

EPILOGUE

THE PHENOMENOLOGY AND MEANING OF MERGER AND NO-SELF EXPERIENCES

One great challenge remaining for this theory is to provide an adequate understanding of the spectrum of selfless and merger experiences, such as those arising from solitary and formless meditations like Mahamudra or Shikantaza, or from Koan meditations focused on aspects of formlessness, interpenetration, or object merger. My own "deepest" experiences resulting from these meditations were of "No self, and no object." I became the sky, trees and the wind or the totality of my experiential reality. There was no longer a separate self, nor was there a perceived separate object. I felt as if I had literally become the sky. It and I became one within my subjectivity, with no boundary between us, and with no remnant of a separate self-awareness.

Sometimes this happened in meditation, and sometimes while walking down the street. The merger experience itself had a myriad of forms. Sometimes in meditation I became the sound of a bell, or the wind, and felt swept away by a wintry storm. Sometimes I'd become the sound of a bird and suddenly would be flying over the countryside on its wings. At other times my arm, resting on a tree, would merge with its form. Like Kay's merger with her boyfriend on the motorcycle, I'd merge with the tree and feel a close communion and love for it. More often the experience consisted of going into a profoundly silent meditation, feeling a great peace and then experiencing a merger with my environment, perhaps experiencing an external storm as now raging in me. The outside world would come into me or I would merge outwardly into the world. I could merge with any sensation, sight, sound, body feeling or object touched. Sometimes, if I deliberately "looked" for it, there was still a sense of self somewhere in the merger; at other

times there was not. This is one of several classes of merger experiences, and one fairly common for Zen practitioners.

There are many, many other varieties of non-merger meditation experiences, most considered "illusionary" or Makyo in Zen, but honored guests in Hindu and in Buddhist Tantric traditions. This class includes visions or dreams of the teacher or of gods, out-of-the-body experiences, auditory and visual hallucinations, Kundalini or "internal felt energies," changes in the body's apparent size or mass, and apparent levitation experiences. Other sorts of Makyo include blissful states, bright lights that the self merges into, states where the mind feels frozen solid, hearing "angels" sing when chanting, or seeing in absolute darkness. The variety of Makyo experiences are endless. Muktananda used to say, "Without them, what good is spirituality?" in obvious disagreement with the Zen view.

My own Makyo experiences lasted a few years until "cured" by Sasaki Roshi's emphasis on the pragmatic. The merger experiences, and progressively deeper meditations continued for several more years. As a practitioner, and as a counseling monk and UCLA instructor teaching Zen, I discovered three things about these experiences, true for me, and for many others who were long involved in meditation: 1). I did not change from them; 2). most other people had no understanding or personal "taste" of this kind of experience--it didn't fit their idea of "spiritual;" and 3). the more I studied psychology and was in therapy, immersed in feelings, loneliness, object love, hurt and loss, the less I had these experiences.

No matter how profound the experiences felt, no matter how often I repeated them, no matter how they deepened my understanding of Buddhism or of my experiential realms, as a person I did not change. The personal self that disappeared in meditative absorption always returned. I may have returned with far greater insight into the Koan problem and the attached Buddhist Sutras. I may have felt better, always being

on the verge of these wonderfully releasing experiences, and always close to intense experiences of reality and myself, but I was not a better person. I was able to be far more productive, but it was done with a rigidity, a disregard for others and a single-minded intent of re-entering the Samadhi states. I didn't really change as a person until I was in therapy dealing with person related feelings of loss, hurt, love, fear and jealousy. The "transcendental" experiences did not impact or affect my personality.

Although many people have oceanic or no-self experiences that deeply affect them, the kinds of merger experiences they had and regard as "spiritual" were not like the ones just described. Often they felt the profound peace of entering a church and feeling totally secure. Or else, for a moment while walking down the street they felt a sense of unity with all of reality. Their self did not totally disappear into experiential reality. They did not become phenomenally indistinguishable from the trees or mountains. Instead, their being felt merged in an emotional way, held and supported by God and the universe. They felt at union and peace with everything, but their separate sense of self did not disappear. There was an emotional merger, but not selflessness. Sometimes in these experiences, they would have reciprocal feelings of love and gratitude for the God source and sometimes not. Their merger was what we might conceive a six month-old baby feels during some optimal merger with mother, feeling peaceful, understood, loved and utterly secure.

