

Casey L. Miller. *Being Tranceported vs. Just Being: Ludic Reading and Zen Meditation*. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2006. 37 pages. Advisor: Brian Sturm

This paper examines ludic reading, in which the reader “disappears” into a book, and Zen meditation, in which practitioners see the world as it is, giving rise to an opening of the heart. Interestingly, these two activities are sometimes interpreted as being at odds with each other: ludic reading involves a psychic journey to another time and place, while Zen meditation concerns itself most emphatically with the here and now. While from a certain angle this is irrefutably true, this paper takes the alternate tack of considering the congruencies inherent in absorbed reading and meditation. Looking more closely, both ludic reading and Zen meditation involve the dissolution of a strong sense of selfhood and are methods of experiencing the balm of nonduality. This conclusion is arrived at with the help of scholarly works, books on Buddhist practice, and most importantly with the first-hand reports of practitioners of deep reading and Zen meditation.

Headings:

Zen Buddhism—Meditation

Literature—Paradoxes

Psychology—Psychology of the Marvelous

BEING TRANCEPORTED VS. JUST BEING: LUDIC READING AND ZEN  
MEDITATION

by  
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Approved by

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There is no Frigate like a Book  
To take us Lands away  
Nor any Coursers like a Page  
Of prancing Poetry—  
This Traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of Toll—  
How frugal is the Chariot  
That bears the Human Soul!  
-Emily Dickinson

Words cannot express Truth; that which words express is not Truth.  
-the Diamond Sutra

“What happens to us when we read?” This seemingly straightforward question is the impetus for the thirteen pages that follow in Sturm’s article, “The Reader’s Altered State of Consciousness.” Another seemingly innocent question, “What happens to us when we meditate?” has been taken up by thousands of Zen practitioners over the 2,500 years since the Buddha’s death. Taking the prize for the pithiest “answer” to the latter question is the saying that “Meditation doesn’t answer the question; it destroys the questioner.” In other words, meditation is a vehicle for realizing the fleeting impermanence of all things, including our cherished selves, and a time-tested method for experiencing a healing unity with the cosmos. But since meditation is the art of abiding with what is, and ludic reading by definition involves transportation to another time and place, what are these activities doing rubbing elbows in the title of this paper?

Admittedly, ludic reading and meditation may at first blush appear to be strange bedfellows. But if we look closer, the two activities share a good deal of common

ground. For starters, both are impressively ancient. Narrative has been an integral part of human society at least since Homer's day, when his hero Odysseus spun a yarn so effectively that at the end "such was the spell he had cast on the whole company that not a sound was heard throughout the shadowy hall." (Nell 48) Meditation has similarly ancient roots: Reps recorded practices oddly akin to Zen roughly 4,000 years old in his book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. As Sturm notes, the experience of narrative involves "a 'journey' of some sort (at least metaphorically) to reach the world of the story." (9) Much like our ancient forbear Odysseus, our reading (or movie watching or music listening) takes us on a voyage of discovery to strange lands. When we return, we have been forever altered. Similarly, Zen masters speak of meditation as a journey or a path of self-transformation.

This congruence of language is apt, for even though there is a strong emphasis in Zen on lived instead of read experience, both Zen meditation and ludic reading can be used as tools to work with the suffering we all experience. We need not create conflict by setting the two activities up in opposition to each other. It is said that a map is not the territory, i.e. our immediate experience of life takes precedence over book-learning (the map.) Or, as James Audubon said, "When the bird and the book disagree, always believe the bird." (Kornfield, xiii) Still, maps can help us find our way; the rational mind is a useful navigational tool. If we fall prey to the Scylla of reading only maps or the Charybdis of shunning maps completely we succeed only in making our journey harder than it need be! Rather, our immediate, lived experiences and the things we experience vicariously in books can nourish each other.

Tennis players know that there is a certain spot on their racket that sends the ball rocketing away with the slightest flick of the wrist; this paper will explore how people find this sweet spot in their lives. Our exploration, a journey in itself for reader and writer, will examine ludic reading and Zen meditation as interlocking paths of self-education. After guiding the reader through explanations of the reading trance and Zen meditation from scholarly and experiential angles, we will descend from the Ivory Tower to interview four practitioners of ludic reading and three Zen practitioners in an attempt to discover how the peaceful experiences of both practices can be cultivated in our everyday lives. Thus, in incorporating experiential and discursive approaches to meditation and reading, the paper will seek to be a performance of the harmony hinted at in the title, with any luck threading its way through the mythical Homeric dilemma.

