observe the many points of encounter between these different forms of dialogical religious existentialism. we must aim to interpret and set free the poetic essence that lays dormant within the walls of our theological religions. for poetry offers existential insights that we must discover anew. our task is to recapture this poetry.

in other words: to find eternity in a fleeting moment it’s easy. but finding a fleeting moment in all of eternity, that’s what truly matters. to see a god in a little fig it’s not difficult. but seeing a little fig in a god: now, that’s the human predicament.

i speak of a god. but my definition of god is different. i do not believe in a god that exists in the same sense and meaning of the concept of existence as it applies to the beings and objects of the universe. existence, as we are able to understand it, requires a material component. being this the case, the god abraham, jacob and isaac spoke of cannot possess any of the anthropomorphic attributes predicated of it. that is to say: god is not a body nor a spirit, and he is not omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. nor, of course, is god any of its opposites.

it follows from this that god does not possess a personhood, and therefore it does not act toward the world in a personalized way. we relate to god in a personal way, but we cannot make the same claim in regards to god. therefore, in contrast to theistic theology, we ought not view god as a participant in history or in the cosmos.

founded on the same abrahamic theological premises, maimonides argued that every biblical reference depicting god as having a body or any other human characteristic ought to be understood only as a metaphor or an allegory. if that is the case, the references to a god that is a creator, a redeemer and a providential provider, are only metaphors or allegories. metaphors or allegories to what? to our innermost poetic insights and feelings.

many of the thinkers and poets i dialogue with in this book write the word “god” in their texts. therefore i too use the word god. but my god is not of a spirit transcendent. god is the embrace of the neighbor. i will however argue that when thinkers or poets speak of the experience of the divine, they are speaking of their profound dialogical encounter with the realm of the poetic.

what is it that the concept of god is an allegory of, or a metaphor for? like all poetry, the concept of god is an allegory or a metaphor for our existential experience of the
realm of the poetic. in other words: we have chosen to call god this exuberant feeling of the beauty embedded in the saying of thou to one another and to nature. therefore, the theistic concept of god is the psychological construction of an anthropomorphic reference to that which we experience as an overwhelming emotional content.

but this experience of the realm of the poetic refers not only to deep emotional contents of the mind. the experience of the poetic is not a mystical phenomenon, it is the ordinary and simple deed of saying thou to a neighbor and to a being. the essence of the poetic, primarily and essentially, refers to its enactment as a deed between i and thou.

for god is not a belief we hold, god is a deed we do. this poetic realm i speak of is the deed of embrace of the neighbor and all beings, and in this context, when we speak of our love of god we must remember that the sacraments of the divine are nothing other than the sacraments of the neighbor.

but let us be clear on this, for this is the entire principle behind dialogical philosophy: we are not saying that performing divine sacraments will bring providence to our neighbors: we are saying that engaging in dialogue with the neighbor is, in itself, the divine sacrament. when we say that the sacrament of the divine is one and the same as the sacrament of the neighbor, we do not mean to say that performing one fulfills the requirements of the other. what we are saying is that the performance of the sacraments of the neighbor fulfill the requirements of any possible sacraments of the divine.

that the most fateful events of life are revealed through simple and ordinary events is one of zen’s most important insights. zen says: before enlightenment we carry water and chop wood. after enlightenment we carry water and chop wood. before enlightenment we thought that rivers and mountains were just rivers and mountains. during training we began to see that rivers were not just rivers and mountains are not just mountains. after enlightenment we realize that rivers are just rivers and mountains are just mountains. pessoa the poet said that the only mystery is why do we believe that there is something mysterious about life. a hasidic story tales of that student who used to rush in the morning to watch his master tie his shoelaces. in other words: the recognition of the “suchness” of every thing that exists, as-is, in its outward form and inner content, is the entirety of the state of enlightenment.

tagore gathers fruit, dogen cooks rice, pessoa drinks wine and buber pets a horse. where else will we find liberation? in other words, as dogen might say, these poets are enlightened because they are present in intimacy with the ten thousand things.

by creating the concept of god as separate from the experience of the poetic, and by identifying this experience as a unique inner event that can only be ascribed to the
realm of the transcendent, we essentialize the divine, and that is the fundamental error of all spiritual life. we experience our lives and the world as whole-beings, not as minds alone or as bodies alone. we exist as human beings through our modes of relationship, and when we experience i-thou, that is the living god of all existence.

buber said this in a slightly different manner, one i deem not fully satisfactory. buber said that in every genuine meeting between two people, god is like the electricity that surges between them. electricity seems to suggest an element that exists outside of the relationship itself, only generated through it. but if we consider that electricity already existed within the two elements, only to be awaken through the relationship, then we can argue that god is not distinct and apart from the relationship itself.

if god exists as an entity unto itself, we do not know, nor can we possible know the essence of divinity. but we do know of the ways we can meet her presence, and in that sense there is no god outside of our dialogue with a being. we meet god in our dialogical relationships with one another and with nature, for god is the meeting itself.

and this is of the essence of dialogue, for if god is the relationship, the kind of community we create amongst us will either be the manifestation of the presence of god or it will be its eclipse. in other words: the messianic age is now and here, at each moment, and in every place. for messianism is not a stage of history in the future, or one we have lost in the past. every deed of embrace of the neighbor is the unfolding of the days of the messiah.

that is to say: each one of us is the one and true messiah, and each one of us is the rebellious and beloved prophet.

the poet ravindranath tagore, in contrast to some strains in theology and mysticism, argued that we should not seek to empty our human-self in order to fill our emptiness with the presence of god. tagore tells us that man must manifest his humanity if god is to manifest his divinity. for the poet the reverse is true: god needs to empty itself so the human could fill the divine and manifest himself. buber likewise said that to bring the presence of god into our lives we must not abandon, but affirm our whole-being humanness with all that it entails and contains. it is perhaps for this reason that heschel the poet said that god is in search of man: god, like man, is in search of lost betweens.

tagore and buber are arguing for the dialogical view that only a fully manifested human can be in a true relationship with the divine. but we become fully human in the between of the i and thou, and a relationship with the divine is nothing other than our embrace with a being of life. that is the difference between a poet and a prophet. a poet speaks with the beings of the world. a prophet speaks to the beings of the
world. a poet who believes in his words speaks never to himself but to the thou he encounters. a prophet who believes in his mission speaks only to himself, even as he addresses the world.

everything that lives was born of a relationship. broken homes are relationships too. and so are broken hearts. death is the precise moment when all relationships cease. but we ask: if the fundamental fact of life is the meeting between i and you, why so many failed relationships? we have devoted our mental energies to conquering the world, and some of us to conquering the mind, but we must redirect our searches and learn the hardest of all tasks known to humankind: how to meet a being in genuine relationship. we search within and we search without, and some of us believe that there is a search beyond the within and the without. but the entirety of the human story is our search for lost betweens.

