



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
CORPUS CHRISTI

THIS DISCRETE CHARM OF *ŚŪNYATĀ* (*EMPTINESS*) & ZEN IN THE ART OF BASKETBALL

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PROJECT (PART 1)

- Teachings about *śūnyatā* (emptiness, openness, vastness) play a central role in Mahayana Buddhism.
- They are all encompassing, include
 - *semantics* (a study of meaning)
 - *metaphysics* (a study of what really exists)
 - *epistemology* (a study of what and how we know)
 - *psychology and phenomenology*
 - *soteriology* (teachings about liberation/salvation)
- They are among the most difficult teachings to grasp both in an intellectual sense and....
at the intuitive level, to those who practice various forms of meditation

PROJECT (PART 3)

In a book length monograph, I argue that the language and rituals surrounding the game of basketball

- provide ‘windows’ on *śūnyatā*
- help to understand the phenomenology of meditative states
- and help us to understand *soteriology* adopted within Buddhism

Furthermore, the language and rituals developed within the tradition of Zen help us to understand philosophical, spiritual, and even mystical aspects of sport

BUDDHISM: BASIC TEACHINGS

THREE MARKS OF EXISTENCE

- *Dukkha* – suffering.
- *Anicca* – impermanence
- *Anatta* – there is no permanent (solid, unchanging) ego (self, soul)

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- Life is *dukkha*.
- Suffering is caused by cravings, attachments, and ignorance.
- Suffering can be overcome (-> nirvana)
- The Noble Eightfold Path leads to nirvana

The folds cover all aspects of life including the intellectual, ethical, meditative and soteriological



samadhi

deep meditative absorption

awakening
satori, kensho



- Experiential realization of the unity of *śūnyatā* and 10,00 things
- *Comes in degrees: annutara-samyak-sambodhi (Great Unsurpassed Perfect Awakening)*

nirvana



Extinguishing negative mental states and emotions
Happiness. Peace

BUDDHISM: BASIC TEACHINGS

- All terms and categories are terms of conventional designation
- They are good for practical purposes
- Ultimately, everything is *śūnyatā* (emptiness)
- *From the point of view of śūnyatā there is no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind (The Heart Sutra)*
- This sounds very nihilistic
- The main point of the book is to show that *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is not nothingness
- ... and to provide hints how its realization helps to dissolve dukkha (suffering)

PLAYING IN A ZONE

The ego falls away. Time flies.

Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost (Csíkszentmihályi).

You lose track of time, what quarter it is.

You don't hear the crowd. You don't know how many points you have. You don't think. Offensively everything is instinctive. When the feeling starts going away, it's terrible. I talk to myself and say, C'mon, you gotta be more aggressive. That's when you know it's gone. It's not instinctive anymore (Ben Gordon).

PLAYING IN A ZONE (2)

At that special level, all sorts of odd things happened: The game would be in the white heat of competition, and yet I wouldn't feel competitive, which is a miracle in itself. **I'd be putting out the maximum effort, straining, coughing up parts of my lungs as we ran, and yet I never felt the pain. ...**

There have been many times in my career when I felt moved or joyful, but these were the moments when I had chills pulsing up and down my spine. (Bill Russell)

[W]hen that happened **I never cared who won.** I can honestly say that those few times were the only times when I did *not* care. I don't mean that I was a good sport about it – that I'd played my best and had nothing to be ashamed of. On the five or ten occasions when the game ended at that special level, **I literally did not care who had won. If we lost, I'd still be as free and high as a sky hawk** (Bill Russell).

ON SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF SPORTS

... characteristics (of flow) include deep concentration, highly efficient performance, emotional buoyancy, a heightened sense of mastery, a lack of self-consciousness, and self-transcendence. (Andrew Cooper)

The zone is the essence and pinnacle of the athletic experience, for it reveals that, at their root, sports are a theater for enacting the drama of self-transcendence.

... [In] the zone, the extraordinary capacities that lie within each individual are made manifest. To grasp this hidden dimension is to transform the very meaning of athletic play (Cooper).

