

ONE

Awareness Bound & Unbound

On the Nature of Attention

No wisdom can we get hold of, no highest perfection,
No Bodhisattva, no thought of enlightenment either.
When told of this, if not bewildered and in no way anxious,
A Bodhisattva courses in the Tathagata's wisdom.
In form, in feeling, will, perception and awareness
Nowhere in them they find a place to rest on.
Without a home they wander, dharmas never hold them,
Nor do they grasp at them. . . .
The Leader himself [the Buddha] was not stationed in the realm which is
free from conditions,
Nor in the things which are under conditions, but freely he wandered
without a home:
Just so, without a support or a basis a Bodhisattva is standing.

—*Ashtasahasrika Sutra*, 1:5–7, 10

Subhuti: “How is *prajnaparamita* [the highest wisdom] characterized?”

Buddha: “It is characterized by non-attachment. To the extent that beings take hold of things and settle down in them, to that extent there is defilement. But no one is thereby defiled. And to the extent that one does not take hold of things and does not settle down in them, to that extent can one conceive of the absence of I-making and mine-making. In that sense can one form the concept of the purification of beings, i.e., to the extent that they do not take hold of things and do not settle down in them, to that extent there is purification. But no one is therein purified. When a Bodhisattva courses thus, he courses in *prajnaparamita*.”

—*Ashtasahasrika Sutra* 22:399–400

Do we miss the nature of liberated mind, not because it is too obscure or profound to understand, but because it is too obvious? Perhaps, like Edgar

Allen Poe's purloined letter, we keep overlooking it: rummaging around hither and thither, we cannot find what we are searching for because it is in plain sight. Or, to employ a better metaphor, we look for the spectacles that rest unnoticed on our nose. Unable to see her reflection in the well, Enyadatta wanders about looking for her head. Mind seeks for mind.

Such, at least, has been a central claim of the Mahayana tradition. How central? How much insight might be gained by taking seriously and literally the many Buddhist admonitions about "not settling down in things" and the importance of wandering freely "without a place to rest." Although a few qualifications will need to be made later, my basic thesis is simple:

Delusion (ignorance, samsara): attention/awareness is fixated (attached to forms)

Liberation (enlightenment, nirvana): attention/awareness is liberated from grasping

Although the true nature of awareness is formless, it becomes "trapped" when we identify with particular things, which include mental objects (e.g., ideologies, one's self-image) as well as physical ones. Such identifications happen due to ignorance of the basic "nondwelling" nature of our awareness. The familiar words "attention" and "awareness" are used to emphasize that the distinction being drawn refers not to some abstract metaphysical entity ("Mind" or "Consciousness") but simply to how our everyday awareness functions.¹ To appropriate Hakuin's metaphor in *Zazen Wasan*, the difference between Buddhas and other beings is that between water and ice: without water there is no ice, without Buddha no sentient beings—which suggests that deluded beings might simply be "frozen" Buddhas. I hope to show that this straightforward distinction is not only consistent with basic Buddhist teachings but also gives us insight into some of the more difficult ones. Moreover, this perspective may illuminate some aspects of our contemporary life-world, especially the particular challenges of modern technology and economics.

Before developing the above claim about awareness, bound and unbound, it is necessary to emphasize how widespread and important it is within the Mahayana tradition, for it is found in many other canonical and commentarial texts besides the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*. Thus, the most-quoted line from a better-known Prajnaparamita text, the *Diamond Sutra*, encapsulates the central doctrine of the *Ashtasahasrika Sutra* in one phrase: "Let your mind come forth without fixing it anywhere." According to the *Platform Sutra* of the sixth Ch'an patriarch Hui-neng, this verse precipitated his great awakening, and certainly his teachings make and remake the same point: "When our mind works freely without any hindrance, and is at

liberty to ‘come’ or to ‘go,’ we attain liberation.” Such a mind “is everywhere present, yet it ‘sticks’ nowhere.” Hui-neng emphasized that he had no system of Dharma to transmit: “What I do to my disciples is to liberate them from their own bondage with such devices as the case may need” (Yampolsky 133).² Po-chang Hui-hai, another Chan master who lived about a century later, elaborated on the nature of liberated mind:

Should your mind wander away, do not follow it, whereupon your wandering mind will stop wandering of its own accord. Should your mind desire to linger somewhere, do not follow it and do not dwell there, whereupon your mind’s questing for a dwelling place will cease of its own accord. Thereby, you will come to possess a non-dwelling mind—a mind that remains in the state of non-dwelling. If you are fully aware in yourself of a non-dwelling mind, you will discover that there is just the fact of dwelling, with nothing to dwell upon or not to dwell upon. This full awareness in yourself of a mind dwelling upon nothing is known as having a clear perception of your own mind, or, in other words, as having a clear perception of your own nature. A mind which dwells upon nothing is the Buddha-mind, the mind of one already delivered, Bodhi-Mind, Un-created Mind . . . (Hui-hai, in Blofeld 1969, 56)

Lest we think that such a capitalized Mind is something other than our usual one, Huang-po Hsi-yun deflates any illusions we may have about its transcendence:

Q: From all you have just said, Mind is the Buddha; but it is not clear as to what sort of mind is meant by this “Mind which is the Buddha.”