But firstly, what is an altered state of consciousness? Ludwig answered:

I shall regard altered state(s) of consciousness...as any mental state(s), induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness. This sufficient deviation may be represented by a greater preoccupation than usual with internal sensations or mental processes, changes in formal characteristics of thought, and impairment of reality testing to various degrees. (quoted in Marsh, 131)

Though the term “altered state of consciousness” (ASC) may trigger associations of states more dramatic than the reading trance, upon closer examination we find the term to be an accurate description of our experience when we are lost in a book. Just as the term “trip” is used to describe the more extravagant ASCs, people invoke metaphors of travel when

describing ludic reading. (Ludic reading is a highly absorbed state in which we take leave of our everyday surroundings and immerse ourselves in the world of a book. It is as if we dissolve into the alternate reality of a text.) In Gerrig's words, "[Being transported] goes a long way toward capturing one of the most prominent phenomenological aspects of the experience of narrative worlds. Readers become 'lost in a book.'" (3) Our normal consciousness recedes, leaving us free to experience another time and place. Nell describes the phenomenon poetically: "The black squiggles on the white page are still as the grave, colorless as the moonlit desert; but they give the skilled reader a pleasure as acute as the touch of a loved body, as rousing, colorful and transfiguring as anything out there in the real world." (1) The literature on ASCs describes several characteristics of altered states which can also be applied to ludic reading: "reduction of exteroceptive stimulation and/or motor activity" (decreased sensory stimulation), "increased alertness or mental involvement," "alterations in thinking," "disturbed time sense," "loss of control," "change in emotional expression," and "feelings of rejuvenation." (Ludwig 10-16) Marsh relates the experience of a girl in a hypnosis experiment: "Julie observed that hypnosis was like reading a book....She said, 'When I get really involved in reading, I'm not aware of what is going on around me. I concentrate on the people in the book or the movie.... Reading a book can hypnotize you.'" (138) Julie's experience will sound familiar to anyone who has experienced ludic reading.

Of all the ASCs open to human experience, in American culture reading is, along with television-watching and drinking, the most readily available and socially acceptable.

As Bourguignon tells us, “Weber’s Protestant Ethic...is, perhaps, the type of value structure that allows least expression for, and has least sympathy with, the ecstatic experience. The nineteenth-century view of progress, not only from simple to complex but from a primitive mentality to a civilized one, is associated with an evaluation of the ecstatic as savage and childlike.” (342-343) The movement from simple to complex so apparent in the intricacy of Western technology is balanced by the Zen Buddhist emphasis on simplicity and clarity. For example, the well-known Buddhist temple Borobudur in Java has successive tiers of iconography dealing with events in the Buddha’s life, each level becoming progressively more austere until at the apex of the monument there stands a single stupa devoid of any markings whatsoever.

Becker has a point similar to Bourguignon’s: “From the possessed of the early Middle Ages, to the witches of the late Middle Ages, to the women who fell under the spell of Mesmer in the late eighteenth century, to the modern-day reincarnations of these phenomena as ‘multiple personalities,’ or to the current rage for altered consciousness among rave enthusiasts, the history of trance in our civilization is the history of a perversion.” (13) (Apparently Becker does not consider reading to be a trance state; perhaps for her it is not.) She also ignores another common ASC: it has been pointed out by Muses and Young that “the commonest light-trance induction technique is called ‘a TV commercial’ in our culture.” (quoted in Marsh 138) There is no need to search dusty foreign lands for exotic ASCs; we experience one every night when we fall asleep.

According to Becker, “A Balinese trancer acts differently in trance from a Sufi trancer, who acts differently again from an American Pentecostal trancer. One’s society

teaches one, quite precisely, how to act in trance.” (42) Thus while every healthy adult is physiologically capable of any number of altered states, each society differs in which ones are given sanction. “Cultural prescriptions determine what are proper or improper expressions of basic drives. The drive derivatives [trance behaviors] manifested by the subject are, in the end, limited by what his society defines as normal or abnormal, and by which of these derivatives the subject knows will be encouraged, tolerated, or discouraged.” (Van Der Walde 58) Our society happens to regard reading as a salubrious activity; others have the same opinion of spirit possession, ecstatic trances, and hallucinogenic states.

There have been others who have approached the reading trance from a more technical point of view. Nell’s *Lost in a Book* records his experiment with physiological changes induced by reading; he found that respiration, skin potential, and heart rate “increased over the baseline resting measure....Although readers claimed that reading was a relaxed and rather passive experience, Nell found that they were actually in a physiologically aroused state. There was also a marked drop in arousal immediately following reading when subjects closed their eyes.” (Sturm 4) This state of excitement while reading is intriguing given Laurence Sterne’s quaintly-phrased contention that good writers leave much of the work to readers: “No author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine....” (Gerrig 20) Our experience of a book is the result of a complex interaction between the author, what she has written, and what we make of it



all: altering any of the variables will alter the communication accordingly. Though reading and meditation are commonly envisaged as passive activities, it would be more accurate to describe them as less ostentatious forms of action. Both reading and meditation must be learned, practiced, and nurtured over a period of years in order to bear fruit.

