

~~The~~ Zen of Non-Duality



Part One
One-Hand Clapping

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PART ONE One-Hand Clapping

Mindful Bird Illustrations
Mei-Rung Huang



All Zen is the Zen of Non-Duality

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Buddha - in the *Lankavatara Sutra*:

"Mind itself is not dualistic."

"...there are, Mahamati, those who have fallen into the dualistic way of thinking, being unable to comprehend the truth."

Buddha's Cousin Ananda, in the *Lankavatara Sutra*:[\(1\)](#)

Looking at the waves of the ocean and also at the mental agitations going on in the minds of those assembled, [Buddha thought of] the ocean of conscious mind, where evolving dualities [like the waves] are stirred by the wind of objectivity.

The Zen of Non-Duality

PART 1 – One-Hand Clapping

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Master Baizhang (709 – 788 J. Hyakujo)

When the time is appropriate, one suddenly achieves realization as if remembering something previously known, but then forgotten.

BUDDHA'S DHARMA OF NON-DUALITY

Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen (“Whey-nung” 638-713 Japanese: Eno)

Buddhism is not dualistic. The aim of Zen is to take hold of this non-duality of truth. ...Every possible form of dualism is condemned as not expressing the ultimate truth. [\(2\)](#)

Brain/Mind Researcher, Author, Professor Robert Ornstein

[Humans have] two major modes of consciousness, one analytic, one holistic...[\(3\)](#)

Cognitive Scientist, Professor Lay Leng Yeap

There is a need to recognize and accept the fact that there are two equally valid methods of acting upon, processing, perceiving, and storing information. [\(4\)](#)

Zen scholar and translator D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966)

Our rationalistic way of thinking has no use in evaluating Zen. Zen's uniqueness lies in its irrationality, or its passing beyond our logical comprehension. [\(5\)](#)

Buddha (c. Sixth Century BCE), *Lankavatara Sutra*

There are, Mahamati, those who have fallen into the dualistic way of thinking, being unable to comprehend the truth. [\(6\)](#)

INTRODUCTION

The heart of Zen is Buddha's plain teachings on Non-Duality from the *Lankavatara Sutra*. The *Lanka* is the foundational text of Zen. It's the one written scripture brought to China from India, around the end of the Fifth Century, by Zen's First Patriarch, Bodhidharma.

Master Huineng (638-713 J. Eno), the Sixth and final Patriarch of Zen who basically released Zen to the general public, confirms in Zen's *Platform Sutra* that "Non-Duality is the aim of Zen".

Perhaps the best known of all Zen teachings is Master Hakuin's Eighteenth Century koan: "*The Sound of One-Hand Clapping*". This famous metaphorical riddle is a clear hit at the dead center of mental dualism versus the holistic mindset of Non-Duality.

Perusing the words of Buddha himself in the *Lankavatara*, one can focus on his actual teachings about what non-duality is. And we can read his hints about how to achieve a personal experience of non-dual awareness.

If there is a single point to Zen, as Master Huineng suggests, then this has to be it: Buddha's simple teachings on Non-Duality from the foundational text of Zen.

1 - Sixth Patriarch (Master Huineng): The “Aim of Zen is Non-Duality”



In the late Seventh Century, Huineng, the Sixth (and final) Patriarch of Zen, explained that the “aim of Zen” is simply

“taking hold of the Non-Duality of Truth”[\(10\)](#)

The *Lankavatara Sutra* is the foundational text of Zen. The Lanka was importantly the only text that the First Patriarch, Bodhidharma, took with him when he emigrated from India into China, around the turn of the Sixth Century.[\(11\)](#) After that, Zen’s earliest generations of Bodhidharma’s followers were known locally in China as the *Lanka* school. The type of Indian Buddhism they were learning from the *Lanka* was called *Dhyana* in Sanskrit (meaning mind only), which the Chinese pronounced *Channa*, and then *Chan*. Much later when their unusual dharma was taken to Japan, that term morphed into the Japanese word *Zen*. (A better translation of *Dhyana* into modern English would probably be "pure consciousness only" i.e. Buddha's "sky without a cloud".)

A main objective of the *Lankavatara* is Buddha’s desire to fully explain Non-Duality, (and to simultaneously explain his underlying *Doctrine of the Two Truths*).