Huang Po: How many minds have you got?

Q: But is the Buddha the ordinary mind or the Enlightened Mind?

Huang Po: Where on earth do you keep your “ordinary mind” and your “enlightened mind”?

(Blofeld 1958, 57–58)³

A familiar corollary to such claims, therefore, is the Chan/Zen insistence that enlightenment is nothing special, it is just realizing the true nature of our ordinary activities:

Zhaozhou: “What is the way?”

Nan-ch’uan: “Everyday mind is the way.”

(*Wu-Men-Kuan* case 19, in Pitken 1991)

When Hui-hai was asked about his practice, he replied: “When I’m hungry, I eat; when tired I sleep.”

Q: “And does everybody make the same efforts as you do, Master?”

Hui Hai: “Not in the same way.”

Q: “Why not?”

Hui Hai: “When they are eating, they think of a hundred kinds of necessities, and when they are going to sleep they ponder over affairs of a thousand different kinds. That is how they differ from me.”

(Blofeld 1969, 95–96)

It would be easy to cite dozens of Chan and Zen texts emphasizing the above points. Familiarity with them tends to dull our appreciation of just how radical such claims are, from an Indian perspective as much as for a Western one. In European metaphysics “mind” evokes the Platonic *Nous* and Hegel’s *Geist*, the latter cunningly employing historical development to realize itself. The Vedantic Brahman has different nuances, yet its famous identification with the *Atman* “Self” does not impede its transcendence. The contrast with Nan-chuan’s quite ordinary mind (Ch. *xin*) is quite striking: chopping wood and drawing water, “just this!”

The Pali texts of early Buddhism do not emphasize “everyday mind” in the same way, for they often draw a strong contrast between the mind-consciousness of an ordinary worldling (*puthujjana*) and the liberated mind of an arhat. Yet there is a similar focus on not-clinging, especially in the *Salayatanavagga* “Book of the Six Sense Bases,” the third collection of connected philosophical discourses in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, where the Buddha repeatedly teaches “the Dhamma for abandoning all.” A noble disciple should develop dispassion toward the six senses and their objects (including the mind and mental phenomena) and abandon them, even feel revulsion for them, for that is the only way to end one’s *dukkha* “suffering.” “Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: ‘It’s liberated.’ He understands: ‘Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived,

what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.’” Listening to this discourse, “the minds of the thousand bhikkhus were liberated from the taints by non-clinging” (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000, 2:1143).⁴ From a Prajnaparamita and Zen perspective, all that is lacking in this passage is a clear recognition that the *tathata* “thusness” of the “abandoned all” is the goal of the spiritual quest. Such a conclusion may also be inferred from the emphasis elsewhere in the Pali sutras on letting go of the five *skandhas*, “heaps,” which, like the twelve links of *pratitya-samutpada*, “dependent origination,” are said to encompass everything. The absence of grasping is what liberates.

The Nonduality of Samsara and Nirvana

That the Pali emphasis on not-clinging and nonattachment does *not* include an explicit recommendation of everyday mind is an important difference between early Buddhism and Mahayana. Expressed another way, the issue at stake is how we are to understand the relationship between samsara and nirvana. In early Buddhism the nature of nirvana is notoriously, perhaps intentionally, obscure. Few passages attempt to characterize it except negatively: the end of *dukkha* “suffering,” the end of *tanha* “craving,” the end of *avidya* “ignorance.” In short, nirvana is the full negation of its opposite, the spiritual solution to samsara. The main question is whether nirvana refers to attaining a different reality or dimension of reality (e.g., experienced in meditative trance), or whether nirvana refers to some different way of perceiving and living in this world.

This ambiguity is familiar to anyone who studies early Buddhist texts. What has been less noticed is that the ambiguity of nirvana is ipso facto shared by the ambiguity of samsara (literally, “going round and round,” the cycle of birth and death). Yes, we know that samsara is this world of *dukkha*, and so on, but without a better understanding of nirvana—of the nature of the alternative—it is not possible to be clear about what is negated and exactly how it is negated. The basic difficulty is that nirvana and samsara form a conceptual duality, in which the meaning of each is dependent on the other. Neither can be understood on its own, without the other, which means that we cannot really know what samsara is until we know what nirvana is. In fact, preoccupation with such dualities is another example of how our attention gets stuck, how we bind ourselves without a rope.⁵

This has consequences for the entire Buddhist project, which relies upon some version of that duality: the possibility of progressing from suffering to liberation, from delusion to enlightenment. Does waking up mean that one shifts from the former to the latter, or that we realize such dualistic thinking is itself a conceptual trap?

