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# THE SOMAESTHETICS OF HEAVINESS AND HARA IN ZEN BUDDHIST MEDITATION

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## The Breath of Buddhist Meditations

The earliest meditative practice of Buddhism may well have been *ānāpānasati* (“mindfulness of breathing”), the value of which consisted in its developing serene concentration (*samatha* or *samādhi*) and insight into the true nature of reality (*vipassanā*).<sup>1</sup> Within many traditional Buddhist contexts, this came to involve a close coordination of *ānāpānasati* and *vipassanā*.<sup>2</sup> Here the practitioner typically begins with

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<sup>1</sup> *Ānāpānasati* means “mindfulness” or “awareness” (*sati*) of “breathing” (*ānāpāna*). The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (*The Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing*) is the 118th discourse in the *Majjhima Nikāya* of the Pāli Canon (also known as the *Tipiṭaka*). It attributes *ānāpānasati* to the Buddha and refers to it as the core liberating practice of early Buddhists. Section 2 of the *sutta* describes how the Buddha observes the breath while sitting beneath a tree: “Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’” *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 118.

*Samatha* or *samādhi* is typically rendered as “serenity,” “concentration,” or “absorption” (as we will see later). *Vipassanā* (literally, “special” [*vi-*] “seeing” [*passanā*]) means “insight.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ānāpānasati* was believed to be especially conducive to yielding insight into the true nature of things, and thus became closely associated with another form of meditation frequently referred to by traditional Buddhists: *vipassanā*. This is evident in the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (the 10th discourse of the *Majjhima Nikāya*), the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (the second “basket” or *piṭaka* of the Pāli Canon), and the *Visuddhimagga* (the 5th century text of Buddhaghosa that stands as the most influential treatise on traditional Buddhist meditation outside of the *Tipiṭaka*). In recent centuries, several “modern” Theravāda Buddhists (especially in Burma, Thailand, and

*ānāpānasati*. With eyes closed, he or she passively observes the breath at the tip of the nostrils and then expands their awareness to sensations in other areas involved in nasal respiration.<sup>3</sup> After concentrating the mind through this exercise, the practitioner takes up *vipassanā*: they survey the various sensations of the body, starting from the crown of the head and working their way down to the toes, and then moving back up in the reverse direction.<sup>4</sup> While these sensations can be externally oriented (e.g. the sense of the skin touching one's shirt), they can also be internal (the sensation of one's heartbeat, the feeling of muscle fastened to ligaments and bones, the sense of various mental and emotional phenomena). But whatever sensation it is that one encounters, the *vipassanā* meditator treats sensations as impermanent and lets them go once they arise. This is meant to facilitate a fluid, continuous movement across the field of sensations: even if one encounters an uncomfortable feeling, their attention does not linger on the sensation.<sup>5</sup> The concern to

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Sri Lanka) re-interpreted core Buddhist texts (in particular, the *Satipatthāna Sutta*, the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, and the *Visuddhimagga*) with an eye to enhancing the significance of *vipassanā* ("insight") over *samatha* or *samādhi* (serenity, concentration). While such developments are indeed creative revisions of early Buddhist meditative practice, they nonetheless take place within the Theravāda frame. For this and related reasons, I refer to these modern adaptations as still within the fold of "traditional Buddhism." For more on this, see Robert H. Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," *Numen* 42, no. 3 (1995): 228–283, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3270219>.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast with breath retention and other practices of yogic *prānāyāma* (which regulate breathing), in *ānāpānasati* one simply becomes aware of how breathing is happening in itself. Typically, one feels sensations of coolness on the ingoing breath and warmth on the outgoing breath. After some time with this, one then directs awareness to sensations in adjacent areas involved in respiration: inside of the nostrils, at the top of the upper lip, and the whole triangular area from the top of the nose to the top of the upper lip. This is prescribed by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu and S. N. Goenka, among others. For more details on this, see Buddhādāsa, *Getting Started in Mindfulness with Breathing: Accessible, Beginning Steps for Ordinary People*, trans. Santikaro (Bangkok: The Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives and Liberation Park, 2015); also consider William Hart, *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S. N. Goenka* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> This body scan might move in the following order: crown of the head, skin around the skull, face, ears, neck, right shoulder to right fingers, same with the left, front torso, back of the torso, right hip, thigh, knee, calf, ankle, foot, toes, same with left. I again refer the reader to Buddhādāsa, *Getting Started in Mindfulness*; and Hart, *The Art of Living*, for sample instructions concerning this method.

<sup>5</sup> If a certain location has been overlooked, is experienced as cloudy, quiet, or numb, or displays a gross, impenetrable thickness, then the practitioner may go back and attend to such areas. But it is important that one's attention does not become fixated such that the given

avoid fixation holds throughout the exercise. Aside from gently shifting one's attention from the breath to the next adjoining part of the body, the practitioner does not intervene in, critique, or react to the character of their breathing, the quality of a given sensation, or the content of thoughts and emotions – one does not even try to make sense, as it were, of these sensations. Importantly, though, it is the breath that remains the grounding phenomenon of *vipassanā*: the traditional Buddhist meditator begins with and regularly returns to observing the breath (especially when the mind wanders, becomes distracted, or gets engrossed by a painful sensation).<sup>6</sup>

As the practitioner develops facility with these exercises, the breath softens, the senses sharpen, the body scan becomes more fluid (one eventually surveys the body in a single breath cycle), and one experiences *samādhi* – an experience of concentration or absorption, including even the nondual awareness of the body and mind in a singular, unified body-mind sensation.<sup>7</sup> But of course, this is a distinctly Buddhist practice, and so its ultimate goal is to alleviate suffering. For the Buddha, we suffer not just because accidents happen (one stubs their toe or gets a cold); suffering is more subtle and ubiquitous than physical pain.

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sensation overpowers their attention and generates new *samskāras* (especially the mental traces of anger and aversion). For this reason, the meditator should first strengthen their awareness, equanimity, and concentration before attending to “stuck” areas. Prematurely doing so can not only disrupt the flow of the body scan, it can have damaging consequences. Goenka gives attention to this at Hart, *The Art of Living*, 69–80.

<sup>6</sup> Some attention is given to this in a study of the meditative practice recommended by Buddhādāsa in Geoffrey Ashton, “Losing my Mind and Loving Mosquitoes, Crickets, and other Jungle Inhabitants: Reflections on Field Research and its Frustrations at a Buddhist Meditation Retreat in Southern Thailand,” in *At Home and In the Field: Ethnographic Encounters in Asia and the Pacific Islands*, eds. Suzanne S. Finney, Mary Mostafanezhad, Guido Carlo Pigliasco, and Forrest Wade Young (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 278–284. Goenka gives even more explicit attention to this in his teachings. For this, see S. N. Goenka, *Discourse Summaries* (Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> The association of mind-body nondual realization with some sort of liberating awareness is given little to no attention in early Buddhist texts. However, more modern applications of *ānāpānasati* and *vipassanā* have been known to elicit such experiences. Much of this is based on my own first-hand experiences and personal conversations with practitioners. For a documented account of this, consider the discussion concerning how to practice Buddhist meditation toward the realization of mind-body nondualism available at: Michael W. Taft, “How to Do Nondual Vipashyana,” *Deconstructing Yourself*, June 4, 2021, <https://deconstructingyourself.com/how-to-do-nondual-vipashyana.html>.

