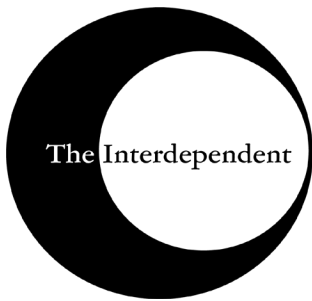


# ***Subject and Reality: Self, Plenitude, and Ultimate Truth in Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism, and Sufism***



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## **Abstract**

This article presents two interconnected arguments. Firstly, it compares three distinct religious traditions—Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism, and Sufism—in order to argue that each posits the same nondual Reality (here called *Subject*) as the ultimate ontological Truth and the true Self of individuals. It is erroneous to identify with the body-mind and apprehend multiplicity. Secondly, it argues that the practices of these different religions lead to the same end: realization of the true Self or *Subject*. The purpose of this study is to highlight the essential unity of global religions and the Oneness of Being.

## **Keywords**

Advaita Vedānta; Brahman; Comparative Religion; Fanā; Samādhi; Satori; Sufism; Ultimate Reality; Zen Buddhism

## **Introduction**

This article concerns a central existential question: “Who am I?” Since ancient times, many have believed that they are the briefly lasting body. Some others, realizing that the body changes constantly and that all of its parts are not essential to having a full sense of self, have believed that they are actually embodied minds. Fewer others, realizing that even the mind changes constantly, as one thought cascades after another, have sought that constant sense of “I”—the true Self—that never changes. Fewer among those seekers have actually found it. It is not a new discovery, rather this knowledge has existed since the dawn of civilization, carefully written down in the oldest scriptures known to mankind: the Vedas.

The Vedas are ancient Hindu scriptures known to have been orally transmitted since at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. Within the Vedas, there are Sanskrit texts known as the Upaniṣads, which form the foundation of Advaita Vedānta, an ancient school of nondual philosophy. Its central theses are: (1) we are not limited, separate, and distinct individuals, (2) the world that we perceive as separate from us and as consisting of a multiplicity of objects is illusory; in actuality, there is only One metaphysical Reality: Brahman or Existence-Consciousness-Bliss Absolute, and (3) the apparently limited individual *is* Brahman. That is, our true Self is none other than Brahman.

The present comparative study explores how this idea of Self is not unique to Advaita Vedānta. According to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bengali mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, who preached the harmony of all religions, various traditions have various names—Brahman, God, Allah, *Śūnyatā*—for the same Ultimate Reality. Through his mystical experiences, Sri Ramakrishna verified that at the core of all religions is the same Truth which, whether one calls it Allah, Brahman, or God, is no different from the individual’s innermost, truest Self. Drawing from such testimony and through comparative analysis, this article presents three intertwined arguments: (1) the metaphysical posits of three distinct traditions—Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism, and Sufi Islam—seem to converge

at the same nondual Reality (here called *Subject*) which is also the true Self of all individuals, (2) the Lacanian Real, which may be similarly construed as a nondual reality, is not a true plenum and that *Subject* is in fact prior to the Real (excluded here), and (3) the spiritual practices of these three traditions, despite their external differences, lead to the same realization: identity of the true Self as *Subject*.

The first part establishes the metaphysics of *Subject* through a comparative study of Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism and Sufism, arguing that the Vedāntic Brahman, as the birthless and deathless Self, has metaphysical equivalents in Zen Buddhist and Sufi thought. The second part argues that different spiritual practices—*jñāna yoga* in Advaita Vedānta, *koān* practice in Zen Buddhism, and the *ṭarīqah* in Sufism—converge at the same end: the realization of the true Self as *Subject*.

### ***Subject and the subjectivity***

This part argues that Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism, and Sufi Islam seem to posit the same Ultimate Reality as the true Self. The word *Subject* is used to unify the cross-cultural terminology for the Ultimate Reality known as “Brahman,” “Allah,” and “*Śūnyatā*” in the Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist traditions respectively and to convey the metaphysical nature of this Reality as a pure, nondual subjecthood, unobjectifiable and without object. *Subject* is of the nature of Being-Consciousness. Therefore: it is not something *that* exists, but is Existence itself, and it is not something *that* is conscious, but is Consciousness itself. Furthermore, it is not only the Ultimate Reality but also the true Self. That which individuals believe to be the self—body, personality, and/or ego-identity—is not the real Self, but an illusion. The illusory, limited individual identity, comprising the body-mind complex, is termed the *subjectivity*. The *subjectivity*

is temporary since it comes into existence and dies shortly thereafter. The true Self as *Subject*, however, is the eternal and undying Being-Consciousness.

## **The Question of Death**

*A man finds himself, to his great astonishment, suddenly existing, after thousands of years of non-existence; he lives for a little while; and then, again, comes to an equally long period when he must exist no more. The heart rebels against this, and feels that it cannot be true.*

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Vanity of Existence*

Death is, funnily enough, the most *certain* of all phenomena, and yet the deepest and most personal uncertainty. One knows *that* it will come, but not *when*. One fears it—one does not know what it is or what it means: “In death, will everything cease to *be*, and I along with it? Will everything collapse into nothingness? Or is there a place where I will *go* when I die?” This has been the most central question of all religion: What *is* death? Does it only mean a disappearance of sorts, or does it mean non-Being?

Death as disappearance is easier to conceive than death as non-existence, non-Being. One cannot imagine what it is *not* to *be*, for to even imagine the world where one does not exist, one has to be present as the subjective agent who *imagines* that world. Nothingness, thus, lies beyond the conceptual horizons of the human mind. Nothingness, or the realm of *Nothing*, is neither a thing nor not-a-thing.<sup>1</sup> It is supposedly a complete absence of Being, where there is neither subject nor object. Can one ask, “What *is* it?” when it is precisely *nothing*? One might say that it is conceivable as “that in which nothing exists,” which can be represented in set theory as an empty set: Nothingness = {nothing}

But then, does Nothingness not become a *something* (the set) that contains *nothing*? Suppose one imagines an empty sphere: inside the sphere there is nothing, yet the sphere *is*. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Entities that are not “things.” For example, space is not a thing itself, it is that within which things exist.

in a sense, the emptiness inside the sphere *is* as well—the nothing is nothing, yet *is*. Henri Bergson and Bede Rundle were among those thinkers who proposed that Nothingness cannot be imagined at all even if one tries to mentally subtract all existing things. One is bound to stop at their own subjective consciousness and space—two things that cannot be thought away. Yet, these two are precisely *no-things*, for space is not a thing but rather that within which things exist,<sup>2</sup> and consciousness is that which renders subjecthood, thereby being unobjectifiable itself.

