

Chapter 1

Suffering: Divergent Conceptions of the Context of Enlightenment

There is no shortage of suffering. With greater or lesser intensity and profundity, each of us is at one time or another plunged into a world where things have gone awry, where a child is dying, where love goes unrequited, where pleasant illusions are being shattered, where sickness or old age causes our life to fall in on itself—a tortured parody of its customary radiance. While there may be an unfortunate few of us who pass our entire lives without ever experiencing love or success or consistently good health, none of us escapes the experience of disappointment, of sorrow or adversity or grief. Suffering, we are tempted to say, is a universal experience of mankind.

The Buddha would seem to agree. In the scriptures collected together in the canon, the Buddha is often found remarking that he teaches only suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path to that end—the so-called Four Noble Truths. Indeed, one of the central tenets of the early Buddhist catechism was that suffering (*duḥkha*)—along with selflessness (*anātman*) and impermanence (*anitya*)—is one of the three marks (*lakṣaṇa*) characterizing all existing things (*dharmas*). These facts notwithstanding, I believe that the temptation to regard suffering as a universal experience is one we have good reasons to resist. In fact, failing to do so not only paves the way to a misconstrual of the stated intention of the Buddha's teaching—bringing about the end of suffering—but to the idealization and eventual fossilization of enlightenment through a denial of its profound sociality.

In declining to accept the proposition that suffering is a universal experience, I am not, of course, denying that there is ever a point in talking about the most general characteristics of suffering. There

are many useful insights which depend in large part on such an abstraction from the uniqueness of my or your experience. Indeed, the Buddha's articulation of the eightfold path can be seen as depending on just such an abstractive analysis undertaken in the second and third of his noble truths. My contention is simply that the suffering which the Buddha sought to resolve was not this abstract or theoretical construct, but rather the actually lived suffering of people whose lives came in some way to be intimately interwoven with his own. If we are to understand Buddhist enlightenment and its relation to Buddhist practice, our first step must be one of strenuously resisting the inclination to regard suffering as essentially ahistorical—a phenomenon which has and will continue to recur in countless generations of sentient being. That, after all, is a suffering divested of its meaning-dimension, of all truly personal ramifications. While theoretical (which is to say universal) problems are necessarily resolved only by equally theoretical solutions, no theoretical solution can effectively answer to the always changing demands of actually lived suffering. And it is directly to these latter, irreducibly personal crises and their virtuosic resolution that Ch'an practice orients us. Ultimately, they provide our sole opportunity for realizing the sociality of Ch'an enlightenment.

Such claims stand in rather sharp opposition to the popular view according to which it is perfectly intelligible to assert that the problems we face as individuals are universal even though our very individuality insures that our solutions will necessarily differ, even if only very slightly. According to this way of thinking, cultural patterns can effectively be understood as serving orientational requirements that are essentially generic. That is, they can be seen as the concrete embodiment of diverse, ever-evolving, and yet relatively stable coping strategies developed by various communities in the face of commonly recurring problems or crises. What this amounts to saying, of course, is that the problems confronting us are not culture-specific, and that uniqueness (where it manifests at all) is evident only in our reactions or responses.

No doubt this is good news for the comparative anthropologist or sociologist who can then begin to develop a cultural taxonomy based, for example, on how various communities resolve the 'universal problems' of hunger or intergenerational aggression. But it also reflects a bias typical in post-animistic, explicitly 'scientific' societies like our own where it is adamantly held that creativity and will reside exclusively in individual, intelligent beings such as ourselves. Such a view belies, however, a merely presumptive belief

that suffering has no intrinsically communicative dimension. We may learn from our problems, but not because they occur for the purpose of teaching us. Suffering is simply the unplanned and yet always law-conforming interruption of the smooth realization of our typically calculated, individual ends.

And so, while our responses to suffering may be individual and so characteristic, the same cannot be said for suffering itself. According to the popular view, our crises are not part of an inherently intimate history for which we are unavoidably and personally responsible, but are taken to be universally generated and impersonally constituted 'facts' to which we react or (awareness being on our side) respond, typically by either efforts to escape or control the conditions that give rise to suffering. That is, since the causes of suffering are objective or characterized with otherness, only its solutions can in the end be either significant or subjective—either yours or mine. Not surprisingly, perhaps, where such views prevail, there typically obtains a marked absence of tolerance for alternative solutions. After all, if the cause of our suffering is universal, how can *our* solutions fail to be equally so? While not a strictly valid inference, the history if its pervasiveness is both ample and bloody.

Especially for the Ch'an Buddhist, such a view of suffering must ultimately be seen as self-defeating. Granted that the intent behind all the Buddha's teachings and by implication all Buddhist practice is bringing an 'end to suffering,' investigating the reasons for this in some detail will prove crucial in establishing a legitimate context for understanding enlightenment.

Universality and Objectivity: The Dilemma of the Suffering Individual

Let's consider the case of hunger.

It seems to most of us quite self-evident that hunger is a universal problem. That is, hunger is a discomfort which all animals regularly experience and deal with, each in their own fashion and according to their individual predilections. Eagles seek out field mice, deer seek out tender shoots and leaves, New Yorkers seek out pizza. But hunger itself—the experience of a need for nourishment—is the same regardless of the species to which one belongs.