it is a fundamental truth that we must be present in the here and now, for there is no other time or place. and only presence liberates. but we cannot ask the oppressed and the suffering to be here and now. and most of us are not aware that we are living in bondage in the lands of constriction. for not every here is here, and not every now is new. we must attain the true-here and we must attain the true-now. it is a clear principle: to enact the liberation of the self in the concrete and practical manners of our daily lives, we must transform the self together with the social system. in particular we must transform the structures of labor.

in this book i write of poets and thinkers that have seen. and that have also heard. i believe that the dialogical insight is present in their words because it was enacted in their lives. for we judge religions not by their textual teachings, but by the manner in which they have been enacted in the relationships of our lives. the poets and thinkers i dialogue with have actualized the between of i and thou in the realm of relationships between humans and with nature. but of course: none of them are saints to worship or heroes to idolize. that would render them as “its” in our spiritual paths. that would be the buddha we must kill.

we have often made the error of engaging in “spiritual bureaucracy.” that is: we assign different spiritual roles to our companions on the path, and we give titles to these roles. spiritual bureaucracy is not the same as institutional bureaucracy, but it stands as its cause and gives it its sustenance. we all need to be poets and thinkers and doers and sitters and rescuers and believers and doubters and peacemakers. we are fools in the cause of love and clumsy in relationships, and it is for that reason precisely that we are the saviors of one another. existence is one because it is diverse, therefore we must not limit ourselves, nor should we seek the opposite. we should refuse labeling our paths. we should refuse being defined by outside roles and rules. and more importantly, we should refuse to define our companions on the path by formal roles and outside rules.
we can say that the presence of god on earth depends on man being present with each other and with the beings of earth. buber insisted that his philosophy of dialogue cannot be reduced to the realm of the interpersonal. as viktor frankl pointed out, a monologue of two is not a dialogue. buber understood dialogue as a way of living with one another and in society, therefore this dialogue depends entirely on the social system within which we live.

in other words: dialogue transcends the meeting of two, for the meeting of two can only be the beginning. dialogical philosophy calls for the creation of communities of dialogue where interactions of i-it will be replaced by relationships of i-thou. from a buberian perspective, the reconstruction of society as a whole is the foundation for the dialogical transformation of our modes of relationships with one another. we will replace i-it with i-thou only in the context of a dialogical society.

we know this to be true from our own human experience: we misdirect happiness into possessing things, believing there is no distinction between having and being. we misdirect love for one another into loyalties to the false idols of wealth, flags and race. but i hold that what stands at the foundation of the religions that inspire us, and what hides behind the happiness we seek, are poetic insights seeking expression and understanding. religion does offer a way of explanation for the wonder of life, even if this explanation is itself unexplainable. but poetry explains nothing and for that reason we can learn everything from her.

the paradigm within-without is a false dichotomy. we are whole-beings, and there is no going toward the within nor toward the without: there is only the going toward the between. to seek and train the within is as erroneous as seeking and training the without. we experience the world in the mind and in our bodies, as existence precedes essence and dialogue precedes both.

there is no-mind separate and apart from the world, for there is no life separate and apart from the world. the experiences in the mind are created in our relationships with the world that is inside and outside of our minds. that is to say, the contents on the mind depend on our relational enactments toward that which stands next to us. in existential terms this calls us to choose whether we will say thou or it to the world. and it is that choice alone that will determine whether our experiences in the-within will be peace and gladness or strife and sadness.

we are not spirits without a body, nor are we in any way detached and isolated from the natural world and from one another. as zen argues, we live in a world of interbeing in which everything that exists comes to existence through a process of dependent co-arising. that is to say: all that lives depends for its birth and sustenance on everything else that lives. everything in the world is within everything else, and
therefore the goodness we bring to any being is the goodness we bring to ourselves and to all beings.

we are whole-beings in an ecological realm of being. no being in the world limits my space, it only expands it to an unknown infinite. the freedom of my neighbor in no way limits mine, it only makes it real.

we saw that from a dialogical perspective, we make a distinction between the self and the ego. ego is what emerges from the interactions of i-it. self is what emerges in the relationships of i-thou. there is no i without a thou. the i apart from the thou is not the i, it is the ego. and only the ego can say IT. egos interact with each other, but can never dialogue with one another. but the moment we say thou to a being, it is our true self that emerges to life. true-selves enter into relationships with one another. we can interpret the buddhist concept of no-self as referring to the ego. thus no-ego is the self. we can only say thou with our whole-being, and the whole being is a manifestation of the true-self.

buber wrote: “what has to be given up is not the i, as most mystics suppose: this i is indispensable for any relationship, including the highest, which always presupposes an i and you… what has to be given up is not the i, but that drive for self-affirmation which impels man to flee from the unreliable, unsolid, unlasting, unpredictable, dangerous world of relation into the having of things.” this is a fundamental understanding of dialogical philosophy: the i of i-it is the ego. the i of i-thou relationship is the true self. through the i-it i become an IT, but through the i-thou i realize the nature of my humanness. therefore, using dogen’s words, the self that needs to be dropped is the false self that emerges through our i-it interaction with the myriad things. once this false self is dropped, as dogen says, we become enlightened by our genuine i-thou relationships with these same myriad things.

psychotherapy, as practiced by the official profession, is inherently non-dialogical. the setting of healer and healed, however it might be coached in egalitarian terms, cannot be conducive to true healing. it can only bring a measure of emotional skill geared to adaptation and conformity. in dialogue there is no healer and healed, there is only a dialogue in which both parties participate. our minds can tell us to feel equanimity with the outside world without regard to our physical or material conditions, but this is essential to understand: this kind of healing, detached from the existential world of relationships, is not a manifestation of our true-selves, it is but a delusion of the ego.

consider what hermit siddhartha learned under the bodhi tree when confronted with a determined maya just before his moment of awakening. or moses of the desert understood when he demanded pharaoh to let his people go. they recognized their
confrontation with false idols, powerful enough to engender feelings of trust and complacency. The peace and gladness we experience in the mind is in the within, but it is not only from the within: the true peace of the mind is always from the between of i and thou.

The Buddha told us that happiness is within us if we follow some precepts in our relationships with all beings. The i-it system of capitalism tells us that happiness is outside of us, generally in some commodity we can purchase. Capitalism fabricates both the artificial needs and the artificial means by which to satisfy them, and this is a never-ending process. The Buddha identified this i-it approach to life as the perennial wheel of dukkha.

Moses agreed with the Buddha, but he argued for a different solution to attain the end of suffering: for Moses happiness requires leaving a land of bondage and creating a new community in a land of promise. Moses did not ask the people to find liberation in the here and now, for the people’s here was a place of bondage and the peoples’ now was a time of injustice. Moses argued that to be happy we must live in a free society, and for that purpose, we must construct a community sustained by compassion and social justice. In other words, there can be no happiness, not within and not without, in a society sustained by the interactions of i-it. Capitalism is a mode of the interaction of i-it, and it ought to be replaced with new modes of relationships based on i-thou. As Erich Fromm said, the dichotomy is either to have or to be.

And this is the essence of the concept of the Sabbath, the most genial of all creation of the biblical mind. The Sabbath is the one day of the week when all commodity related activities are strictly prohibited, even the thought of labor must be avoided. The understanding is that the pursuit of holiness cannot be compromised with the deliberate and willful pursuit of materialism.