Thus Nothingness, neither thing nor no-thing, remains elusive and unintelligible, guarded by the last intelligible no-things, namely space and subjective consciousness. One must notice a complexity: it is not only that Nothingness, where nothing exists, is not accessible by human thought and imagination but also that it *does* exist in the sense that it *is* Nothingness! It is a paradox: that which seems to denote an absence of Being has a Being itself! Rundle concluded, along with others such as F. H. Bradley, that “there is just no alternative to being” (Rundle 113). For to even postulate a non-Being is to give it some degree of Being. Following Rundle’s conclusion that “there is just no alternative to being,” death as Nothingness becomes an impossibility (Rundle 113). To think of it another way: if there is non-Being, it is a cessation of Being, which implies that there must be beginning to Being and therefore a cause. A cause of Being cannot lack or be outside of Being. Thus, Being must be self-caused, self-sustained, and eternal: *ens causa sui*. By extension, when one dies, it cannot mean that they entirely cease to exist. Despite the death of the body-mind, a complete cessation of Being is impossible.

The conclusion, therefore, is that death as Nothingness is only apparent non-Being—it is, perhaps, a disappearance that may or may not retain the invisible similarity to life as thought of when conceiving an afterlife of the soul enjoying pleasures in a heaven or suffering punishments

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<sup>2</sup> This is the substantial view of space, which holds that space exists independently of its contents.

in a hell. One can say that it is the *isness* or Being that continues in Death just as it continues in Life.

## **The Question of Being**

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his book *Being and Time*, writes:

It is said that ‘Being’ is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts. As such, it resists every attempt at definition. Nor does this universal and hence indefinable concept require any definition, for everyone uses it constantly and already understands what he means by it (21).

The meaning of the ‘to be’ verb is intuitive—one knows it most clearly and intimately. Everything else follows from this premise: that things exist. It is presupposed in all ontology and taken as a concept for granted. Heidegger himself opens his *magnum opus* saying: “This question has today been forgotten” (Heidegger 21). But which question? What *is* “Being”?

Even though we know what Being is, we do not *know* what it is. Heidegger inquires: What, exactly, *is* that “which determines entities<sup>3</sup> as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood, however we may discuss them in detail” (Heidegger 26)? One can try to understand the question more intuitively by following this simple thought exercise:

Imagine a yellow armchair. The yellow color of the armchair is a directly observable quality or property of the armchair. The yellow color is also an experienced qualia<sup>4</sup> for any direct observer. Now, the backrest and armrests of the armchair disappear, and the remaining piece of furniture no longer resembles an armchair (perhaps it is now more like an ottoman). Here, one

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<sup>3</sup> Things that exist.

<sup>4</sup> Qualia is an instance of a subjective, conscious experience.

must notice that the form of the yellow furniture has obviously changed, but that has not resulted in any change in its *yellowness*. Though no longer an armchair, its yellowness remains the same. Furthermore, it is the same yellowness that is perceived in the yellow of a sunflower or taxi. Thus, the manifested form of the yellowness can change—it can be an armchair, a flower, or a taxi—but the yellowness itself does not change.

Similarly, the Being or the *isness* of the chair is perceived in the particular observable form of the chair. The form of the chair (or what it *is*) can change but the *isness* of it does not—the same *isness* that was present in the armchair is retained in the ottoman, just as in the case of its yellowness. The yellowness of the ottoman is not any more or less than the yellowness of the armchair, and similarly, the *isness* of the former is not any more or less than the *isness* of the latter. Furthermore, the *isness* of the armchair is no different from the *isness* of a sunflower or a taxi.

Now, if one asks, ‘what is yellowness?’, the only way to answer is by pointing at the yellow armchair, the sunflower, or the taxi. There would be no other way to explain the meaning of ‘yellowness’, or other terms such as ‘sweetness’ or ‘warmth’, to an ignorant individual without pointing at examples that allow the meaning of these terms to be directly perceived. Such “definition by pointing” is called ostensive definition, the use of which assumes that the inquirer has at least a rudimentary understanding of what the word means in language. Therefore, in order to be able to grasp the meaning of ‘yellowness’, one must rudimentarily understand what is meant by color. But an exact definition of ‘yellowness’ apart from its particular instances remains lacking.

Similarly, we possess a rudimentary and intuitive understanding of what is meant by Being. But even though we know what Being is through the examples of things that *are*, we do not *know* what it is. Just as ‘yellowness’ is not itself something that is yellow, Heidegger notes that “the

Being of entities ‘is’ not itself an entity” (Heidegger 26). He means to emphasize that the Being of entities is separable from their being-that-entity. Just as the yellowness is separable from the yellow armchair or the yellow sunflower, the *isness* of entities is separable from the what-it-is.

Interestingly, Heidegger’s conception of *Dasein*<sup>5</sup> places the human individual at the center of the question of Being, since it is the human “understanding of Being” that allows this inquiry in the first place (Grimes 92). Per Heidegger, *Dasein*’s Being ends in death and, “there is nothing beyond the grave” (Grimes 163). However, one must note that *Dasein*’s awareness of Being and the faculty of inquiry are not, in themselves, essential to Being-as-such. Heidegger himself writes in later works: “But that which before all else ‘is’, is Being”—so the Being of *Dasein* cannot be, and need not be, a necessary condition for Being-as-such (Heidegger 53). How can that which is established prior to all else—Being itself—be dependent on the human being? *Pace* Heidegger, how can a human being’s death be the ultimate threat to Being? *Dasein* dies; but does the Being of *Dasein* end? Advaita Vedānta claims no, *It* does not die.

## Death Revisited – *Na Hanyate*<sup>6</sup>

न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचि  
नायं भूत्वा भविता वा न भूयः ।  
अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो  
न हन्यते हन्यमाने शरीरे ॥2.20॥

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<sup>5</sup> According to Heidegger, a human being is a special entity, *Dasein*, that is existentially situated in the world and that has the unique ability to recognize and understand Being, and that is what makes it so central to the inquiry. Heidegger holds that in order to reach the answer to the question of Being, one must go through *Dasein*, the sole entity that understands Being. However, he points out that the investigation of *Dasein* is only provisional, a ‘preparatory procedure by which the horizon for the most primordial way of interpreting Being may be laid bare’ (Heidegger 38). That “horizon” for understanding Being, he posits, is time—Because *Dasein* is a Being-towards-death. Since *Dasein* is aware of the inevitability of its own death, its Being is penetrated by the ‘possibility of non-Being’ (Grimes 106). Death implies finitude, which makes time—temporality—inextricable from *Dasein*. Heidegger concludes that time is ‘the meaning of the Being of that entity which we call *Dasein*’—all due to the finitude of man’s existence (Heidegger 38).

<sup>6</sup> Sanskrit for ‘*It* does not die’.