We suffer because our lived reality does not conform to how we think it ought to be – either because things change in ways that we would not prefer (what the Buddha calls “the suffering of change”) or because reality does not conform to the habituated conditions that we impose on it (“the suffering of conditioned states”).<sup>8</sup> Buddhist meditation attempts to remedy this by training the mind to let go of the *ought* and allow things to show themselves *just as they are*, as given to the senses and prior to language. From this, the Buddha articulated the following *negative* insights, that is, insights into *the way things are not*. Things are irreducible to distinction between mind and matter, purified of the need to be seen in any particular or predetermined way, and empty of mineness or self (everywhere the Buddha looks for the “I” or self, he finds only its absence). Such realizations were seen to have tremendous practical value: that which the Buddha calls *dukkha* (suffering, misery, dis-ease) loses its power to capture one’s attention.<sup>9</sup>

As Buddhism spread throughout Asia, its theoretical and practical philosophies adapted to the presuppositions of new cultural arenas. The emergence of Japanese Zen Buddhism exemplifies this. In keeping with its Buddhist roots, Zen is fundamentally concerned with alleviating suffering and outlines a way of life where meditative practice occupies a central place. But there are nuanced differences between the meditations devised in traditional Buddhism and the form of “seated meditation” (*za-zen*) widely taken up by Zen Buddhists. Zen and *zazen* thrived in Japan largely because they were able to recast Buddhist concerns in a way that successfully accommodated East Asian ways of be-

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<sup>8</sup> The Buddha refers to these as *vipariṇāma-dukkha* and *saṃkhāra-dukkha*, respectively; see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London: The Gordon Fraser Gallery, Ltd, 1978), 19.

<sup>9</sup> As the 5th century Theravāda Buddhist monk, Buddhaghosa wrote: “Mere suffering exists, but no sufferer is found; The deeds are, but no doer is found” (*Visuddhimagga*, 513; quoted at Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 26). This statement does not deny that suffering takes place. It simply means that phenomena as they appear before the senses, including phenomena that induce the experience of suffering, do not originally show an “I” who stands as the owner of that suffering. The skilled practitioner still experiences uncomfortable sensations as *uncomfortable*. But because he has disciplined his attention to phenomena without fixating his attention on those arisings, and because he has recognized that the sufferer is not ultimately real but instead is a derivative, conventional reality, then suffering-inducing phenomena are not binding in any ultimate sense. Rahula offers further analysis along these lines at *What the Buddha Taught*, 73.

ing in the world (those of Confucianism and Daoism, in particular).<sup>10</sup> Focusing upon developments within Japanese Rinzai Zen, this paper examines how *zazen* redeploys the body, sensation, and breath in terms of an explicitly somaesthetic orientation.<sup>11</sup> In short, the Zen meditator learns how to face suffering by developing three features of a somaesthetics that are generally not emphasized in traditional Buddhism: the postural form of the body, the capacity to perceive weight, and above all, the performance of breathing from the lower belly or *hara*.

### The Weight of Suffering

In order to appreciate the differences between more traditional Buddhist practices (including modern *Theravāda* *Buddhisms*) and those of Zen, let us situate Zen in the context of Buddhism's core theme: suffering. With the first Noble Truth, "All this is suffering" (*sarvam idam duḥkham*), the Buddha believed that he was speaking to a universal human concern. But Zen may not share the same presuppositions about suffering as did the Buddha.

Since this essay is enframed by the English language and its tacit philosophical assumptions, let us first consider some attitudes toward suffering that run deep in Western languages and cultures. Largely due to the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in the "Western world" we take for granted the value of light and lightness over the dark and heaviness. In order to lead a life of religious, epistemic, and moral truth, we are often taught to step out of the darkness and "into the light" (e.g. the light of God), to resolve the obscurity of misunderstanding and have things "come to light" (the light of reason), and to stand upright away from the depravity of vice (original sin) and "take the

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<sup>10</sup> Among other things, Zen integrated Confucian notions of relational personhood and authoritative conduct (*ren*), and Daoist theories of *chi* (vital energy) and practices of inner alchemy (*neidan*). A sequel paper in progress explores these themes further as they pertain to *zazen*. An excellent study of this is provided by Peter Hershock, *Chan Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> For the sake of brevity, this paper uses the term "Zen" to refer to Rinzai Zen, with a focus on the Tenryū-ji (beginning 14th century) and Chōsei Zen (21st century) lineages.

high road” of virtue.<sup>12</sup> By following such a program, we can more fully enjoy the lightness, levity, and love that stem from our higher (often construed as divine) nature.

For an illustration of this, consider Van Gogh’s painting, “Miners’ Wives Carrying Sacks of Coal” (shown in Figure 1). Here we find a group of women burdened by heavy bags of coal. Each of them is hunched over (some at almost 90 degrees) as they walk along a dark, barren, snow-covered path. They are depicted as passive, powerless victims forced to undergo overbearing work conditions. Note how the woman in the left part of the painting looks back, seeming to express a world-weariness and general sense of dis-ease. The painting conveys the heavy weight of suffering: to suffer is to bear a burden (physical, mental, spiritual) and continue on without much choice.

The etymology of “suffering” corroborates this interpretation of van Gogh’s painting.<sup>13</sup> The word is comprised of two Latin parts: the prefix “*sub*” (meaning “under,” “below,” “beneath” [e.g. submarine] and “secondary” [e.g. “subordinate”]), and “*ferre*” (meaning “to carry,” “to endure,” “to bear” [e.g. a “ferry” or transport ship]). Put simply, to “suffer” means to be made to under-go, endure, or feel oneself beneath a burden that one must bear or carry.

Understanding suffering in these terms gives clues to the meaning of *duhkha* – the Sanskrit term commonly translated into English as “suffering.” *Duhkha* (*dus* + *kha*) often gets rendered as “having a bad axle,” where *dus* connotes “bad,” “difficult,” and *kha* means “axle hole.”<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>12</sup> Such phrases are well-known to natural English speakers, and their latent presuppositions typically run deeper in those speakers enculturated in arenas that have been influenced by Judeo-Christian values. To give one example, consider a passage from the Gospel of John (1.4-1.9): “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. There came a man sent from God, whose name was John [...] He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light. There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (La Habra: CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2006), 1539–1540.

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to my colleague, Tom Cavanaugh, for bringing Van Gogh’s painting to my attention, as well as for his interpretation of this painting in terms of the etymology of “suffering.” I also thank Gordon Greene for his comments on the possible meanings of “Miners’ Wives Carrying Sacks of Coal.”

<sup>14</sup> “*Dus*” changes to “*dub*” as a regular feature of sound combinations (*sandhi*) in Sanskrit: the “s” changes to a “h” (*visarga*) when the following syllable begins with a “*kh*.” Meanwhile, the



Figure 1: Vincent van Gogh, “Miners’ Wives Carrying Sacks of Coal,” 1882, Watercolor, Paper (Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands).<sup>15</sup>

presumably refers to the discomfort of riding in a cart with a bad axle caused by one of its wheels having an off-center hole.<sup>16</sup> But some scholars interpret *duḥkha* differently, including the renowned Sanskritist, Mon-

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Pāli spelling is *dukkha*, where the “*dus*” morphs into “*duk*” according to the *sandhi* rules of the Pāli language. Pāli is a Middle Indo-Aryan language that was used by the Buddha and which would become the language of the Buddhist Pāli Canon (*Tipiṭaka*) and the liturgical language of Theravāda Buddhism.

<sup>15</sup> Image available at “Vincent van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Quotes, and Biography,” accessed November 30th, 2023, <https://www.vincentvangogh.org/miners-wives-carrying-sacks-of-coal.jsp#>.