Basically, Buddha's "*Greater Truth*" (the first of the two) is simply unity or non-duality: the holistic mindset. That concept is fundamental. Non-duality is difficult to conceptualize, but Buddha helps us out with some metaphors and road signs in the *Lanka*.

And secondly (no pun intended), Buddha's "*Lesser Truth*" is two-ness or du-ality (the fragmented, linear, rational, non-holistic way of perceiving the world).

When Buddha says "*Two Truths*" here, he is not talking about "truth" in the way we connotate(12) that word. The term "System of Knowing" or "States of Awareness" would probably be a better English translation here than "Truth".

So a better English name for Buddha's *Doctrine of Two Truths* would probably be "*Buddha's Doctrine of the Two Systems-Of-Knowing*". But by whatever name, a main objective of the *Lankavatara Sutra* is Buddha teaching people about his *Two-Truths*.

The *Lankavatara* is Buddha's cousin Ananda's(13) transcript, of a lecture series Buddha delivered in Sri Lanka. He went to teach there at the request of Ravana,(14) the ten-headed Lord of Demons or Ashuras; and lord of the island fortress, Sri Lanka. With his ten heads, Ravana is the perfect poster-boy for duality, or multiplicity - isn't he?

Surely Carl Jung, at least, would say there's a reason why Buddha would choose the guy with ten heads to host his great lecture series teaching duality versus non-duality.

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Much of the *Lankavatara Sutra* falls quickly into place if we survey what it has to say about Buddha's two opposite truths, or two systems of knowledge.

In Sanskrit: the word *Prajna* (holistic-mind) names the "*Greater Truth*". And the word *Vijnana* (duality, comparison, analysis, rationality, etc.) is the "*Lesser*" of the two. Two complementary, and very different, ways to observe and interpret the world. The *Two Truths* (two states of conscious mind): non-duality and duality. Holistic *Prajna* (or bodhi-mind) versus dualistic *Vijnana*. *Prajna* sees the whole forest, and *Vijnana* sees individual trees.

D. T. Suzuki is known as the West's first major interpreter of Zen. He published the first English translation of the *Lanka* in 1932. It's still the definitive English version. In his introduction, Suzuki points out that the Two Truths are of "most essential" importance to Buddhist philosophy. And he mentions how explicit Buddha is in the *Lanka*, in pointing out the differences between them. Non-Duality and Duality:

Suzuki, introduction to his translation of the *Lankavatara Sutra*:

The *Lanka* is quite explicit in assuming two forms of knowledge: the one for grasping the absolute or entering into the realm of Mind-Only, and the other for understanding existence in its dualistic aspect in which logic prevails and the *Vijnanas* are active. ...To distinguish these two forms of knowledge is most essential in Buddhist philosophy.(15)

Duality is a concern we modern westerners share across the millennia with Buddha and the Tang Dynasty masters. Our contemporary philosopho-sphere is full of self-awareness pundits, philosophers, and seekers of many types, discussing this issue of dualism versus the holistic mindset (non-duality). The concept of holistic non-duality gets a lot of press these days. There are organizations specifically for non-duality. Seminars, conventions and workshops are being given, classes are being taught, and a lot of books are being written about non-duality. There are frequent conferences on science and non-duality; and currently at least one American publishing company specializes in books about non-duality. Buddha would certainly approve.



One can see by looking, that ten-headed King Ravana experiences the world through a super-dualistic twenty-eyed faceted lens. He has sort of a compound fly's-eye conceptualization of the world. This may partially explain why, in the ancient epic *Ramayana*, he kidnaps the goddess Lakshmi from her husband Ram (incarnation of Vishnu, Preserver of the World). Reality is fragmented into multiple pieces by Ravana's wrong perspective - literally. He's a perfect metaphor. There's no way Ravana could naturally have a singular, one-eyed, holistic view of anything. Obviously nobody could be a worse violator of Buddha's non-duality than ten-headed Ravana - who finally came asking Buddha for help. With his ten heads, Ravana is lost much deeper into duality than humans are.

Buddha makes it very easy for us, dualistic-minded humans, to identify with the *Lanka*'s protagonist, Ravana.[\(16\)](#) A reader, delving through the *Lankavatara* for the holistic perspective of bodhi-mind, will have an easy time understanding how ten-headed Ravana is feeling - as he listens to Buddha deprecating all those who are lost in duality. Those lost in duality: such as Ravana himself (and we who study Zen and the *Lanka*).