*It is never born, nor does It die;  
nor having once existed, does It ever cease to be.  
It is unborn, eternal, changeless, ever-Itself.  
It does not die when the body is killed. (Bhagavad Gītā, 2.20)*

“What happens after Death?” the young Nachiketa asks Yama, the god of Death, in the *Katha Upaniṣad* (Kathopanishad 25). Yama says: “On this point, even the gods had doubted before. Very subtle is the subject and hard indeed to be comprehended... Entreat me not for this boon—release me from that obligation” (Kathopanishad 26). But after much pressing, Death agrees to reveal to Nachiketa that “Great Hereafter about which a man has his doubts” (The Upaniṣads 129). He says:

[It] is not born; It does not die. It has not sprung from anything; nothing has sprung from It. Birthless, eternal, everlasting, and ancient, It is not killed when the body is killed. (The Upaniṣads 140)

In death, it is the *subjectivity*—the delimited individual—that perishes. The organic body exhausts its vitality; the mind and identity of the person who “inhabited” the body also seemingly vanish; in all certainty, the living being ceases to be. Yet the Upaniṣad reveals: “It does not die.” The “*It*” that the Upaniṣad refers to is none other than Being itself, known in the Vedānta as Brahman:

All this is verily Brahman (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 11).

Who is one, the cause of many, but who has no cause, and is separate from cause and effect, self-existent, Brahman (Vivekacūḍāmaṇi 119).

*Satcitānanda* (Dṛg Dṛśya Vivēka 28)

*Sat-cit-ānanda* is the Sanskrit epithet for Brahman, meaning Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. Brahman, by definition, is Existence or Being itself. It is not something *that* exists; it is Being itself. Furthermore, it is not something *that* is conscious, but Consciousness itself. According to the Upaniṣads, it is the Being-Consciousness of the *subjectivity* that continues after

death—*It* does not die; it cannot, for Being, that which is prior to all, which is self-caused, cannot cease to *be*. That which continues after death, which never ceases to *be*, is Brahman: the true Self.

### **Being as *Subject* as Self: The Fourth**

The claim that one's true Self is the eternal and self-effulgent Being-Consciousness seems entirely unintuitive. One knows that one was born, and one knows that one will die. How, then, does the birthless-deathless Being-Consciousness possibly relate to the individual who is certainly born and certainly dies? One might, at most, conceive of oneself as a "part", "manifestation", or "instantiation" of Being. John Grimes notes in his interpretation of Heidegger that the self is an "instantiation" of Being simply because it *is* (Grimes 95). However, the self is not Being itself because the individual eventually dies and ceases to *be*. The human being, *Dasein*, is undoubtedly mortal, or temporal. Heidegger remarks, "in thus interpreting *Dasein* as temporality, however, we shall not give the answer to our leading question as to the meaning of Being in general" (Heidegger 38). But what is the meaning of "Being in general"? What *is* Being in general? Here, Advaita Vedānta provides an answer: it is Brahman, the true Self.

Brahman is not only Being but also Pure Consciousness. The two, Being and Consciousness, are inseparable. Being *is* Consciousness, and vice versa, according to Advaita Vedānta: "As Brahman is the essence of Being, so It is the essence of Consciousness or Light. Brahman needs no other light to illumine Itself. It is self-luminous" (The Upaniṣads 44). Furthermore, Brahman is no impersonal Being, nor are we only "separate instantiations" of it. Advaita Vedānta claims that the unified true Self of individuals is *Brahman* alone. The

*subjectivity*—the delimited individual—is not the true Self, but an illusion.<sup>7</sup> The true Self of all is the Ultimate nondual Reality that is Being-Consciousness itself. Importantly, Advaita Vedānta does not share the contemporary analytic understanding of consciousness as “conscious states” of mind—that is, any state wherein an *individual* is conscious *of* something. For the purposes of clarity, the term *Subject*<sup>8</sup> is introduced to indicate the Vedāntic conception of Being-Consciousness as a pure subjecthood that is unobjectifiable and without object.

The argument for Being as *Subject*—and as the Self—is concisely established in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, where the human “appears divided into four quarters”: the waker in the waking state, the dreamer in the dream state, the deep sleeper in the state of dreamless deep sleep, and the ‘fourth’ (the *Subject*) (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 12). The first three are illustrated below:

**The Waker – The Waking State – The Waking World**



‘The first quarter is... whose sphere (of activity) is the waking state, who is conscious of external objects... whose experience consists of gross (material) objects’ (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 13)

**The Dreamer – The Dream State – The Dream World**



‘The second quarter is... whose sphere (of activity) is the dream, who is conscious of internal objects... and who experiences the subtle objects’ (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 18)

<sup>7</sup> The word “Illusion” is a translation of the Sanskrit term *māyā*. The word “appearance” is also used to indicate the concept of *māyā*. It denotes a sense of reality which is neither entirely real nor entirely unreal. The world is *māyā*, or an appearance, that results from ignorance about the true Reality.

<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the word *Subject* is used to unify the cross-cultural terminology for the Ultimate Reality and will be used interchangeably with Brahman, Śūnyatā, and Allah.

**The Sleeper – The State of Dreamless Deep Sleep – Blankness**

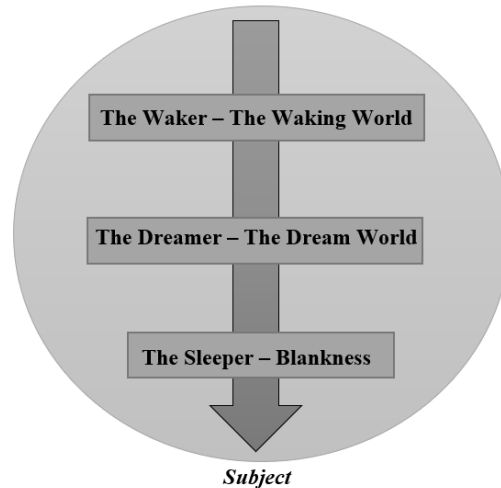


‘That is the state of deep sleep wherein the sleeper does not desire any objects nor does he see any dream. The third quarter is... whose sphere is deep sleep, in whom all (experiences) becomes unified or undifferentiated’ (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 21)

The waker, dreamer, and sleeper are the same *subjectivity* in three different states. The *subjectivity* is entirely morphed in each state as the waker who experiences the physical world, the dreamer who experiences the dream world, and the sleeper who is completely unaware of both the physical and dream worlds. The *subjectivity* identifies with each state, being a waking agent, a dream agent (possibly different from the waking personality), or asleep and devoid of experience. Advaita Vedānta asks: “if the individual is someone in the waking state, becomes someone else in the dream state, and disappears completely in the deep sleep state, how is it that there is always a continuity in the ‘I’ who reports experiencing all the different states?” Often the waking body-mind-world is different from the dream body-mind-world, yet there is a recognition that it is the same “I” who experiences both. Furthermore, in deep sleep, there is no body, no mind, and no world to experience, yet it is the same “I” who wakes up and reports the experience of a blissful sleep.