“What do you think, Subhuti? In ancient times . . . did the Tathagata attain anything called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind?”

“No, World-Honored One. According to what I understand from the teachings of the Buddha, there is no attaining of anything called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind.”

The Buddha said, “Right you are, Subhuti. In fact, there does not exist the so-called highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind that the Tathagata attains. . . . Why? Tathagata means the suchness [*tathata*] of all things.” (Price and Wong 1974, 24)

This exchange from *The Diamond Sutra* supports an understanding of language that distinguishes Buddhism from “divine revelation” religions such as the Abrahamic traditions, which are founded on the sacred word of God (as recorded in the Bible and the Qur’an). For Buddhism any such linguistic identification is attachment, and clinging is not the spiritual solution but part of the problem. With language we construct the world, including ourselves, and it is important to realize how we deceive ourselves when we identify with any of those constructions, including Buddhist ones.

By no coincidence, the locus classicus for both denials—the denial that *samsara* and *nirvana* are different, and the denial that the truth of Buddhism can be expressed in language—is the same: chapter 25 of Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamakakarikas*, which deconstructs the concept of *nirvana*. It concludes with one of the most celebrated verses in Buddhism: “Ultimate serenity [*shiva*] is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things; no truth has been taught by a Buddha for anyone, anywhere” (25:24, in Candrakirti 1979, 262).⁶ We are not saved by discovering any linguistic truth, for there is no such liberating truth to identify with. This demotes all Buddhist categories to *upaya* “skillful means,” pointers that may be helpful but not if we take the finger for the moon. What does that imply about the distinction between *samsara* and *nirvana*?

There is no specifiable difference whatever between *nirvana* and *samsara*; there is no specifiable difference whatever between *samsara* and *nirvana*.

The limit [*koti*] of *nirvana* is the limit of *samsara*. There is not even the subtlest difference between the two. (25:19–20, in Candrakirti 1979, 259)⁷

Yet this perspective, by itself, may go too far to the other extreme, and end up negating the spiritual path. If there is nowhere to go, there is no way to get

there, and thus no need for any spiritual practice, or for Buddhism at all. So in the same chapter Nagarjuna also distinguishes between them: “That which, taken as causal or dependent, is the process of being born and passing on, is, taken non-causally and beyond all dependence, declared to be *nirvana*” (25:9, in Candrakirti 1979, 255). There is no contradiction between this verse and verses 19–20. The key point is that *samsara* and *nirvana* are not different realms of existence (they share the same *koti*, “limits”), for the terms refer to different ways of experiencing or “taking” this world. What more can be said about that difference? Elsewhere I have tried to characterize the different ways of perceiving causality in verse 9.⁸ The importance of Nagarjuna’s position here is that it is consistent with the claim that *samsara* is awareness bound and *nirvana* is the “same” awareness liberated. Attention is liberated when it does not “stop at” or grasp at any particular thing, including any conceptual truth, including this one.

This also helps us understand the significance of the Madhyamaka distinction between two truths—*samvrti* the everyday transactional truth and *paramartha* the supreme truth—and why we need the lower truth to point to the higher truth. To claim, for example, that “*nirvana* is attention unbound” seems to invite our assent: “Yes, that’s true!” But to commit ourselves to that proposition—to *identify* with it—would be self-contradictory and self-defeating insofar as such an identification binds our awareness to a particular set of concepts that we use to get a handle on the world, a worldview that thereby retains a grip on our awareness. Yet concepts and doctrines nonetheless retain their lower-truth value as teaching devices necessary to point to the higher “truth” that nonetheless always escapes their supervision.

Attention Addicted

How is our awareness bound? According to the second noble truth, the cause of *dukkha* is *tanha* “craving,” perhaps best understood as insatiability, when we can never get enough of what is sought. We often understand this as referring to physical urges—with sexuality as the archetype—but focusing on the body can be problematic for two reasons. First, emphasizing our physicality perpetuates the mind/body dualism that has haunted Western culture since long before Descartes. The danger is that we will understand the spiritual solution as mind (soul, rationality, etc.) transcending or dominating the body, which encourages the repressions and perversions that plague such a hierarchy. This hierarchy was also important in Shakyamuni’s India (is it therefore an Indo-European or Axial Age problem?), for according to the traditional biographies his first spiritual practice was asceticism: starving the

senses, in effect. Buddhism became a revolutionary “middle way” between sense indulgence and sense denial, because it emphasized attention-control (including *cetana* “intention-control”) instead.