In the *Lanka*, Buddha is addressing both his host, ten-headed Ravana, as well as an interlocutor, the bodhisattva[\(17\)](#) called Mahamati.[\(18\)](#) Buddha warns them about the consequences of duality. His statement is perfectly clear. The holistic perspective of bodhi-mind is not available to those with a dualistic mindset.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*[\(19\)](#)

There are, Mahamati, those who have fallen into the dualistic way of thinking, being unable to comprehend the truth.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*[\(20\)](#)

The world cherishes dualism and is [thus] bewildered with wrong views.

Over and over in the *Lanka*, Buddha comes back to repeat what Suzuki called his "most essential" teachings, on how to recognize and achieve holistic bodhi-mind. And how to avoid slipping back into vijñana's dominant dualistic mindset.



A thousand years after the life of Buddha, in the late Seventh Century, Master Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, leaves no question about how important non-duality is to the core of Buddha's teaching. He explains precisely why the foundational text of Zen would be so focused on the issue of duality versus non-duality:

Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch(21)

...Buddhism is not dualistic. The aim of Zen is to take hold of this non-duality of truth.

We encounter the Sanskrit word *vi-jnana* repeatedly in the *Lanka*. Suzuki explains to us how the word itself is a great introduction to understanding what Buddha means by duality versus non-duality. The second part of the word *jna-na* refers to knowing. (Jna-na Yoga, for example, is the intellectual yoga, the yoga of knowing and knowledge.)

The ancient P.I.E.(22) word "jna" is the root of our words *know and knowledge* (jnowledge). And that's what it meant five thousand years or so ago. It's been sounded variously across millennia and different civilizations as *jna, kna, kno, or gno*. The ancient Greeks preserved this root in their word *gno-sis*, which we sometimes still hear in English, as well as its derivative *a-gno-stic* or not-knowing.

The prefix "vi" is the same P.I.E. root we see in the middle of our words *di-vi-de*, river, rival, and *individual*, etc. This root *vi* means to rive or to *divide*.(23) (Does it sound onomatopoeic?)(24)

So as Suzuki explains, the Sanskrit word *vi-jnana* therefore means the dualistic type of *knowing* or understanding the world - which comes from conceptually *ripping* or *dividing* the wholeness of your reality into individual objective parts.(25)

Vijnana is objectification. Vijnana is the process of discrimination; of seeing things as separate from each other. Vijnana is how we discriminate mother from father, sweet from sour, good from bad, and form from formless.

Some Buddhist systems have a separate vijnana for each discriminating sense; eye vijnana, ear vijnana, thought vijnana, etc. But it's always about the mental ability to distinguish or discriminate holistic unity into multiple *individual* objects. It's conceptually busting up the wholeness of reality into a bunch of fragmented parts, *divided* from each other. It's about learning to unfocus your innate attention from the whole forest, and see the *individual* trees instead. At its root, *vijnana* is losing sight of singularity, wholeness, or oneness.

Suzuki points out that concepts of Buddhist psychology like this are unsimilar to the kind of structures we encounter in western theories of mind. One must approach with a different outlook.

Our psychology books don't talk about vijnana. Vijnana comes from a very differently-oriented, so to speak, system of psychology.



Buddha explains that *vijnana* is the faculty by which we sentient beings are able to look beyond the wholeness or unity of reality. With *vijnana* we conceptualize the other, or the opposite: dualism or multiplicity. And thus we become consciously aware of differences between good and bad, form and no-form, being and non-being, etc. That changes everything. Exactly like *Book of Genesis* stories in the Garden of Eden.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra* [\(26\)](#)

Mahamati, *vijnana* falls into [the dualism of] form and no-form, being and non-being, and is characterized with multiplicity... *Vijnana* attaches itself to the multitudinousness of objects.

...[With *vijnana*] are seen things inferior, superior, and middling; things defiled and free from defilement; things good and bad.

***Vijnanas* are the waves of multiplicity.**

(Buddha's term "multiplicity" might really describe his intentions here better than the word "duality", since it's the same thing but more so. It's more inclusive and complete.)