<sup>16</sup> Winthrop Sargeant (who may have been a better song writer and musician than a scholar of Sanskritic philosophies), writes: “The ancient Aryans who brought the Sanskrit language to India were a nomadic, horse- and cattle-breeding people who travelled in horse- or ox-drawn vehicles. *Su* and *dus* are prefixes indicating good or bad. The word *kha*, in later Sanskrit meaning ‘sky,’ ‘ether,’ or ‘space,’ was originally the word for ‘hole,’ particularly an axle hole of one of the Aryan’s vehicles. Thus, *sukha* [...] meant, originally, ‘having a good axle hole,’ while *duḥkha* meant ‘having a poor axle hole,’ leading to discomfort.” Winthrop Sargeant, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 303.

ier Monier-Williams.<sup>17</sup> He argues that *dub-kha* originally meant *dus-sthā*. “Dus” is not controversial: it is the original syllable. More difficult to discern is that the “kha” of “*dub-kha*” derives from “ $\sqrt{sthā}$ ,” meaning “to stand.” Monier-Williams calls attention to how the writing of “kha” (ख) appears nearly the same as for the verbal root, “ $\sqrt{sthā}$ ” (स्था). Due to phonological changes in the development of Sanskrit (so goes the argument), the writing of “*dus-sthā*” (दुस् - स्था) changed to “*dub-kha*” (दुः- ख), at which point the initial literal denotation became concealed. This suggests a different grounding in lived experience for the meaning of *dubkha*: “standing badly,” “an improper manner of standing,” or “difficult to stand.” In other words, suffering has a visceral basis: bad posture. The “difficulty in standing” (*dub-kha*) that one observes with the women depicted in Van Gogh’s painting might thus be seen as a direct physical manifestation of their suffering (*sub-ferre*). *Dubkha* results not from having ridden in an imbalanced chariot, but from standing poorly underneath a heavy burden.<sup>18</sup>

India’s most famous philosopher of suffering is the Buddha, and he seems to view *dubkha* in a like-minded way. In speaking to his disciples, the Buddha relates *The Parable of the Raft*:

Oh monks, a man is on a journey. He comes to a vast stretch of water. On this side the shore is dangerous, but on the other side it is safe and without danger [...] There is no bridge for crossing over [...] It would be good therefore if I would gather grass, wood, branches and leaves to make a raft, and with the help of the raft cross over safely [...] Having crossed over and got to the other side, suppose that man should think: “This raft was of great help to me [...] It would be good if I carry this raft on my head or on my back wherever I go.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1899), 483.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, the meanings of the Sanskrit term *dubkha* (or the Pāli *dukkha*) are more nuanced and varied than one single interpretation can capture, including my own. I do not pretend to achieve an exhaustive analysis here, and I would welcome comments about precisely how early Buddhists understood this term. For now, I emphasize that my intention here is just to open space for a philosophical reconsideration of the meanings of *dubkha*. To this end, I hope that this etymological analysis helps to disclose previously hidden shades of meaning.

<sup>19</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 11–12. I use Rahula’s reference to this parable, given in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*.



The Buddha then asks rhetorically: “What do you think, oh monks? If he acted in this way, would that man be acting properly with regard to the raft?” He answers his own question: “No, sir [...] It would be good if I beached this raft on the shore, or moored it and left it afloat [...] In the same manner, oh monks, I have taught a doctrine (*dhamma*) similar to a raft – it is for crossing over, and not for carrying.”<sup>20</sup>

The “dangerous,” near side of the shore represents a life of suffering (*duḥkha*), whereas the far shore connotes the experience of *nirvāṇa* (Sanskrit; Pāli: *nibbāna*). More than simply a description of two ways of being, this parable summons us to cross over to the other side of the water by taking a particular attitude toward *duḥkha*: let it go. The Buddha is so intent upon this that he calls us to let go of all things, including his own teachings – even the *dhamma* can become a burden that pulls us down into suffering. He exhorts his disciples at the end of *The Parable of the Raft*: “You, oh monks, who understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, should give up even good things (*dhamma*); how much more then should you give up evil things (*adhamma*).”<sup>21</sup>

In support of this radical call, the Buddha articulates a practical psychology of craving or thirst (*tṛṣṇā*). Craving is a primary cause of suffering because it binds our present feelings, thoughts, and actions to the past.<sup>22</sup> For example, suppose that I am entrapped by anger toward my neighbor, who damaged my fence last month and refuses to fix it. Meditations such as *ānāpānasati* and *vipassanā* were designed to remedy this. The practitioner becomes aware of presently arising sensations, e.g. the inbreath at the entrance to the nostrils, the physical sensation of the skin in contact with one’s shirt, the mental sensation of a memory. Craving may take place with respect to these sensations, thus giving rise to thoughts such as “The feeling of this shirt on my skin is uncomfortable, and so I want to remove it,” or “The memory of my neighbor’s

<sup>20</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 12. This passage uses the Pāli spelling, *dhamma*, to denote the teachings of the Buddha. The Sanskrit term is *dharma*.

<sup>22</sup> The Buddha identifies three forms of craving (Sanskrit: *tṛṣṇā*; Pāli: *tanhā*): *kāma-tṛṣṇā* (craving for sensual pleasures), *bhāva-tṛṣṇā* (craving for existence), and *vibhāva-tṛṣṇā* (craving for non-existence). Paul Williams and Anthony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2002), 43–44.

actions makes me angry, and so I want to sue him.” However, by disciplining one’s attention, one notices how thirst takes place separate from and subsequent to the earlier sensation (of the shirt on one’s skin, of the memory of one’s neighbor, etc.).<sup>23</sup> From this clear awareness of the temporal gap between the two moments, the meditator learns to distinguish the arising of a given sensation and the manifestation of craving with respect to that sensation.<sup>24</sup> This opens up a certain psychic distance from thirst: firmly rooted in the presently arising feeling itself, the meditator discovers the ability to not react to sensations. In turn, the craving gets deprived of its fuel. This does not eliminate unpleasant sensations from ever taking place again (I may continue to experience frustration with respect to the memory of my neighbor’s actions); but having disciplined the felt need to react to sensations, one steadily extinguishes that which feeds unhealthy modes of emotional response (forms of craving such as anger) and the exacerbation of suffering. Put differently, the meditator learns how to shed the weight of the past, and as a result, becomes free to experience present happenings more clearly.

Zen agrees with the Buddha’s general message. But it does not adhere to some values that the parable takes to be self-evident. Consider that the Buddha relates the journey toward “the other shore” as an individual endeavor, and that his raft (i.e. the *dhamma*) is meant to be “beached on the shore, or moored and left afloat.” He is not to use it for returning to the near shore and traversing back and forth. Above all, the raft is “not [meant] for carrying.”<sup>25</sup> I draw attention to this for

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<sup>23</sup> Importantly, sensation and thirst arise sequentially, not in synchronicity – otherwise, the Buddha’s analysis of the arising of suffering in terms of a sequence of causes and effects would have no value. Rahula explains: “It is this ‘thirst’, desire, greed, craving, manifesting itself in various ways, that gives rise to all forms of suffering and the continuity of beings. But it should not be taken as the first cause, for there is no first cause possible as, according to Buddhism, everything is relative and inter-dependent. Even this ‘thirst’, *tanhā*, which is considered as the cause or origin of *dukkha*, depends for its arising (*samudaya*) on something else, which is sensation (*vedanā*), and sensation arises depending on contact (*phassa*), and so on and so forth goes on the circle which is known as Conditioned Genesis (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).” Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 29. The various spokes in this conditioned wheel of suffering and their sequential, causal interrelations are related in several early Buddhist texts. For more on this, see Henry Clark Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 90.

<sup>24</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 72–74.