That brings us to the other reason for not focusing on the physical fixations. Buddhism also emphasizes another cause of our *dukkha*: conceptual proliferation (Pali *papanca*; Sanskrit *prapanca*), a linguistic process that is awkwardly subsumed within the *tanha* of the second noble truth. This world is samsara for us not only because we crave physically. *Prapanca* means that we live in a fantasy world of our own making, constructed out of our conceptualizing as well as our cravings. The relationship between desires and concepts becomes clearer when we see that the fundamental issue remains, again, our attention. Samsara is reified as awareness becomes preoccupied with pursuing certain desires (sex and food, but also money, fame, etc.) and fixated on certain ways of understanding and perceiving the (objectified) world. Both are types of clinging, and in both cases (really, different aspects of the same process) the solution involves nonattachment.

If getting stuck is the basic issue, neither desires nor concepts are problematical in themselves. We get into trouble not because we have concepts but because we “settle down” in particular ones—not only those that support a particular self-image, but also religious dogmas or political ideologies that offer us a secure fix on the world. The solution is not to get rid of all concepts, which would amount to a rather unpleasant type of mental retardation, but to *liberate* them, as Dogen seems to suggest in the *Sansuikyo* fascicle of his *Shobogenzo*: to be able to move freely from one concept to another, to play with different conceptual systems according to the situation, without becoming fixated on any of them. Conceptualizing, too, can be bound and unbound.

A similar point can be made about bodily desires, including sexuality. The importance of nonattachment does not mean recommending promiscuity over monogamy (or vice versa), for the issue is not the object(s) of our affection but the relationship between one’s attention and sexual drive. Perhaps this helps us to understand tantric practices, which sometimes employ forbidden activities for spiritual purposes. The drive toward sexual union is often cited as the best example of craving, and Pali Buddhism strictly forbids monastics any genital contact, yet according to the tantric tradition the energy of that urge can be used in a liberatory way. Tantric accounts usually explain this practice physiologically—*prana* is redirected to the higher chakras—but there may be a simpler way to understand the process. Can attention retain or gain an awareness of its intrinsic nondwelling nature, even while engaged in coitus? The normal tendency, of course, involves a future-directed and increasingly urgent focus on the release of orgasm; yet nonattached, unbound attention is not driven to go anywhere or do anything, because it has nothing to gain or lose in itself. In the urge toward climax, can one become more aware of that

which does not change, which does not get better or worse? Failure means becoming more enmeshed in the seductions of samsara, the craving for pleasure that leads to more *dukkha*. Success means freedom from addiction to pleasure, which is not the same as needing to avoid it.

Attention is normally *conditioned* by what it does, and especially by those things done intentionally. This points to the demythologized meaning of karma, including the Buddha's emphasis on *cetana*, which highlighted the role of intentions and volitions. The Buddha transformed earlier approaches emphasizing sacrifice and other rituals into an ethical principle by focusing on our motivations. "It is *cetana*, monks, that I declare to be *karma*. Having willed, one performs an action by body, speech and mind" (Nyanaponika and Bodhi 1999, 173). What distinguishes our actions from mere behavior, our responses from mere reactions, is that they are *intended*. Some such understanding of karma is implied by *anatta*, the denial that "I" am or have any unchanging core of substance or *svabhava*, "self-being." My subjective sense of self is a construct, and the most important components of that construction are *samskaras* "habitual tendencies," which mold character and constitute "my" karma.

According to this interpretation, karma is not an ineluctable law of the universe involving some precise calculus of cause and effect. The basic idea is simply that our actions have effects—more precisely, that our morally relevant actions and intentions have morally relevant effects that go beyond their utilitarian consequences. Shakyamuni "ethicized" karma into one of the keys to spiritual development: how one's life-situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of one's actions right now. *Anatta* means that karma is not something I *have*, it is what "I" *am*, and what I am changes according to my conscious choices. "I" am (re)constructed by what "I" intentionally do, because "my" sense of self is a precipitate of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Even as my body is composed of the food eaten, so my character is composed of conscious choices, constructed by my repeated mental attitudes.⁹

Buddhist teachings, however, distinguish good karma from awakening, which involves realizing the nondwelling nature of one's awareness. Beneficial karma may make it easier to practice, and insofar as one is awakened one is less motivated to create bad karma, yet the fundamental issue is not the quality of one's karma but freeing oneself from karmic conditioning.

According to Pali Buddhism, an enlightened person does not create any new karma but can still suffer the consequences of past karma. Moggallana, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, is said to have endured a gruesome death for having murdered his parents in a previous lifetime. Less mysteriously, Angulimala renounced his career as a serial killer and quickly attained nirvana, yet was attacked and beaten by the townspeople he had terrified

(Bhikkhu Bodhi 1995, 710–17). These examples raise the question of what it means to be “unconditioned.” The more objective issue concerns one’s physical and social circumstances. Even when I realize that my attention is intrinsically free, I will still be “constrained” by my situation, including the images and expectations that others have of me. If I spiritually awaken in a prison, the cell doors will not magically open. One’s attention, liberated or not, is always limited by the forms of awareness that circumstances make available. The paradox is that to be *one with* those conditions is to experience one’s awareness and life as unconditioned. The explanation of that paradox is in the lacking-nothing nature of nonclinging attention.