Despite the changing states, there seems to be something that does not become modified when the *subjectivity* becomes modified. According to the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, that is Brahman, or *Subject*, the “one alone who is thus known in the three states” (Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 27). It is important to note that *Subject* is not actually a “fourth state” separate from the other three but is

ever-present in and through the three changing states as the steady “I”. *Subject* encompasses the waker, dreamer, and sleeper as the true Self, as illustrated below:



This unintuitive argument is often illustrated with an analogy to gold and gold ornaments. A necklace, ring, or bracelet are all made of gold. The name and form of the ornament can change but its essential substance, gold, is always the same. The gold is not only immanent in the ornaments but also transcendent, since gold itself is not a necklace or ring but the substance from which the ornament—and anything else—can be made. The necklace is gold, yet gold is not the necklace. Similarly, Brahman manifests in the waker, dreamer, and sleeper, yet it is transcendent to each of those states.

One commonly believes that the self is the limited body-mind complex, but according to Advaita Vedānta, this is entirely misguided. One must introspect: if I am the body, then which part of the body exactly? If I am the mind, then which part of the mind? If the body and the mind change constantly, how is my sense of “I” always the same? Advaita Vedānta gives a direct answer: the sense of “I” is consistent despite the changing body-mind because one is not the body-mind. One is the Being-Consciousness *Subject* who perceives and is untouched by the changes in the body-mind. That *Subject* never ages, never despairs, never rejoices, never suffers, yet it

witnesses the aging, suffering, and rejoicing of the *subjectivity*. Interestingly, this assertion about the true nature of the Self has cross-cultural parallels in Zen Buddhism and Sufism.

## **Universality of *Subject*: Zen and Sufi Perspectives**

*Truth is one, sages call it variously.*  
Rig Veda 1.164.46

The metaphysical Truth—Brahman—posited by Advaita Vedānta has close parallels in other mystical and meditative religious traditions. Aldous Huxley observed and collected these parallels in his 1945 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*, arguing for a core Truth common to seemingly diverse religious traditions. The “perennial philosophy” has been spoken of by “the devout contemplatives of India, the Sufis of Islam, the Catholic mystics of the later Middle Ages” as “that eternal Self in the depth of particular, individualized selves, and identical with or at least akin to, the divine Ground” (Huxley 1). Huxley notes that different religious traditions have recognized the same metaphysical Truth and agree that it can only be known through direct experience, as expressed by the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Advaita Vedānta philosopher, Ādi Śaṅkarācārya:

The nature of the one Reality must be known by one’s own clear spiritual perception; it cannot be known through a pandit (learned man). Similarly the form of the moon can only be known through one’s own eyes. How can it be known through others? (Vivekacūḍāmaṇi 24)

Known only through direct experience, the perennial philosophy “in its fully developed form [has] a place in every one of higher religions” (Huxley vii). This universality of the perennial *Subject* is briefly considered here from two perspectives—one from the Buddhist Far East and the other from the Islamic Middle East.

*The Zen Subject*

According to Huxley, “the best of the Mahayana sutras contain an authentic formulation of the Perennial Philosophy—a formulation which in some respects... is more complete than any other” (Huxley 10):

One Nature, perfect and pervading, circulates in all natures,  
One Reality, all-comprehensive, contains within itself all realities.  
The one Moon reflects itself wherever there is a sheet of water,  
And all the moons in the waters are embraced within the one Moon.  
The Dharma-body (The Absolute) of all the Buddhas enters into my being.  
And my own being is found in union with theirs, ...  
It is only when you hunt for it that you lose it;  
You cannot take hold of it, but equally you cannot get rid of it,  
And while you can do neither, it goes on its own way.

You remain silent and it speaks; you speak and it is dumb *Yung-chia Ta-shih'* (Huxley 9).

Regarding the metaphysical reality, Zen Buddhism takes “a positionless position,” maintaining that it is “not two” *and* “not one”—negating both the dualistic and nondualistic stances about the Ultimate Reality (Nagatomo 1). Prima facie, this seems entirely unlike the Advaita philosophy which posits the nondual *Subject* as Being-Consciousness. However, D. T. Suzuki notes that the negation of duality as well as non-duality is actually an affirmation of Being: “Zen is holding up in this very act of negation something quite positive and eternally affirmative” (D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* 39).

The Zen intention is to rise above the intellect and its tendency toward logical reasoning—“to reach a higher affirmation than the logical antithesis of assertion and denial”—and directly experience the ground of Being (D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* 66). The

abundant abstractions and contradictions in the Zen methodology are representative of that higher, ineffable, inconceivable, and indescribable Reality that is unknowable by ordinary modes of logical reasoning. Zen is as elusive as the Reality that it points towards, yet Zen masters describe it as “your everyday thought”—once again a contradictory abstraction meant to point towards Being that is transcendent yet immanent (D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* 43). The Zen way is to directly experience the Reality that is “not one” and “not two,” and overcome the oppositional ontology where, due to the established methodological terrain of logic, contradictions and inconsistencies abound. The direct experience is the highest affirmation of an entirely non-contingent Reality beyond all contradictions: pure Being.

Zen appears to point towards *Subject*: a pure Being beyond subject-object duality, subject-predicate duality, and affirmation-negation duality. It is also beyond non-duality, as that too is a negation of multiplicity. Zen has no word<sup>9</sup> for *Subject* for it aims to break the linguistic and logical restrictions through the *koān*, a paradoxical and nonlogical anecdote or poem, which serves to help the practitioner transcend the *subjectivity* or the ego-consciousness: “Koan, literally meaning ‘official document,’ is a kind of problem given to Zen students for solution, which leads to the realization of the truth of Zen” (D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* xxvi). Through meditation on the *koān*, one must arrest the activity of the *subjectivity* in order to “see” one’s true “nature.” One must transcend the distinction between “I” and “other”, “the everyday either-or, ego-logical, dualistic standpoint”—an experience described by master Dōgen as “dropping off the body and the mind”—in order to know *Subject* (Nagatomo 11).

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<sup>9</sup> However, in the Buddhist tradition, the Ultimate Reality is often denoted by *Śūnyatā*, which literally means emptiness or voidness. However, D.T. Suzuki explains that this should not be understood as ‘nothingness or vacuity or contentlessness. It has an absolute sense and refuses to be expressed in terms of relativity and of formal logic. It is expressible only in terms of contradiction. It cannot be grasped by means of concepts. The only way to understand it is to experience it in oneself’ (D. T. Suzuki, *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk* xxiv).

*The Sufi Subject*

The classical metaphysics of Islamic mysticism, “*taṣawwuf*”<sup>10</sup> in Arabic and “Sufism” in western literature, echoes the perennial philosophy of *Subject* (Schimmel, Sufism 1). In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the “golden age of Sufism,” Ibn al‘Arabī (1165-1240) formulated a sophisticated theosophical system that postulated the metaphysics of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, meaning “Unity of Being” (Schimmel, Sufism 2). Annemarie Schimmel succinctly explains: “According to this theory all existence is one, a manifestation of the underlying divine reality” (Schimmel, Sufism 2). For the Sufi believer of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the Ultimate Reality is nondual Being-Consciousness.