This line of reasoning seems so natural and flawless that we are inclined to regard it as simple common sense—certainly not as a highly metaphysical artifact. However, it is arguable that the grounds for such a claim actually amount to nothing more substantial than a disposition toward rendering experience in generic terms in order to facilitate our control of it while at the same time losing sight of what is sacrificed in the reduction. Phenomenologically, as lived suffering, the hunger of an eagle is not in any relevant sense equivalent to that of a resident of the Bronx heading downstairs for a pizza. The eagle's hunger is never simply the noting of a void capable of being filled generically. Were this the case, the eagle could as well swoop down to eat corn or wheat as it could some small game.

An eagle hungers for a mouse—a furtive, watchful creature given to hiding among clumps of grass and termite-ridden tangles of fallen scrub oak branches. Flying so as to keep its shadow from crossing the path of its prey, with any luck the eagle will plummet from several hundred feet in the air and snare it unsuspecting on hunt-sharpened talons. The entire complex of organic desires, physical skills, environmental set, and interspecific conduct and coordination which describes the hunger of an eagle is at every point dissimilar to those constellated when an insurance adjuster descends two flights of stairs and orders pepperoni pizza to go. At bottom, hunger is an experienced quality of relationship obtaining among two or more species, a relationship which is universal or generic only to the precise extent that we enter it in a spirit of ignorance or *avidya*. While there may well be a universal problem of 'hunger,' its solution must be equally universal—'eating,' the consumption of 'food'—and this has virtually nothing to do with the intensely personal act by means of which a mother eagle snares the youngest male of a new litter of field mice.

At this point, the advocate of the received opinion is likely to throw his or her hands up in despair and complain—surely you are not going to deny that we all eat? Not at all. We all eat, and each in our own way. But what our eating solves is never the universal problem of hunger. To the contrary, what is satisfied is your or my actual hungering, our specific needs to literally incorporate this or that living being, digesting the energy bound up in their organization and turning it to uses which are uniquely our own. And at the level of lived and not merely theoretically resolved suffering, the feeding of an eagle, a deer, a New Yorker, or a Chinese from Taiwan are neither ultimately the same nor different. No actual act of eating

is ever replicated exactly, nor (as the Buddhists would say) does eating itself have any abiding self-nature. The mere fact that it is possible to lump a great many acts together under the rubric of a single concept or word does not warrant the belief that they can in anything but an arbitrary sense be assimilated to or identified with one another—not, at least, in the absence of setting definite horizons for what we are willing to take as relevant. Failing to realize this fosters a tendency to justify our disregard of the entire, unimaginably extensive and intensive network of interdependencies which are decisively focused in every act of determining that and what something 'is.' And so we find ourselves, for example, trying desperately to alleviate world hunger in ways so fantastically impractical that 40,000 children are dying each day of malnutrition.

Importantly, from a Buddhist perspective, this should not be assumed to force us into asserting that suffering is necessarily individual—a matter of so-called subjective experience. To the contrary, the Buddhist commitment to realizing the interdependence of all things requires us to resist seeing hunger as a particular feeling which can be legitimately isolated from the rest of a living being's unique manners of perceiving and desiring, its ways of moving and keeping still, of revealing and concealing, of being born, procreating, and dying. By analogy, if a living being is like a piece of improvised music, hunger may be likened to a single chord or phrase within it, a chord 'composed' characteristically of several, relatively distinct notes. But while this chord has a special meaning in the context of the entire piece, taken in isolation, abstracted from the harmonic structure of the piece as a whole, it has neither unique precedents nor consequents. It is an abstraction empty of any truly musical import. The same is true of 'hunger' taken as a universal—that is, abstractly marked—phenomenon. What the word "hunger" refers to is not any actual living being's concrete realization of a need for sustenance with all the attendant considerations of how it moves and perceives and communicates. To the contrary, it refers if at all to a constellation of marks (*lakṣaṇa*) which bears no more intimate connection to the always uniquely articulated, interspecific relationship felt as hunger than the group of notes referred to as a "C#min7" does to the chorus of Dave Brubeck's "Take Five." And yet, if pushed to it, we typically are not only comfortable with but adamant in asserting that pieces of music like "Take Five" are 'composed' of chords like C#min7ths, and that the crisis in Somalia reflects material conditions that are of a piece with those in Bangla-

desh or any other impoverished nation where 'hunger' is killing thousands every day.

An Ontological Digression: Inverting the Being-Value Distinction

At this juncture, it is highly instructive to pause and consider in an anticipatory fashion what underlies this comfort and intellectual ardor and whether it may serve us well or ill in the attempt to understand what the various buddhas (and not necessarily *we*) mean by suffering and its resolution. At bottom, the *belief* that music is composed of and with notes, chords, and distinct rhythmic patterns or that hunger amounts to a condition universally identifiable in terms of felt distress in the abdominal cavity, of irritability, decreased concentration, low blood sugar, and so on itself depends on the presupposition of independent or identifiable entities. In sharp contrast with that of the Buddha and his Ch'an compatriots—and certain strains of contemporary physics notwithstanding—the worldview in which such a belief seems plausible is fundamentally atomistic. That is, entitative existence is at some level presumed to be basic—even if the entities considered are recurrent 'processes' or even 'experiences.' In consequence, wholeness is seen under the rubric of accumulation, of composition or construction. It is something brought about or caused, not that from which all 'things' are abstracted.