Nevertheless, after awakening one’s mental predispositions (*samskaras*) do not necessarily or immediately lose their attraction. A liberated smoker will not automatically lose the physical desire for a cigarette. A genuine awakening should make it much easier, of course, to ignore that urge, but the desire will arise. This point reflects on long-standing debates about whether enlightenment is instantaneous or gradual, all-or-nothing or in stages. Realizing the unbounded nature of one’s attention may or may not be dramatic, but it happens suddenly. It is not something that *I do*, nor does it happen *to me*, for both of those ways of understanding are dualistic; rather, there is a *letting go*. Of what? Not simply of whatever I am grasping, but *of grasping*. Yet habitual tendencies do not simply evaporate. One’s attention still tends to assume familiar forms, and this highlights the importance of continued practice: the more gradual process of making intrinsically free awareness more effectively free. This also touches on the problem with comprehending Buddhism philosophically, or taking it as a philosophy. I can understand (and write about?) all of this conceptually, without it making much difference in my daily life, in how my attention actually functions. Grasping the implications of these concepts is very different from letting go of grasping.

So far, I have made no reference to any “object of consciousness,” preferring the notion of “attention or awareness taking form.” Especially in a Mahayana context, any mention of form evokes the central claim of the *Heart Sutra* that “form (*rupa*) is no other than emptiness (*shunyata*), emptiness no other than form.” So far, too, this chapter has not mentioned *shunyata*, largely because of the baggage that accompanies that overused term. For Madhyamaka *shunyata*, “the absence of self-existence,” is a shorthand way of referring to the interconditionality of all phenomena, the fact that every phenomenon arises in dependence on others. In terms of my basic claim—delusion as attention bound, awakening as attention unbound—the *Heart Sutra*’s famous equation gains a somewhat different significance. Awareness unbound is *shunya*, having no form or any other qualities of its own. More precisely, awareness whether bound or unbound is *shunya*, although bound awareness is unaware of its intrinsic nature because it is too busy grasping

and too afraid to let go. Attention in itself can be characterized only by its characteristiclessness: being formless and colorless, “it” is *nothing*, which is why it can become any-thing, according to circumstances. Emptiness is not other than form, because *nothing-in-itself* attention is always assuming one or another form—not only visual and tactile ones, but sounds, tastes, smells, thoughts, and so on. Then perhaps the many statements in the *Heart Sutra* that “X (the five *skandhas*, the twelve *nidanas*, etc.) is *shunya*” are not making (or denying) an ontological claim about the nature of X-in-itself, but rather pointing out the nature of the relationship between empty-in-itself awareness and the various forms it assumes.¹⁰

Does this provide insight into some other basic claims? There is nothing whatsoever that needs to be attained. To be deluded is not to lack something; it is simply not to realize the nature of one’s attention. This is consistent with *anatta*: the no-thing-ness of awareness is not a self. The *sense* of a self as separate from the rest of the world—the duality between subject and object—is a psychosocial construct composed of habituated ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. There is no need to get rid of the ego, because it has never existed. It is the self-image that persists because feelings, intentions, and actions refer to it. Buddhist emphasis on *anatta* implies that constant reference to this self-image is the foremost trap for our attention.

In place of the usual duality, in which consciousness becomes aware of some object or other, liberated awareness is nondual because it *becomes* one thing or another:

There is a line a famous Zen master wrote at the time he became enlightened which reads: “When I heard the temple bell ring, suddenly there was no bell and no I, just sound.” In other words, he no longer was aware of a distinction between himself, the bell, the sound, and the universe. This is the state you have to reach. . . .

Stated negatively, it is the realization that the universe is not external to you. Positively, it is experiencing the universe as yourself. (Kapleau 1966, 107, 137)

Compare the seventeenth-century Japanese Zen master Shido Bunan:

The moon’s the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I’ve become the thingness
Of all the things I see.

As Dogen famously puts it at the beginning of *Genjo-koan*: “To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To

forget the self is to be actualized by myriad beings. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away” (Dogen 1985, 70).

If the self is a construct, so is the *external* world, for when there is no inside there is no outside. In the *Sokushinzebutsu*, “Our Mind Is the Buddha,” fascicle of the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen described his own experience by quoting the Chinese master Yang-shan (d. 916): “I came to realize clearly that mind is nothing other than mountains, rivers and the great wide earth, the sun, the moon and the stars” (in Kapleau 1966, 205). If my usual sense of separation from mountains, and so on, is a delusion, then my nonduality with them is not something that needs to be attained. Instead, the delusion of a discrete self is to be dispelled by realizing the nondwelling nature of awareness.