<sup>25</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 12.

two reasons. For one, it illustrates differences in theorizing the *bodhisattva* ideal. Theravāda Buddhism generally views the *bodhisattva* as an exceptional (and thus, rare) individual who is resolved upon becoming a Buddha, whereas Mahāyana widens the *bodhisattva* path, making it available to all persons.<sup>26</sup> Mahāyana Buddhism also associates this ideal with a spontaneously arising compassion: its *bodhisattva* strives to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of *all* beings, not just themselves. *The Parable of the Raft* does not portray such a notion of the *bodhisattva*: in saying that the boat should be docked at the far shore, and thus not used to ferry across other seekers of *nirvāṇa*, the Buddha emphasizes that each of us must realize *nirvāṇa* for ourselves and through our own efforts, not for the sake of another or by riding on the backs of others' achievements.

A second difference between traditional Buddhist and Zen attitudes follows upon the first, and it echoes the above connotation of *duḥkha* (suffering) as standing poorly beneath a weight. Since for the Buddha, one's own enlightenment does not depend on saving others, then there is no need to carry or hold onto the raft. Going further, not only is it unnecessary for a Buddha to shoulder this burden (since he has already arrived to the far shore), the weight of the raft impedes the way forward. It threatens to drag him down into darkness and deprive him of *nirvāṇa*, enlightenment, or that liberating sense of *being filled with* or *made into light* – where light signifies both shining (or illuminating) and being less heavy (such as when one levitates or just experiences levity in general).<sup>27</sup>

Based on this, it certainly would *not* “be good if I carry this raft on my head,” the Buddha suggests.<sup>28</sup> But is it not possible to be under what one carries (*sub-ferre*) without exhibiting suffering? Must the weight of things entail standing badly (*dus-sthā*) and aggravating compulsive pat-

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<sup>26</sup> This individualism is in keeping with prevailing Indian views of liberation: spiritual pursuits were widely seen to be private, personal affairs. For more on this, see Jeffrey Samuels, “The Bodhisattva ideal in Theravāda Buddhist Theory and Practice: A Reevaluation of the Bodhisattva-Śrāvaka Opposition,” *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 3 (July 1997): 399–415.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the etymology of “light” and “enlightenment,” see Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1780–1783.

<sup>28</sup> Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 12.

terns of action and re-action (*karma*)? Consider the long-time practice still evident in many rural, non-Western cultures, where one carries a heavy basket of food or other items on their head. In Figures 2–4, these women stand beneath a weight but show no sign of suffering. Contrary to the depressed, caved-in bodies depicted in van Gogh’s painting, these women carrying baskets exhibit a certain ease, grace, and vitality. Presumably, they do not personify suffering because their motor and sense organs are not passive in the face of suffering. Instead of just witnessing the sensation of heaviness and letting it fall by the wayside, they acutely feel the weight of things and coordinate their bodies with a view to actively receiving weight, allowing it to drop directly into and through their bodies.



Figures 2–4: Three women carry baskets on their head, and the weight drops through them.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Fig. 2: Indian woman carrying basket on her head on a beach after fish sale, Morjim, March 11, 2013 in Goa India (Shutterstock/alexnika). Fig. 3: Indian woman in Tanjore in the Tamil Nadu region of southern India (Shutterstock/Steve Allen). Fig. 4: Indian woman walking on the fog street in Varanasi, India with the basket on the head (Shutterstock/Anastasiia Gooz).

These three women carry three baskets. The correlative to this in Pāli is “*ti-piṭaka*” (lit. “three baskets”) – a term that, as noted above, also refers to the authoritative teachings of the Buddha (i.e. the Pāli Canon). Most likely, these women never carried or studied the *Tipiṭaka* of Buddhism. Traditionally, only men were taught the “Three Baskets” of the Buddhist Canon, while women (perhaps more so than men) were tasked with carrying ordinary baskets.<sup>30</sup> But might the experience of ferrying beneath the weight of ordinary baskets have taught them about suffering in other ways? People living in industrialized countries stopped carrying baskets on their heads long ago. The Industrial Revolution replaced this practice with more efficient transport machines (e.g. motorized carts) and corresponding skills (driving cars, learning how to fix cars), all of which enabled us to transport ourselves here and there while levitating over the landscape.<sup>31</sup> But have we since forgotten how to *sub-ferre*, to stand beneath things? And did we forget how to suffer just as we forgot what it’s like to dwell in the dark or to carry things on our heads?

### *Zazen* and the Somaesthetics of *Hara* Breathing

According to Zen, suffering is a psycho-physical phenomenon that affects the mind through the physical body.<sup>32</sup> By training the body to stand beneath the weight of things in the right way, one can ameliorate the problem of suffering, including mental suffering. To this end, Zen envisions the body as somatic (that is, as both a living and lived body) and has developed a regimen of somaesthetic practices that center around the experience of heaviness.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The three “baskets” or primary sections of the *Tipiṭaka* include the rules of monastic life (Pāli: *vinaya*), the sermons of the Buddha (*suttas*), and the philosophical and psychological analysis and interpretation of Buddhist doctrine (*abhidhamma*).

<sup>31</sup> For an interesting study on this and related topics, see Peter Adey, *Levitation: The Science, Myth and Magic of Suspension* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Reaktion Books, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Recall the above note: by “Zen,” I refer to the Rinzai Zen lineage known as Chosei Zen, which traces itself back to Tenryū-ji (beginning 14th century).

<sup>33</sup> Somaesthetics is broadly concerned with the following: (1) the aesthetic experience and usage of the body (*soma*) as a somatic body, that is, as living, sentient, and purposive; (2) a multi-disciplinary study that coordinates theoretical, empirical and practical approaches to

In demonstrating how the orientation of Zen is somaesthetic, consider that Buddhists frequently take the most ordinary activities of life – how to sit, walk, eat, bathe, breathe – and transform them into spiritual exercises. This is evidenced in traditional Buddhist practices, which are largely concerned with bodily perception and the traces of *karmic* or intentional action that get lodged in the lived, i.e. somatic, body. But such exercises were typically viewed as mental practices.<sup>34</sup> Just notice the manner in which the Theravāda Buddhist meditator (dressed in the yellow robe) in Figures 5–6 sits with a comfortable, though somewhat slumped over, posture. In *ānāpānasati* and *vipassanā*, the core sitting exercises for such monks, the presented form of the body is not emphasized, and the practitioner is explicitly directed to *not* regulate or perform the acts of sensing and breathing in any particular way. Body, sensation and breath are merely objects of passive awareness. By contrast, see how the Zen monk on the right (depicted in two im-

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the somatic body; and (3) fostering capacities for bodily presentation, perception, and performance. My understanding of somaesthetics primarily follows the work of Richard Shusterman. For more on this, I recommend Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Rahula discusses this: “This mindfulness of awareness with regard to our activities, taught by the Buddha, is to live in the present moment, to live in the present action... Here in this form of meditation, you haven’t got to perform any particular action in order to develop mindfulness, but you only have to be mindful and aware of whatever you may do... you have only to cultivate mindfulness and awareness always.” Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 72–73. Arguably, the most important text on meditation from the Buddhist canon is the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (“The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness”) which recounts “four applications of mindfulness [that] are the one and only way by which beings become pure.” *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 49; quoted in Edward Conze, *Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1969), 25. The *Visuddhimagga*, meanwhile, tells us that “without mindfulness, the mind may not be upheld or checked.” *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 49; quoted in Conze, *Buddhist Meditation*, 28). Contemporary examples abound that show the significance of Buddhist mindfulness in theory and practice. Consider the methods prescribed by the Thai Buddhist monk, Buddhadasa, for practitioners at Wat Suan Mokh. The theoretical and practical dimensions of *ānāpānasati* and *vipassanā* as recommended at Wat Sun Mokh are discussed in Ashton, “Losing my Mind and Loving Mosquitoes, Crickets, and other Jungle Inhabitants”. For these reasons, Buddhist meditation is often associated with “mindfulness meditation.” Paul Griffiths offers a slightly different perspective on mindfulness. His rendering of mindfulness as “a paradigm case of observational analysis” highlights this practice as active and engaged. Paul Griffiths, “Indian Buddhist Meditation,” in *Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese*, eds. Takeuchi Yoshinori et al. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 51.

ages) sits erect and tall, yet relaxed. Similar to traditional Buddhists, his seated practice is designed to yield concentration (*samādhi*) and insight (*vipassanā*) into the nature of existence. However, *zazen* incorporates physical posture, sensation, and breath into a somaesthetic regimen.