And yet this latter view more accurately describes the direction of Buddhist metaphysics in which there is an explicit refusal to assert the self-existence (*svabhāva*) or independence of any 'thing.' The doctrine of *anātman* or nonself, is not nihilism—the counterpart and hence intimate complement of thingism—but a celebration of unsundered and nonabstract wholeness. It is a realization of the fact that music is *only analyzed into* 'notes' and 'chords,' that living is only abstractly parceled into 'organic molecules,' 'cells,' 'drives' and their 'satisfactions,' that suffering is only intentionally construed as a universal problem admitting a myriad unique solutions. These analyses may be helpful. They are surely a convenience. But they should not be presumed to mirror the structure of the world prior to its articulation through our karma or intentional activity.

In other words, the universality of 'hunger'—its being liable to recurrent identification—must be seen as a function of the characterization of experience. It stands as evidence only of the abstraction

of abiding features or marks based on the prior projection of consistently (or habitually) adopted perceptual values. Likewise for any opening up of objectivity by way of positing a 'real' difference between 'us' and what we repeatedly identify as 'the same.'

Now, especially in the Mahayana tradition of which Ch'an is ostensibly an exemplar, all marks or characteristics are understood as *dispositional* in nature. They do not reveal or even denote some absolute essences or world-features originally independent of our consciousnesses and their doings. To the contrary, what all characteristics reveal are our own lived inclinations and aversions—patterns of liking and disliking rooted in an aboriginal schism of the experienced and the experiencer. These various segregations, so crucial to the definition of our egoic identities no less than the objects of our liking and disliking, are by all Buddhists decried as artificial and ultimately conducive only to further suffering. Neither Being nor beings precede envaluation—the introjection/projection of values—but arise only as a function thereof. If, as the Mahayanist insists, all things are originally empty (*śūnya*), their very definition as things cannot but be our doing, our karma.

The salient point here is of a piece with the metaphysical pivot of the *Diamond Sutra*, one expression of which is that no bodhisattva is a 'bodhisattva,' we only designate him or her as "bodhisattva." Applied at various points in the sutra to beings, buddhas, truths, and indeed to all things (*dharmas*), this formula radically undermines the segregation-enhancing architecture of existence or self-identity. The first term in the formula (*dharma*, for example) evokes an irreducible wholeness or ambiguity with which we are presently and attentively responding. The second appearance of the term ('*dharma*') refers us to what is constituted as a result of our disambiguating projection of limits to relevance, our convenience-motivated decision of 'what is' and 'what is-not'—a decision establishing relatively fixed horizons for the emptiness of the *dharma* in question. The term's final appearance ("*dharma*") denotes the particular linguistic designation we conventionally associate with our projected value or '*dharma*.' Most generally, then, nothing should merely be seen as what we value or consider relevant, and certainly not as some ontologically independent entity to which some word in our lexicon refers. That is, no [*dharma*] is a '[*dharma*]', it is only designated as "[*dharma*]". Our utterances, no matter how carefully sophisticated, never refer to what precedes thinking, but only to our projected value horizons—some preferred 'this' or repulsive 'that.'

Now, regardless of the unsalutary consequences of writing under the dictates of a grammar based on the distinction of subjects and predicates, it should not be supposed on the basis of the above that *some determinate [dharma] exists* prior to our (either individual or cultural) projection of '[dharma].' Whatever is 'prior' to thinking and our variously biased acts of envaluation has no name, no location, no worth or lack of it. It is not one or many, material or ideal. We may be content with saying it is empty or better yet ambiguous, but even this may still and untruthfully imply some substance or thing which has the characteristic of being indeterminate.

In the world of the bodhisattva as described in the *Diamond Sutra* and as evidenced in the recorded sayings of the masters of Ch'an, all 'individuals' or 'entities' are best viewed as distillations of lived experience—distillations on which we may become intoxicated if proper caution is not taken in making use of them. Indeed, the more abstract and ideal, the more concentrated the spirit we distill, the more likely we are to lose contact with the world of mutuality. According to Ch'an, that world is one in which 'reality' connotes not some special quality or substance or transcendental well-spring, but simply living in such a fashion that when crises arise—challenges to us physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually—we are able to carefully respond with them. In reality so defined—as an operational context and not an object as such—truth cannot be seen as a standard (logical), or an ideal (conceptual), or a mirror of nature. Truth ceases to be what is correct, but is instead understood simply as correcting—just as reality has ceased to be taken to be something objective and is realized instead as neither subject nor object, but as precisely that relation in which the two dissolve in creatively apt conduct.¹

Granted the objective existences of things and/or features, when things go awry it makes perfect sense to attempt either putting them directly back in place—the strategy of control—or removing ourselves from proximity with those things which can be identified as the cause of disruption—the strategy of escape. But the ideal of escape is what the Mahayana has derided as the Hinayana solution—the solution of separating from the wheel of birth and death and thus inculcating a practical dualism. And as we shall see in part II, especially for the Ch'an Buddhist, control must be seen as highly suspect, appealing as it does to an explicitly constructive model of harmony, embroiling us in direct effort and intention, and hence binding us with more and yet ever more karma. Thus dis-

posed, the very acts by means of which we hope to alleviate suffering depend on and deepen the principal conditions without which suffering itself cannot arise.

