

Inner and Outer Object, Inner and Outer Gaze: Paradoxes of Buddhist Performance

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“I tell you that there is no making an end of suffering & stress without reaching the end of the cosmos. Yet it is just within this fathom-long body, with its perception & intellect, that I declare that there is the cosmos, the origination of the cosmos, the cessation of the cosmos, and the path of practice leading to the cessation of the cosmos.”¹

“Observe his inclination in yourself.”²

As a performer, a creator of charged intentional situations, who has found refuge, hope, and guidance in a Buddhist path of meditation and training, a ghost haunts me: the seemingly inevitable end of art as I understand it. I will rehearse here one version of this end, one that in some ways is the same end invoked in this passage from the Pali Canon: “the cessation of the cosmos”. The hinges, as so often in Buddhist phenomenology, are agency, activity, perception, and positionality.

Two people enter a theater from opposite ends.

To attend a “performance” can be broadly understood as the act of placing oneself in a situation where one is invited to give attention to something being *done*, with the only difference between live, or time-based arts, and plastic or static arts being the present tense of the actions being done rather than the predominately past. As modern understandings of “performance” have deepened, the word has come to describe many kinds of intentional

¹ Buddha, Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Rohitassa Sutta: To Rohitassa." <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn02/sn02.026.than.html>, Accessed 11/20/13.

² Shakespeare, Hamlet, 2.1.

action, with people performing gender, race, class, or any public activity in addition to traditionally craft, ritual, or aesthetically-oriented actions. Still, all of it can be understood as *doing*. That doing is apparent to any bodies within range as information arises through the physical senses (largely seeing and hearing, but performances have of course been crafted to stimulate all five physical senses). When we take in any sensory information, thoughts and feelings arise, so the “mind” -- which I’ll use to refer to the organ of thought and feeling -- is also engaged in the process, particularly in its responsive function, but the locus of the material being witnessed is conventionally considered to be “external” to the body of the audience member. Audience member X attends to the actions of performer Y, is percipient of sensory stimuli, and experiences “internal” thoughts and feelings as a result. This delineation of “internal” and “external”, or “inner” and “outer”, in relation to sensory information is impossible to sustain in philosophical argument -- the 1st century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna slam dunks the rebuttal in his *Root Verses of the Middle Way*³ -- but as consensus reality it is necessary in an inquiry into the relationship of meditation to performance.

If the heart of performance activity is to *do* and be witnessed *doing*, a fundamental stance of both roles in the performance equation is to attend to that which is *external* to oneself. The audience member is invited to attend to that which is external, engaging with sights, sounds, and other sensations mostly not originating in their own body and intentions. And the performer attends outside if she manipulates her own body and/or other physical materials while also considering in any way her actions from the position of an observer who is not herself. If a performer is crafting her actions in order to sculpt the sensory experience of the witness, we can say that she is attending to the outer, *even if her attention is on herself*. Here’s how Zeami, the founder of Nō theater, describes what we might call “outer gaze”:

³ Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (Boston: Wisdom, 2013).

“[One’s] outward behavior as seen by a spectator is ‘the objective view’ of oneself. Hence, what [someone] sees [of himself] through his own eyes is his ‘[subjective] view’. It is not the [same] view[point] as the objective view. To see [oneself] from the view[point] of the objective view is in effect [to adopt] a view[point] that is mentally the same as that of the spectator. At such a moment, [the actor] can discern the stage figure that he is creating.”⁴

Zeami encourages the Nō actor to see himself as *he imagines* the audience sees him, calling this gaze “objective”. The practice seems to be to construct mentally an external witness to your own dancing body, then imaginatively inhabit that witness in order to see -- and Zeami’s intent is clearly visual here -- the body. How different is this visual-imaginative somatic sense from proprioception: knowing (by implication from the inside, not through external feedback like mirrors) the body’s position in space, or being absorbed in physical sensation? All of these are ways we observe the body, but proprioception and sensation are internal gazes, where Zeami’s “objective” gaze *sees* itself as external. Imagination, of course, is a mental factor, and as such is thought, the quintessential internal phenomenon, but because the thought is directed toward the body as a material object, and necessarily situates the seer away from the body, it performs as external. The performer becomes audience, whose paradigmatic role in the theater is to observe the other, to objectify. If observation of one’s own body places one in the audience role, what of observation of one’s thoughts and feelings? Where does the witness sit for *these* dances? The search for the seat of the witness is at the heart of the Buddhist path, and a core aspect of that search is the reframing of sensory activity, the very substance of performance.

