

Contemplating Philosophy, Philosophizing Contemplation*

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Pause and become present

Hello and welcome. Thank you for being here.

I specifically want to thank Dr. Gereon Kopf for inviting me to participate and contribute, although he may have second (or double-nine) thoughts after this presentation.

Drawing upon the methodology of Contemplative Studies, which overlaps with other approaches like comparative theology, critical race theory (not illegal yet), and feminism (also not illegal yet), I want to begin with a few remarks on my own positionality. This relates to critical subjectivity and self-contextualization.

- In terms of the present gathering, geographically and nationalistically speaking I am NOT international, although all of my grandparents immigrated to the United States from Western European countries (seven ethno-cultural identities in total) and I aspire to be transnational (perhaps also transrational)
- I also am NOT a scholar of Japanese philosophy and religion
- And I am NOT located in the discipline and field of (Western) Philosophy, although I am a contributing member of the Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion project

Given these three “nots” (knots?), informed by the Daoist emphasis on *wú* 無 (“without/non/beyond”), perhaps I am exactly where I should be (assuming I am here).

- For those of you who do not know my background and work, my primary fields are Contemplative Studies, Daoist Studies, and Religious Studies
- I also have reflected deeply and written critically on the (mis)application of the category “philosophy” (e.g., so-called ~~philosophical Daoism~~) for understanding Daoism. This includes the problematic construction, appropriation, and domestication of Daoism in so-called Asian Philosophy, so-called Chinese Philosophy, and comparative philosophy. This is not the moment to review my larger critiques, but interested individuals may look at my books *The Daoist Tradition* (2013) and *Daoism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2014)
- Suffice it to say, Daoism is an indigenous Chinese religion, the “Tradition of the Dao,” with the Dao being the sacred and ultimate concern of Daoists. There is, in turn, an informing soteriology (ultimate purpose) and theology (sacred). From my perspective and more challenging for a conventional philosophical approach, Daoists and Daoist communities place a strong emphasis on practice and experience, specifically as cultivated,

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embodied, and transmitted as contemplative and even mystical being-in-the-world. This is one in which open receptivity and energetic listening are primary

In our brief time together, I want to take some intellectual risks (already begun), in hopes of advancing what might be framed as “contemplative philosophy,” that is, philosophy informed by contemplative practice, and contemplative practice informed by philosophy. Or perhaps what I am aspiring towards is philosophy as contemplative practice. This relates to my larger views about (and vision for) Contemplative Studies as an emerging *interdisciplinary* field and of contemplative practice as such, with particular concern for the Humanities and Liberal Arts, and perhaps beyond. Here a few words are in order regarding both.

Antimatter/Russell Edson (1935-2014)

On the other side of a mirror there's an inverse world, where the insane go sane; where bones climb out of the earth and recede to the first smile of love.

And in the evening the sun is just rising.

Lovers cry because they are a day younger, and soon childhood robs them of their pleasure.

In such a world there is much sadness which, of course, is joy.

As articulated in my book *Introducing Contemplative Studies* (2018), Contemplative Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience. This includes three primary defining characteristics: (1) Practice commitment, especially formal meditation; (2) Critical subjectivity; and (3) Character development, with the latter being perhaps most controversial, but also especially relevant in the present context (I hope). “Contemplative practice” is a larger umbrella category; it encompasses approaches and practices more commonly referred to as “meditation,” “prayer,” and cognate disciplines. Contemplative practice refers to various approaches, disciplines and methods for developing attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom, and the like. Possible connective strands and family resemblances include attentiveness, awareness, interiority, presence, silence, transformation, and a deepened sense of meaning and purpose. I am particularly interested in what I refer to as religiously-committed, tradition-based and theologically-infused contemplative practice.

Drawing upon my larger “philosophy of praxis,” which might also point towards the possibility of a “praxis of philosophy,” praxis as a critical category consists of four interrelated dimensions, namely, views, methods, experiences, and goals. Although I have primarily utilized this interpretive framework to discuss religious practices, it has a broad application, including to any approach or undertaking such as philosophy itself or the present setting. So let us engage in a momentary meta-reflection along these lines, taking ourselves as our “data-set.” Presumably, we have an individual and collective belief in scholarship and evidence-based argumentation rooted in reason(ableness). This leads to making perhaps otherwise nonsensical and even absurd presentations (try doing this as street performance) to a room, sometimes modestly attended (exit stage-right), of well-behaved and respectful, sometimes even respectable and respected,

“colleagues.” We sit or stand, clap (or not) when expected (or not). We may tell ourselves (and others, including administrators and students) accompanying stories about knowledge production, field development, the importance of so-called “higher” education, and even personal interests. Some then later gather to discuss “issues,” “insights,” “contributions,” and the like, perhaps over alcohol-infused banquets.

