

I::thou

It↔It

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Synopsis

Martin Buber's ideal for faith rests on the notion of the individual, ultimately, being defined by dialectic relationships with others in such fashion that the other is no longer an other but rather part of a transcendent relationship which defines both the I and the You. By contrast, although Buddhism recommends a daily practice of compassion and the individual address of the bodhisattva to individuals, ultimately the realization is required that there are no individuals, or egos; that all are objects of perception, which drop to nothing when it is realized that the perceiver does not exist; and that all finally reduces to the achievement of nullity, which is the true reality. This paper explores the effect that these two systems have on communicating transcendence of the human experience from the practitioners of each system to the persons constituting mankind in general.

I. Buber

Martin Buber was a man from the Jewish tradition; a classically educated philosopher active in Jewish revival movements of the twentieth century.¹ Although Judaism is often seen as a religion concerned with numerous laws, such as the over six hundred commands found in the Torah, the basis of Judaism is founded on two dialectical relationships.

The first relationship is between Yahweh and the Jewish people, as well as between Yahweh and each individual Jew. This originates in the covenant between Abraham and Yahweh, found in the Torah in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis:

"...the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him.. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous... this is my covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham... I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant... Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised...Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact."²

Abraham implemented the covenant within his household, and it has been maintained to this day by the Jewish people, descended from Abraham and holding to the covenant through Isaac (Gen. 17:21).

The relationship of the covenant is further remembered in the "Shma Israel":

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deu. 6:4-5)³

This commandment, declaring the relationship between the Jewish people and their deity, is often held as one of the two great commandments given to the Jewish people. This relationship is truly dialectical, although it may not seem so at this juncture in Tanakh. Time and time again, though, it is seen that the Jewish deity is dependent for his very definition on the well-being of the Jewish people. Thus Samuel addresses the Jewish people, "For the sake of His great name, the LORD will never abandon his people..." (I Sam 12:22)⁴; and, while scolding the Jewish people for faithlessness, Isaiah still prophesies:

"Though I know that you are treacherous,
That you were called a rebel from birth,
For the sake of My name I control My wrath;
To My own glory, I am patient with you,
And I will not destroy you.
See, I refine you, but not as silver;
I test you in the furnace of affliction.
For My sake, My own sake, do I act -
Lest My name be dishonored!"
(Is. 48:8-11)⁵

The Jewish deity, while having the power to destroy the Jewish people, forbears; for without the relationship with his people, his Name has no value; there is no I in the Jewish deity without the Jewish people. From both sides of the relationship, it is I::Thou; without the relationship, there is nothing.

The second of the great commandments, generally held to summarize the commandments relating to relationships among the Jewish people, is found at Leviticus 19:18: "Love your fellow as yourself."⁶ (In Christian translations of Leviticus, this is generally worded "Love your neighbor as yourself.") An equal perception of love is commanded between each Jew and every other Jew. The Jewish person must see, in every other Jewish person, himself, reflected; seeing the other as an it instead of a you violates this commandment.

The history of Judaism since the completion of Tanakh has mainly focused on detailing the numerous legalisms within Tanakh, and especially within Torah. Thus the Mishnah was composed to study practical applications of Torah to everyday life, and the Talmud studied questions from Mishnah as a guide to the further pursuit of truth extracted from the Torah.⁷ Buber, however, takes an entirely different tack from the traditional Jewish studies that had existed from approximately 50 B.C.E. to the twentieth century C.E. Instead of concentrating on the numerous legalisms, he concentrates on a fuller development of the two commandments that summarize the law, and on the relationships that they declare: God to man, and man to man.

The commandments of Love are central to Buber's thesis. For him, Love contains both responsibility and equality, as Love does as described in Tanakh. The Jewish people need their deity; their deity needs them. The Jewish deity takes the responsibility to protect the Jewish people; the Jewish people uphold the covenant with circumcision and with taking their deity as the one and only deity, as they were called upon to hear thousands of years in the past.

In summary, Buber's beliefs are an extension of traditional Jewish scripture, if not of traditional Jewish scholarship. Firmly rooted in Torah, the basis of the universe is the I::Thou relationship, man to man and man to God. God, moreover, is knowable by this relationship in and of itself; it cannot be proven and it is not provable, it can only be known.⁸

II. Zen Buddhism

Buddhism is derived from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, a prince who was appalled at the suffering in the world, and meditated until he came up with an explanation for it. His explanation is based on an impersonal world of perceived objects, which have no intrinsic reality; his solution is to realize the unreality of perceived objects, and of the perceiver as well, at which point there is nothing left to experience suffering.