————— . —————

Buddha says that the dualism of *vijnana* is foreign to mind itself. Mind, or consciousness, exists in a larger realm than duality. The dualism of *vijnana* is something we learn, or something we develop towards. Or maybe both.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([27](#))

Mind itself is not dualistic.

Buddha couldn't be more clear. If you're looking for his unified holistic Nirvana - then the only thing stopping you is your vijnana - the discriminating dualistic mindset. Avoiding vijnana is achieving bodhi-mind. Buddha tells us that's what Nirvana is all about:

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([28](#))

According to my teaching, Mahamati, the getting rid of the discriminating Mano-vijnana([29](#)) - this is said to be Nirvana.

...I enter into Nirvana when the vijnana, which is caused by discrimination, ceases.

Buddha's definition of non-duality is so clearly the ultimate extreme. He's saying we can reach a state of mind where we are conscious beings - but not consciously aware of any discriminations or dualities whatsoever. Pure bodhi-mind. We could have no thoughts involving good versus bad, desired versus not-desired, things inferior versus things superior, or even "being" itself versus non-being. Buddha describes a completely unified holistic mindset; with no conscious participation of vijnana at all.

Some say our holistic rightbrain holds this non-dual consciousness always there in still quiet awareness. But that awareness isn't usually noticed, since it's overshadowed by the prominent leftbrain's constant over-amped chattering dualistic analysis of everything.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([30](#))

...Transcendental knowledge is free from dualism.

...When the dualistic discrimination is gotten rid of, there indeed is perfect knowing.

Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen([31](#))

Every possible form of dualism is condemned as not expressing the ultimate truth.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([32](#))

To reach the Nishpanna [perfect knowledge/consciousness] it is necessary to transcend all forms of dualism.

Is that even possible? ...Let alone long-term desirable, or functional. Most of us will have to take it on faith that Buddha is not exercising extreme holistic license here. But all

the same it's important to understand Buddha's definition of the *Two Truths*, Vijnana and Prajna: duality and non-duality.

Whether really possible or not-possible, Buddha's extreme definition makes it very clear what he's talking about. We can see exactly how Buddha looks at things. He leaves no question about how we should interpret the Sixth Patriarch's statement, quoted above:

Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch(33)

Buddhism is not dualistic. To take hold of this non-duality of truth is the aim of Zen.

Ref_1: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki trans. (2009) p. 4.1.

Ref_2: Suzuki (1956) pp. 73-74.

Ref_3: Ornstein (1977) p. 12.

Ref_4: Ornstein (1997) p. 95.

Ref_5: Suzuki (1949) p. 20.

Ref_6: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) pp. 46-47.

Ref_7: *Shambhala Dictionary* (1991) p. 167.

Ref_8: *Before Huineng the dharma had been basically passed from just one master to one student each generation; all the way back thirty-one generations to the Buddha. We know the names of all thirty-one.*

Ref_9: *Huineng was the sixth, final, and definitive Patriarch (with a capital P) of Zen. For the past millennium all existing schools of Zen have traced their heritage through him. Huineng is often credited with grafting Bodhidharma's Indian Dhyana Buddhism onto the Chinese tradition of the Tao.*

Ref_10: Suzuki (1956) pp. 73-74.

Ref_11: *Middle of the Northern-Southern Dynasty; Bodhidharma died around 527.*

Ref_12: *Isn't connotation an interesting concept? In accepting that concept we admit that words don't have immutable meanings. As Buddha says in the Lanka, words and meaning are not the same thing. (Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki 2009, p. 166).*

Ref_13: *Buddha's cousin who attended him and wrote down from memory many of the canonical sutras.*

Ref_14: *The antagonist who kidnapped Sita, Rama's consort, in the Hindu epic Ramayana.*

Ref_15: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) pp. xxxi-xxxii.*

Ref_16: *Here's another clue for better understanding Ravana: In the great epic Ramayana he kidnapped deity (Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu). Doesn't that indicate he's as human as the rest of us?*

Ref_17: *The short definition is a person well on their way to becoming an enlightened buddha.*

Ref_18: *Maha-Mati (Great-Mind) is the bodhisattva who was asking the questions, basically interviewing Buddha, during the lecture series transcribed as the Lankavatara Sutra.*

Ref_19: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) pp. 46-47.*

Ref_20: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) p. 277.*

Ref_21: Suzuki (1956) pp. 73-74.