Both Moses and Siddhartha felt they had to leave their homes if they wished to find liberation. But this is the essential dichotomy: Moses’ desert was different from Siddhartha’s forest, for Moses did not leave alone and did not leave his child behind. Moses left with all the people, with all the families, and with all the animals. Moses knew this well: as long as one person is not free, no one is. As long as one person is not happy, we are all trapped within the bondages of dukkha. If one person remains behind in Egypt, we will never reach the land of promise. And Siddhartha, as the Buddha, came to understand this too. For he left his tree behind and went to the marketplace to meet the people. And this is the concept of prophet and the concept of bodhisattva.

The common understanding is that when we speak of Zen-Buddhism, we must first speak of Buddhism, as Zen is a modifier to the system of Buddhism. But I argue the
contrary. I believe that the system of Buddhism is a modifier to Zen primordiality. The experience of Zen is a primordial relationship between us and life, and therefore it precedes any religious constructs built around it, and in this case, the religion of Buddhism. The human experience of the practice of Zen is the essential moment of inception, only modified in its search for enactment and understanding by the creeds of institutional Buddhism.

A primordial substance refers to the original matter that exists prior to and independent of any subsequent additions and modifications. In other words: primordiality in the realm of the spirit is the original moment of inception of personal and social experiences. Buber speaks of I-Thou dialogue as the primordial moment of inception of all genuine spiritual revelations.

From a dialogical perspective, experiences are not only of the mind. An experience is a whole-being response to an encounter that entails both feelings and deeds. A primordial experience occurs in the unmediated encounter with the suchness of the here and now. “Suchness” is a concept in Zen that indicates the true nature of reality as-is, prior to any rational and emotional descriptive interpretations of it. In Zen the emphasis is in the dropping of all manners of conceptualizations of the experience, as concepts mediate between the mind and the primordial reality. The primordiality of the moment and place emerges as the natural response to an original encounter. This immediacy ought to be understood as the experience of the poetic. The primordial remains naturally untouched by the interferences of both reason or intuition. In Zen terms, this is the direct pointing from the phenomenon to the mind, and that is what Zen entrusts as the primary characteristic of its practices.

Consider this usage of the concept of primordiality: the Hebrew prayer of “Adon Olam” (Master of the Universe) states it clearly: God was king before the universe existed and will remain king after the world ends. In other words: Kingship is primordial to the essence of God, not contingent on external conditions.

The principal idea in Zen’s understanding of the spiritual life is that liberation can be attained without recourse to scriptural theologies or religious rituals. For Zen liberation is in everything we do now, and in everything we meet here. But we must understand that not every now is a now, and not every here is a here. We must attain the now and the here, and that attainment is all the liberation Zen speaks of. How do we attain the now and the here? Through a life of I-Thou dialogue with the ten thousand things.

Zen argues that there is no realm of existence or of the mind we need to attain that is separate and apart from the realm of the immediate. There is nothing above and there is nothing below. There is nothing hidden and there are no secrets to be revealed.
in other words, from a zen perspective, liberation occurs when we understand that we are already liberated. but the tragedy of life is that we have forfeited this liberation in exchange for a life of i-it. therefore, the awakening of our liberation depends on us choosing to stand in i-thou relationship with all beings. buddhism speaks of mindfulness. mindfulness is being present here and now, and presentness is being in i-thou dialogue with our neighbors and with our earth. how do we practice mindfulness? through a life of i-thou dialogue with the ten thousand things.

i’m sailing on the mandovi river ferry. in zen they say that we must discard the ferry once we reach the shore. after all we can’t walk on the promised land while carrying such a heavy burden. in other words: all religious practices become unnecessary once the goal behind their practices has been attained. for zen, this distinction between skillful means and end-goals is very important, but also very paradoxical. zen says: nirvana is samsara, and samsara is nirvana. that is to say: dualism is a delusion as the means and the goals are one and the same. but for some of us there is no firmer ground than the waters over which we sail. after all, we can’t carry the shore on the ferry, it will sink. for in the realm of the spirit, no one can lead anyone anywhere. but to be more precise: if they can lead, they will lead us astray. zen understands this well. they say: if you meet the buddha on the road, kill him. indeed. but as for me, i refuse to kill: i have learned instead to smile and cross the street.

thistic religions teach their own version of non-dual spirituality, as for them no distinction exists between the rituals they perform and the goals these rituals are intended to attain. the rituals are sacraments, and as such, at no point can the believer discard them. the goal to find god is found in the sacrament itself. this is the meaning of halacha in orthodox judaism: one cannot discard the mitzvoth for only in their performance will god be present.

from a dialogical perspective, often times we cannot attain liberation for we are too distracted seeking it. the most intractable distractions to liberation are of two kinds: the spiritual-systems we have invented to help us attain it, and the social systems that fragment our lives into times of freedom and times of lesser-freedom. for freedom and liberation cannot be partial, otherwise, what shall we call those times of day we are not free or not liberated? there is no being partially in freedom, there is only being partially in bondage. to have less freedom means to have more bondage and to have less liberated-time it means to be not-liberated all of the time.

based on this understanding of buber and zen, the basic premise of dialogical ecology is that spirituality, or poetry, or god, is a deed we do. that is to say: the life of the spirit, or the life of the poem, or the life of the god, must be enacted in the ways we live our lives with the world and with each other. spirit, poetry and god are the between of i-thou relationships. we do not manifest spirituality by performing
religious rituals: we manifest the spirit by embracing the neighbor, and we embrace the neighbor by entering into relationships of genuine dialogue. we do not manifest poetry by only writing words. as francis of assisi well said: we teach the gospel, and if necessary we use words too. we manifest gospel by the ways of our relationship with the whole of existence. god is not in the relationship, god is the relationship.

and if indeed the realms of the spiritual, the poetical and the godly are realms of relationship, we must understand that our human calling is to engage in the transformation of society. we must transform society from an system based on i-it interactions to an community founded on i-thou relationships.

we meet god as we meet with one another in genuine relationship, and therefore the manner of our meeting defines the biblical distinction between the realms of the sacred and the realms of the profane. god is absent in the profane interactions of i-it, as in the psalmist’s poem that tells of the eclipse of god. god emerges in the relationship of i and thou, as the biblical poet told us of this creative god that realized that it wasn’t good for man to be alone and decided to give adam a beloved eve.

there is a religious language to help practitioners hide behind a spirituality that has no calling for dialogue. this language promotes a belief in a spirituality that is independent of the relationship between people. in other words, rather than dia-logos, that is to say the existential meaning that can only be actualized in the relationship with the other, the belief is in mono-logos, that is the spiritual error that requires the withdrawal within the self. this belief system argues that enlightenment or salvation is a private state of being, and in that sense we can say that this is a form of spiritual narcissism.

but salvation is not from above nor is salvation from below, it is not from within nor from without: salvation is from the life of the community. that is to say: we are saved in the practices of the sacraments of the neighbor. but aside from salvation, the truth of the spiritual life is that there is no spirituality outside of the between of i and thou.