It is widely believed that the original form of Buddhism is what is known today as Hinayana Buddhism.⁹ This form of Buddhism has the Four Noble Truths as a basic guide to viewing existence:

"Suffering → All things are suffering
Origination → The twelve links of dependent origination, in order
Stopping → The twelve links of dependent origination, in reverse order
The Path → The Eightfold Path"¹⁰

The "links of dependent origination" are in turn a listing of mental activities which bring suffering. These activities are ones which tend to reinforce the notion that there is such a thing, such an idea, as "existence". By existing, suffering is made inevitable.¹¹ In turn, the Eightfold Path is a methodology for eliminating the links of dependent origination.

While Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism have clearly delineated paths to follow, Zen Buddhism attempts to attain non-existence in an individual and transcendent manner.¹² Paths and rules to follow are, in and of themselves, objects to cling to, which in turn validate existence; they can thus be seen to be possible impediments to remove oneself from the world of things so that suffering no longer exists.

This is not to say, however, that Zen advocates withdrawing from the world; the practitioner of Zen Buddhism has a positive duty to aid other beings in gaining the enlightenment to avoid suffering by learning to shun existence. The Four Great Vows of Zen Buddhism clearly place the duty to others ahead of the achievement of individual Buddhahood:

"However innumerable beings are, I vow to save them;
However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them;
However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to master them;
However incomparable the Buddha-truth is, I vow to attain it."¹³

An important task in extinguishing suffering is to remove the ego. For this reason, in dealing with the concept of beings, it is better to avoid the ego. The Diamond Sutra teaches,

"Subhuti, those who desire inferior doctrines are attached to the idea of an ego, a person, a being, and a soul."¹⁴

The realization that all beings are really objects leads to the elimination of perception; if there is no ego, there is nothing to perceive, and therefore no suffering can be felt, for there is no existence. Thus, the best relationship that can be formed before enlightenment occurs is the relation of It to It, which precedes the nullity of Nirvana.

III. Practical Aspects

The I:You approach of Buber's philosophy is fundamentally different in its foundation from the object-reducing approach of Zen. I:You is an empathetic approach, establishing a relationship where what is felt by one is felt by another. In contrast, as feeling is one thing that the Zen practitioner is seeking to eliminate both for himself and for others, the approach to others is more sympathetic than empathetic. On a practical basis, this would seem to make Buber's approach more helpful at actually contacting the beliefs and feelings held by another, enhancing communication. However, this may well be a Western cultural bias of mine; Western culture is more individual-oriented than Eastern culture tends to be. What a Western person would see as trivializing his individuality, many Eastern people would see as a natural acceptance of how the universe is structured.

The approaches to these philosophies would seem to make Buber's a more accepting philosophy. However, this is not necessarily so in practice. One problem with acceptance in Buber's philosophy is the traditional application of the term "fellow" as found in Leviticus, cited above. This application is, of tradition, only to fellow Jews, not to fellow people; it is, in fact, one of the major philosophical differences between Judaism and Christianity, where the two great laws are cited in Luke 10:27, and then the term "fellow" - or "neighbor" - is extended in the succeeding verses to include all people, and not just those of one's kin group. In writing, Buber does not seem to restrict himself to the traditional Jewish interpretation; however, in practice, traditional Jewish beliefs seem to have prevailed. Hasidism, the Jewish tradition that Buber revised, has long been insular and remained insular with Buber's revival of it. Hasidic communities, such as the one in Lakewood, New Jersey, often go to great lengths to keep themselves separate from the surrounding community, even to the extent of creating independent first aid squads which operate separately from the local emergency services system.

Zen, on the other hand, also seems to be contradictory in practice. Though engaging in an I:it philosophy rather than an I:you philosophy, the practitioner of Zen takes great lengths to reach and communicate with every person in the form best to communicate with any given person. Thus the Kwannon Sutra says, speaking of Kwan Yin (also known as the Boatsu), a bodhisattva who legendarily established the first of the great vows and refused full buddhahood until all are enlightened:

"... If beings are to be saved by his assuming the form of a provincial chief, the Boatsu will manifest himself in the form of a provincial chief and preach them the Dharma.

If beings are to be saved by his assuming a householder's form, the Boatsu will manifest himself in the form of a householder and preach them the Dharma.

If beings are to be saved by his assuming a lay-disciple's form, the Boatsu will manifest himself in the form of a lay-disciple and preach them the Dharma.