Here I should mention that my views and approach, which now involve a “new vision” (addendum), stand in contrast to mainstream or corporate COST (CCOST) (consider the unspoken true *costs*), now under the guise of so-called “contemplative research” (let’s all be good scientists together) and the like. Mainstream COST is actually an evangelical Buddhist project, often with covert proselytization and cognitive imperialism (not to mention Orientalism), with various careerist and corporatized subtexts. (Who wants to reproduce the status quo?)

And they all play on the golf course
And drink their martinis dry
And they all have pretty children
And the children go to school

Let me be clear: I do not believe that deep and committed contemplative practice (or authentic education for that matter) is compatible with capitalism and with corporate sponsorship and agendas. (I know, I have just lost my remaining non-existent funding.) (Alternatively, consider the Merton-Hanh-MLK, Jr. triad). While I could offer a systematic critical analysis of corporate meditation and its academic representatives and colluders, including reflections based on ethnographic, participant-observation fieldwork, this is not the place-time (exit stage-left). Nonetheless, one might simply consider the identities of the scholars and institutions involved; the excessive emphasis on the “wisdom-compassion dyad”; medicalization and scientization (i.e., Buddho-neuroscience) as a legitimation (and missionary) strategy; and an assumed/presumed Mahāyāna Buddhist aspiration to “alleviate suffering” and to “save all sentient (human) beings” (especially Buddhist sympathizers who go with the program), often with an unacknowledged and perhaps uncritical *upaya* (“skillful means”) subtext in which decontextualization and reconceptualization are rationalized in various ways (“the-ends-justify-the-means”). This includes banalized forms of so-called “mindfulness,” in various forms of cultural appropriation and commodification, in such a nebulous manner as to be basically meaningless. My apologies—I’m just trying to be mindful of those mindlessly practicing (and selling) mindfulness. And I’m sorry to tell you, the world is on fire, both literally and figuratively. So perhaps contemplative renunciation, infused with a sense of *mappō* 末法, is the more viable response (survival strategy). For my part, I am more interested in a field centered on equity, diversity, and inclusion (or whichever order you prefer), including “hidden diversity” with respect to affiliated communities, disciplines, and traditions. What would happen if we made Dance the baseline? Or Theatre? Or Architecture? I am more interested in the radical transformative, perhaps even revolutionary potential of a contemplative approach. As a Daoist scholar-practitioner (and now court-exile and outsider-scholar) with ecological and social justice concerns, I am committed to developing scholar-practitioner approaches (SPA) and critical adherent discourse (CAD), including the possibility of inter-contemplative dialogue (ICD) and even inter-species relationality (ISR), beyond the human-primate collective.

The Room/W.S. Merwin (1927-2019)

I think all this is somewhere in myself
The cold room unlit before dawn
Containing a stillness such as attends death
And from a corner the sounds of a small bird trying
From time to time to fly a few beats in the dark
You would say it was dying it is immortal

Now, Gereon asked me if I would speak about “mindfulness and philosophy,” especially with respect to Japanese philosophy. Well, I think you know the answer by now, but...

For my first Out-of-Turn Speech, let me raise the question of what is “philosophy,” both as a rubric and as a discipline/field, or series of fields. With respect to the category/categorization question, let us take the example of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism, which is referred to as so-called ~~philosophical~~ Daoism in outdated and inaccurate Orientalist constructions. As the latter, especially in imagined/ary “Zhuangzian reflections” (domestications), it is the focus of endless philosophical (intellectualized) publications through the lens of Western categories like “nihilism,” “relativism,” and “skepticism.” Etc., etc., etc. Following some of my other critiques, this might be thought of as the “ZZ Philosophy Industry” (ZZPI). In contrast, “classical Daoism” refers to the earliest Daoist *religious* community, which emerged around 300 BCE and is documented in such well-known texts as the *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters), also known as the *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), and the *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang). In these and related works, there is an assumed, shared practice repertoire and training regimen focusing on apophatic and quietistic (emptiness-/stillness-based) meditation. Some indigenous, contemporaneous Chinese Daoist designations for the latter include *shǒuyī* 守一 (“guarding the One”), *xīnzhāi* 心齋 (“fasting of the heart-mind”), and *zuòwàng* 坐忘 (“sitting-in-forgetfulness”). The practice basically involves sitting in silence, with the informing view of innate nature (*xìng* 性)-as-stillness being the Dao-as-Stillness. This is an emanationist and immanence theology. The practice is primarily contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic. The associated “philosophical insights,” which are perhaps more accurately characterized as “contemplative” and even “mystical,” are informed by this practice, *actually assume a root in this practice*.