these pages argue for a different manner to approach our spiritual yearnings. i do not believe in religions for that which we call spirituality is a poetic dialogue with the world. it is in that sense that i speak of a realm of the “spiritual.” i do not believe in any of our existing holy books. and i presume i wouldn’t either in any future ones, as i do not agree with the concept of holy books. the holy book is the one we write with our deeds in the world.

i do not believe in prophets, but i believe in each of their prophecies. for prophets are poets gone astray, and in that sense, each one of us is born a prophet. every person has access to a plentiful and exacting revelation. none is binding on anyone else,
except on those participating in the meeting between revealer and hearer. revelation is not a message from a realm of the transcendent: revelation is nothing other than the deed of dialogue, and it is this deed the entirety of the holy message.

i do not believe in temples for the holy temple is always here and now, there where you and i meet in genuine encounter. where is the temple of god? some say it is within me. but that’s pride and arrogance. there is no within, nor is there a without. there is only the between of i and thou. is the temple outside of me? beware! that magnificent building with all its glitter and awe is a delusion. the temple was not built to give a home to a wandering god, but to give glory to all that he is not and never will be. the true temple of god is between i and you. preferably under a mogra tree.

consider this: all existing proclaimed revelations are indecisive on matters of ethics, and that alone is proof of their human provenance. holy books that promote or tolerate or justify war and injustice are not true revelations from a true source of being.

it is not true to fragment love in terms of emotions and deeds. in being in love there is no distinction between the emotions of love and the deeds of love. one cannot arise without the other and neither can endure apart from the other. in making love, giving and receiving are one and the same deed. to actualize love, it is to enact our deepest emotions as deeds of relationship. we are whole-beings, and it is in the deeds of love where our minds and our bodies become one and the same.

is the suffering jesus the incarnation of god? of course he is! who isn’t? is the peaceful buddha an incarnation of vishnu? of course he is! who isn’t? for we are all incarnations of the source of being. but know this: only in the between of i and thou.

the abrahamic religions believe in the separation of god and world. there is no logical reason to believe in this premise, nor in its opposite. whether the substance of being is one or two or infinitely multiple, the i-thou dialogue incarnates the presence of both the god and the world. the ontology of being may inform different ethical choices, but our existential practices of dialogue are our essential human decision.

a god that can’t be refuted is not a god. in other words: a god that is right even when he’s wrong is not a god: he’s an idol. a god that promises life but delivers death, is not a god, it’s his adversary. god speaks in human language says the talmud. therefore, if god sends us to war, he’s not a god, it is us. if your teacher sends you to war, he’s not a teacher, and he’s not a prophet, and he’s not a saint. and even worse! he’s not a good man.
god lives through me and you and through me and you he does his many works. but let us make this point clear: i am him and he is me when i say thou, and you are him and he is you when you say thou. and god is everything else.

i know that just like me, god loves love and daring breezes and a good malbec. and he also loves old man bach and old man pandit jasraj. but god can only enjoy this life and rejoice in this world if we do. for he does not exist except through our joy. and i do not exist except with you. i enjoy god for the sake of man. just as he yearns. and i enjoy you for the sake of life, for there is no life on earth without a relationship.

did god save a wretch like me? i was never a wretch! not even in my deepest despair. for we are all born buddhas-in-distress. that is all. it is an amazing grace. there is no wretchedness in this world at all said good rebbe nahman. on this, let me stay with him.

we are in search of lost betweens. but we are also afraid of them. how do we learn to dis-cover the between? by embracing one another. for nothing can teach us how to love, only love can teach us. broken embraces are relationships too, for they are in a desperate search of their own lost betweens.

god does not desire me to empty myself! he made every aspect of me for his own sake. and this holds true even if he does not exist! god desires to empty himself for me to come into him. even if he does not exist! or i. but my desire is to be now, and if possible to be here too. for what good is an empty man?

we are in search of lost betweens. all the poetry we live and all the philosophy we study is only our way to learn how to embrace one another. and we desperately want to learn how to grieve. we tell ourselves stories of salvation and enlightenment. stories of a grace that is amazing. and we create a god in our own image and likeness for him to create us in his own image and likeness. for what good is an empty god?

i need to be me so god can be god. god needs to be god so i can be me. there is no me without god. there is no god without me. and there is no god or me outside of the between of i and thou. and like me, god desires to live. and he can only live through my body and my mind. and he can only love through my love. grace is not a gift from some above. there is no above as there is no below. and gifts are everywhere. grace is between i and thou. if we hear well, grace speaks in human language: it is an imperfect grace, but still amazing. just like god. just like i and you. for what good is an empty grace?

god remains hidden to the eye because he wants us to know her through her deeds. but of course, some deeds pale in comparison. not just any deed! not even creation
of heavens and earth! the god of moses did not introduce himself to the people as
the one who created heavens and earth, but as the one who frees slaves and demands
justice. that is all. and surely justice and freedom are greater than creation itself, for
creation is empty without relationships of compassion. god’s deed was the deed of
social justice. just as simple, just as sacred. for what good is an empty creation?

god remains mute to our ears because he wants us to know him by the sounds of
babies laughing and crickets chirping on fig trees. god cannot be touched, for he
wants to be touch in the body of the beloved. god is here if i and you are here. we
can say that god does not want us to see him because we might not like him. i think
that’s nonsense. god and us like each other very much.

the god of bad deeds is not a god but an idol. the god of freedom and justice incarnates
in deeds of freedom and justice. but we should know this: the deeds of god are
nothing other than our embrace of the neighbor.

nothing that exists is not the body of god. in other words: when we say thou, it is
god speaking. but when we say IT everything becomes an IT. especially god. when
we say thou all the betweens are god. things can be conquered, betweens can only
be dis-covered. betweens are always present, even when hidden behind the eclipse
caused by itness.

but we ask again: if all real living is meeting, why so many broken relationships? we
have told ourselves the delusion that the world is composed of tradable commodities
and our ideas about them. in other words: the interactions of i-it cannot give birth
to genuine relationships, nor can they sustain them for us and for our children. we
ought to urgently but pleasantly redress our search and learn how to dis-cover the
between of i and thou.

institutional religions tend to promote and sometimes demand the wearing of
uniform vestments. uniforms are designed to obliterate the individual identity of
the practitioner and replace it with a collective delusion. the opposite of identity
is not anonymity, it is delusion. in other words, identity itself is never dropped,
only exchanged. this new collective identity is a constructed uniformity founded on
equally constructed collective memories. the many dangers of constructed collective
uniformities has been duly recorded in history. ah! but the naked buddha is different.
he wears nothing other than his own identity. of course, the moment nakedness
is promoted or demanded it too becomes a uniform. for this is the truth: from an
existential perspective we are all different from one another, and it is only in the
confirmation of difference that we can aspire to demand equal rights and promote
brotherly duties. we must accept the inherent right of individuals to not con-form
and to not become uni-form. like music, each note is different from the other and
that is how music lives.
in a sense, human history has been detached from spiritual history. generally speaking, the spiritual teachings we have received have not been enacted in the ways of our social and communal systems of relationships. this isn’t surprising, as we need to understand that human history precedes spiritual history. that is to say: we actualize the spirit in the public square.