Figures 5–6: A Theravāda Buddhist meditator (left) and a Zen Buddhist meditator (center, right).<sup>35</sup>

*Zazen* posture gives central importance to the presented form of the body. Consider these three basic instructions for how to display one’s body:

1. Draw in the chin just enough so that the crown of the head is at the highest point of the body.
2. Maintain an erect but relaxed spine position. There should be a natural but not pronounced bend of the lower back. While this curve is not completely eliminated, one should avoid sticking one’s behind out and back.

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<sup>35</sup> Fig. 5 authored by sasint, available at <https://pixabay.com/photos/buddhist-monk-sitting-meditation-1807526/>. Fig. 6 shows the Zen practitioner, Kodo Sawaki (accessed on October 15, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/kodo.sawaki/photos/a.589521497748862/5821570837877209/>).

3. Find your energetic center of gravity in the *hara* (Japanese for “lower belly”). This is key: in Zen, the *hara* is one’s energetic and spiritual core. When properly engaged, it stabilizes the psycho-physical (or somatic) body as a being-in-the-world: pressure, tension, and contact with the world get registered and absorbed in the lower belly.<sup>36</sup>

Having accomplished these three instructions, the head should stack directly onto the shoulders, the shoulders should stack onto and drape off of the spine, and the torso should drop into the *hara*.

The second pillar of *zazen* is bodily perception, namely, the perception of gravity working on the body. In order to establish and maintain right posture, one needs to constantly scan the sensations of the body, not unlike in *vipassanā*. In *zazen*, however, one scans for a specific sensation: the pull of gravity. Furthermore, the meditator actively judges sensations according to a discernible criterion: proper alignment of the body within one’s gravitational field. One seeks out unnecessary muscle contractions – such as those for keeping oneself upright, or just parts of the body that hold residual tension – and then attends to these misalignments. This often begins with sensing the weight of the head: if the head is in the wrong relationship to gravity, then it will jut too far forward, and as a result, the muscles of the neck and upper back cannot relax (since these will engage in order to keep the head from falling forward and pulling the torso with it). When this becomes a habit (a *saṃskāra* or somatic trace), then the shoulders will routinely hold tension and assume an unnecessarily high default position. Accordingly, one task of the *zazen* meditator is to inspect the body for areas of tension and make postural adjustments that bring the body into natural alignment with the Earth. When the practitioner achieves proper alignment, they are able to calmly perceive the pull of gravity working on

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<sup>36</sup> For more details on how Buddhists of the Chosei Zen tradition practice *zazen*, see the prescriptive comments given by the 20th century Japanese Zen Master, Omori Sogen in Hosokawa Dogen, *Omori Sogen: The Art of a Zen Master* (London: Routledge, 2011), 36–63. Sogen writes from within the Tenryu-ji lineage and anticipates the formulation of Chosei Zen. The instructions and rationale described here continue to be practiced by monastic and lay people of the Chosei Zen community. For more recent elaborations on these instructions for *zazen* practice, I direct the reader to the Chosei Zen website: “Chosei Zen,” accessed October 15th, 2023, <https://choseizen.org/>.



all physical and mental phenomena of the somatic body, such that the weight of these manifestations drops directly into the *hara*.<sup>37</sup>

Performing breathing in a particular way is the third pillar of *zazen*. The inhalation gets drawn into the lower belly (*hara*), while the chest and shoulders disengage from the act of respiration. As the *hara* fills with air, one scans the body for the sense of gravity, identifies holding patterns, gently makes postural adjustments (tucking the chin, rolling the shoulders back and out, etc.), and allows the weight of the body to sink into the *hara* and pass through to the pelvic floor. Importantly, this does not involve actions that we would ordinarily consider to be “mental”; the instruction is not to first imagine the breath sinking into the belly, such that it then suddenly happens. Rather, this is a physical performance: by coordinating the inhalation with subtle postural adjustments and the scan for sensations of weight, more space opens for the breath to sink deeper toward the pelvic floor.

These three instructions for developing the somatic body are not merely sequential, as if first one presents correct posture, then one perceives the body in a gravitational field, then one inhales. They are dynamically interrelated in a regimen of learning how to stand (or sit) well beneath the weight of things. From this, one can go about life without embodying suffering, even though the body-mind always already finds itself weighed down. But does the Zen way of experiencing gravity merely help one to bear, endure, or survive the challenges of life? Can this somaesthetic approach help to positively enrich one’s life?

### Awakening the Somatic Body through Gravity and Grief

Suffering is not to be avoided in Zen. To the contrary, the inquiry into suffering as an embodied experience is what leads one to *nirvāṇa* or awakening. This is mostly in keeping with its Buddhist roots. But Zen conducts this inquiry while remaining directly beneath the weight

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<sup>37</sup> It bears noting that our thoughts, feelings, and emotions have weight. Consider the sensations of love and grief: typically, one experiences love as light-weight, whereas grief is much heavier. I further explore this later in the essay.

of things, and it does so because the experience of heaviness helps to awaken the somatic body.

In order to demonstrate this, consider some linguistic relationships. The following English words are etymologically derived from a common Latin ancestor, *gravis*, meaning “heavy” or “weighty”: “gravity,” “gravy,” “grain,” “gravel,” and “grief.”<sup>38</sup> The link between “gravity,” “gravy,” “grain,” and “gravel” is not a stretch: these things are heavy, they settle into small cracks at the bottom of things, they are susceptible to gravity.<sup>39</sup> Less apparent is the link between gravity and grief. In sorting this out, note that “grief” shares an even closer kinship with the word aggravation than it does with “gravity.” “Grief” derives from “*gravis*” by way of the Latin terms *gravare* (“to weigh down”) and *aggravare* (*ad* + *gravare*, or “to make heavier,” “to *add* or increase in oppressiveness”). A grievance can easily turn to aggravation, especially if an already hurtful situation gets worse or exacerbated by additional misfortune (such as when one suffers an “insult to injury”). In English, we have words like “hot-headed” to refer to people in the grip of aggravation and anger. Heat rises, one’s face might even turn red, when a grievance gives way to anger. Grief would appear to occur a little lower in the somatic body, closer to the heart or mid-chest area. English phrases corroborate this: when one grieves or feels sad, then one might say, “I suffer from heart-ache,” or “My heart feels heavy.” What’s more, grief appears first, and then seems to elevate in the body when something gets added onto the initial grievance.

But is this the natural movement of grief? Does grief still elevate in the body if nothing extra (Latin “*ad*”) increases the initial grievance (“*gravare*”? Derived from the “*gravis*” cluster of terms and meanings, all of which share the meaning “heavy,” “grief” has the sense of “getting us down.” But how far down does that feeling drop? I suggest that grief

<sup>38</sup> Partridge, *Origins*, 1324–1327.