Although Ibn al‘Arabī never uses the expression *waḥdat al-wujūd* in his writings, the word *wujūd*, meaning existence or Being, is extensively emphasized in his works. In the Qur’anic sense, *wujūd* means Being, and it is inextricable from “to become conscious of,” or “to find,” “awareness,” or “consciousness.” William Chittick clarifies that “in Ibn ‘Arabi’s terminology... *wujud* means not only being and existence (the ‘objective’ side of reality), but also finding and awareness (the ‘subjective’ side of reality)” (Chittick 37). To Ibn al‘Arabī, *wujud*, the only Reality, is God alone, and all other apparent realities derive from God: “it was utterly obvious to [Ibn al‘Arabī] that there is no Real Being but God and that everything other than God is unreal being,” and he and his followers “focused on the Real *Wujūd* as the one, unique reality from which all other reality derives” (Chittick 6).

God as Being or *wujud* is obvious in Islamic ideology since one of the Qur’anic divine names is “Light” or *al-nūr*. The Qur’an 24:35, often referred to as “the Light verse”, mentions: “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth.” God as Light is understood as God as Being. The Sufi philosopher Sadr al-Dîn al-Qûnawî (1207-1274) explains that “naming God ‘Light’ is

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<sup>10</sup> Meaning literally “to dress in wool.”

‘tantamount’ to naming him Being,” for just as “True Light brings about perception but is not perceived,” true Being causes “manifestation and finding but is neither manifest nor found” (Chittick 6).

It is not difficult to see that God as Light as Being, and as inextricable from awareness or Consciousness, is none other than *Subject*. It is spoken of by the Islamic mystics in ways very closely paralleled with Hindu thought. The inextricability of Being from Consciousness is as emphasized by the Sufis as by the Advaitins and the Zen Buddhists. William Chittick also comments:

It hardly needs to be pointed out that in English neither “being” nor “existence” has the connotation of awareness and consciousness... We moderns are happy to think that “existence” came before consciousness, or that living beings gradually evolved from dead and inanimate matter. For Ibn ‘Arabi and much of Islamic thinking (not to mention kindred visions in other traditions), no universe is thinkable without the primacy of life and awareness, the presence of consciousness in the underlying stuff of reality (Chittick 38).

Clearly, the notion of *Subject* is not an isolated idea unique to a single tradition, but a universal, perennial philosophy independently discovered—nay, realized—by many. Considering the parallel metaphysical posits of three diverse religious traditions, it is plausible that the underlying Reality is indeed something of the nature of Being-Consciousness.

### **Seeking *Subject***

How does one realize the true Self? The fact that one’s true Self is none other than *Subject* must be realized through spiritual discipline. Intellectual understanding is not enough; one must have direct and personal experience. According to each of the three traditions considered here, the

true Self is fully and properly realized through spiritual practice. Sri Ramakrishna famously remarked that there are as many paths as faiths, that is, all paths lead to the same end. Thus, the disciplines of Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism, and Sufi Islam, despite their practical differences, are all aimed at the same end: realizing *Subject*.

### ***Jñāna* and *Vijñāna*; knowledge and Knowledge**

*Some have heard of milk, some have seen milk, and some have drunk milk.*  
Sri Ramakrishna, *Śrīsrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, an excerpt from the ancient Sanskrit epic, *Mahābhārata*, is a dialogue between God, the Lord Krishna, and the warrior-prince Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra where Arjuna must fight and kill his kin. In the approximately seven-hundred-verse-long dialogue, Lord Krishna imparts the highest spiritual knowledge to Arjuna while convincing him to fight the just battle. Many schools of Hindu philosophy have interpreted the *Gītā* as conveying their philosophy, and the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkarācārya has also done the same.

The terms *jñāna* and *vijñāna* appear multiple times in the *Gītā* and both mean “knowledge.” However, there is a difference between the kind of knowledge that is meant by *jñāna* and the kind that is meant by *vijñāna*. Etymologically, the Sanskrit prefix “*vi-*” “functions as an intensifier... then, *vijñāna* would be a deeper or more comprehensive form of knowledge than *jñāna*” (Maharaj 1218). Śaṅkarācārya, in his commentary on the *Gītā*, precisely distinguishes the first kind of knowledge, *jñāna*, from the second, *vijñāna*. In the commentary on verse 3.41, he writes: “*Jñāna*, learning, means knowledge about the Self etc. from the scriptures and a teacher. *Vijñāna*, wisdom, means the full experience of that” (Bhagavad Gītā 148). Thus, *jñāna* is the intellectual understanding, or “learning,” of the Ultimate Reality that one gains through reading the scriptures and listening to teachers, whereas *vijñāna*, or “wisdom” or “realization”, is an experiential capital-

K intuitive Knowledge of the Ultimate Reality. With *jñāna*, one is not enlightened, but with *vijñāna*, one is.

The 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is titled “*Jñāna and Vijñāna*” and is entirely devoted to describing what the *Vijñāni* or the Knower of Brahman realizes by means of spiritual experience. *Vijñāna*, therefore, is the higher of the two knowledges since it is the direct realization of the Self and not mere theoretical understanding. The indirect knowledge or *jñāna* must develop into *vijñāna* through direct personal experience of the Self as the nondual Brahman or *Subject*.

The distinction between indirect and direct knowledge is also found in the *Panchadasi*, a 14<sup>th</sup> century text by Vidyaranya Swami. In the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter, indirect and direct knowledge of the Self are described as the fourth and the fifth steps respectively, out of a total of seven steps, to Self-realization. The journey of a spiritual aspirant through these seven steps is demonstrated by the following parable:

Ten men cross a river. Upon reaching the opposite bank, they decide to count if all have made it. One volunteers to count and sees that only nine men have made it across. He panics and despairs. Another volunteers to do a second count and finds that only nine men have made it across. Believing that they have lost the tenth man, the group wails. A sage passes by and offers to help. He is told that the tenth man has drowned. The sage quickly counts the men and sees that they are indeed ten in number—nobody seems to have drowned. He realizes that the men have made an error: the counter has forgotten to count himself! The sage sees the truth and assures the men that the tenth man has not been lost. The men refuse to believe him and continue to cry. The sage assures them that the tenth man is indeed present, urging them to count the number of men once again. After the ninth count, the sage points at the counter who has forgotten himself and says “Thou art the tenth!” Thus, the men count again, realize their error, and rejoice.

The parable demonstrates the journey of a spiritual seeker through the following seven steps: (1) Ignorance, (2) Obscuration, (3) Superimposition/*Viksepa/Samsara*, (4) Indirect knowledge, (5) Direct knowledge, (6) Cessation of grief, and (7) Perfect satisfaction. The first three steps belong to the stage of bondage and the final four steps belong to the stage of liberation. In the parable, the stage of bondage is characterized by grief and suffering. It symbolizes ignorance: when the individual, forgetting the true Self, identifies with the external body-mind. The stage of liberation is where suffering is transcended and the men attain happiness. It symbolizes the process of enlightenment: one first comes to know of the Self indirectly through teaching and then directly through personal experience. In the pursuit of Knowledge, one first acquires *jñāna*, indirect knowledge, and then *vijñāna*, direct knowledge or realization.