learning from the story of mara attacking siddhartha under the body tree, a spirit not manifested in the communal-flesh is only a mirage. body and spirit are one and the same, and for that reason, siddhartha touched the earth to declare mara a mere delusion. therefore, borrowing from religious language, our body-spirit finds its living expression in its devotion to the performance of the sacraments of the neighbor. that is to say: we learn the teachings of the spirit from the existential requirements of our social and communal relationships. it cannot be otherwise. our spirit cannot teach us our history, for history is what teaches the spirit what it is and what it can possibly be. this is the truth: we cannot be taught love, we must allow love to teach us.

in other words: we do not practice meditation or study religious texts to prepare ourselves for the tasks of offering the world our compassion and lovingkindness. for the motivation behind our desire to practice meditation or learn religious texts already demonstrates the presence within our hearts of the consciousness of compassion and lovingkindness. the decision we make to practice or learn is already a form of the enlightenment we seek through practice and learning.

consider this: zen master lin-ji, the founder of the rinzai school of zen, famously said: “if you meet the buddha on the road kill him.” we’ve been hearing this wonderful teaching even since before he died in the year 866. and yet, rather than killing the buddha we are constantly giving birth to new ones. and instead of funeral rites, we design worship rites. buddha cannot teach us and we cannot teach him. we must dialogue with the buddha and let life and buddha teach one another. the spirit does not lead nor follows for it is always created in the between of our encounters.

there are two sacraments: the sacrament of the neighbor and the sacrament of wrestling with the gods. the hebrew word “israel” means to “wrestle with god.” over millennia of exegesis many different interpretations have been offered for this extraordinary concept. but since we cannot know what god is, how can we possibly wrestle with it? and in this context, how can we know what the deeds of wrestling with god actually entail? i argue that wrestling with god and the sacrament of the neighbor are one and the same practice. for the relationship we can attain with the gods is nothing other than our perennial efforts to create a genuine community of man. for creating community is an effort akin to wrestling with our inner conflicts and our outer desires.
there is no relationship with god outside of the relationship between person to person. my view is this: the teaching here is to wrestle not with an unknowable god, but with our fear of the between. we wrestle with the idea of wrestling with god.

we must know that any idea we conceive of god is a false idea. any feeling we have of god is a false feeling. in other words: we must wrestle with our desire to understand god, be that intellectually or emotionally, and more so we must wrestle with any understanding we believe we have come to attain. the outcome of the wrestling match is utterly irrelevant, as this match ought never to end. we must see the wrestling as both the path and the destination. the moment we stop wrestling with god we must cease any pretense of standing in her presence. for what we have done at that moment is create and idol, one that faithfully reflects our own image and likeness.
ON DIALOGICAL PHILOSOPHY AND ZEN BUDDHISM

I-thou dialogue is enlightenment manifested in the practice of relationships.

This chapter is not an academic study on Zen or Buber. This is a dialogue I hold with two friends for life. It is true that Zen defies definitions, but that is also a way of defining it. I believe that Zen can still be understood in myriad ways. I offer here this, my own understanding of the premises Zen stands upon, and of the ways it has influenced my thinking on dialogue, or interbeing, as Zen poet Thich Nhat Hahn speaks of the dialogical foundations of Zen practice.

This is the insight we learn from placing Buber and Zen side by side: we learn to encounter one another by encountering one another. We learn to dialogue by embracing the neighbor. For the God of the immediate encounter is not above nor below, it is the between of I and thou, and the Buddha of the immediate encounter is not within nor outside on the road, it is the between of I and thou.

In the inexplicable paradox that is spiritual enlightenment, sometimes the holiest person will find his repose in his agitation, her security in her doubts, and his utmost peace on the turning of his cheek. This is the koan of holiness: the more your bare hands wash the dust off the feet of the desert walker, the cleaner they are. The more you stand and shout for peace in the square, the deeper your restful silence becomes. The more you feed the poor and house the homeless, the better fed and housed you will be.

There is one inescapable existential reality: to be holy we must do the deeds of holiness. It does not require sitting facing a wall, or dropping on the knees in front of the cross; or reading the Torah during the days and during the nights. For unless we do peace and we do love, anything else we do is only the fantastic delusions of Mara. As Suzuki Roshi well said: there are no enlightened beings, there is only enlightened activity. That is to say: holiness is not a state of inner-bliss. It might be that, but it is nothing at all unless it is an activity we do. The activities of holiness are a dialogical project, for holiness is making the peace and it is making the love. Holiness is making the between of the I and the thou.

Zen, as is dialogue, is a practice. That is to say, it is a way of living, not only a psychological training or a religion. Zen is not a theology nor a discourse on the ontology of being. We learn dialogue as we learn Zen, by the performance of their
in this sense, i argue, there is an existential place of encounter between buber and zen.

dialogical-ecology is the existential confluence between the dialogical philosophy of martin buber and the meditation practices of zen buddhism. we speak of existential confluence, not necessarily of philosophical similarities. that is to say, we argue that the enactment of i-thou dialogue between people and with nature is one and the same as the practices of mindfulness meditation in zen buddhism, or for that matter, in buddhism in general.

in other words, the teachings of zen, when practiced as social deeds, can only be enacted within the framework of a dialogical society.

we argue that i-thou relationship is the primordial existential reality from which all conceptions of ethics and human liberation emerge. with the same understanding, we argue that zen “spiritual” practices are the primordial system of awakening from which all other systems and practices of enlightenment emerge. it is in this sense that zen precedes buddhism.

i-thou dialogue is nothing other than what zen describes as mindfulness. all life is relationship, and enlightenment or awakening is in the practice of mindful relationships with the neighbor and with all-beings. a mindful relationship, by the nature of what it demands of the practitioners, represents an approximation to the practices of i-thou dialogue. but let us make clear that the term “approximation” does not indicate that other methods of relationship are a more complete form of i-thou dialogue. i-thou dialogue, as the manifestation of an intentionality, can only be practiced as an approximation to the goal. there in no prajna-paramita of dialogue, as otherwise we would fall into the error of creating an orthodoxy of meanings and practices.

i-thou is a deed we do. it is not a state of consciousness that can be detached from its specific deeds. so is the case with zen: meditation is a deed we do, and this deed is itself the entirety of the practice. as zen poet dogen said, zazen is story and satori is zazen.

from the perspective of dialogical ecology, i-thou dialogue is both a state of awakened consciousness as to the thou status of the other, as well as the existential enactment of that awakened state of consciousness in the form of dialogical relationships within society and with nature. inner awakening and the deeds of dialogue are one and the same existential event. one cannot be if the other is not. we awaken to the reality of the true-self only in the between of i and thou.

zen speaks of zazen as the immediacy of the encounter of the practitioner with his true self and with true reality. and this is the state of awakening or satori. immediacy
is here understood as an experiential event not mediated by reason, creed or rituals. Buber, likewise, speaks of i-thou dialogue as the immediacy of the encounter with God. Buber’s immediacy is understood as a whole-being event that cannot be mediated by reason, creed or rituals.