Objectivity and the Decision of 'Self' and 'Other'

In sum, for the Buddhist, suffering cannot have an abiding self-nature and so should not be identified with any particular or set constellation of marks, no matter how convenient this identification may initially appear. What such abstractive identification fosters is not concursive harmony, but the discourse or flowing apart of a central, decision-making, action-generating, and hence karma-producing 'self' and those experiences which come about as a result of its interaction with an inferred and often resistant periphery of things (*dharmas*)—both objects and other supposed subjects.

As stated earlier, none of this is intended to deny that there is a level of generality where we can speak and reason intelligibly about suffering or hunger. What is being denied is that whatever is so discussed has ever been actually experienced by any living creature and that such discussions have any real bearing on resolving the always unique sufferings and hungers by which sentient beings are so often bound. Bluntly put, it is neither necessary nor without exception beneficial to *discuss* hunger in order to alleviate it since the objectivity occasioned by discussion distances us from any solution to lived hunger just as surely as it does from intimacy with that hunger itself.

The importance of all this for our present conversation is that as long as we naively accept the viability of seeing suffering as a universal problem or concern supposedly addressed and rectified by the Buddha's teachings and (in our case) the practice of Ch'an, we will systematically read into those teachings and that practice a universality in light of which they will appear either damagingly inconsistent or as peculiar reformulations of philosophical, psychological, and practical truisms with which we have long been familiar. In other words, we will understand Buddhism in general and Ch'an in particular as alternative takes on the same world and hence the same problems that our own religious, philosophical, and eschatological traditions have been investigating or articulating for several millennia. Nothing could be more infelicitous. What Ch'an Buddhism offers is not ultimately a new view or theory about *the*

world and how it has come to be, but an entirely new world—an unprecedented narration in which value precedes and engenders all existence.

What we are embarking on, then, is a line of reasoning which is radically empirical in the sense that it refuses to buy into the fallacy of objective sameness and difference—the fallacy that because we can *speak* objectively about things being the same or different, that they were so prior to and independently of our saying so. As suggested above, if we take the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* seriously—especially in its later expression through the *Prañāpāramitā* conception of emptiness—neither ‘what is’ nor ‘what is not’ can be seen as ultimately independent of us. Rather, they must be recognized as projections of value—an orienting or biasing of our awareness toward or away. Without such an orientation, there is quite literally nothing to say, no ‘thing’ to point out or designate.

Emptiness should not, however, be understood as something we can assert, a kind of underlying ground on which our projections are directed. We are in fact warned explicitly of the dangers of such a move by—among others—the great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna who informs us that while “(t)he Victorious Ones have announced that emptiness is the relinquishing of all views, (t)hose who are possessed of the view of emptiness are said to be incorrigible (MK 13.8).” Emptiness is not a kind of Buddhist surrogate for Being or Substance. Indeed, as the relinquishing of *all* views, it is perhaps best understood as the practice of embracing ambiguity. As long as we are concerned about ‘things,’ as long as we introject a knowing subject and project known objects, emptiness fails to obtain. Emptiness obtains only as awareness exquisitely poised, unbiased by any habitual disambiguations. In this sense, emptiness is not exemplified by the ideal of an absolute ground, but by the fluidly graceful virtuosity of a master of *t'ai ch'i chuan* who is able to move in any direction at any time, precisely as needed.

Sameness and difference both imply resistance—a selection (or more radically a projection) of horizons for relevance, boundaries for conduct without which no self-identical thing can be said to exist. In this sense difference and identity mark the curtailment of emptiness, and speaking objectively thus entails (for the Buddhist) the adoption of a stance with respect to our awareness by means of which a bound viewer/observer comes into being. We *make* our ‘selves’ different from what is observed and then discover justification for our inability to directly and infallibly control the flow of time/events. This, we assume, amounts to a proof of real difference

between us and what happens to and about us. The circularity is vicious.

But if instead we refrain from marking our 'selves' off as different from experience and if we accept the Buddhist thesis that experience always (even if often only inevitably) conforms with intention—the doctrine of karma—we find it impossible to perceive any nonarbitrary distinctions between who we are and how things have come to be. In short, speaking objectively indicates our willing or unconscious/conditional projection and acceptance of a dualistic world. Once the schism between an introjected 'self' and a projected, experienced 'other' is accepted and naturalized, it will never be convincingly closed by logical or conceptual means. Suffering will seem intractable.

An important corollary of the realization that identity and difference are artifacts is accepting that no experience corroborates or validates any other. Experiencing is always and irreducibly unique. As the Buddha's doctrine of impermanence (*anitya*) makes clear, there are no abiding things or states, and it is only in talking about experiencing from a sufficient, often logical, distance that the appearance of sameness emerges and with it the possibility that one 'event' or 'experience' can validate and not merely enhance another. In fact, the language of classical empiricism wherein it makes sense to say that experiences of certain types "come to us" is highly problematic in that it lays an obscuring, objective gloss over the act by means of which 'experiences' are constituted—the act of setting horizons (temporal, spatial, conceptual, emotional, etc.) for relevance; what Ch'an refers to as ignoring the emptiness of all things. Experiences don't come our way, but are created—excised from the whole narration of which 'you' and 'I' are also mere abstractions. In the immediacy of the actual, the problems confronted by any living creature are always part of the fabric of experiencing, and experiencing is never generic, even if our thinking about it is.