How does *jñāna* develop into *vijñāna*? The following section will briefly discuss some of the practices used to attain the Knowledge of the Ultimate Reality, or *Subject*, as found not only in Advaita Vedānta but also in Zen Buddhism and Sufi Islam.

### ***Samādhi***

*Once, a salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. It wanted to tell others how deep the water was. But this it could never do, for no sooner did it get into the water than it melted. Now, who was there to report the ocean's depth?*  
Sri Ramakrishna, *Śrīsrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*

*The knower and the known are one. Simple people imagine that they should see God, as if He stood there and they here. This is not so. God and I, we are one in knowledge.*  
Meister Eckhart

How might different religious traditions, with different doctrines and practices, all lead to the same Reality? Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practice of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam led him to conclude: "As many faiths, so many paths." The metaphysical posits of Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism, and Sufism are seemingly convergent. In each tradition, the experience of Ultimate

Reality—Brahman, Allah, or *Śūnyatā*—is claimed to be objectless. In that state of meditative absorption in the highest Truth, there is no object and thus no possibility of a variability in experience.<sup>11</sup> In that ineffable objectless experience, there is only One: the pure *Subject*.

In Advaita Vedānta, one is enlightened in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, attaining the full Knowledge of the true Self as the nondual Brahman. The term *samādhi* also appears in Zen Buddhism, but complete enlightenment is understood as *satori*. For the Sufis, experience of the Ultimate Reality is the direct “tasting” (*dhawq*) of God, but the highest mystical experience is to annihilate oneself in union with God (*fanā*). The highest enlightenment in each tradition seems to converge at the same realization of the true Self as *Subject*.

### ***Nirvikalpa Samādhi***

There are different levels of meditative absorption or *samādhi*. Some states of *samādhi* retain the distinction between subject and object and are collectively known as *savikalpa samādhi*. The highest state of meditative absorption, where all duality is transcended with the full realization of Brahman, is known as *nirvikalpa samādhi*. The *Dṛg Dṛśya Vivēka* describes *nirvikalpa samādhi* as the “highest kind of concentration in which the practitioner realizes his real Self” (Dṛg Dṛśya Vivēka 35):

the Nirvikalpa Samādhi is that in which the mind becomes steady like the (unflickering flame of a) light kept in a place free from wind and in which the student becomes indifferent

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<sup>11</sup> A subject that experiences + an object that is experienced together comprise an experience in the regular sense. Variability in experience is a result of changing objects. One might see a blue flower and then a yellow leaf. Undoubtedly the subjective qualia of these two experiences are different. However, the difference is not due to any change in the subject—it is the same subject who saw the blue flower and the same subject who saw the yellow leaf. The difference in experience is entirely due to difference in the object of experience. Changing objects lead to variability in experience. The enlightenment experience being devoid of object, therefore, cannot have any variability.

to both objects and sounds on account of his complete absorption in the bliss of the realization of the Self (Dṛg Dṛśya Vivēka 34).

Thus, *nirvikalpa samādhi* is the state of meditative absorption wherein duality is completely transcended. There is no object to be experienced. The subject-object divide collapses into Brahman, the nondual Being-Consciousness, and the *subjectivity* or ego-identity dissolves. One's body becomes stiff and still, but one is not dead. Detached from the body-mind in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, one realizes the true Self as *Subject*.

For the objectless experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the mind and all of its activities must stop. It is not easily attainable, for “controlling the mind is more difficult than controlling the wind” (Srimad Bhagavad Gītā 142). In Advaita Vedānta, “Nirvikalpa Samādhi... can be attained only as a result of discrimination between the real and the unreal” (Dṛg Dṛśya Vivēka 36). The specific practice of such discrimination is *Jñāna Yoga* or the way of knowledge. As the main spiritual discipline in classical Advaita Vedānta, it has three important components:

- i) *Śravaṇa*: Hearing or listening
- ii) *Manana*: Reasoned reflection
- iii) *Nididhyāsana*: Meditation

The first step in the practice of *Jñāna Yoga* is *śravaṇa*, that is, methodically studying the scriptures and the teachings of the guru. The student must attentively listen to the teachings of the Upaniṣads imparted by a qualified guru. The second step, *manana*, is reasoned reflection on the teachings. The student must rationally contemplate the teachings and pose questions to the guru. The deep contemplation is meant to arouse doubts in the student's mind, which are then dispelled either by the teacher or through further contemplation. Through this, the student must come to the

intellectual understanding (*jñāna*) of Brahman, firmly believing the teaching to be true, but not yet directly knowing the Self.

The third step, *nididhyāsana* or meditation, leads to *viññāna*, direct knowledge. The student must meditate constantly on the Self through a practice of discrimination or *vicāra*. One must discriminate between the real and the unreal, between the Self and the non-Self, because one erroneously believes the unreal (the illusory and impermanent world) to be the real, and the non-Self (the body, the mind, and the ego) to be the Self. Discriminating thus between Self and non-Self, and meditating upon the nature of Brahman, one's ignorance and error are dispelled. The *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha-Sāraḥ* notes: “*Nididhyāsana*, in the form of meditation, is said to be the destroyer of the erroneous cognition” (6). Furthermore, “by practicing this repeatedly, the mind-stuff automatically becomes tranquil and restrained,” bringing about detachment and renunciation, and resulting in *samādhi* (*Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha-Sāraḥ* 7).

Thus, it is through the constant and diligent practice of these three steps of *Jñāna Yoga*—*Śravaṇa*, *Manana*, and *Nididhyāsana*—that one becomes established in the Knowledge of Brahman. For the enlightened one who attains *viññāna*, there is a complete cessation of suffering since they are no longer identified with the limited body-mind. Firmly established in the Self, they attain to the highest Bliss.

## ***Satori***

*If you wish to seek the Buddha, you ought to see into your own Nature (hsing);  
for this Nature is the Buddha himself.*  
Bodhi-Dharma, *Kechimyakuron* (D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*)

Similar to Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism holds direct experience to be central to spiritual life. One must directly experience their “true Nature,” which is none other than *Subject*. It is not

something that one attains to—it is something one already *is*. Zen practice, therefore, is done in order to realize that one is already *Subject*. But one might legitimately ask, “Why must I practice if I am already *Subject*?” The Buddhist answer is the same as the Advaita answer: because you do not know it, because you are ignorant. Ignorance (Pāli: *avijjā*), in Buddhist thought, is the “antithesis of Enlightenment” (D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* 116). Through the sitting meditation practice of *zazen*, the Zen practitioner attempts to overcome ignorance and “embody non-discriminatory wisdom *vis-à-vis* the meditational experience known as ‘*satori*’ (enlightenment)” (Nagatomo 1).