We refer to i-thou dialogue as a whole-being way of life for the encounter with the other is not an event limited to the realm of the psychological. From a dialogical perspective, the encounter with a being is embedded in the totality of dialogical meetings across all realms of relational existence. From this perspective, we can argue that Zen’s ability to become a whole being way of life becomes truncated the moment it is not enacted as a comprehensive social practice.

Buber referred to an unmediated encounter with a being as a moment of inception. This is a distinctive and non-reenactable relational event of the whole-being. Zen speaks of immediacy with the suchness of being, that is, a moment of direct realization that likewise occurs in a unique and non-reenactable event. In both cases, the essence of the experience is an existential practice. The experience itself cannot be separated from its existential practice, it is one and the same. In other words: since the encounter and the realization are attained through the immediacy of a dialogue between self and world, no creedal rituals or intellectual reasoning can attain a measure of efficacy. For that reason, Buber rejected formal religion, and an original definition of Zen speaks of pointing directly at the mind bypassing words and texts. But it’s important to understand that the dialogical encounter is nothing other than the i-thou dialogue with the neighbor and with nature. It is one and the same.

According to Master Dogen, the practice of meditation is itself the awakening we seek, not just a path to its attainment. Likewise, from the perspective of dialogical ecology, the relationship of i and thou is itself the liberation we seek, not only a method for its attainment.

In this context, the question as to whether consciousness precedes social practice or social practice is the source of consciousness is of lesser importance, for ultimately, from the perspective of dialogical ecology, consciousness and social practice must be integrated as one and the same existential event.

We should say that Martin Buber begins where Zen Buddhism has discontinued its practice, namely, at the point of the implementation in society and with nature of the relational practices of the awakened consciousness. In other words, an awakened consciousness can only be actualized in the realm of dialogical relationships. Conversely, Zen offers Martin Buber a meditation practice geared toward the facilitation of the awakening of the dialogical consciousness. This is the koan of dialogue: we can only learn the heart of love by practicing the deeds of love, but
without a heart of love we cannot practice the deeds of love. there is no before or after, there is only here and now.

in a manner different than dogen’s but nonetheless still reaffirming of the dialogical nature of awakening, zen poet hakuin argued that satori is not the end or the goal, but only its starting point. it is in this sense that we have said that dialogue begins where zen seems to stop. hakuin asked that zen ought not to stop, but strive to actualize itself in the realm of the social. he was quite explicit on this matter. once we have reached the state of satori we are required to practice zen in the enactment of deeds of service and compassion for all beings. in other words, we could ask: “have you reached the state of satori? quite wonderful! now what!?” for a non-actualized satori is a satori not attained.

for this aim, hakuin suggested an extraordinary idea: to pursue a post-satori training.

in a manner similar to the dialogical view that the revelation of god on earth is of no religious consequence if not enacted as a way of ethical living with one another and with nature, hakuin argued that the implementation of satori in service and compassion is, in a sense, more important than satori itself. and this is so even if the implementation can come only after the initial attainment, as it is not a matter of chronology but of primordiality. hakuin wanted to use the mind of enlightenment for the enactment of an enlightened society. an enlightened society is not the aggregate of many individual enlightened persons: it is the enactment in society of concrete deeds of enlightened relationships.

furthermore, hakuin inveighed against what he called “do-nothing zen,” a reference to zen practitioners who, as hakuin put it, rather than enacting their enlightenment in the life of society, “pass day after day in a state of seated sleep.” therefore, the solution hakuin spoke of was tantamount to our understanding that buber begins where zen stops.

in many respects, hakuin is precisely the place of confluence between buber and zen i was speaking of earlier. consider this: for hakuin the point is that there is no difference between the path to attain satori and the practices that actualize satori. hakuin said: “what is to be valued above all else is the practice that comes after satori is achieved. what is that practice? it is the practice that places the mind of enlightenment first and foremost. this is my forty-first year, and i at long last penetrated into the heart of this great matter. suddenly, unexpectedly, i saw it, it was as clear as if it were right there in the hollow of my hand. what is the mind of enlightenment? it is, i realized, a matter of doing good, benefiting others by giving them the gift of the dharma teaching.” paraphrasing dogen’s teaching that we do not practice zazen to attain satori, as zazen is already satori, we can say that for hakuin, there is no difference between attaining satori and a life of genuine compassion, for
compassion is already satori, and satori is essentially a life of compassion. we can therefore argue that the post-satori training hakuin spoke of is the pursuit of a life of i-thou dialogue with all beings.

but are we required to engage in meditation in order to attain the consciousness of "thouness"? i argue that we attain consciousness of compassion and love through deeds of compassion and love. as the bible says: we do and then we hear. if our goal is the transformation of society into a dialogical community, we must begin the work of transformation here and now. but clearly, the practices of zazen and meditation in general are enormously beneficial for the attainment of a mind of peace.

a dialogical society is not, in itself, an aggregate of individuals that have attained a state of mental bliss. dialogue is a way of concrete relationships between people and with nature. the goal of the dialogical society is what hakuin wanted to accomplish: to put the mind of enlightenment to social action. how do we put the mind of enlightenment to social action? by the embrace of the neighbor. in other words: a dialogical society makes it possible to pursue, implement and sustain the mind of enlightenment.

in both, buber and zen, the teachings of each are already embedded within the teachings of the other, but in a form that requires the translation of the abstract into the concrete. each teaching emphasizes what seems as a different precept: in buber it is the practice of i-thou dialogue and the reduction of the scope of i-it relationships, and in zen it is the practice of zazen. but we must understand that i-thou dialogue is a practice of social-meditation, and zen meditation, inasmuch as it teaches non-attachment and non-conceptualization, can be understood as a practice leading to the reduction of the scope of i-it relationship with the ten thousand things.

in other words, the saying of thou and the practices of meditative mindfulness, are one and the same existential deed. i-thou is social-deed-meditation. i-it is social-samsara.

buddhist dhammic socialism and buber’s religious socialism are similar teachings in regards to the actualization of the awakened mind within the realm of an enlightened society. there can be no personal enlightenment if it does not manifest as a way of relationships in society and with nature. we are whole-beings, therefore our true-selves can only emerge from the darkness of samsara and into the enlightenment of satori through the integration of the awakened mind and the deeds of the between of i and thou. dialogue is the actualization of enlightenment in the realm of our relationships with one another and with nature.

hakuin’s teachings notwithstanding, official zen does not provide an articulated answer as to how to organize the social and economic structures of society once
the state of awakened consciousness is attained. buber, on the other hand, does not speak as to how to attain a state of awakened consciousness. and there is a reason for this: for buber i-thou relationships are deeds we do, and these deeds do not require an antecedent state of awakened consciousness. the deeds teach the consciousness.