These are very similar to the Oneness or "illusion of merger" states that Lachmann (1982) talks about which provide temporary psychological healing. From my viewpoint they originate within the spectrum of interpersonal relationship states of partial merger-communion and symbiosis that are most easily induced in certain kinds of psychotherapy, not in solitary spiritual practice. Lachmann induced these states in

subjects by the subliminal projection of the phrase "My mommy and I are one." He impacted their interpersonal and representational experiences. Yet these are also the states the Hindu Bhakti yogis revel in, and that Ramakrishna's life revolved around even though the yogi ostensibly remains alone. The Bhakti yogi apparently does merger with his God representations.

These "illusion of merger" states are described more fully in chapter four and are quite different from the disappearing boundary states of Kensho. These oneness states have a feelings of comfort, security, and are emotionally soft or "cuddly." Kensho states are far more stark, vivid and phenomenon oriented rather than interpersonal and emotion oriented. In Kensho there is both merger and a disappearance of self, indicating involvement of the self-core and I-ness, while in the illusion of merger states there is an emotional merger, but the self is still there, indicating either the core self is not involved or that it is merged but with a reflexive consciousness remaining. Most likely, the merger is on the periphery of self, in the realm of self and object representations or in the transitional spaces.

In the late 1970's I entered psychodynamic therapy. At first I dealt with issues of depression and loss. I became absorbed in the therapy process, lost in the inner feeling sphere where before I had been lost in Samadhi with the external world or other experiential realms of body feelings and images. As one Zen monk friend told me, very few people know their bodies like a Zen monk. He may spend hours each day exploring various aspects of his subjectivity, especially his body. Few people know their imaging or thinking like a monk either. Therefore when a monk turns to psychotherapy, he has introspective tools and an acquired ability to lose himself in his experience that substantially improve his ability to benefit from psychotherapy.

But Zen, and most Eastern religions place little emphasis on negative object related feelings like loss, hurt, loneliness, hopelessness, fear, hate, or envy. If they admit object related feelings as acceptable, it is usually the positive feelings of love, devotion, commitment and merger done towards Guru or spouse. The emphasis is on the good feelings ("rapture" or bliss of God-union in the Hindu and Muslim yogas) rather than the realistic spectrum of emotions attached to real relationships, especially abandonment issues, the hurt of not being important enough to the other, depression from being alone and separate, grief over past and future losses, and envy at the other's importance in our life and our dependence on them. Strangely, I have found a strong measure of acceptance for anger, self-righteous anger and acting out these feelings with most Zen teachers (mostly privately), Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu gurus. Sometimes it seems anger is the universally accepted negative feeling in spirituality, but not envy, jealousy, hurt, shame or dependency.

Becoming lost in my inner feeling world and connecting these elements to past losses, fears of relationship and narcissistic injuries had the effect of localizing me in my body and my personal self. I became a person relatively less able and less interested in becoming a bird or the trees or the sound of a bell--no matter how exhilarating those experiences were. I now became a person worried about relationships, dealing with guilt, depression, disappointment, fear and loss as well as the wonders of positive experiences of communion, merger, love, humility and gratitude. I became grounded in myself as a person rather than in magic-like boundless identifications.

I also recognized my oneness experiences (and anyone else's) had an indefinite interpretation. They could support a dozen different metaphysical systems or worldviews from Castaneda's sorcerer's realities, to the Buddhist Hua Yen interpenetrating reality idea, to Muktananda's idea of God play-

ing through individual consciousnesses. A more ordinary interpretation, and far more likely, was that through my concentration and meditation, I had made the boundaries of my self permeable, allowing control over my self-identifications, to expand them to include trees and a bell's sound, or to contract them to a single image or body sensation, such that temporarily I left identification with myself as a person. This was a wonderful experience because myself, as a person, was in pain--a pain so prevailing and chronic I didn't recognize it until therapeutically immersed in it. Part of the benefits of identifying with a bell's sound was to not feel depression at the core of my personal self.