Curiously, we already know this from an early age. In stark contrast with the received view, when we find ourselves in the midst of confronting our life's problems, we will hear nothing of their being generic. As every one of us knows who has not come out of adolescence unscathed by love, there is nothing more self-evident than the fact that the suffering we endure when we are abandoned by our lover is unlike that undergone by anyone else at any other point in the history of the species. Family and friends may try to console us by confessing that they have had the very same feeling themselves, endured precisely the same wretched hollowness that

to us seems so absolutely unique, but we will not, perhaps cannot, believe them. If we say as much, the typical rejoinder is that given sufficient time and distance we will be able to see the truth of their claims—the fact that nearly everyone at one point or another goes through the experience in whose thrall we are unfortunately imprisoned.

Reasonable as many of us think it sounds, this reiteration of the received view should, rather than setting our minds at ease, raise a host of troubling questions. First and foremost of these is, why is the recognition of the universality of our experience of suffering dependent upon placing the latter at a sufficient (temporal or logical) remove? The usual response to this invariably involves some mention of the fact that only in this way are we able to rationally reflect on our experience—to view it objectively. This is a deceptively simple move. We are easily persuaded by the mention of “facts”. It is a ‘fact’ that when we are too deeply involved with someone or something we cannot see the whole picture. We judge on the basis of the biases determined by our perspective, by our intimacy with the persons or experiences in question. Underlying this ‘fact’ is the conception of true knowledge as not depending on perspective. We can see what something really is only when we can attain proper closure with respect to it, when we can (*as it were*) see it from all sides at once—a feat necessarily involving our acting as ahistorical agents, attaining what Thomas Nagel (1987) has referred to as “the view from nowhere.”²

While we shall turn in subsequent chapters to the critical examination of the relationship between a bias toward objectivity and our conceptions of sociality, existence, knowledge, truth, and meaning, it is imperative to stress that a normative insistence on objectifying the experience of suffering cannot but prejudice our understanding of enlightenment—forcing us into assuming it will be at once *common*—that is, identifiable—and private or subjective: an event experienced and yet liable to corroboration. As stated above, the rationale for viewing our experience objectively is ostensibly that it allows us to assert the existence of significant identities spanning what are apparently isolated or private streams of consciousness. In short, objectivity is sought after as a means of avoiding a lapse into (or remaining stuck within) an intractably solipsistic particularism. The *possibility* of objectivity is not, of course, given *a priori*, but is admitted on the basis of our evident ability to speak intelligibly to others using words that do *not* amount to mere names. Our ability to speak of love, grief, hunger, and the like, and

to apparently be understood, is taken to suggest that there is something common to all our experiences that these words either refer to or in some still unclear sense represent. As something experienced in common even if individually, the end of suffering (enlightenment) must be taken to be something other than us—a goal we can seek. Yet this is flatly denied by the Buddha on numerous occasions when he remarks that in attaining enlightenment he attained nothing at all and when he insists that there are, in actuality, no marks by which the enlightened can be distinguished from those who are not.

For just this reason it is also crucial to stress that the idealization of objectivity and the *presupposition* of the unassailable privacy of personal experience—a presupposition rooted with equal tenacity in both the Cartesian and traditional Indian belief that consciousness is in some sense concealed or bound up within matter—are mutually entailing. Hence, the Buddha's insistence that consciousness be seen as an emergent system arising with the contact of a sense-organ and sense-object. Consciousness is not located *in* the organism (either as a constituent element, identifying feature or transformation), but is understood as the peculiar quality of the relatedness of that organism and its environment.³ Consciousness is, in this sense, fundamentally public, not private. If this is so, changes in consciousness must be seen as changes in conduct and the attempt to objectify experience by setting it at a great enough distance that we are no longer moved by it is only to detach ourselves from the social context in which the creative transformation of consciousness is paradigmatically located. Thus, while it is the case that (as will be argued later) the Ch'an resolution of suffering entails a dissolution of the horizons we typically establish for ourselves as 'individuals,' this is not to be seen in terms of an abstraction (escape) from social interaction—an orientation to seeing others as 'like me'—but in terms of preserving the uniqueness of our own place in the world while systematically relinquishing the horizons we have hitherto projected in marking off what is 'me' and 'mine' from what is 'other.' That is, we relinquish those features of our experience which lead to the assertion of either identity or difference.⁴ In Buddhist terms, this is referred to as realizing emptiness—the practice of relinquishing our hitherto prevailing horizons for relevance/meaning.

Similar charges can be leveled against defending the objectification and universalization of experience by situating the process of objectification in the larger project of rationalizing experience—of

rendering it analytically intelligible in the hope of being better able to control and direct it. If we allow that consciousness arises in a social context, in relationship, suffering must be seen as in some quite real and irreducible sense interpersonal and any attempts to control our own experience or its conditions must be seen as manipulative of the experience of others. Insofar as what we take to be essential in experience is an abstraction, such manipulation necessarily disregards the living uniqueness of those with whom we are interacting. In so ignoring their uniqueness, we commit an act of violence which robs them of their character, which forbids them a creative presence not only in our own lives, but theirs as well.⁵ In terms to be more completely elucidated below, the strategy of ending suffering through control commits both us and those among whom we live to a life where sociality is maximally attenuated, where the unprecedented or improvised is radically subjugated to regularity.