Ref_22: *Proto-Indo-European language: mother of Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, Latin, Greek, English, etc.*

Ref_23: *And di-vi obviously means to cut or rive into two pieces.*

Ref_24: *Ramachandran (2004) pp. 76-82 (bouba-kiki effect)*

Ref_25: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) Introduction pp. xxiii – xxvii.*

Ref_26: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) (1) p. 136 ; (2) p.18; (3) p.42.*

Ref_27: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) (1) p. 268; (2) p. 135; (3) p. 114*

Ref_28: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) p. 109.*

Ref_29: *Mano-vijnana, a mental vijnana or faculty for discriminating things and ideas from each other. See Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) pp. xxiii – xxiv.*

Ref_30: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) (1) p. 135; (2) p. 114.*

Ref_31: Suzuki (1956) pp. 73-74.

Ref_32: *Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) p. 114 in footnote.*

Ref_33: Suzuki (1956) pp. 73-74.

2 - The Psychology of Zen: Our Original Holistic Mindset



Basically, Zen psychology holds that we humans all start with an originally pure, holistic mindset, which then gets “corrupted” as we begin to conceptualize duality. [\(34\)](#)[\(35\)](#)

Buddha, Lankavatara Sutra[\(36\)](#)

...As is pure gold, water free from dirt, and the sky without a cloud, so is the Mind pure when detached from discrimination [duality].

The quest for humans like us is to rediscover that original holistic mindset. That non-conceptual, non-dualist mindset - Buddha’s sky without a cloud.[\(37\)](#) It’s the cornerstone of Zen. In Thomas Cleary’s words it’s “the essential initiatory experience of Zen.” The fundamental concept here is simply the existence of a pure, uncorrupted, non-dual state of original mind. One must take this for granted, in order to begin understanding the non-duality which Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch, calls “the aim of Zen”.

Four Zen masters quoted below, across twenty-five hundred years, address Buddhism’s holistic, non-dualist, “original mind”:

Buddha to Ravana, *Lankavatara Sutra*(38)

Mind itself is not dualistic.

Master Mazu (709-788 J. Baso)(39)

Ignorance is to be ignorant of one's original mind; and enlightenment consists simply in awakening to one's original nature.

Thomas Cleary, translator, author, and Zen scholar(40)

Zen writings commonly refer to... "original mind" as it is in itself, the universal ground of consciousness, concealed beneath the temporal conditioning that forces people to experience life through outlooks arbitrarily limited by their cultural, social, and personal histories. This realization is considered the essential initiatory experience of Zen...

Sixth Patriarch, Master Huineng in Zen's Platform Sutra(41)

... If you know your original mind, this is deliverance. Once you have attained deliverance this then is prajna.

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The main story in the *Platform Sutra* involves General Chen Hui-ming (called General Ming), around the year 700 [Tang Dynasty]. The illiterate rice-pounder, Huineng, is a non-student kitchen helper at the monastery, where the general has retired to study. One day Fifth Patriarch Hongren, who is the master of this Zen community, announces his recognition that the kitchen helper is the only one in the community enlightened enough to succeed him. When Ming and the other monks discover that this unlearned and illiterate rice-pounder is to be their master and teacher they become very angry and want to punish him. Patriarch Hongren tells rice-pounder Huineng to flee for his life, so he sneaks away in the night with Ming and several other vengeful monks close on his heels. Ming is the first to catch up with him, but at that moment the general has a realization:

Paraphrasing Zen's *Platform Sutra*:(42)

General Ming (in a perfect allegory of self-realization) suddenly realizes that the illiterate kitchen-helper Huineng is in fact the great hidden Sixth Patriarch of Zen. So the general repents, and begs Huineng to teach him dharma.

Huineng's subsequent teaching to General Ming at that moment is his first transmission, as the Sixth, and Final Patriarch of Zen. It's definitive. He has just furtively accepted Bodhidharma's robe and bowl from his master, Fifth Patriarch Hongren; as the sign of being the official successor. This is Huineng the Last Patriarch's first moment of releasing Zen to the public. And it distinctly encapsulates his understanding of the dharma. His instructions are simple. The dharma is primarily to stop thinking dualistically, and recover your original, holistic state of mind:

Sixth Patriarch, Master Huineng to General Ming, in Zen's *Platform Sutra*

When you're not thinking good, and not thinking not-good, then experience your own true original self.