According to the *Heart Sutra*, all dharmas are *shunya*. There is no birth and no cessation, no purity or impurity, no increase or decrease. Since awareness is literally a no-thing in itself, the categories of purity or impurity do not apply to it. Attention does not become purer when taking the form of a Buddha image, nor less pure when cleaning the toilet, or excreting into it. More controversially, it does not become better when I act compassionately, or worse when I murder someone in a fit of rage. But no birth and no death? Does that mean unbound awareness is immortal?

The Anxiety of Awareness

Buddhist teachings contain many references to realizing “the Unborn,” beginning with two well-known passages attributed to the Buddha in the *Udana*. In addition to such a claim in the *Heart Sutra* and other Prajnaparamita sutras and commentarial texts, similar statements are found in the records of many Chan/Zen adepts. None of them emphasized it more than the Japanese Zen master Bankei (1622–93), who used the concept as his central teaching. “Since the Buddha-mind takes care of everything by means of the Unborn [*fushou*], it has nothing to do with samsara or nirvana. Seen from the place of the Unborn, both of them are like the shadows in a dream” (Waddell 1984, 56). The Unborn, like the intrinsic nature of our attention, is not something that can be gained: “It’s wrong for you to breed a second mind on top of the mind you already have by trying to *become* the Unborn. You’re unborn right from the start. . . . The true Unborn has nothing to do with fundamental principles and it’s beyond becoming or attaining. It’s simply *being who you are*” (123). Simply realizing the nature of your awareness.

But how does simply *being who you are* escape birth and death? A monk asked Bankei: What happens when someone who believes in the Unborn dies? Is he born again or not? He responded: “At the place of the Unborn, there’s no distinction between being born and not being born” (121).

Why not? Is the Unborn a transcendental consciousness that repeatedly takes on new bodies when previous ones die?¹¹ No, for the categories of life and death, like all other characteristics, simply have no purchase. Liberated awareness has no reason to fear death because no-thing has nothing to lose. We are reminded of Epictetus's classical argument in his *Letter to Menoecus*: "When we are here, death is not, and when death is here, we are not." Nondwelling attention in itself lacks nothing, because there is nothing it could gain. With nothing to gain or lose, there are no "hindrances in the mind" and nothing to fear, as the *Heart Sutra* concludes.

The ego-self does have something to lose: itself, its self. The ego-self has nothing to lose, because it is a fictional construct. We suffer because awareness mistakenly identifies with (sense of) self, a construct that itself identifies with the body, which is subject to pain, illness, old age, and death. Bankei offered a curious "proof" of the Unborn to demonstrate that it is not the same as the self. "When you face me and listen to me say this, if somewhere a sparrow chirps, or a crow caws, or a man or woman says something, or the wind rustles the leaves, though you sit there without any intent to listen, you will hear and distinguish each sound. But it isn't your self that is doing the listening, it isn't self-power" (Waddell 1984, 58).¹² The point, apparently, is that our attention is not a function of self, not an act that the self *does*, because spontaneously hearing and identifying the sparrow is an unprompted act of perception that escapes its agency.

Whether or not we find this argument persuasive, the distinction between attention (awareness, mind, etc.) and sense of self remains basic to Buddhism. Awareness itself lacks nothing, but the sense of self lacks everything, because it is illusory, in the sense that it is nothing more substantial than an ever-changing network of mental and physical processes. Such an ungrounded and ungroundable *sense* of self can never become a *real* self. Nevertheless, the urge to become more real, and perpetual failure to achieve it, haunts the sense of self as a sense of lack. The "return of the repressed" in the distorted form of a symptom links this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we usually try to make ourselves real in the world. Groundlessness is experienced as the feeling that "there is something wrong with me," yet that feeling manifests, and we respond to it, in many different ways. The tragedy is that no amount of *X* can ever be enough if it is not really *X* that we want. When we do not understand what is actually motivating us—because what we *think* we need is a symptom of something else—we end up compulsive.

This applies not only to secular compulsions such as money, fame, and sexual gratification, but also to "spiritual" pursuits, insofar as we expect that religious practices will lead to an enlightenment that finally makes us (feel) more real. Enlightenment does not involve discovering a ground for our groundlessness, but realizing that our groundless awareness, "without a support or a basis," does not need any other ground. One's awareness cannot be secured, except in

the realization that, being no-thing, there is nothing to secure.¹³ Although a conditioned, impermanent sense of self cannot attain immortality, a nondwelling awareness can dwell in—or (better) *as*—an eternal present.

This implies that our fundamental problem is not fear of death but dread of our no-thing-ness. Solving the latter problem should also resolve the former, not because one realizes some transcendental consciousness that survives physical death to enter another body (what happens at death is not thereby determined), but because nonclinging awareness does not distinguish between being alive or not being alive, as Bankei puts it. Chopping wood, drawing water, eating when hungry, resting when weary—where is the birth and death in that?