<sup>39</sup> “Gravity,” of course, refers to weight or downward acceleration. “Gravy” means “a heavy sauce, stew,” and comes from *gravis* by way of some intermediate terms, including the Latin *granum*, meaning “seed, grain.” “Gravel,” meanwhile, evolves through the Old French word *gravele*, meaning “sand” or “small stones.” The French *grave* appears to be a misspelling of Latin *granum*, while the English term *grave* is more closely related to “carve” and “engrave” (by way of their shared basis in the Old English *grafan*, “to dig, dig up; engrave, carve, chisel”) than it is to “gravity.” Partridge, *Origins*, 1324–1327.

initially manifests lower in the body than the heart – at least as low as the belly, such as when one says “My stomach is tied up in knots” or “I feel sick to my stomach” upon learning of a significant loss. However, we tend to forget or disregard this sensation, misplace it in the heart, and surround it with a fortress of aggravation. (Tension in the shoulders, the jaw, the muscles around the eyes, and the fists can signal this much.) But this dis-ease results not from the design of grief itself; something else gets added onto it, namely, craving, or the felt need to do something about the grievance.<sup>40</sup>

The emergence of aggravation from grief can be situated in the sequencing of traditional Buddhist meditative experience. Recall that, in this context, the practitioner attempts to become aware of the gap between the initial sensation (i.e. that of a grievance) and the subsequent arising of craving with respect to that sensation (i.e. anger or aggravation). In becoming aware of the distinction between awareness of a grievance and thirsting to act upon that awareness, one begins to develop the ability to let go of craving. By disciplining the felt need to react to the sensation of grief, one exhausts little-by-little the mode of intentionality known as aggravation. For many traditional Buddhists, this is what it means to face the suffering of grief: to feel grief just as it is, without aggravation manifesting afterwards.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Phenomenologists call this felt need “intentionality”: consciousness or awareness invariably is about or directed toward something. The Buddha likewise recognizes this. But he does not take the intentional structure of consciousness to be the cause of suffering or that which gets added onto a grievance. We do not suffer because we sense a displeasing object – or at least, though one might experience ordinary suffering due to disagreeable sensations, this is not the cause with which the Buddha is concerned. Recall that the Buddha’s practical philosophy is primarily oriented toward the second and third forms of suffering, both of which resist the way things really are: the suffering of change (*vipariṇāma-duḥkha*) and the suffering of conditioned states (*saṃskāra-duḥkha*). The root cause of these modes of suffering is that which arrests our awareness or fixates its relationship to things. This is precisely why craving is a cause of suffering. We can respectively understand the three varieties of craving – *kāma-tṛṣṇā* (craving for sensual pleasures), *bhāva-tṛṣṇā* (craving for existence), and *vibhāva-tṛṣṇā* (craving for non-existence) – in terms of fixation on pleasure and the obsession that compels a fight or flight response. See Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 29.

<sup>41</sup> Rahula speaks to this: “there is a way of practicing mental development (‘meditation’) with regard to all our sensations or feelings, whether happy, unhappy or neutral. Let us take only one example. You experience an unhappy, sorrowful sensation. In this state your mind is cloudy, hazy, not clear, it is depressed [...]. First of all, you should learn not to be unhappy about your

The problem, then, is not so much *that grief happens* but *how we carry grief*. Buddhism widely recognizes that we cannot eliminate those external conditions that give rise to grievances. But in contrast with the Buddha's methods, Zen undertakes not just a phenomenological description of *what it's like to experience grief* (and other sensations) in the body; it engages in practical experimentation with how the somatic body carries grief. Where we feel grief largely hinges upon how we hold our grief.

Here is an alternative description of the feeling of grief, as given by the 21st century Zen master, Gordon Greene: "I was with my mother when she died, and I can still feel the sensations of just sitting silently at her bedside for the thirty minutes before my sister arrived in the room. I felt drained of all thought. Every part of me sagged, felt pulled toward the floor. Draining and sagging are gravity at work. Gravity and grief as one."<sup>42</sup> What Greene describes can be experienced first-hand through intensive *vipassanā* practice: after several days of repeating the body-scan exercise, thought-patterns become calm, the senses become highly acute, and the meditator is prone to experience the body and mind in terms of a unified sensation. However, for Greene this intensified, singular body-mind realization happened through trained attunement to a specific sensation: that of heaviness, gravity, or grief. Grief is like gravy, grains, and gravel: it is meant to sink. But it often does not because our sensory and motor organs are susceptible to becoming arrested by the felt need to protect the one who suffers. Fixated by the object of grief and the "I" who supposedly endures the grief, the body-mind relinquishes its ability to consciously feel, breath into, and stand beneath the grief.

So how do we remedy this seeming incapacity to let go of grief? For Greene, allowing grief to drop is more so a physical ability than a men-

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unhappy feeling, not to be worried about your worries. But try to see clearly why there is a sensation or a feeling of unhappiness, or worry, or sorrow. Try to examine how it arises, its cause, how it disappears, its cessation [...]. It is the same with regard to all sensations or feelings [...]. Here is no attitude of criticizing or judging [...]. It is simply observing, watching, examining [...]. Thus you become detached and free, so that you may see things as they are." Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 73–74. Likewise, the experience of grief is to be had just as it is.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon Greene, "The Weight of Suffering," *Gordon Greene* (blog), April 24, 2018, <https://gordongreene.org/2018/05/02/the-weight-of-suffering/>.

tal one. Grief (and other varieties of suffering) arrests us due to psycho-physical distortions and misalignments with respect to gravity. But we can foster the ability to perceive and breathe into grief, and assume a posture that allows grief to drop. He attributes success in this respect to having developed *hara* (lower belly). Greene explains:

In order for that [dropping of grief] to happen, numerous muscles throughout the body need to “wake up” and to relax. For muscle tissue to wake up, it needs to feel the pull of gravity. That process of feeling the work of gravity throughout the body takes a great deal of time because of the ways in which we identify with our habits. For the most part we are not aware that the ways we hold our body in the gravitational field are based on neuromuscular habit. This means that literally we don’t feel gravity in the majority of the muscles in our bodies. At least we don’t feel that gravity until we are struck by grief, or we train intensely in Zen.<sup>43</sup>

This diagnosis echoes traditional Buddhist (even pan-Indian) thinking about the interrelation between action, habit, and re-action. The repeated performance of intentional actions (*karma*) produces habit traces (*saṃskāras*) that get lodged in the somatic body; habit traces bind the person to rebirth (*saṃsāra*) into craving (*trṣṇā*) from moment to moment; and rebirth into craving induces one to compulsively react to one’s environment. But there is a way out of this cycle – and a way out that does not require one to abandon the agency of the body or to escape the heaviness of suffering. By developing one’s posture, sense faculties, and breathing, one can stand with confidence directly beneath the weight of things and allow it to drop through their body. Moreover, this is not just a defense tactic. The weight of anything, including the weight of grief, can be positively used to sink into one’s ground and awaken the somatic body from the slumber of countless lives of habituated being-in-the-world.