In other words, the dharma of Zen is about non-duality. Just learn to avoid your *viñāna* for a while. Learn how to turn off your conscious awareness of separation between opposites such as good and not-good.⁽⁴³⁾ Follow Buddha's instructions, and stop objectifying your reality. Then you've got it. That's the definitive original teaching of Master Huineng, the Last Patriarch of Zen.

At least according to Huineng and the *Platform Sutra*, that's the heart and the aim of Zen; and that's what Zen is all about.



The *Lankavatara* reflexively describes Buddha traveling across the sea to Sri Lanka, to teach the massive gathering of bodhisattvas, at the invitation of Ten-Headed King Ravana. (This event happened twelve centuries before the above incident where General Ming catches up with Huineng in the forest; and instead of beating him up, begs him to transmit Buddha's hand-me-down dharma.)

With a poetic metaphor, the *Lanka* tells how our human consciousness is originally as still and deep as the ocean Buddha is traveling across toward Sri Lanka. But then our *viñāna*'s evolving dualities corrupt the original wholeness of our reality by breaking it into waves of conceptually-separated objects or "things". It's this mental process of dualistic objectification which stirs up and fractures our innate holistic mindset. And the *Lanka* explains that this is the process by which we end up lost in our morass of dualistic "wrong perspective":

Ananda, *Lankavatara Sutra*⁽⁴⁴⁾

Looking at the waves of the ocean and also at the mental agitations going on in the minds of those assembled, [Buddha thought of] the ocean of conscious mind, where evolving dualities [like the waves] are stirred by the wind of objectivity.

Buddha's explanation of duality here is not even vaguely scientific or empirical; but isn't it an extraordinarily informative metaphor?

As Suzuki suggests, Buddha's psychology feels conceptually different from the psychological structures we're used to addressing in the West. His metaphor here about objectivity and human consciousness is a complex and subtle statement, about aspects of consciousness that we don't usually think about. It's a different mindset. It takes getting used to.

Ref_34: Same as the story of Adam and Eve and the Tree of Duality ("Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil").

Ref_35: : This exact idea is precisely expressed in the *Platform Sutra*'s telling of how Hongren's great poetry dual settled the question of who would inherit Bodhidharma's robe and bowl, and become the Sixth Patriarch of Zen. Huineng won by arguing that there's originally nothing there to be corrupted.

Ref_36: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) p.113.

Ref_37: What a great metaphor.

Ref_38: Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) (1) p. 268; (2) p. 135; (3) p. 114.

Ref_39: Cheng (1992) p. 22

Ref_40: Cleary (2005-c) p. 3.

Ref_41: Yampolski (1967) p. 153.

Ref_42: As recounted by Koan 23 of the Gateless Gate collection.

Ref_43: ...or any other thing from its opposite, or its complement. How about desired and not-desired? That's the same as good and not-good, isn't it?

Ref_44: Lankavatara Sutra, Suzuki (2009) p. 4. (The English words and brackets here are Suzuki's)

3 - Labels and Language: Language is Duality



Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*[\(45\)](#)

Because of discrimination there is duality.

Buddha makes a real effort in the *Lanka* to explain the psychology of vijñana to us. Any time we discriminate, or mentally divide things up into separate objects, then Buddha says we've entered duality. This is vijñana, which prevents us from experiencing his dharma of holistic bodhi-mind.

To follow Buddha's thinking we have to remember that his psychology takes a different approach. It addresses very different issues than what we're used to, with our modern western paradigms of mind. Buddha and his followers slice the loaf up differently than how we're used to thinking about it.[\(46\)](#) Suzuki warns us: don't try to analyze Buddha's perspective, or stuff it into rational pigeon holes. You can't come at it with a dualistic mindset and skeptical rationality.

Imagine the person who doesn't conceptually discriminate between mauve and purple, or who doesn't bother to distinguish any difference between the colors of teal and turquoise. Consider the bespoke boyfriend who still hasn't noticed what color his new girlfriend's eyes are; much less the shade of her eye shadow. Imagine visiting a friend in northern Alaska, who carefully distinguishes many categories of snow, and employs dozens of distinct names for the different types. Those are all considerations of *vijnana*; a concept Buddha works hard to convey.