...

If beings are to be saved by his assuming a youth- or a maiden-form, the Boatsu will manifest himself in the form of a youth or a maiden and preach them the Dharma..."¹⁵

In Zen, then, the practical aspect is for the bodhisattvas and those who wish to become so to take any length to save other beings from suffering; but an I:you relationship is a fundamental contradiction of the philosophy and, if engaged in, would likely destroy any learning which would otherwise have taken place. Thus the Diamond Sutra states:

"...a Bodhisattva is not to practice charity by dwelling on form. Subhuti, the reason he practices charity is to benefit all beings."¹⁶

Form is not something which with a relationship is to be established; the form is unimportant, simply a convenient vehicle to make the Dharma known. This practice, wherein ego and birth are unimportant, may actually be a more practical method of saving beings from suffering than the empathetic approach of I:You, which being ego-based injects certain requirements of form into actions taken which are intended for the benefit of another.

IV. Transcendent Aspects

The transcendent nature in Buber's philosophy is fundamentally different in approach from the one in Zen. Buber, writing from the standpoint of Judaism, accepts unreservedly the notion of a single ruling deity who ultimately controls all. For Buber, the ultimate transcendent relationship is that between each individual person and the deity; but this relationship remains as a relationship between two separate beings, they do not merge one to the other. "God embraces but is not my self."¹⁷ Buber specifically takes issue with the notion of Buddha's it

relationship leading to unity and eventually an indescribable condition which may or may not be nullity.¹⁸

The goal in Zen is to transcend all existence to move to a state indescribable in human language; the closest description of this state is not-being or non-existence, but this is not necessarily the concept of not-being or non-existence as taken absolutely literally. Seung Sahn, a Zen teacher who has prepared texts specifically with a view to better explaining Zen to a western mindview, simply describes this state as "don't know".¹⁹

"Only if you completely cut off all thinking can you return to your original nature, which is between life and death. That point's name is 'don't know'. It is very important to attain that and then help this world: then life and death cannot touch you. This is why meditation is so important."²⁰

Buber's criticisms of the Buddhist system are based on the fundamental incompatibility between I:you relationships and Buddhism's rejection of the ego. The Buddhist idea of ending suffering and reaching transcendence without establishing personal relationships are anathema to Buber. Buber faces a paradox: in order to establish an I:you relationship with a bodhisattva, he would have to first renounce the concept of relationships. This type of transition presents no problem to a follower of Zen: forms are simply transient systems, which have no basis in reality, and can be put on and shed as necessary. Ironically, the non-personal relationship of Zen would allow a follower of Zen to communicate with a follower of Buber's personal relationship system, while preventing a follower of Buber's personal relationship system from communicating with a follower of Zen. Personal relationships are empathetic; they depend on knowing, which cannot be done in Zen. However, Zen allows the presentation of information in many differing forms until a matching form is found which allows the communication to take place.

V. Summary

Although at first glance Buber's system seems more accepting and personalized than Zen, in reality the reverse is true. Buber's system requires the acceptance of certain forms, including ego, to communicate; this requirement makes communication impossible with those who do not accept the designated forms. Zen, on the other hand, is a non-specific system in which forms are unimportant; the only important thing is to try all avenues available until communication takes place, without requiring that certain assumptions be made by the Other.

Endnotes

¹Buber, Martin, tr. Kaufmann, Walter, I and Thou, outside back cover. Touchstone Press, New York, 1966.

²Jewish Publication Society, tr., The Tanakh, pp. 23-24. Quality Paperback Book Club, New York, 1992.

³ibid., p. 284.

⁴ibid., p. 435.

⁵ibid., p. 721.

⁶ibid., p. 185.

⁷Steinsaltz, Adin, The Talmud - The Steinsaltz Edition - A Reference Guide, p.2. Random House, New York, 1989.

⁸Buber, pp. 180-182.

⁹Seung Sahn, The Compass of Zen, p. 115. Shambhala, Boston, 1997.

¹⁰ibid., p. 97.

¹¹ibid., p. 95.

¹²ibid., p. 209.

¹³Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro, Manual of Zen Buddhism, p.14. Grove Press, New York, publication date unknown.

¹⁴ibid., p. 47.

¹⁵ibid., pp. 33-34.

¹⁶ibid., p. 46.

¹⁷Buber, p. 143.

¹⁸ibid., pp. 140-142.

¹⁹Seung, p. 349.

²⁰ibid., p. 350.