Narration and Personal Conduct: The Community of Suffering and Its End

As a means of illustrating the direction in which I think it appropriate to move in coming to a contextually valid, Buddhist understanding of suffering, I would like to take a look at an extremely rich story present in the *Therigatta* (vv. 213–23). Once, there was a young woman named Kisagotami, the wife of a wealthy man, who had apparently lost her mind because of the death of her child. Carrying her dead child, she wandered from house to house in her village, begging her neighbors to give her some medicine that could revive the baby. Finally, someone referred her to the Buddha who was staying at Jevatana.

She approached the Buddha and, throwing herself at his feet, begged his assistance. He told her that to heal the child, he would have to have four or five mustard seeds from a house where no son, father, mother, daughter, or slave had died. Thanking the Buddha, Kisagotami set out, going from door to door in search of a house where death had never entered. Finally, she reached the very outskirts of town without having found a family that had not been visited by death. She returned to the Buddha and in his quiet pres-

ence her mind cleared. From that day on, she was one of his devoted followers.

According to our usual set of presuppositions, the point of this story is that suffering is universal. Kisagotami learns that grief is an experience common to all of us, one that is perhaps inevitable given the nature of sentient being. Among these presuppositions, however, is a more or less well-articulated belief in the objectivity of identity and hence in the reality of essences or universals—a belief which finds no purchase in the scheme of early Buddhism or the Ch’an tradition to which we shall later turn in some detail.⁶ In fact, for reasons which will hopefully become increasingly apparent, I would maintain that a consistently Buddhist interpretation of the story suggests that there are two alternative and profoundly practical implications of Kisagotami’s trip through her village. First, she is made to realize that there is no free zone where impermanence and suffering do not reach. This is not to say that impermanence or suffering are everywhere the same, but only that there is no place in the world where one can go to avoid being confronted with changes and crises. Superficially, this means that no happiness can last indefinitely, that no good situation can be maintained forever. But more importantly for the Buddhist practitioner, the ubiquity of impermanence guarantees that no gridlock is intractable—that no matter how hopelessly stuck or stricken we feel, this bondage is also something arisen only in passing. All situations are negotiable.

Secondly, and for us most crucially, she learns that suffering always occurs in the context of a communally-articulated life-story. The Buddha does not simply tell her that everyone experiences such grief, but asks her to go from house to house inquiring of the inhabitants of each whether death has occurred there. It might be supposed that this is only a pedagogical device, a way of forcing a “hands-on” realization. But that hardly suffices. We have to recall that Kisagotami is not just “a woman,” a faceless player in a generic tale, but someone known with greater or lesser intimacy by everyone in her village. When she knocks on a door and asks if a death has occurred in the home, rather than being answered with a brusque yes or no, her own pain will call forth that of the person she meets.

In all likelihood, she is invited into the house and haltingly told or reminded how the eldest son—a boy named Sanjaya—was to have been married just a year ago. On a routine hunting trip, he had slipped down into a ravine and broken his back against a boulder lodged in the limbs of a fallen tree. He had died a month later in the

very room in which they are speaking. She would be told about the son's bride-to-be—a teenage girl who is perhaps Kisagotami's own younger cousin or niece. She would hear about the effect the death has had on Sanjaya's brothers and sisters, about how his father still could not smile even though laughter had returned to the house among the youngest children, the ones with the shortest memories. All of these people would have names and birth dates, distinctive traits and dreams. They are friends and relatives whose life-stories include and are included in her own.

Hearing these stories and being drawn ineluctably back into the fabric of her neighbors' lives, their hopes and fears, their sorrows and joys, Kisagotami must have begun already to feel herself being healed. But it is only upon returning to the Buddha and reporting her failure to secure the mustard seeds that Kisagotami is said to have truly awakened. Relating the stories of her neighbors, Kisagotami actively understands that suffering is never merely objective or subjective, but profoundly and irreducibly interpersonal, shared. By entering the homes of her neighbors and asking about the intimate fortunes of their families, Kisagotami dissolves the barrier of grief-induced madness thrown up between herself and her life-companions. By relating those fortunes, including them now as part of her own, she opens herself to the unlimited reciprocity of true community. It is in that moment of profoundest narration that 'one' and 'many' dissolve. That is her awakening.

One of the implications of the personal nature of suffering is that its power is not a function of its being an *event*, but of its meaning-generating role in a person's life. *What* happens is decidedly less important than *how* it ramifies among all those whose stories are in even some very small way included in and inclusive of our own. The case studies of clinical psychologists amply testify to the truth of this—what proves traumatic for me and severely distorts the development of my character was for you an occurrence of no lasting effect or importance. Being empty, events have no essential nature or significance but are like all things and at all times in open transformation.⁷

In actuality, whenever we speak of "my suffering" we are not merely making an assertion about a generic transformation of consciousness which we are at this point accidentally enduring. Rather, we are speaking the names of all our friends, relatives, and enemies and the relations established with them through the particular intentions we have formed, the karma we have created. In this sense, while suffering is irreducibly personal, unlike the pains which af-

flict us all from time to time, no suffering is in reality 'mine'—something I can possess or dispossess. And so, while suffering is always uniquely embedded in a history in which I am a principal player, it is never mine alone but always *ours*. The true locus of suffering is not the objective, so-called "natural" world of individual 'people' and 'things,' but the fathomless intimacy of *narration*. Thus, it is never merely my experience which is marked with distress and gone awry, but the entire drama—the world as a whole—from which both 'you' and 'I' are only artificially (even if relevantly) abstracted.