Nevertheless, there is something fundamentally mysterious about the Unborn. I cannot comprehend it, cannot grasp its nature, because “I” *am* it. Our usual way of understanding attention and awareness assumes a tripartite epistemology: *I am aware of some thing*. *Anatta* implies that there is no such subject-predicate-object relationship, which means that “my” awareness is actually not “mine.” Then whose awareness is it? It is easy to respond “no one’s,” yet that does not evade the deeper question: What does it mean for awareness not to be the consciousness *of* some agent? Why and how does liberated awareness assume the forms that it does? Some types of meditation (e.g., Zen *shikan-taza*) involve maintaining a “pure” attention that does not dwell on anything. Although thoughts and other mental phenomena continue to arise, the sky remains blue as such clouds drift through it. Where do they come from? Some such question likely prompted the Yogachara postulation of an *alaya-vijnana* unconscious, where karmic seeds dwell until conditions awaken them. A nondwelling, contemplative awareness allows those seeds to sprout, so they can be “roasted” by not identifying with them. Instead of responding to them, one lets them go.

Yet it is not only memories and affect traces from the past that arise unbidden into awareness. Our attention can take new, spontaneous, sometimes inexplicable forms, which is what we mean by creativity. How does that happen? Beethoven, Brahms, and Puccini believed that their compositions were dictated or assisted by God. Less explicitly religious composers (and artists, writers, etc.) have spoken of being “vessels”—for what? When awareness becomes liberated, something more is involved than what we normally understand as the everyday mind of chopping wood, and so on. In place of the Japanese term *kensho* for one’s initial glimpse of enlightenment, some American Zen groups now refer to an “opening.” *Opening* highlights another aspect of nondwelling, nongrasping attention: its noninstrumental responsiveness and sensitivity to what arises. To realize that my awareness is not mine is to discover that its no-thing-ness has infinite depths. When we think about nonclinging, we usually visualize external objects and sensory phenomena,

but, when attention is not referring back to the self-image that is ego, there is also receptivity to what springs up from its own depths.¹⁴

The Attention-Deficit Society

The earlier discussion of karma addressed only the individual aspects of moral cause and effect, yet we are social creatures subject to collective influences beyond personal agency. In other words, there is also collective karma. Traditional understandings of karma and rebirth, which can understand group karma only by bundling individual karmas, become implausible when applied to genocide, for example. To argue that all those who perished in Nazi concentration camps must have been reaping the karmic fruits of their evil deeds in previous lifetimes is fatuous, to say the least. There is, however, another way to approach the issue of collective karma: by considering what conditions our collective awareness. How has the development of the modern/postmodern world affected human attention—not only what we attend to, but how we attend to it? It is important to see the implications of the previous discussion for some of the social issues that concern us today. The constriction or liberation of awareness is not only a personal matter. What do societies do to encourage or discourage its emancipation?

Recent media coverage suggests that one of our major concerns about attention is the lack thereof. Attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have become serious medical issues in the United States, originally among schoolchildren but now among young adults as well.¹⁵ What might be called the fragmentation of our attention is addressed in chapter 5. The present chapter concludes by noticing two other influences on our collective attention: its commodification and media/political manipulation.

The Commodification of Attention

Although it is difficult to overemphasize the cumulative effects of television (including video and video games) on our collective attention habits, there is a more basic problem. For those of us in the developed (or “economized”) world, the greatest “awareness trap” is consumerism, which involves sophisticated advertising that has become very good at manipulating our attention. Since production problems have become relatively easy to solve, today the bigger economic challenge is keeping us convinced that the solution to our *dukkha* is our next purchase. As the pioneering advertising executive Leo Burnett (1891–1971) put it, “Good advertising does not just circulate information. It penetrates the public mind with desire and belief.” That penetration may have

been lucrative for his clients, yet it also has other, more problematic consequences: “[I]n a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves, the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy” (Illich 1973, 46).¹⁶ Whether or not one is able to afford the desired product, one’s attention is captured.

Recently it has become more evident that attention is the basic commodity to be exploited. “The new economy is not an information or a knowledge economy. . . . It is an attention economy,” according to a writer in South Africa’s *Financial Mail*, coining a meme that has proliferated in business circles.¹⁷ “The basic resource of this new economy is not something they provide us. It’s something we provide them—‘mindshare,’ in the charming idiom of the trade. Now ask yourself this: What if there’s only so much mind to share? If you’ve wondered how people could feel so depleted in such a prosperous economy, how stress could become the trademark affliction of the age, part of the answer might be here” (Rowe 2001, unpaginated).¹⁸