All these though are pretty mundane examples of *vijnana*, compared to the extremes addressed by Buddha. He's concerned about grand *vijnana*, such as the very separation of good from bad, form from formless, and being from non-being, etc. (He's specifically telling us, of course, that it's possible for us to mentally re-unite all that opposition into a singular awareness of holistic oneness.)

Is it possible that anybody could ever be more holistic than what Buddha is talking about here, with his absolute all-inclusive non-duality?

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Finally Buddha gets down to a more operational, mechanical, level; and instructs us in the *Lankavatara* that the conceptual process of attaching names, labels, and categories to things is a basic act of *vijnana* or discrimination.[\(47\)](#) For whatever the benefit of mental labels, words and language, Buddha tells us they inherently generate a dualistic mindset. Conceptualizing or filtering the world with words and language prevents holistic bodhi-mind. Buddha wants us to re-experience our original holistic mindset - devoid of leftbrain's labels, words and language, objectifications, comparisons, and pigeonholes. Just non-verbal, non-dual simple awareness.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*[\(48\)](#)

Words, Mahamati, are an artificial creation.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*[\(49\)](#)

Words come into being, Mahamati, with discrimination as their cause.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*[\(50\)](#)

By "discrimination" is meant that [mental process] by which names are declared. ...Saying that this is such and no other, for instance, saying that this is an elephant, a horse, a wheel, a person walking, a woman, or a man, each idea thus discriminated is so determined.

Buddha explains that filtering our understanding of the world through language is automatic dualism. The very act of thinking with words and grammar binds us into the dualistic mindset, and prevents an understanding of Buddha's holistic *Greater Truth*.

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Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([51](#))

The ignorant take hold of knowledge according to words, and are bound up like the silkworm with their own discriminations.

Master Linji (“Lin-gee” 810-866 J. Rinzai)([52](#))

You are hindered by the labels and slogans you grasp. They obstruct your perception of objective truth.

Physics Nobel Laureate Niels Bohr([53](#))

We are suspended in language in such a way that we cannot say what is up and what is down.

James Gleick on Feynman’s physics([54](#))

Our knowledge of things is inextricable from the language we use. The words and analogies from which we build our explanations are culpably linked with the things explained.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([55](#))

...The realm of self-realization is free from words and discriminations, having nothing to do with dualistic terminology.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([56](#))

Mahamati, words are not the highest reality, nor is what is expressed in words the highest reality.

Sixth Patriarch Huineng([57](#))

Whatever can be named leads to dualism. ...As long as there is a dualistic way of looking at things there is no emancipation.

The bodhisattva Manjusri in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*([58](#))

Non-duality is no speech, no explanation, no direction, and no representation, leaving behind all questions and answers.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([59](#))

...The highest reality is to be attained by the inner realization of noble wisdom [prajna]; it is not a state of word-discrimination. ...Therefore, Mahamati, you must try to keep yourself away from the various forms of word-discrimination.

Master Nanyue (677-744 J. Nangaku)([60](#))

If you say what a thing is, then you’re already wrong.

Master Zhaozhou (778 – 897 J. Joshu)([61](#))

Separating from words is self-liberation.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra*([62](#))

Mahamati, be not engrossed in the word-teaching.

Buddha, in his *Flower Sermon, Gateless Gate*, Koan #6 (63)

I have the eye of the true teaching, the heart of Nirvana, ...the ineffable stride of Dharma. It is not expressed by words.

So Buddha has said a whole lot in the *Lanka* about how discrimination and objectivity create vijñāna, the dualistic mindset. But it's not easy to visualize what he means, when he recommends his completely non-dual prajñā, or bodhi-mind. How do we conceptualize a mindset which isn't cognizant of the difference between form and formless, or being and non-being?

Given the difficulty of a human imagining complete non-duality, it might be useful to consider that some other life-forms such as bugs must exist in a mind-state something like that. Or how about lizards, chimpanzees, and maybe infant humans? The Zen masters talk a lot about how bodhi-mind is just returning to our original mindset. So maybe it could somehow actually be possible to experience for a moment that state of perfect non-duality, as Buddha suggests?