### *Zazen* and the Alchemy of *Hara* Breathing

The most powerful tool of Zen is a practical philosophy of respiration that centers around the *hara*. Considered just in terms of the inha-

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<sup>43</sup> Greene, “The Weight of Suffering.”

lation, breathing from the *hara* is not unlike diaphragmatic respiration. Both offer a corrective to thoracic or chest breathing: when the breath comes from the chest area, one's oxygen intake is compromised, karmic residues get lodged in the area surrounding the heart, one feels cut off from the lower body, and there is a diminished sense of groundedness (both physically and mentally). By engaging the lower abdomen during the inhalation, the *hara* expands (not unlike how a bellows functions), one's oxygen intake improves, the heartbeat slows, one's blood pressure stabilizes, and weight is allowed to sink. But *zazen* gives unique emphasis to the exhalation – and this is where the concepts of *hara* and *hara* breathing get distinguished from those of lower belly and diaphragmatic breathing, respectively. The lower abdomen remains expanded while exhaling, as it gently pushes down into the pelvic floor and widens outward. This happens naturally in some actions, such as coughing: the breath literally exits from the mouth, but an energetic movement explodes down and outward through the belly. The exhale of *hara* respiration can be thought of as a slow-motion cough. Through a long, steady, complete outbreath, one drives the exhale into the *hara*, gently contracts the muscles around the anus, and slightly tucks the hips (*koshi*) in order to create an unimpeded channel that tunnels down through the pelvic floor. Indeed, this is an activity that requires training (humans do not naturally exhale in this way). But it awakens our natural vital energy, produces lift through the crown of the head, and even helps to alleviate the suffering of others.

Referencing the mechanisms of a piston engine is instructive (see Figure 7–8). A piston engine is typically a heat engine that uses one or more reciprocating pistons to convert pressure into energy through a rotating motion. The engine consists of a fixed cylinder and a moving piston. The expanding combustion gases push the piston in a downward, circular motion, this rotation creates an ignition that generates power, and this power gets conducted along a vertical channel. In many ways, this is similar to the workings of breath and posture in *zazen*: the inbreath draws air into the lower belly, the outbreath circulates this air while maintaining air pressure in the lower belly, and this, in turn, maintains a sense of connection to one's ground while igniting an intense heat or focused energy that extends upwards, permeates the body,

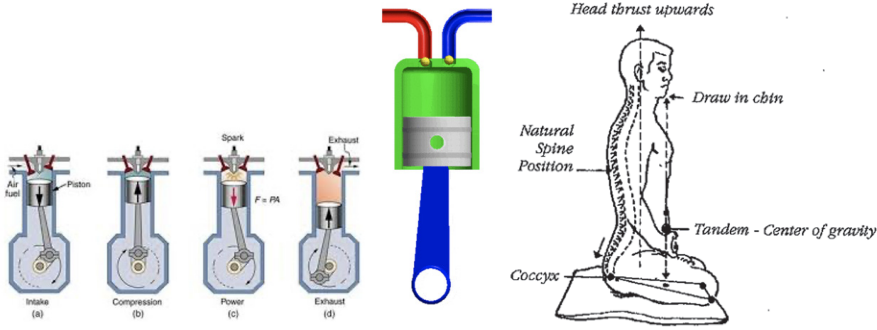


Figure 7–8: Rotating movements ignite heat in a piston engine and *hara* breathing.<sup>44</sup>

and spreads throughout one’s environment. Through repetition of these respiratory movements, an intense but soft power becomes concentrated in the lower belly.

Indian *yogis* have long referred to this creative, heated energy as “*tapas*,” and they frequently link it to the Vedic god Agni, the god of fire whose name is cognate with English “ignite.”<sup>45</sup> Neither mere material nor just mental (as if the mind were free-floating separate from the body), this heat is psycho-physical; it is nondual, vital energy itself. From within the lower belly, a small kernel of supple, dynamic energy

<sup>44</sup> For more on images gathered in Figure 7 and my very simple explanation of a reciprocating piston engine, see here: “How Pistons Work: A Detailed Look at Types, Functions, and Mechanisms,” *Marinerspointpro*, accessed October 15th, 2023, <https://marinerspointpro.com/piston-working-functions-materials/>. Figure 8 is taken from Omori Sogen, *An Introduction to Zen Training: A Translation of Sanzen Nyumon*, trans. Dogen Hosokawa and Roy Yoshimoto (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 41.

<sup>45</sup> *Tapas* comes from the Sanskrit word for “to heat, to burn, to give out warmth” (the verbal root, “*tap*”). First appearing in Rg Veda 10.154.5, *tapas* has long been associated with the Vedic god of fire, Agni (himself often considered a great *tapasvin* or “possessor of *tapas*”). It later became associated with the ascetic practices of Jainism and Buddhism, as well as variations on the theme of an eight-limbed *yoga* (where *tapas* is frequently associated with the *niyamas*, such as its meaning “self-discipline” in the *Yoga Sūtras*). In tantric yoga traditions, meanwhile, this heat takes on more dynamic meanings associated with the power (*śakti*) to be cultivated through inner alchemical practices. For more on these topics, see Walter O. Kaelber, “*Tapas*, Birth, and Spiritual Rebirth in the *Veda*,” *History of Religions* 15, no. 4 (May 1976): 349–350, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062153>.

becomes concentrated and expands outward along vertical and horizontal planes, radiating outward in the shape of something like a bubble. Zen, of course, speaks the language of the alchemical traditions of East Asia: in place of *tapas*, its vocabulary is that of *ki* (Chinese “*chi*”). The longer and more deliberately that one practices *hara* breathing, the stronger one’s *ki* (psycho-physical, vital energy) becomes. When performed well, this respiratory practice allows the meditator to enter a deep *samādhi*, a state of relaxed concentration. Importantly, though, *zazen* is more so an inner alchemical practice of energy cultivation than it is a contemplative practice.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, while *samādhi* indeed develops certain epistemological and psychological powers (e.g. the ability to focus one’s mind or attention), we should prioritize the ontological meaning of *samādhi* as a nondual *absorption* into the environment. One’s being (the Greek “*ont-*” of “ontology”) as a discrete “I,” self, or mind that stands over and against the world melts away through a merging with the absolute self, mind, or body of the universe.<sup>47</sup> However one terms it – *tapas*, *ki*, *chi*, psycho-physical, vital, nondual energy – the heat that animates the body and enables digestion and other metabolic processes is the same fire that dissolves illusions that linger in the holding patterns of the heart and the head, such as the illusion that the mind and body are two, or that self and other are separate.

Having fed the lower belly through repeated, disciplined breathing – not unlike how one feeds a wood burning stove with firewood and just enough air – the *hara* becomes tender, hot, and expansive with *ki*. As noted above, the inbreath is associated with sinking: it attunes one to the sensation of gravity at every square inch of the body. But the meditator does not literally sink to the floor like a wet noodle. Each outbreath drives a gravity-countering force upwards, such that vital energy swells and rises through a subtle channel. Greene explains what

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<sup>46</sup> If interested to explore this further, consider the parallels between Omori Sogen’s account of Zen training in *An Introduction to Zen Training* and Robin Wang’s study of the inner alchemy of Daoist *neidan* practice in *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Sogen writes: “Zen is to transcend life and death (all dualism), to truly realize that the entire universe is the ‘True Human Body,’ through the discipline of ‘mind and body in oneness.’” Sogen, *An Introduction to Zen Training*, 93.



happens when our weight “passes through to the ground without being ‘held’ by muscles in-between [...] we use that weight to teach us the breath and the posture needed to carry that weight [...] Just enough use of muscle and bone to hold that weight, but no more than necessary. And a use of breath that drives the countering lift. The gravity of grief is countered by the lift.”<sup>48</sup>

Importantly, the vertical extension that Greene describes applies only to the subtle body. The gross, physical body yields to the pull of gravity, steadily releasing the holding patterns that get “‘held’ by muscles in-between,” while the soft, steady, extended push of the outbreath establishes a base from which vital energy grows skyward.