nonetheless, from a dialogical perspective, as zen needs to actualize the practitioner’s state of enlightenment in social and economic structures of society, we should say that dialogical philosophy needs the practices of zen, as the recognizing and manifestation of the thou in the other requires more than a philosophical-ontological understanding as to the essence of being. the zen practices of meditation and mindfulness are able to bring an individual to the conscious recognition of the thou in all beings. and the actualization in ordinary life of this cognition of thouness is the entering into dialogical relationships with each other and with nature.

buber said that the dialogical life is an expression of both will and grace. from the perspective of dialogical ecology, the will of dialogue is manifested in a twofold way: in our decision to engage in social-deed-meditative behaviors, and in the actual enactment of the deeds of i-thou relationships with one another and with nature. the grace of dialogue is nothing other than the relationships themselves.

zen speaks of no-self. to understand this concept from dialogical perspective, we make the distinction between the i that emerges in the i-thou relationship and the i that emerges in the i-it relationship. the i of the i-thou is the true-self, and the i that emerges in the i-it interactions is the ego. there is no-self in the i-it interactions, and it is in that sense that we can say that zen’s teaching of no-self is a reflection of the dialogical concept of ego. zen says that the ego must be dropped. in dialogue we drop the IT and reveal the self.

in concrete terms, dialogical relationships of the awakened mind can most adequately be actualized within the framework of what buber described as a libertarian socialist society. this society is a federation comprised of communities of dialogue. in buddhism this is known as dhammic socialism. in other words: the genius of both i-thou dialogue and zen meditation is actualized in what liberation theology has referred to as the sacrament of the neighbor.

most religious traditions teach a similar teaching in regards to the importance of ethics. ethics refers to the mode of relationship we choose to enter into with one another and with nature. buddhism’s eightfold path to enlightenment details specific behavioral requirements deemed necessary, not contingent, to the practice of liberation. from a dialogical perspective, not only is ethics a fundamental deed in and of itself, but in its very essence, ethics is the means for attaining the presence of god in the midst of our lives.
levinas argued that ethics is first philosophy. that is to say, we do not derive ethical principles from a prior ontological understanding of being, but we derive any possible understanding of being from within the practices of human presentness with one another. in other words: relationship is primordial. in existentialism this is explained by the principle that existence precedes essence. but form a dialogical perspective we can add that existence is relationship, and therefore, i-thou dialogue is the practice of enlightened existence. relationship is primordial. as buber said: at the beginning it was the relationship.

from the perspective of dialogical ecology, the dichotomy of personal and social as two separate realms is not recognized as such, for it is transcended into the realm of the in-between. one becomes an i through a thou, and this i-thou relationship is explained in terms of concrete practices in society. both the realms of the personal and the realm of the social are abstractions, as the only realm of human existence is the life of the liberated person in a dialogical community.
CHAPTER 4

ON ZEN’S PARADOXICAL SPIRITUALITY

logical paradoxes may or may not be resolved. existential paradoxes, in contrast, are never resolved, they can only be lived. we live paradoxes, and we cannot discard them, for life itself is the most magnificent of paradoxes. what is essential to understand is that the “resolution” of existential paradoxes is embedded within the performance of the deeds of existence, not in the mind, nor anywhere else outside of them.

a recourse to a non-natural source of being does not provide meaning to the paradox of existence, it extracts it away, for it abandons all possible explanations in the care of logical inconsistencies. the paradox of existence cannot be resolved, it can only be lived. but if it could be resolved, we ought not to. for wonder and faith are more necessary to life than certitude and beliefs.

shikantaza, is one of zen’s paradoxes. shikantaza means “just sitting.” it is the zen practice of zazen, sitting-meditation, done only for its own sake. that is to say, we “just sit” with no purpose other than the sitting itself. there are no ulterior motives attached to the simple deed of sitting. no satori on the higher end of the practice, and no simple relaxation on its more prosaic side.

purposeless activity, the focus of which is nothing but the activity itself, is one of the ideals embedded in many spiritualities. in zen practice, the aim is to detach oneself from goals and purposes, thereby attaining a state of calm awareness. in god-oriented spiritualities, there is the belief that god favors those who worship without the expectation of quid pro quo rewards.

in this sense, zen’s shikantaza is the same concept known in jewish religion as “torah l’shma,” that is, the performance of the commandments of the torah for the torah’s sake only, without extraneous goals or expectations. torah l’shma demands that we be detached from any conscious considerations regarding the divine providence that might accrue to the fulfillment of the torah. expectations of divine rewards, be that on earth or in heaven, diminish the spiritual power embedded in purposeless contemplative deeds.

a contemplative deed is a gaze into one’s own self mirrored in a never ending series of observations that lead nowhere else but back to the-within whence it came. master dogen said that satori is zazen and zazen is satori. in other words, we do not sit to
attain enlightenment, for the life of enlightenment is the sitting itself. all that is to
be attained is already contained within the deed leading to its attainment. there is no
path and there is no end, there is only the here-and-now, this place and this moment.
therefore, to expect a reward from the performance of the deed is to not understand
the essence of the deed.

it is argued that by performing a task in a disinterested fashion, with no other mental
content attached to it other than the proper performance of the deed itself, or in
other words, by renouncing the belief in the pursuit of goals and in particular of
paths to lead us to them, one becomes able to reach ever higher levels of meditative
mindfulness. and it is mindfulness, according to buddhism, the one key to the
attainment of awakening. in that sense, any action performed “just for its own sake”
is recognized to be of great mental and spiritual value and benefit to the practitioner.

and therein lies the paradox. if it is indeed of great value and benefit to the practitioner
to practice zazen for its own sake, then it is no longer the case that the deed is done
“just for the sake” of the deed itself. from a practitioner’s perspective, there is an
underlying intentional purpose to the practice of shikantaza.

this paradox of the purposeless-purpose should be seen as a zen koan, and in the way of
zen koans, its resolution lies only within the performance of the deed itself. to explain
shikantaza is to miss the point that there is no explanation to paradoxes, there is only
living with them, being present to them and allowing them to be present with us. the
zen we comprehend is not the real zen. a zen we do not ignore is not the real zen.

the believer who believes that god favors those who ask for no favors, worships in
order to accrue those favors. and this takes us to a form of spiritual paradox that can
only be resolved by the performance of the deed itself. these are all paradoxes of
faith.

the jewish philosopher yesahyahu leibowitz argued that any worship of god that is
not l’shma is a form of idolatry. according to leibowitz we ought not to make god
a servant to our own human interests and needs, but the contrary is the truth, we
ought to renounce our own “ego”, and as the case was with abraham and his son
isaac, we can only do so by submitting completely to the will of god. we practice
the will of god by accepting the yoke of the commandments of the torah, for god’s
will is embedded in them. in other words, as maimonides said, we perform the
commandments knowing that the reward of the commandment is the commandment
itself.

fr. richard rohr, coming from a christian perspective, said that faith is not of
something, but is its own reward. we have faith for faith’s sake, and there is nothing
else our faith is pointing at outside of itself. it is difficult to understand this idea
when placed within the context of the christian faith he practices, as the entirety of
the religion is predicated on the belief that faith in christ is not only the path to the
father, but more so, it is the only path.