As far as instructions for how to get there, Buddha's most tangible recommendation in the *Lanka* is probably about labels, words, and language. He's very adamant that the basic act of labeling, naming, and categorizing is a definitive act of dualism. Of course mentally returning to our original mind, back before we started thinking in terms of namable objects and categories - though perhaps possible is clearly easier said than done.

But the masters say it's not something you can strive for and go get, in any case. It's not about "doing" anything. Master Mazu said "No Gate is the Dharma Gate. Those who seek the dharma should not seek for anything." Master Nanquan said "If you try to approach it, you go away from it. The more you seek after it, the more it moves away from you." It's something you have to just discover about yourself; like something you have to suddenly remember from a long time ago. Master Baizhang said "When the time is appropriate, one suddenly achieves realization as if remembering something previously known, but then forgotten."

Ref_45: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) (1) p. 180.

Ref_46: *Buddha is attempting, of course, to show us how to mentally un-slice our reality back into a single, unitary loaf again.*

Ref_47: *Maybe we can infer similarly for any use of mental definitions, symbols or indirect representations?*

Ref_48: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) p. 91.

Ref_49: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) pp. 76-77.

Ref_50: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) p. 195.

Ref_51: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) p. 141.

Ref_52: *Cleary* (1989) p. 6.

Ref_53: *Bricmont* (2016) p. 75.

Ref_54: *Gleick* (1992) p. 369.

Ref_55: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) pp. 76-77.

Ref_56: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) (1) p. 124; (2) p. 77.

Ref_57: (1) *The Platform Sutra, the Sixth Patriarch's recounting of his history and teachings*; (2)

Huineng quoted in Suzuki (1969) p. 36.

Ref_58: *The Book of Serenity*, Cleary (2005-b) p. 201; *Manjusri in a conversation with Vimalakirti*.

Ref_59: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) pp. 76-77.

Ref_60: Suzuki, D. T. (1994) p. 68.

Ref_61: *Green* (2001) p. 64.

Ref_62: *Lankavatara Sutra*, Suzuki (2009) p. 68.

Ref_63: *Reps* (1961) p. 95



Buddha, in his *Flower Sermon*, *Gateless Gate*, Koan #6 [\(63\)](#)

...the ineffable stride of Dharma. It is not expressed by words.

Sixth Patriarch Huineng [\(57\)](#)

Whatever can be named leads to dualism. ...As long as there is a dualistic way of looking at things there is no emancipation.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra* [\(49\)](#)

Words come into being, Mahamati, with discrimination as their cause.

Buddha, *Lankavatara Sutra* [\(28\)](#)

According to my teaching, Mahamati, the getting rid of the discriminating Mano-vijnana [\(29\)](#) - this is said to be Nirvana.

...I enter into Nirvana when the vijnana, which is caused by discrimination, ceases.

Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen ("Whey-nung" 638-713 Japanese: Eno) [\(2\)](#)

Buddhism is not dualistic. The aim of Zen is to take hold of this non-duality of truth. ...Every possible form of dualism is condemned as not expressing the ultimate truth.

AFTERWORD – Watching Non-Verbal Awareness



Try memorizing five or ten important historical dates, and then recite them to yourself several times. For example, 4.5 billion years ago the earth and solar system were formed; 66 million years ago the Chixulub meteor hit the earth and killed off the dinosaurs; 1859 Darwin published *Origin of the Species*, etc. In this experiment, using complicated events you're familiar with will be more interesting than simplistic ones.

Once you've memorized your list perfectly, recite it to yourself silently, but only the numerical dates – without the events that happened on those dates. As you go through the list, notice how your mind consciously associates the events with the dates you're reciting. Notice how the events are being conceptualized non-verbally, without any words, labels or specific symbols.

_____ . _____

Many self-awareness systems and Buddhist groups practice meditation with the tip of the tongue turned up so it's lightly touching the roof of the mouth. One modern reasonable-

sounding explanation for this practice is that both the mind and the body understand that talking is impossible in this position. Talking can't happen with that obstruction.

Obviously this presents a conscious mental reminder to stop conceptualizing in words. But another suggested effect is a bit more complicated. Because the dualistic leftbrain's linear operations depend so much on routines and circuits usually employed in naming and speaking, this tongue position supposedly tends to suppress leftbrain functions overall, allowing the non-duality of holistic rightbrain's awareness to be more noticeable.

(Isn't it interesting how many self-awareness practices employ methods to suppress speech.)

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