As this happens, the belly (Sanskrit *garbha*) awakens as a womb (*garbha*) that is pregnant with animating life-force.<sup>49</sup> This corrects misrepresentations of Buddhism as life-denying. For clues to why Westerners misconstrued this, consider some forgotten cultural practices that affirm life through a process of negation. For millennia people have gone to the theater to watch tragedy unfold, even though they already know the ending and have no intention of preventing it from happening all over again. Why is this? Certainly, it is not because we enjoy watching others suffer. More likely, we want to grieve but do not know how, especially when the world assaults our injuries with added insults. The theater offers a safe space where we can let our guard down; our shoulders, heart, and tears can sink to the floor, and we can re-connect to source, namely, the Earth. As Aristotle observes, grief conjoined with fear is especially suited for experiencing *catharsis* or an “emptying out” that has the effect of cleansing and rejuvenating the heart. Not coincidentally, here are some other cathartics (and now I use the term cathartic in the medical sense): seeds (e.g., psyllium seed husks) and grains, both of which derive from the Latin *granum*, were traditionally ingested in order to accelerate the emptying out of waste material and poisons from the digestive tract. When used in the right way, the members of

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<sup>48</sup> Greene, “The Weight of Suffering.”

<sup>49</sup> The same Sanskrit term, *garbha*, means both “belly” and “womb.” Not unlike in Japanese Zen, this suggests that, across Indian *yoga* traditions, the belly is a womb of vital, life-giving energy. Related to this etymological analysis, the English “pregnant” is a meaning of the Latin *gravid*, which is cognate with *gravis*. See Partridge, *Origins*, 1324–1326.

the *gravis* family (gravy, gravel, grains) are instruments of healing precisely because they negate, cancel, and empty. They remove obstacles to the somatic body returning to life. Likewise, grief can serve as an agent of *catharsis* by accelerating the work of gravity upon the grip of the emotions. And the key to allowing the experience of grief to heal is, above all, breathing. A tender, calm, long exhale allows things to empty downward and out while transfiguring weight into lift and death into subtle life. The secret to levity – and indeed, to life – is gravity, and gravity works in many ways.

Like any other performance, *hara* breathing is social. In virtually all Zen communities, *zazen* is to be practiced with eyes open. And for much of Japanese Rinzai Zen, meditators sit facing inward toward each other.<sup>50</sup> This shows the Mahāyana Buddhist emphasis on the *bodhisattva* path. Zen meditators sit, sense, and breath with and for each other. They develop their powers of bodily presentation (or posture), perception of gravity, and the performance of respiration in order to address the suffering of all sentient beings – starting with just those beings who are facing them during *zazen*. This gets conveyed by the final *gravis* term to be examined here: *gravitas*. *Gravitas* means “dignity,” “influence,” “solemnity,” “depth of personality,” and “weight.” It often signifies confidence, authenticity, seriousness of purpose, and poise. From a Zen perspective, the poise of *gravitas* requires some clarification. Poise should not be psychologized at the expense of neglecting the body. Recall Newton’s law of universal gravitation: all objects (even the smallest particles) attract other things by virtue of their mass. Newton articulated a sophisticated formula for determining how this force of attraction operates. But he studied gravitation between merely physical, insentient objects, not embodied, living ones. The workings of *gravitas* between somatic bodies are more complicated. In this sphere, *gravitas* alludes to the quality of someone’s psycho-physical presence (*kiai*), a presence that elicits in others a sense of respect, trust, and safety, and which viscerally registers in the body as calm, groundedness, and ease.

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<sup>50</sup> This is not the case in all Zen communities. In many instances, meditators sit away from each other and facing a wall. For more on how Chosei Zen training involves sitting inward toward each other, see “Chosei Zen.”

Speaking from his experience as a hospital chaplain and medical school faculty member, Greene explains how *zazen* transforms grief into something like *gravitas*:

This phenomenon – standing up against the weight of suffering – is significant to me for two reasons. One reason is about learning a more effective form of *zazen*. As you learn to push up from the hips, through the back and the neck, with the crown of the head then pushing toward the ceiling, your senses become more open and your exhalations become longer. If you instead simply sit there like a rock – all gravity and no countering lift – then your thoughts rather than your breath will dominate the experience and your *zazen* never comes alive. The second reason is a more public one. For many people whose work is to alleviate the suffering of others – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – one of the toughest skills is to learn how to face that suffering without it becoming a burden of your own. For example, you might be someone who works to ease the suffering of a woman not unlike the miner's wife that van Gogh painted. If you become bent over with the weight of her burden – coal or sadness – then all of my experience as a hospital chaplain suggests that you won't be of much help to her. Instead, whatever words might be spoken with that woman, I would want to also be showing her what's possible in her own body. I can show her what it means to let the weight of that load – physical, emotional, spiritual – flow through me as efficiently as possible.<sup>51</sup>

*Gravitas* educes from others an inexplicable confidence in the workings of the universe – a confidence that does not hinge upon hope for a better, more agreeable world, but which results from the well-developed sensation of that which always already grounds and supports us: gravity. One person's *gravitas* helps others to feel the weight of suffering without producing habits of reaction that arrest their attention and prevent them from seeing things just as they are.

### Conclusion

In closing, recall the perplexing term that the Buddha invokes to describe the experience of awakening: *nirvāna*. Not unlike the members

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<sup>51</sup> Greene, "The Weight of Suffering."

of the *gravis* family, *nirvāṇa* is best understood in terms of negation.<sup>52</sup> Warning us against positive attributions of meaning to the word, the Buddha and later Buddhist logicians speak of *nirvāṇa* in terms of a radical emptiness – an emptiness so extreme that it is empty of emptiness itself. This is not a nihilistic assertion. Rather, it is a call to prevent us from turning *nirvāṇa* into a manifest object or presented reality that could in turn elicit craving. The more direct translation of *nirvāṇa* as an “extinguishing” or “blowing out” expresses this. In several passages, the Buddha likens *nirvāṇa* to extinguishing a flame, where the flame represents that which fuels our suffering.<sup>53</sup> This suggests that the quest for *nirvāṇa* is one of endarkenment – a blowing out of that which lights up any given experience as if that singular experience were ultimately true. This is not to reject descriptions of *nirvāṇa* as an experience of profound illumination, levity, or lightness of being. But for much of Rinzai Zen, this realization is to be had through awakening the somatic body to its original condition – a condition that transcends the dualities of pain and pleasure, body and mind, self and other, life and death. Two other, internally related polarities that should be added to this list are those of light and dark, and levity and heaviness. In Zen, the path to awakening the body-mind proceeds through the dark, and our best guides through endarkenment are things heavy, such as gravity, grief, and the weight of suffering.

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<sup>52</sup> Rahula comments: “A negative word need not necessarily indicate a negative state. The Pāli or Sanskrit word for health is *ārogya*, a negative term, which literally meanings ‘absence of illness’. But *ārogya* (health) does not represent a negative state. The word ‘Immortal’ (or its Sanskrit equivalent *amṛta* or Pāli *amata*), which also is a synonym of *nirvāṇa*, is negative, but it does not denote a negative state. The negation of negative values is not negative. One of the well-known synonyms for *nirvāṇa* is ‘Freedom’ (Pāli *Mutti*, Skt. *Mukti*). Nobody would say that freedom is negative. But even freedom has a negative side: freedom is always a liberation from something which is obstructive, which is evil, which is negative. But freedom is not negative.” Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Closely related to this, *nirvāṇa* is also often associated with the extinguishing of three “fires” that bind us to rebirth (*samsāra*) into craving. These three fires are typically identified as passion, aversion, and ignorance. See Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 65.

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