As persons, and consistent with the Buddha's denial of the existence of any beginning to the cycle of birth and death, we did not *come to be* at such and such a time and place, but rather are continually *coming about*. Rather than being seen as individuals, the truth of suffering leads to seeing each of us as the unfolding of a complex of relations not only between the members of a sometimes gradually and sometimes wildly articulating cast of characters—the primary of which is a nominally singular narrator—but between various times, places, actions, and levels of meaning as well. Contrary to the experience-biased intuitions of any centrist construction of both the person and of sociality, such a life-story is not the product of the narrator—the 'I' or ego referred to in Buddhism as "the self" (*ātman*)—who eventfully *asserts* him/herself as the most important character in each of our tales and expends most of his/her efforts in commenting on and plotting the course of the narrative's unfolding. The subject to whose experiences we seem to be uniquely privileged is, in fact, but a single aspect of who we are as narration.

Just as a movie cannot be identified with or reduced to the musings of a voice-over narrator, but necessarily includes all the other characters developing in it as well as a unique group of settings and locales, a soundtrack, and so on, a person cannot be reduced to a thinking and acting individual. Instead, a person should be seen as an ambiguity-celebrating narration irreducible to even the sum of all its parts. The 'one' we usually refer to as "me" and the subnarratives he/she constructs in justification of a purported existence among but essentially apart from or independent of others are, in actuality, no more central (or for that matter, peripheral) than the neurotically self-reflective individualists that Woody Allen so frequently and brilliantly caricatured in films like *Annie Hall*.

There is necessarily, then, a tension involved in speaking about narration and our 'selves' in a single breath. In part, this is a function of the recursiveness of narration itself, and in part a consequence of

our 'realistically' informed belief that stories are intentionally constructed out of logically and temporally prior facts or happenings. As a world, narration folds back on itself at many points, each typically identifying itself as an 'I' or 'me' apparently situated directly in the midst of things. Indeed, the very languages we speak are dialects of the 'self'—dialects wherein subject differs from object, where qualities adhere or inhere, where stories are told and listened to by storytellers and their audiences. We must, however, try bearing in mind that this tension between on the one hand the stories we tell about and in construction of our 'selves'—our identities as 'persons'—and on the other hand the narration or world/person of which 'you' and 'I' are simply abstract parts, is itself a function of the hubris and confusion that underlie existential objectification and the belief that we are self-identical individuals. And so, while there may be times when grammar and stylistic considerations insist that we speak of narration as if it were something 'we' do and not that out of which 'we' arise, in actuality the very distinction of whole and part, of creator and created, is—for the Buddhist—entirely spurious. Once again, all differences are made.

As indicated in the preface, narration should not, therefore, be understood primarily as telling, but as realizing intimate connection, as healing, making whole. Far from being a function of the storytelling ego who at times habitually and at times obsessively identifies him or herself as the *axis mundi* or center of the world through a juxtaposition with 'others' positioned at one or another level of circumference, narration is best seen as a dissolution of the selfish geometry of control and escape.

In the context of a metaphysics in which value is seen as the origination of any 'being' and in which ambiguity is understood as, if not basic then at least pervasive, unlike the divisive telling practiced by the egoic 'self,' narration announces a healing creativity. While the stories 'we' tell settle or fix what is otherwise unsettling, they do so only through an original denial of our reciprocity with what is being told. That is, certainty is purchased at the price of ontological and so axiological isolation. And yet, even these tales must be recognized as features unavoidably derivative of the ever-burgeoning narration out of which 'you' and 'I' have been carefully, if not always consciously, abstracted. Thus, while our selfish telling may function as a primordial means of ascertaining or comprehending the world through its fixation in the 'self'-articulated forms of concretely told narrative, the narrative movement or conduct out of which we have chosen to identify our 'selves' as more or less dis-

crete beings is by no means prohibited from blossoming in unabated creativity. The constant reference in the Mahayana texts favored by Chinese Buddhism to the interpenetration of myriad buddha-lands is in this sense a means of denying an ontological status for the difference among various places and articulating instead the realization that our 'world' is a single and limiting construal of the 'same' narration which a buddha constitutes as a realm in which everything without exception is continuously accomplishing the buddha-work of enlightenment. As such, conduct is the irrepressible unfolding of new worlds which our self-spoken and 'self'-articulating stories only imperfectly and obscurely mirror.

And so, while as selfish individuals we tell stories about who we are, selecting these or those events as useful and rejecting others as out of character for the constitution of our 'persons,' there is another level at which there is no 'one' telling the story, at which we are truly persons and not merely 'self'-articulating 'persons.' As a useful analogy, think of storytellers ('persons' or 'selves') as being like dots strung out along one side of a strip of paper and their narratives as wavy, often overlapping lines on the opposite side. A person—narration or a world in the fullest sense—is the folding of this paper into a mobius strip, a process by virtue of which the opposition of 'teller' and 'tale' is completely nullified—rendered a function of point of view. As the analogy suggests, whether we are the same or different from our narration is a matter of orientation.

As 'selves' we differ not only from each other, but from the lives we lead, the actions we undertake, the decisions we make. In the terminology of Ch'an, as 'selves' or 'persons,' we live *yu-wei*. Conversely, as persons we enjoy a liberating absence of all such horizons, living spontaneously, wholly without precedent or *wu-wei* 無為. Thus, as terms of art, narrative—a thing told and hence which decides—will be associated with the doings of the self; and narration—what we will later and more fully describe as a mode of envaluation—will be allied with the harmony-realizing and yet suffering-occasioned improvisation of Buddhist personhood. Narratives distinguish 'selves' while narration fosters the timely—that is, dramatic—interpenetration (*t'ung* 通) of all things, the realization of what the Ch'an master Huang-po refers to as *i-hsin* 一心, or "one-mind."