There may also be a level of pain associated with just being a self for some people, having a consciousness split between inner and outer, self and not-self or subjective and objective. Being confined into a localized segment of one's total experience and feeling relatively powerless, is a sometimes constricting, lonely and humbling experience, not tolerable to someone who needs to be special or who needs a transcendent metaphysics to escape feeling inadequate or ignored. Also, for many, there is an infant's pre-self remembrance of a reality larger and less differentiated, a world softer and less jagged--a world desperately desired.

There is a third kind of no-mind, no-self experience that is also fairly common, quite often regarded as a spiritual experience, and even more often identified with Zen. This is the experience of "manifesting" the self. The self becomes subject only. The structures and Gestalt of self do not disappear, but self-consciousness does. I just become the activity of tennis or swordfighting or the throwing of an opponent in Judo. Or, I become the smelling of the flower or the riding of my bicycle. I become Galloway's inner game of tennis and Musashi's dueling sword. I "become" the activity or manifestation of the self or the sword I use in the sense that I am not at all aware of my self. I do not disappear

and merge into the universe, because I can plainly see my body and the tennis ball or the opponent as separate. Nor do I merge into the tennis ball; but I do become 100% absorbed in the activity, including a fixated attention on the ball. I am the subject; self as object, arising from reflexivity or from narcissistic preoccupations, is not there. This is the same selfless state Krishna tells Arjuna of in the Bhagavad Gita as the aim of the Karma yogi. I am selfless but not merged.

This is by far the most common understanding of Zen's no-mind and no-self state, and marks becoming the subjective self alone. But it certainly does not mean there is no longer a self. What disappears is self-consciousness. Consciousness becomes directed by the implicit structures; objective consciousness of I-ness, the core self and the representational self disappears, but the structures themselves do not disappear. Self is not an illusion; we may forget it for a moment, but consciousness of it always returns because it is us, and reflexivity is a part of the self's structure. Many people consider this state to be "spiritual" because during absorption in the activity, they no longer feel the biting pains at the base of their being, or loneliness and sorrow that will not be reduced, or fear that won't go away. There may also be an elation associated with this state.

Again, it can be used as a defense against inner pain, but it can also indicate being thoroughly grounded in one's subjectivity, no longer needing reflexivity to gain access to the self. One becomes the self and no longer reflexively watches it. At some point, in psychotherapy or in Zen we need to become the subject or the object (an emotion) alone. The dialectical healing process demands subjectification as did my old master, Sasaki Roshi.

Commonly, a spiritual teacher (and usually the student's friends) will tell a student to get out of himself and his self-preoccupations by total involvement in a Koan or work. Self-preoccupation and excessive or unbalanced reflexivity are

often signs of narcissistic disorders, resulting from parents who never gave the toddler the attention and significance he needed. But one cannot "cure" narcissistic disorders with admonishments not to be self-conscious, or warnings that the self needs to be thrown away. Narcissitic injuries need to be resolved in ways other than becoming lost in activities or meditations and otherwise getting away from the self. The narcissistic person needs merger with the pain of the injuries themselves, not simply to step out of his narcissism by an act of will. The latter becomes just a defense. Reflexivity exists in personality disorders partly as a self-healing attempt to expose and express the pain and partly as a substitute for the attention his parents never gave him. Objectification of this pain is absolutely necessary after core disorders have been exposed as part of the process of building compensatory structure, but coming too early, or learning a technique of voluntary selflessness would abort a full dialectical therapeutic process.

Self-consciousness is also quite prominent in normal, highly developed people, and there is not pathological. In therapy it has a healing function and a grounding function. It also teaches both the therapy client and a "healthy" person how to objectify behaviors and change them, or witness feelings to find their origin and eventually to become absorbed in them. We can have pathologies associated with excessive reflexive self-consciousness or with its absence, but appropriate reflexivity itself is not pathological; in fact, it is absolutely essential. A narcissistic person may be described as having only reflexivity and little outward directed consciousness, while a Christian saint may have little self-awareness. Both are unbalanced, leading to object relations that are too merged in the sense that boundaries of self and other are indistinct. The narcissist sees others as themselves (merged with self representations) and saints see themselves as others (merged with object representations).