but this is one important aspect of practicing-for-practice’s sake. if we argue that
there are no goals to search for and therefore no paths to the goal, we can clearly
understand that there are no teachings to be learned and no teachers to teach them.
as zen proclaims, we must kill the buddha we meet on the road. it is only in our
intimate relationship with the practice itself that we will insure that those two truths
concerning teachings and teachers will not themselves become new teachings.

in the book “strive for truth,” rabbi e. dessler explains the concept of l’shma. he
writes that “an act is done l’shma when it is done as a matter of course, when the
good deed is not seen by the doer as deserving special credit; just as one does not
feel proud at being able to see or hear – on the contrary, inability to see or hear is
perceived as a defect.” in other words, when we sit for the purpose of attaining
enlightenment or we pray to obtain a providential reward from god, we are, in some
sense, acting out in response to some inner “defect.”

applying the concept of deeds for their own sake to a dialogical perspective, only
when the ethical deeds of relationship become seamlessly integrated into our own
natural and spontaneous way of living with each other and with the world, it can be
said that we are fulfilling the practice of saying thou rather than IT to the paradox
of existence.

this is the existentialist point of the practice for the sake of the practice itself with
no ulterior motives: nothing in life can be said to be more important than life itself,
and therefore living life is the ultimate human value. to argue that we may support a
value that is higher than life itself is a contradiction in terms, for everything we do,
even when we sacrifice our own personal lives, we do so for the paradoxical purpose
of ennobling life itself.

the concept of “merit”, that is, the goal of gaining or attaining some manner of
rewards or benefits in exchange for good deeds or correct religious beliefs, falls
under the category of what chogyam trungpa referred to as “spiritual materialism.”
zen was outstanding in its critique of merit, bringing spirituality to the “ordinary”
rather than to the transcendent. when virtue is used to attain a reward it is no longer
a virtue but a commodity. spinoza said this clearly: the reward of virtue is the virtue
itself.

the dalai lama speaks of this same goal of integrating compassion and wisdom as
one natural and spontaneous existential-deed. he argues that wisdom and compassion
are not two separate and distinct mental states, but one and the same existential
deed. the key is that this integration is attained when the contents of the mind are enacted as deeds of the whole being. that is to say, it is in the deed that wisdom and compassion become the same phenomena.

there is no distinction between inner wisdom and outer compassion: both must be enacted as one and the same deed, for our deeds of relationship with one another and with the world spring from the same existential wellspring as do wisdom and compassion.

this is the concept that animates the wu-wei practices of the tao. “the action of no action” is the paradox of obtaining a reward by actively not pursuing it. but again in the case of wu-wei, we can say that if we know in advance that non-pursuing is a path to attaining rewards, then not-pursuing becomes a paradoxical act of pursuing.

there is no wisdom that can emerge apart from compassion, and there is no compassion that is not wise. for outside of the relationship there is no genuine living of which we partake. clearly, living what plato called the “good life” is all the goodness we seek. therefore, the choice is not between reward or punishment, but between life and no-life. and this is the concept of relationships for their own sake.

we do not enact the spirit in rituals or sacraments, but in our relationships with one another and with the world. for that reason the torah says that we have been given the existential opportunity to choose between life and death, and we must choose life. in other words: life is its own reward.

the great practitioners of dialogue are not in love with dialogue, their love is to be in-dialogue. dialogue is a deed we do and the deed itself contains its grace. zen master ryokan taigu (1758–1831. “taigu”: great fool) said: “ever since quitting the temple, my life has been resolutely carefree, my staff is always at my side, my robe is completely threadbare. at night in my hut, through the lonely window i hear the falling rain. on spring days when the flowers riot in bloom, i’m playing ball out on the street. if anyone asks what i’m doing, i say: ‘the most useless man there ever was!’” i say: this is a most beautiful description of human liberation from the bondages of social and religious constrictions. taigu here clearly expresses the contents of his own enlightenment in much the same terms as buber’s philosophy of dialogue: he lives life for the sake of life and nothing else. ryokan’s enlightenment consists of becoming a thou to every being. he sees himself now as a whole-being person of deed and mind, and by his deeds he transforms every IT into a thou.

that is to say: this uselessness taigu speaks of is his ability to no longer regard himself and all that exists as a utilitarian IT. clearly, in an IT system, being a thou renders
a person quite useless. after all, our capital-based social system is founded on the production, distribution and exchange of IT.

and of course, being useless in that sense, which in this case is having attained the state of liberation, will also render one a great fool in the eyes of consumerist society.

ryokan’s is indeed a curious case for it seems to speak of a way of life that applies only to those who choose some manner of isolation from society. we accept that monastics separate themselves from society at-large, but ryokan separated himself from monasticism, without, at the same time, joining society in the ways materialist society expects to be joined. as we can see, the teaching behind ryokan’s poems can be read as intuitions of social transformation.

there is a zen expression that says: “be master of your mind rather than be mastered by it.” most religions teach something similar to the effect that a better part within ourselves must find a way to rest control over other less-better parts. the partition of the self into parts is the foundation of all dualistic thinking. often times, that part religions exhort us to master is the one believed to contain our untamed evil inclinations. i say that this is the wrong attitude.

the desire to be a master, that is, the pursuit of mastering something, anything, precludes the existential opportunity to just “being present with it.” why be a master at all? why not just become foolishly useless and simply be present with the world as taigu was with his rain and his flowers? he could have fixed his robes, but he chose to be with them as they are.

like ryokan, rather than mastering we can also say thou to any part of our minds, and our worlds, and perhaps, thereby, heal the suffering that the alienation of inner and outer brings into our lives. to not be mastered by someone else or by something else external to us is obvious and right, but the biggest effort and merit is to practice our refusal to become masters, be that of others or of things inner and outer. to choose not to master represents our determined refusal to say IT. and that refusal to say IT is what thou saying is. nothing else.

but we also know that the reality is that for as long as we live within the system of consumerist materialism we cannot choose to become foolishly useless. in other words, our liberation from the bondage of constrictions depends largely on the transformation of society. and yes, it is hard to just be, it is difficult to live for life’s sake only, as the moment we say thou, there no longer is a master nor anything to be mastered.

this is another insight i learned: we do not need salvation. salvation needs us. and this is the paradox of awakening. but what is it we need to be saved from? from the
relentless demands of loneliness. this we must know: nothing will save us but our own choice to be saved in the between of i and thou. we are often torn between the peace that could be found in solitude, and the risks embedded in meeting the eyes of another human being. i sat by the ganges river surrounded by multitudes of people offering acts of devotion. and this i saw: we live our lives in search of lost-between. we seek salvation in scriptures and in holy rivers, but salvation is no farther than our next deed of compassion. for salvation is a deed we do. it is for our fear of embrace that we escape to great distances, and it is also for our fear of embrace that we never leave. and it is for our sadness in the face of death that we seek refuge in revelations. but sometimes we foolishly miss the truth that only by saving our neighbor we will save ourselves.

who was ryokan saving by living alone in the forest? during his times and circumstances ryokan may not have had any other means of rebellion. but someone must go up to the mountain for 40 days and forty nights to come back and bring us a torah.