If this is so, if suffering occurs in the dramatic context of a narration in which there can be no substitutions, in which no characters are generic, then the *experience* of suffering must have some relation to our expectations about how our narrative can and

should flow. That is, unlike the biologically explicable experience of pain, experienced suffering depends partially on who we take ourselves to be and partially on what we feel we have reason to expect of our life-experience. As such, suffering can be seen as a function of the collision of actuality and a set of ideals and expectations which inform our particular way of telling the story of our life—an undesired interruption, blockage, or diversion of the narrative out of which our 'selves' are born and nurtured. The extent to which this is a negative experience depends less on what happens than on how well we are able to meaningfully work this interruption into the flow of our narrative. Once again, suffering is not a thing or event with specifiable and abiding characteristics, but a lacuna, the appearance of a diverting interstice or void. In the language of Buddhist metaphysics, suffering must be seen as having no marks (*lakṣaṇa*). That is, its nature is irreducibly axial, not ontic—a function of orientational stress and impedance.

Granted all of the above, the end of suffering is best construed neither as an escape nor as the attainment of unbreached control, but as the creative incorporation of what originally arises in our experience as a disruption of the order or timing of our life-narrative. A talented jazz musician will take an accidental or mistaken chord or note and improvise with and around it, creating in the process an entirely novel passage within the context of a perhaps quite familiarly ordered piece of music. And, in much the same way, the interruptions of suffering afford us the opportunity of conducting ourselves in an unprecedented and manifestly liberating fashion. It is through suffering that we first become aware of the karmic constraints both binding and continually bifurcating our narration. It is, however, and as numerous Ch'an masters have insisted, only by improvising with our karma that the dualisms and divisiveness it reinforces can be healed.⁸

All this notwithstanding, it remains the case that while actuality contributes a radically unique component to our suffering, the ideals and anticipations we entertain are in large part a function of the societal and cultural milieu into which we find ourselves born. This milieu does not only provide the original, raw conceptual material out of which we will fashion our sense of self, the experienced texture of our karma. It supplies us as well with a horizon of possibility within which we can expect our will to be more or less effective and beyond which we are led to believe our energies would be spent in vain.

As implied by much of the recent research into the manner in which 'persons' are conceived in different cultures, we are not born of biological parents alone, but emerge as well from within a cultural matrix of which each of us is a uniquely creative articulation. Among the primary dimensions of this matrix are the linguistic, the mythic, the religious, and the technological orientations of the community under consideration. That is, what we take a person to be depends on how we speak, on the stories we have heard and tell about the archetypes of our communal experience, on the kinds of questions we pose for nature to answer, on the concrete mode of our listening, and on the tools we use in insuring our continued existence. Seen in this way, persons are neither natural nor inevitable. Rather, they are narrative creations emerging in conversation—literally "turning together"—at the highly charged, karmic nexus where the vector of individuality supplied by the genetic and psychodynamic uniqueness of one's parents and the vector of commonality supplied by the matrix of cultural dimensions intersect and interdepend.⁹

Playing off the ideas forwarded by systems theorists like Ilya Prigogine (1980), we might suggest that suffering is a fundamentally personal form of chaos out of which it is possible for new narrative orders to evolve. In this sense, the ending of suffering is not a transcendence of the embodied, feeling self, but a transformation thereof. And since the 'self' or 'person' arises only in a cultural matrix, enlightenment must itself be seen as a process of both personal and cultural transformation.

Perhaps the single most significant ramification of seeing persons as narration—worlds presented in and as conduct—and of (at the same time) admitting the irreducibly personal nature of suffering is that the end of suffering cannot be understood as fundamentally experiential. The end of suffering is not realized as an achieved state of consciousness if by that is meant an internal, psychological state, but in responding with others—in conduct itself. Kisagotami's release from her debilitating grief does not occur, then, as an insight but with her welcoming her community back into herself and her inclusion of and inclusion by the Buddha in the intimacy of that healing narration.

Stripped of our egoic glosses, it becomes clear that even the narrative through which our 'selves' are engendered is not private. That is, our life-story does not have the form of an autobiography composed entirely after the fact from behind the closed doors of

remembered perception. Rather, it reveals itself only in an always ongoing conversation in which there are many partners—some of them human, some not—all of whom are capable of making wholly unexpected contributions with which we must in one way or another respond.

One of the purposes of this work as a whole is to tell a convincing story in which a seminal and profoundly practical realization of the sociality of enlightenment occurred in T'ang-dynasty China. According to this story, one of the crucial conditions for this realization was the presence in China of radically different conceptions of both the nature of personhood and suffering than had traditionally obtained in India—differences in light of which the Buddha's teachings disclosed previously unsuspected ranges of meaning. As a means of establishing a context for regarding this story as plausible, I would like to contrast the broadly Indian and Chinese conceptions of suffering and personality through an examination of the implications of their disparate approaches, both ritually and philosophically, to the practice of ancestor worship. It is to that narrative-supporting task that we shall turn in the following chapter.