The vast majority of merger or selfless experiences, which become most people's ideas of 'spiritual,' are either of the illusion of merger type, or else becoming the subject, lost in activity or into a lover. The illusion of merger experience can be therapeutic and is definitely interpersonal in origin. Usually these merger experiences are not totally selfless; some sense of self or of I remains, indicating that I-ness and the core self are not involved in the merger. This leads to the conjecture that these mergers are just in the representational self and object realm. The lost-in-the-subject-or-the-activity type selfless experience is one resulting from a healthy self, or from a manic-type defense against emotions. The degree of internal self development implied by such an experience, and the role of the object (lover, activity or self), depends on the particular experience and is a complicated subject still needing a thorough exposition. There is no merger with objects or representations in this experience.

The problem remaining in the exposition of this phenomenological theory, is what is the proper explanation or interpretation for the variety of spiritual experiences that are not: 1). interpersonal in origin or scope, or 2). simply resulting from becoming the subject, lost in activity? What do they mean? What does Castaneda's experience of becoming a crow mean? What was Buddha's enlightenment experience, and what did it really mean independent of what he might have thought it meant? What do the No-self, object merger experiences I had early in my Zen career mean? Partially, I believe these experiences are breakdowns of boundaries between experiential realms described earlier, leading to this phenomenological theory where consciousness and objects of consciousness become localized into discrete realms that comprise the subjectivity of the person. That is, these Kensho-type mergers can suggest our model of developmental compartmentalization of subjectivity (and objectivity as a separate realm) into experiential realms. It is not necessary to assume a transcendental causation or interpretation.

Therapy, too, generates breakdowns between the experienter, his feelings parts, and unconscious material--different realms of phenomenal merger from Kensho. Sometimes both types of merger are used as an escape from being a person, or as a mistaken self-transcendence. But are there object-transcendent origins or other non-defensive causes of the No-mind, No-self experiences arising from solitary practices? Do these experiences, in themselves, have intrinsic value apart from transcendent interpretations, or from defense? Does their intensity or some other quality induce changes or initiate a sequence of transcendental object relations beyond the normal spectrum as Ken Wilber and Jack Engler propose? The selfless activity experiences mentioned before are obviously present in healthy people. They have defensive and healing functions, and are also normal experiences for a healthy and grounded self. But the pre-self, Kensho, No-mind experiences of the breakdown of experiential barriers and the disappearance of self are different from just becoming the subject or becoming absorbed in the objects or activities of everyday experience.

As Ken Wilber cogently points out, Kensho states are likely not a simple return to the infant's undifferentiated matrix, because the adult self is already fully formed. That structure does not disappear during Kensho. It may become transparent, but the self's structure remains. Boundaries separating experiential realms become permeable to give new perspectives on habitually structured experiences, but with little effect on the Gestalt of personal self enclosed within those boundaries. Boundaries merely enclose and encapsulate the self but are not the totality of its structure. The content or objects of consciousness change, but the basic structure of the core self and I-ness doesn't unless we deliberately use microanalytic merger on interpersonal feelings and images as in therapeutic microanalysis, bringing them into the self.

The breakdown of boundaries gives us increased understanding of the boundary processes and of the basic structure of subjective reality and the self. The selfless experience, depending on the type, may mark a partial return to the undifferentiated matrix allowing for a second try at differentiation or an attempt to gain relief from being separate and alone. It may also mark a substantial evolution of control over the boundary forming and maintaining processes; but is it a control that has any value in effecting personal-level changes? Do these selfless experiences induce personal changes that occur outside the range of consciousness, or are there other interpretations and meanings to them that better illumine what it is like to be human?

It would be very easy for me, steeped as my life has been in religion, to conjecture that Kensho indicates consciousness, boundaries and the personal are only apparent limitations of our flesh and brains. It would also be easy to interpret oneness experiences of any sort as proof that we are more than human, embodiments of the divine or of a universal consciousness localizing in ourselves. We all are confronted by terrors of death, losing those we love, and growing old; such a belief would be very comforting and very possibly true. But this belief could also rob us of just being human, of fully experiencing our vulnerability, our need for others and the utter humility of being a person. I believe this "hopelessness" is truly spiritual, to fully live the limitations of our humanness, and to each day strive to be more personal, connected for a brief historical moment with other souls. During that moment we have an opportunity to touch each other deeply, to love, and to share our fate. If God or a universal consciousness is involved in all this, so be it; but our primary focus ought to be on each other in this life.