Now, for present purposes and as my second Out-of-Turn Speech, specifically with attention to Japanese philosophy and religion (forgive my mispronunciations), it is noteworthy that Eihei Dōgen 永平道元 (“Way-Origin”; 1200-1253), like Chan/Zen Buddhism in general and the practice of just sitting (*shikan taza* 只管打坐) in particular, was influenced by classical Daoism. In his deservedly renowned *Sansui kyō* 山水經 (Mountains and Waters Sutra), Dōgen explicitly cites or at least alludes to the *Zhuāngzǐ* (*Sōshi*). Specifically, he refers to the story of the legendary Yellow Emperor and his supposed Daoist teacher Master Guǎngchéng 廣成 (Kōsei; Expansive Completion) from ZZ 11. This occurs on Mount Kōngtóng 空同/崆峒 (Kūdō/Kōdō; Empty Identity). Interestingly, this exchange, actually a *master-disciple dialogue and training session*,

occurs among some of the most technical information (instructions) on classical Daoist quietistic practice.

「來！吾語女至道。至道之精，窈窈冥冥；至道之極，昏昏默默。無視無聽，抱神以靜，形將自正。必靜必清，無勞女形，無搖女精，乃可以長生。目無所見，耳無所聞，心無所知，女神將守形，形乃長生。慎女內，閉女外，多知為敗。我為女遂於大明之上矣，至彼至陽之原也；為女入於窈冥之門矣，至彼至陰之原也。天地有官，陰陽有藏，慎守女身，物將自壯。我守其一，以處其和，故我修身千二百歲矣，吾形未嘗衰。」

Lái 來, *lái* 來, *lái* 來

“Come, I will tell you about the utmost Way (*zhìdào* 至道). The essence of the utmost Way is deep and mysterious; the pinnacle of the utmost Way is vague and silent. Let there be no seeing and no hearing. Embrace spirit (*bàoshén* 抱神) in stillness (*jìng* 靜), and the body (*xíng* 形) will naturally align (*zhèng* 正). Be still, be clear, do not labor your body, do not roil your vital essence, and then you can live a long life. When the eyes do not see, the ears do not hear, and the heart-mind (*xīn* 心) does not know,[†] then spirit will guard the body, and the body will enjoy long life. Attend to what is within you; block off what is outside you, for much knowing (*zhī* 知) will do you harm. [Repeat] Then I will lead you up above the Great Brilliance (*dà míng* 大明), to the source of utmost yang; I will guide you through the Deep and Silent Gate (*yǎo míng zhī mén* 窈冥之門), to the source of perfect yin. The heavens and earth have their controllers, yin and yang their storehouses. You have only to take care and guard your own body; these other things will naturally strengthen. As for myself, I guard this unity (*shǒu qí yī* 守其一), abide in this harmony, and therefore I have cultivated myself (*xiūshēn* 修身) for twelve hundred years, and never has my body suffered any decay.”

Suffice it to say, it would take a separate presentation to unpack all of the relevant details in said chapter. Here I simply draw attention to the technical specifics of assumed community-specific contemplative practice, which involves decreasing sensory engagement and psychospiritual agitation. To return to one’s original and inherent connection to the sacred. This is the classical Daoist twofold decreasing (*chóng sǔn* 重損) leading to the twofold mystery (*chóng xuán* 重玄) of the Dao. So, if we take this Dōgen-inspired contemplative mythopoetics seriously, we seek and encounter originary instructions on Daoist quietistic meditation on Mount Kōngtóng, perhaps overlapping trans-temporarily with Dōgen’s own training under Rújìng 如淨 (Nyojō; 1163-1228) on Mount Tiāntóng 天童 (Tendō), while simultaneously studying with Dōgen himself, via the *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 (Treasury of the True Dharma-Eye), in seclusion in Echizen 越前 Province. There we read (listen to) the *Zazen gi* 坐禪儀 (Principles of Zazen [Seated Dhyāna]) and perhaps learn to read the landscape itself as the teachings of the Buddha, and enlightenment by extension. Such is the *Mountains and Waters Sutra*, and perhaps *Actualizing the Fundamental Point*. “To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.” And

[†] An allusion to DDJ 12 and 14; also 3 and 49. See also what I refer to as the seven “core contemplative chapters”: 10, 16, 20, 28, 37, 48, and 57.