“Monks, I will teach you the All. Listen & pay close attention. I will speak.”
“As you say, lord,” the monks responded.

⁴ Zeami, "Kakyo: A Mirror of the Flower. Part One.," *Monumenta Nipponica* 37, no. 3 (1982): 372.

The Blessed One said, “What is the All? Simply the eye & forms, ear & sounds, nose & aromas, tongue & flavors, body & tactile sensations, intellect & ideas. This, monks, is called the All. Anyone who would say, ‘Repudiating this All, I will describe another,’ if questioned on what exactly might be the grounds for his statement, would be unable to explain, and furthermore, would be put to grief. Why? Because it lies beyond range.”⁵

The Buddha, in this short *sutta* (discourse) from the Pali Canon, asserts an ontological finality: that the senses and their objects comprise “All” of reality. In doing this, the text conflates a view of nature (ontology) with a description of direct experience (phenomenology). Taken as a view, it implies that the objects listed exist: the eye & [visible] forms, etc., and states unequivocally that nothing *else* exists. This analysis depends on a crucial step taken by the authors of the Pali Canon (the core body of originally oral texts that the Theravada school of Buddhism considers authentic), which is to consider the mind and its objects to be the same *kind* of things as the physical senses and their objects. The Buddhist understanding is that the mind is a “sense door”, and its objects -- thoughts, emotions, and states of mind -- are no more coming from or belonging to “me” than any other more clearly external sense object, like a table across the room, my lover’s body, or Kenneth Branagh playing Hamlet, about none of which do I make the mistake of thinking “this is me”. A traditional Buddhist argument for the not-self nature of seemingly subjective experiences like thoughts and feelings is that if they *were* the self or *belonged* to the self, they would be *under the control* of the self. Our inability to reliably direct either the body or the thinking mind is given as proof that neither should be considered “me” or “mine”. To discover for oneself if this is true, one is directed to practice, which consists primarily of cultivating calm, focused attention and directing it to sensory experience moment to moment. Is this kind of attention -- open awareness, or “mindfulness” (Pali: *sati*) of sense experience -- an inward or an outward gaze? Here’s a famous

⁵ Buddha, Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "Sabba Sutta: The All (SN 35.23)." Access to Insight. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.023.than.html>, Accessed May 12, 2012.

version of this practice, pared down to essentials for a wanderer who was in a hurry and wouldn't anyway live long. In it, the Buddha is instructing an ascetic named Bahiya.

“Herein, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: ‘In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.’ In this way you should train yourself, Bahiya.

“When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen... in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be ‘with that.’ When, Bahiya, you are not ‘with that,’ then, Bahiya, you will not be ‘in that.’ When, Bahiya, you are not ‘in that,’ then, Bahiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.”⁶

“Merely” refers to the focused quality of the attention, in which cognitive analysis and proliferation of thought is suppressed in favor of as simple as possible an engagement with the objects. “Merely what is seen... heard... sensed... cognized.” At first hearing, it is a directive toward an outer gaze. “To the things themselves.”⁷ As if the objects of the senses are a performance, and “you” are the audience. And what are we to find in this play, in these objects? “Merely” themselves, which flies awfully close to sense objects being Ideals. If this is indeed a phenomenology parallel, as it seems to be, we might perform Husserl’s *eidetic reduction* and look for the “essential natures or essences of the objects and acts of consciousness”⁸, but the Buddha doesn’t go there. Essential natures isn’t generally his thing, at least as he’s portrayed in the Pali Canon. He describes not an essence but a position. This position is a non-position, because there’s no thing that can be found to be in any particular place. “The All” already announced that there’s only six things ever happening, and here

⁶ Buddha, Trans. John D. Ireland, "Bahiya Sutta: About Bahiya (Udana 1.10)." Access to Insight. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.10.irel.html>, Accessed May 9, 2012.