The historical origin of Zen Buddhism lies in Indian Buddhism, and because of Zen Buddhism’s historical roots in Indian thought, the structural similarity of its philosophical postulates to the postulates of Vedānta are unmistakable. In its understanding of ignorance as the cause of the erroneous understanding of the world and Knowledge as the key to enlightenment, Zen echoes the Vedāntic worldview. D. T. Suzuki writes about the concept of ignorance:

Ignorance is not merely not knowing or not being acquainted with a theory, system or law... In Ignorance knowing is separated from acting, and the knower from that which is known; in Ignorance the world is asserted as distinct from the self, that is, there are always two elements standing in opposition (D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* 116).

This concept of ignorance is the same as the concept of *avidyā*, that is, the erroneous understanding of oneself as separate and distinct from everything else in the world. In Buddhism, like in Vedānta, ignorance is dispelled when one transcends the oppositional and dualistic view of the world. Similar to the experience of *samādhi* where the duality of subject-object, knower-known, is transcended, the Zen Buddhist enlightenment also aims to transcend the “dualism of the knower and known” (D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* 117). Suzuki explains that this “transcending

[is] not an act of cognition, it [is] self-realization, it [is] a spiritual awakening and outside the ken of logical reasoning” (D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* 117). But how does the Zen practitioner go beyond duality?

In Rinzai Zen, the *koān* practice is employed in order to aid the spiritual aspirant to transcend duality specifically by breaking through language, logic, and ego-consciousness. The *koān* is “formulated like a riddle or puzzle and is designed in such a way that intellectual reasoning alone cannot solve it without breaking through the barrier of ego-consciousness by driving it to its limit” (Nagatomo 2). A Zen practitioner works closely with a realized Zen master in order to systematically solve all the *koāns* necessary for the full enlightenment experience. A few examples of *koāns* used by Zen practitioners are as follows:

“When both hands are clapped a sound is produced; listen to the sound of one hand clapping.”

“The river does not flow but the bridge does.”

“Show me your original face before you were born.”

It is clear from these examples that the *koān* is not a straightforward statement that has a straightforward meaning. A *koān*, through its paradoxical nature, does the same task as an Upaniṣad that employs paradoxical language—it does not tell, it *shows*. The *koān* indicates the Ultimate Reality where all paradoxes are subsumed and transcended. The practitioner, by meditating upon the *koān*, is able to have a powerful experience of breaking through the barriers posed by language, logic, and their own ego, in order to realize the essential unity of existence and understand that unitive Being-Consciousness as none other than their true Nature.

Meditation leads the Zen practitioner’s mind to become one-pointed in concentration. Nagatomo explains that this is “a state in which no-thing appears” (Nagatomo 6). That is, the

deepest meditation is an objectless experience where one fully realizes their true Nature as the nondual *Subject*: “the Zen practitioner is thrown into a non-dualistic domain of experience” (Nagatomo 11). This absorption, however, is not *satori*, or enlightenment, as Zen understands it.

*Satori* can come to the Zen practitioner all of a sudden: “When a man’s mind is matured for *satori* it tumbles over one everywhere... When the mind is ready for some reason or others, a bird flies, or a bell rings, and you at once return to your original home; that is, you discover your now real self” (D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* 92).

Once the mind of the practitioner, through practice, becomes ready for the realization of Reality, enlightenment comes of itself. The “ultimate destination” of the Zen *satori*, just like the Vedāntic *nirvikalpa samādhi*, “is towards the Self,” but unlike the Vedāntic way where the mind and its functions must altogether stop for the nondual experience of the Self, Zen believes that the Self “must be caught, if at all catchable, in the midst of its functioning” (D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* 93). *Satori* is thus a changed way of looking at the world while being present and active within the world. The enlightened one, upon attaining *satori*, finds their “original face” and continually holds on to that realization. By Knowing their true Nature as the eternal *Subject*, the enlightened one goes beyond birth and death, attaining absolute freedom and with it, the highest bliss.

## ***Fanā***

أنا الحقيقة  
*I am the Truth*  
al-Ḥallāj

Sufism, or *taṣawwuf*, like Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism, upholds the direct experience of the Ultimate Reality, God, as central to spiritual life. Schimmel writes: “The mystics realized that... intuitive knowledge was required in order to receive that illumination to which

reason has no access. Dhawq, direct “tasting” of experience, was essential for them” (Schimmel, Sufism 4). In order to directly “taste” God, the Sufis developed a path, or *ṭarīqah*, with a system of practices, following which the final goal can be reached. According to Sufi mystics like al-Bisṭāmī, al-Ḥallāj, and al-Junayd, the highest goal is *fanā*: “the mystical annihilation of the self in the divine unity” (Elkaisy-Friemuth 3).

Before proceeding, it is important to note that mainstream Islam differs noticeable in its philosophical postulates from Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism. At face value, Islam may appear to be a dualistic religion that believes God as the Creator of the world to be distinct from the world. However, the Classical Sufism of Ibn al‘Arabī postulates the metaphysics of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, meaning “Unity of Being”, which is none other than *Subject*. For the Sufi mystics, God is not distinct from the world. In fact, He is of the nature of Being-Consciousness and is simultaneously transcendent and immanent. Furthermore, the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi mystic al-Ḥallāj, through his famous claim “I am the Truth”, conveyed the idea that the true Self is none other than God.<sup>12</sup> Sri Ramakrishna also realized that the God of Islam is none other than the true Self. Inspired by a Sufi mystic, Sri Ramakrishna devotedly practiced Islam after having already attained the nondual realization of Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Soon, he had “the full realization of the result of practices according to [Islam]” and claimed that he experienced the same Truth in *fanā* as he did in *nirvikalpa samādhi* (Saradananda 260). That is, he directly understood that the God of Islam is none other than the nondual *Subject*.

Thus, it is the same goal for the Muslims mystics as it is for the Buddhists and the Hindus. However, despite the same end, the Sufi means are somewhat different from the two previously

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<sup>12</sup> al-Ḥallāj was imprisoned, tortured, and executed for this proclamation since it was considered heretical at that time. Traditional Islamic thought does not believe that God is identical with the human being, and therefore al-Ḥallāj’s claim “I am the Truth” was met with severe punishment (Schimmel, *HALLĀJ, AL-*).

discussed paths. Schimmel details that the Sufi teacher (*shaykh* or *pīr*) directs the disciple (*murīd*) “to follow strict ascetic practices, and suggests certain formulas for meditation” (Schimmel, Sufism 5). The *ṭarīqah* entails the *murīd*’s journey and development through various “spiritual stations” known as *maqāms* (Schimmel, Sufism 5). The journey begins with a practice of constant repentance, followed by abstinence, renunciation, and poverty. The *murīd* must renounce all worldly pleasures and desires and seek nothing but God. Higher *maqāms* include patience and gratitude, and the “loving acceptance of every affliction” (Schimmel, Sufism 5). Such ethical practices are aimed at “purifying the soul” and serve as preparatory steps for reaching the higher goal of “the relationship with God through witness, annihilation of all other things in the vision and unification” (Elkaisy-Friemuth 139).