“Mountains and waters right now are the actualization of the ancient buddha way.” Mountain-being.

Combining these points with my third and final Out-of-Turn Speech, I would like to invite you to join me in reframing philosophy (in whatever form), perhaps you already are, through the revisionist frameworks of Pierre Hadot (1922-2010) and the later Michel Foucault (1926-1984), specifically their respective emphases on “spiritual exercises” and “techniques of self.” This has the potential to lead to a (re)new(ed) philosophy, even a “contemplative philosophy.” For those of us who care about the Humanities and Liberal Arts (and perhaps something else and something more), such a philosophical approach results in a reframing of the philosophical project as one centering on “philosophy as a way of life” aimed at holistic and integrated character development. In such an approach, we might, *à la* Hadot, investigate some lost, or at least hidden wellsprings. We might think of this as both a hermeneutics of retrieval and a hermeneutics of (im)possibility.

Again speaking out of turn (sorry, a fourth potentially dangerous re-turning, un-winding, and over-stepping), I find myself intrigued by what I (mis)understand about the Greek and specifically Aristotelian Peripatetic (Walking) School, associated with the Lykeion (Lyceum; gymnasium). As someone who walks-and-thinks, who thinks in/as/through walking, as someone interested in embodied cognition and movement awareness, I imagine a new Peripatetic scholarly tradition. As a thought-experiment, actually a “body-experiment,” this would be teaching and learning in/as/through movement. Walking-lectures. Outside and beyond the classroom as conventionally conceived and structured. A somatics of (un/re)learning. On a comparative and cross-cultural level, one might further connect this to the Japanese Haiku poet and wanderer Matsuo Bashō 松尾芭蕉 (1644-1694) and to the American nature writers Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and John Muir (1838-1914). Specifically, it is interesting that Bashō wrote the *Oku no Hosomichi* 奥の細道 (Narrow Road to the Deep North/Northern Interior; 1689/1702), Thoreau *Walking* (1851/1862), and Muir *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916), among others. As Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) tells us, “It is only ideas gained from walking that have any value.”† And from mountaineering and pilgrimage and...*Wanderlust*. (An important counterpoint might be contexts of mobility limitation, such as Nelson Mandela in Robben Island Prison or Stephen Hawking in ALS). In any case, I see great potential for reengagements, revisions, and new applications. This is philosophy as *embodied and enacted*.

The Way In/Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926)

Whoever you are: some evening take a step
out of your house, which you know so well.
Enormous space is near, your house lies where it begins,
whoever you are.
Your eyes find it hard to tear themselves
from the sloping threshold, but with your eyes
slowly, slowly, lift one black tree
up, so it stands against the sky: skinny, alone.
With that you have made the world. The world is immense

† *Götzen-Dämmerung, oder, Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert* (Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer; 1889). Aphorism 34.

and like a word that is still growing in the silence.
In the same moment that your will grasps it,
your eyes, feeling its subtlety, will leave it. . .

~Translated by Robert Bly

Thank you for your kind attention.



ADDENDUM

“Contemplative Studies: A New Vision” by Louis Komjathy. Alternate Homepage of Dr. Louis Komjathy (www.louiskomjathy.com/kontemplacja)

“On So-called ‘Daoist Philosophy’” by Louis Komjathy. Alternate Homepage of Dr. Louis Komjathy (www.louiskomjathy.com/taoisme)

“Praxis” by Louis Komjathy. Alternate Homepage of Dr. Louis Komjathy (www.louiskomjathy.com/kontemplacja)

“Therapeutic Meditation: Hebert Benson’s *The Relaxation Response*” by Louis Komjathy. In *Contemplative Literature*, edited by Louis Komjathy

“Thinking about/through Posture and Movement” by Louis Komjathy. Alternate Homepage of Dr. Louis Komjathy (www.louiskomjathy.com/kontemplacja)

“Translation Guide to Corporate Contemplative Studies (CCOST)” by Louis Komjathy. Alternate Homepage of Dr. Louis Komjathy (www.louiskomjathy.com/kontemplacja)