Rowe is concerned about the commodification of what he terms *cognitive space*, the corporate response to the fact that people might sometimes be concerned about something else besides buying and consuming. This has led to “the ultimate enclosure—the enclosure of the cognitive commons, the ambient mental atmosphere of daily life,” a rapid development now so pervasive that it has become like the air we breathe unnoticed. Time and space, he argues, have already been reconstructed: holidays (including new commercialized ones such as Mother’s Day) into shopping days, the “civic commons of Main Street” into shopping malls. Now advertising is infiltrating into every corner of our conscious (and unconscious) awareness. Sports stadiums used to have ads, but now renamed stadiums are themselves ads. Television shows used to be supported by advertising; today insidious product placement makes the whole show (and many films) an ad. The jewelry company Bulgari sponsored a novel by Fay Weldon that included over three dozen references to its products. A 2005 issue of the *New Yorker* did not include any ads, because the whole magazine was a promotion for the retail chain Target. Children are especially vulnerable, of course, and two-thirds of three-year-olds recognize the golden arches of McDonald’s.¹⁹

In the past one could often ignore the ads, but enclosure of the cognitive commons now means that they confront us wherever our attention turns. Unless we are meditating in a Himalayan cave, we end up having to process thousands of commercial messages every day. And they do not just grab our attention, they exploit it: “The attention economy mines us much the way the industrial economy mines the earth. It mines us first for incapacities and wants. Our capacity for interaction and reflection must become a need for entertainment. Our capacity to deal with life’s bumps and jolts becomes a need for ‘grief counselling’ or Prozac. The progress of the consumer economy has come to mean the diminution of ourselves” (Rowe 2001, unpaginated).²⁰

Consumerism requires and reinforces a sense of our own impoverishment. By manipulating the gnawing sense of lack that haunts our insecure (because groundless) sense of self, the attention economy insinuates its basic message deep into our awareness: the solution is consumption.

The Control of Attention

Dictatorships control people with violence and the threat of it, to restrain what they do. Modern democracies control people with sophisticated propaganda, by manipulating what they think. The title of one of Noam Chomsky's books sums it up well: *Manufacturing Consent*. We worry about weapons of mass destruction, but we should be as concerned about weapons of mass deception and weapons of mass distraction, which may be more insidious because more difficult to detect. To cite only the most obvious example, the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq would never have been possible without carefully orchestrated attempts to make the public anxious about something that did not exist. It was easy to do because September 11 has made us fearful, and fearful people are more susceptible to manipulation.

Traditionally, rulers and ruling classes used religious ideologies to justify their power. In premodern Europe the church supported the "divine right" of kings. In Asian Buddhist societies karma offered a convenient way to rationalize both the ruler's authority and the powerlessness of his oppressed subjects. It implied one should accept one's present social status because it is a consequence of one's past deeds. In more secular societies, however, acquiescence must be molded in different ways.

According to Alex Carey, "The twentieth century has been characterized by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy" (Carey 1996, 18). Corporations are not mentioned in the United States Constitution—the founding fathers were wary of them and did not want to promote them—and corporate power only began to expand dramatically toward the end of the nineteenth century, so successfully that today there is little if any effective distinction between major corporations and the federal government. Both identify wholeheartedly with the goal of continuous economic growth, with less regard for its social or ecological effects. (We are repeatedly told that any unfortunate consequences from this growth obsession can be solved by more economic growth.) This often requires foreign intervention, for our access to resources and markets must be protected and expanded, usually under the guise of "defending ourselves."

Instead of raising questions about this orientation, the mainstream media—our collective nervous system—have become powerful profit-making

corporations that serve to rationalize that belief system. Only a very narrow spectrum of opinion is considered acceptable or “realistic,” and whatever problems arise require only a few minor adjustments here and there. As the earth begins to burn, as ecosystems start to collapse, the media focus our collective attention on the things that really matter: the Superbowl, the price of gas, the latest murder or sex scandal . . .

The Liberation of Collective Attention

Who owns our attention, and who should have the right to decide what happens to it? Rowe concludes that we need a new freedom movement, to “battle for the cognitive commons. If we have no choice regarding what fills our attention, then we really have no choice at all.” From a Buddhist perspective, however, it seems doubtful that any collective social protest movement could be successful without an alternative understanding of what awareness is and what alternative practices promote more liberated attention. It is not enough to fight against billboards and Internet banner ads without also considering what it might mean for awareness to be here and now, deconditioned from attention traps both individual and collective.

To conclude, let me emphasize that this chapter is a thought-experiment. Although I have tried to show that an understanding of the difference between bound and unbound awareness can be quite illuminating, I do not claim that this point by itself is enough to understand the liberation that the Buddhist path aims at. Buddhism includes many other related teachings: impermanence, nonself, interdependent origination (or nonorigination), and so on. Nevertheless, my argument implies that one of the most important issues, for each of us personally and also collectively as a society, is: What is our attitude toward attention/awareness? Is attention to be controlled and exploited, or cultivated and awakened? Is awareness to be valued as the means to some other end, or should we cherish and encourage its liberation as the most valuable goal to be sought? The Buddhist answer to such questions is clear. What is less clear is how much of a role that answer might play in the ways our society responds to that challenge.