As the seeker develops from one *maqam* to the next, they undergo changing spiritual states, or *hāl*, such as “constraint and happy spiritual expansion, fear and hope, and longing and intimacy, which are granted by God and last for longer or shorter periods of time, changing in intensity according to the station in which the mystic is abiding at the moment” (Schimmel, Sufism 5). After such devoted practice, the seeker receives *ma‘rifah* or the “interior knowledge” of God, and *maḥabbah* or an intense longing and love for God. The final goal is *fanā*, the mystical union with God, wherein the seeker realizes the highest metaphysical Truth, the experience of which is described succinctly by Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth:

When the Sufi saints, at the end of their stages of ascent, experience God as the only existent One, they experience the reality of the temporal world as non-existent in itself. In their ascent they move from the material multiplicity to the universal truth, which they lose their ties with the material world. At this stage, they experience the verse “every thing is perishing except God’s face” (28:88) ... When the Sufi ... experiences this truth and sees

only God, which means that his own existence is melted in God, he becomes totally amazed and therefore only aware of God's existence (Elkaisy-Friemuth 145).

Thus, it is clear that at the moment of *fanā*, the mystic realizes that there is only one Ultimate Reality, and that is God. Furthermore, the mystic realizes that God is not an impersonal Creator, rather God is none other than the true Self of the mystic: “knowledge of self yields the recognition that there is nothing in existence but the self, because nothing can be found in the entire universe but God's self-disclosure” (Chittick 25). The annihilation of the self in God is the complete erasure of the ego or *subjectivity* that creates the illusion of separateness in the individual.

Thus, it appears that each of these different paths—*Jñāna yoga*, *koān* practice, and the *ṭarīqah*—lead to the same end: the realization of oneself as none other than *Subject*, as none other than God. The Hindu, the Muslim, and the Buddhist are only distinct as long as each has not seen the true Reality and learned that what each calls Brahman, Allah, or *Śūnyatā* is the same Truth. The enlightened Hindu, the enlightened Muslim, the enlightened Buddhist, and other enlightened souls from any religion, all know that behind the many faces, many names, and many forms, is only One face, and that is their own face: the face of God.

## **Conclusion**

*Behold but One in all things; it is the second that leads you astray.*  
Kabir

The Irish poet Richard Trench observed that the language that we speak is often “wiser, not merely than the vulgar, but even than the wisest of those who speak it. Sometimes it locks up truths which were once well known, but have been forgotten” (Huxley 10). Huxley alludes to Trench in *The Perennial Philosophy* in order to claim that an “insight into the nature of things and

the origin of good and evil” is hidden in “the very structure of our language” (Huxley 10). He points out that in Indo-European languages, the “root meaning ‘two’ [connotes] badness. The Greek prefix dys- (as in dyspepsia) and the Latin dis- (as in dishonorable) are both derived from ‘duo.’” (Huxley 11). Our language hides that the root of evil is “two”; it “confirms the findings of the mystics and proclaims the essential badness of division—a word, incidentally, in which our old enemy ‘two’ makes another decisive appearance” (Huxley 11). Our language reveals that evil begins with duality, division and difference. All hatred, envy, avarice, jealousy, pride, and vanity begin when there are two: I and other. What happens when both the “I” and the “other” coalesce into One? Where goes hatred, jealousy, lust, desire, greed, shame, and all evil?

This article argues that the ground of this world of multiplicity is One. Through a comparative study of Advaita Vedānta, Zen Buddhism, and Sufism, one can see that the goal of various religions, despite the differences in their practices and traditions, is the same Ultimate Reality: the whole and infinite, self-effulgent, self-sufficient, and self-caused *Subject*. This Reality is the true Self, the true I, of all individuals. There is no small and limited “I”, no petty “me” and “mine.” The distinctions between “I” and “other”, “me” and “them,” and “mine” and “not mine” are all unreal. There is no “I” and “God,” no “me” and “my God.” There is only “I am”—and I *am* God, as St. Catherine of Genoa claimed: “My Me is God, nor do I recognize any other Me except my God Himself,” and as Bayazid of Bistun exclaimed, “I went from God to God, until they cried from me in me, ‘O thou I!’”

If one comes to the realization of their true Self, if one finds the unmistakable answer to the question “Who am I?”, one’s life is completely transformed no matter what path one follows. One is liberated from the suffering of human life as soon as one comes to realize that one is not the body, not the mind, and not the limited ego-identity. One realizes that the true Self is immensely

vast, indestructible, immutable, and eternal. It is the silent witness, the infinite ocean of quietude, pervading the universe. It is Existence itself, Consciousness itself, and Bliss itself. The realized one, Knowing the Self, becomes the embodiment of Love, Compassion, and Bliss. There is not a drop of shame, hatred, jealousy, or wickedness in the realized one who knows that there is no other to hate, to be malicious toward, or to be jealous of. There is only love, acceptance, and unity in the heart of the one who knows and sees that everything, themselves included, *is* God.

Such transformed ethics are the result of the metaphysics of *Subject* put forth in this article. The religions that posit such metaphysics necessarily speak of the ethics that follow the understanding and realization of the Self as the all-encompassing Divine. After all, Self-realization, according to these religions, does not mean that one no longer participates in the world. One continues to live and act in the world, but the experience of enlightenment radically transforms one's character and concrete lived experience. These philosophies seem to make the radical claim that enlightenment is necessary for truly ethical conduct. The understanding is that those who are enlightened naturally become the epitome of love, compassion, desirelessness, and wisdom—they come to spontaneously embody an ethic based on a concrete perception of the unity of Being. The realized one is full of peace, since there is no other to desire, and devoid of all petty selfishness, for all is the Self.

What, then, can we learn from the central thesis of this work and from the central theses of the religions examined in this work? What can we learn from the realized Advaitins, Buddhists, and Sufis? The answer is Love and Oneness. Even without the concrete realization of *Subject*, we can come to see the essential unity of Being in the universe. Even if we only understand the message of these religious philosophies intellectually and see that even in our perception of duality and otherness, there is an underlying unity and oneness, we will lead lives of love and compassion.

We can all aspire to a life that is greater than the small life of the body. We can all aspire to the life of the liberated, which the sage Vasiṣṭha described in his beautiful words:

They were free from psychological predisposition and hence they did not seek nor reject either life or death. They remained unshaken in their direct experience... Yet, they roamed the forests, islands and cities... They even engaged themselves in great wars. They retained their equanimity... [They were] utterly free from delusion, from egoistic notion (I do this) and from desire for achievement or the rewards of their actions. They did not indulge in vain exultation when they defeated their enemies nor did they give way to despair and grief when they were defeated' (The Concise Yogavāsiṣṭha).

Such a life—devoid of misery, both physical and mental, and full of a sense of permanent presence and wholeness—belongs to us all. It is not an impossible dream. It is a reality. Only, we need to open our eyes and step out of what we are not, and step into what we *are*. In that process, we will lose nothing, but gain everything.

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