HOW DID IT START

The project taps into three different fields of philosophy; namely:

- Eastern (and comparative) Philosophy
- Philosophy of Religion and Mysticism; and
- Philosophy of Sport

It grew from courses I taught in the Eastern Philosophy and the Philosophy of Religion.

HOW DID IT ALL START?

THIS DISCRETE SHMARM OF EMPTINESS (*SHUNYATA*), OR ZEN IN THE ART OF BASKETBALL

NOTES FOR DISCUSSION

by Stefan Sencerz



The level, area and or subject of a discourse	Buddhist (Zen) expressions (instantiation, exemplification)	Western (basketball) expression (instantiation, exemplification)
What a person do, in what kind of state he or she is	He enters <i>samadhi</i> , he is in <i>samadhi</i> . E.g., Athe Blessed One entered the <i>samadhi</i> that expresses the dharma called a profound illumination” <i>Prajna-paramita</i> @ (<i>Maha Prajna-paramita Hridaya Sutra</i> , The Heart Sutra, p. 154)	He is in the <i>zone</i> . E.g. Michel Jordan is in the zone. Or, the Knicks must be careful for Reggie is about to enter the zone.
Metaphysical component: the level or the state of reality realized or achieved by a practitioner.	Emptiness (<i>sunyata</i>) is achieved. (Assume that the “emptiness” is the translation of the Buddhist term for the most fundamental level of reality.) E.g., the <i>bodhisattva</i> (a deeply realized person) sees “all five skandhas to be empty of nature. Here [i.e., from the point of view achieved by <i>Bodhisattva</i>] form is emptiness... form is no other than emptiness... all dharmas [i.e., ultimate components of reality] are empty” (<i>Maha Prajna-paramita Hridaya Sutra</i>)	It’s unreal! (Referring to what Jordan or Reggie do when they are in the zone.) [Notice, this expression is much more powerful than saying something like “It’s awesome!” “It’s beautiful”]
Subjective component: The level or state of mind realized by an awakened person.	Feeling, perception, formation (volition), and consciousness are all empty (are emptiness)... in emptiness, there is no form, no feeling, no perception no formation (volition) no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no appearance, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch... (<i>Maha Prajna-paramita Hridaya Sutra</i>)	‘He is unconscious! A He has no thought! [See also the opposite; e.g., he thinks too much, he hesitates.]
Verbal plays, spars, and tests.	Mondos and dharma-duels that eventually were codified in the system of koans. The best example: Case 11 from the Mumonkan: Joshu test the hermits.	A certain kind of trash talk when one basketball player actually praises the achievements of another. E.g., Ahere is a great XYZ. He is shooting 95% from the line. He has a great style and form... [See “The Fabulous Five”).
Verbal appreciation; especially giving praise by condemnation.	E.g., Mumon’s commentary on the Case 41 from the Mumonkan. Joshu says the following about Bodhidharma [one of the deepest realized persons in the history of Zen]: “The broken-toothed old foreigner proudly came over -- a hundred thousand miles across the sea. This was as if he were raising waves where there was no wind. Toward his end, Boddhidharma could enlighten only one disciple, but even he was crippled. Ii! Shasanro does not know even four characters.”	“He is bad! He is very bad! (Also, using an-N in certain contexts.)

Essentially, with a page long handout for my Eastern Philosophy class,

WHERE DID IT LEAD?

A MANUSCRIPT:

- Exists as a 150 pages long draft

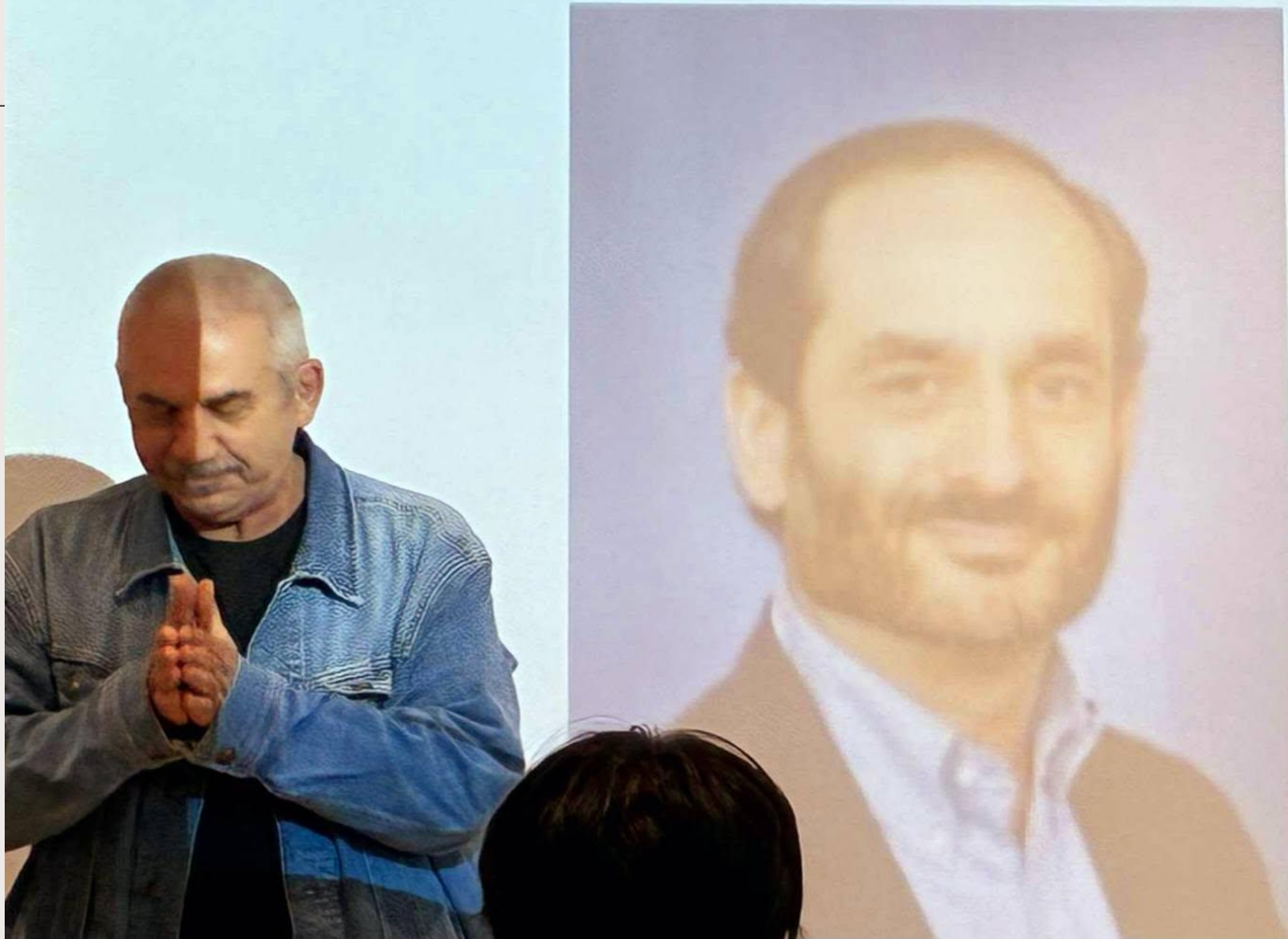
PAPERS

- “The Concept Of Religion And Why Buddhism Is An Outlier” (under consideration)
- “73rd Anniversary of Zen in the Art of Basketball: Or Some Lessons on Spiritual Dimensions of Sports that we can Learn from Herrigel’s” (under consideration)

PRESENTATIONS

- “The Concept Of Religion And Why Buddhism Is An Outlier”, *The 23rd World Congress of the International Association for the Study of Religion*, Krakow 2025

In memory of
Andy Piker (1954–2025)



XXIII IAHR Congress, Krakow, 2025



Korinji Rinzai Zen Buddhist Monastery 光林寺



Korinji Monastery 光林寺













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THANK YOU!

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