⁷ Husserl’s famous phenomenological charge.

⁸ Joel Smith, "Phenomenology," Internet Encyclopedia of Phenomenology, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/phenom/>.

they're lumped into four: seeing, hearing, sensing, and cognizing, with the instruction to just let them be. Not even to observe them. To do so would create an observer. An audience. But an audience would be something outside the six senses, and there's no place for a witness or self in the All. What happens now? You are "not 'in that'... 'with that'... neither here nor beyond nor in between". There are no seats in the theater, and no standing room. All the world's a stage, and all the men and women players -- but where's the audience? Not 'with that'. What shift could cause such a cessation of positionality? The observer is unseated from his place in the head, but the object is not reified as either the self or an independent Ideal, since that would posit something more fundamental than "just what is seen". The object is seen to simply exist. Where can the observer, the seeker, the equanimous phenomenologist stand if not in the body, the reified object, or between? And then what's left of "art"?

"On an empty stage a single performer is facing the vacant rows of an absent audience: to whom to talk to, who would possibly listen, act, react? YOU/ME/WE. The doors remain closed, the performer will not allow any audience to enter. The experience of listening to one's own blood, breath, and imagining one's own gestures: how do I look like? Reading some lines out aloud. Installing basics such as light, screen, spacing of the stage, sounds, some props. Moving into the space of the audience.

"Performance FOR NO audience, the third staging of *Ongoing propositions under different conditions*, consists of a physical space for performance on stage and an online space for writing. The rehearsal takes place as the very moment at which these different spaces coincide and their determinant conditions tend to collapse. Fortunate in time their reciprocal suspension might allow for another space of playing to appear."⁹

Buddhist praxis suggests that attending to the process of sensing, or to the sense objects themselves, is the path to a non-positionality so radical that it ends the cosmos. And that this

⁹ Achim Lengerer and Sönke Hallmann, *Ongoing propositions under different conditions: Performance FOR NO audience.*, 2008. <http://automatist.net/deptofreading/wiki/pmwiki.php/PerformanceFORNOAudience>.

end happens *in the body* -- that looking elsewhere than the body is not necessary or even possible -- but that a witness position still cannot be found, either inside or outside the body. *Nothing* can be found outside the body, since where would one find any of the six aspects of the All except in the body. Observing a sight, I let the sight be. It wasn't myself anyway. But I see. And understand the activity called "seeing". The end of the cosmos happens as a result of understanding seeing (and hearing, sensing, cognizing). Not *doing*. This non-position non-doing leaves aesthetic activity ungrounded, vulnerable to dissolution as its suppositions and identities dissolve. Signifying nothing. Why make anything, again? This is the ghost.

But dissolving doesn't actually signify the end. You are not 'in that' or 'with that', but you also are not *not*. After all, Bahiya was there, listening to the teaching by the Buddha, and he practiced it. The *sutta* says "you should train yourself thus". Non-positionality is a *practice*, not a *reality* (ie: also not an Ideal). *Not* becomes a performance. It is performative, causing real effect (*doing*). Achim Lengerer and Sönke Hallman's piece, *Ongoing propositions under different conditions*, performed at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in Paris in November of 2008, announces the performance of the end. "*The rehearsal*", and here we could say "performance", or simply "All", "*takes place as the very moment at which these different spaces coincide and their determinant conditions tend to collapse.*" Not "at the very moment", but "as" the moment. No position, but a kind of doer-less doing. Rehearsal as moment of collapse. Why is it rehearsal instead of performance taking "place as the very moment"? Because "performance" might fool me into thinking that something could be accomplished, and thus end. Be seen, and thus secure. Rehearsal never becomes performance because there never could be a performance -- never even a momentary end point. *Not* performing. There are sights, sounds, sensations, and thoughts. But nowhere left to stand.

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