Nor is the ludic experience confined to printed material: “It is a rare conversation among adults that does not depart from the here and now. All such instances allow a journey to a narrative world to begin. Clearly, we enjoy many activities that are explicitly designed to prompt experiences of narrative worlds: novels, newspapers, movies, television programs, history books, representational artworks, and so on.” (Gerrig 7) Expanding our scope beyond media, humans have been incredibly ingenious throughout history at finding ways to temporarily alter their perceptions. A peek inside your local liquor store will reveal a cornucopia of escape hatches. Substances, sex, friendships, physical travel, dwelling on the past or future, obsessive cleaning, and even psychosis are all ways we can escape our negative emotions and difficulties, albeit temporarily. Which tools we decide to use and how we use them will have a profound impact on our lives. As the folk singer Ani DiFranco says, “Any tool is a weapon--if you hold it right.” (“My IQ”) As with technology, drugs, and many other tools, they can be used to harm or to heal. My concern in this paper is with how the mind-altering activities of reading and Zen meditation can be used as tools, not weapons.

In a culture as celebratory as ours is of escape and fantasy, in which reading is often accepted unequivocally as laudable, describing the harmful potentials of books may

sound unorthodox. Perhaps the reader feels I have tipped over the sacred cow. But if we leave our attachment aside for a moment we will see that anything we read is only an echo of a lived experience, a pale shadow. If we are not careful we may end up like Nancy Pearl, author of *Book Lust*, who says she has been considering for some time whether there is anything wrong with preferring the world of books to her real life. Or, as the ennui-filled Nell writes, “We willingly enter the world of fiction because the skepticism to which our adult sophistication condemns us is wearying: we long for safe places—a love we can entirely trust, a truth we can entirely believe. Fiction meets that need precisely because we know it to be false, so that we can willingly suspend our reality-testing feedback processes.” (56) It seems clear that Nell (apparently by “we” Nell means “I”) turns to the written word to find solace, paradoxically because he knows what he experiences between the pages of a book is a simulacrum. Zen meditators, on the other hand, adopt the strategy of experiencing their lives without mediation as a means of discovering peace of mind. Thus ludic reading and Zen meditation, though in some ways diametrically opposed, can fulfill the same need.

We can learn from the words of others, but only if we put them into practice in our own lives. We can read about what it is like to drink lemonade, its tangy and tart taste, the beads of moisture running down the side of the glass, the pale moonish color of the liquid, but unless we have actually drunk a glass of lemonade ourselves our “knowledge” will be as flimsy as gossamer. When we really need it, the slightest wind will carry it away like smoke. In Zen this point is made in typical poetic fashion by the image of a finger and the moon: if we wish to show someone the moon, the best way is to

point it out to them. A wise person will see the moon; a foolish one will mistake our finger for the moon. Similarly, if we are not careful, we will mistake words for the truth. Gerrig describes how this happened in the wake of a popular movie: “Fear of shark attacks inspired by the movie *Jaws* kept vacationers out of the water despite the most responsible efforts of the popular press to correct mistaken notions....Non-swimmers were not persuaded by...demonstrations of the fictional worldliness of their beliefs.” (17) Caught in the fear of the narrative world of *Jaws*, the non-swimmers projected fictional events onto their real lives and stayed in their lawn chairs. They mistook the images of a movie for truth. The *Diamond Sutra*, the oldest extant printed book, cautions us against such imagination: “Words cannot express Truth; that which words express is not Truth.” (Price 42) Words (or images), though useful as guides, are not reality. The words of others are merely maps which may or may not correspond to the terrain we are traversing. They may not even be accurate. If we become too enamored of the maps of others we will lose touch with our own ineffable life-experience.

Though we started our journey in the familiar waters of the Western intellectual tradition, by now we have left the sheltered bays and coves behind and are forging ahead into the open water. Hopefully no great white sharks will attack our frail vessel! There have been writers who have said that it is pointless for an Occidental mind to attempt to come to terms with Zen. These writers fail to account for the fact that becoming a student of meditation is just as hard for a native of China as it is for an American; waking up in any culture is a labor of love. They also fail to account for the many westerners who have studied in Asia and have become teachers in their own right. If one wishes to

study Zen, there is no need to live in a Japanese monastery; the practice is always right in front of our noses. But the question remains, “What is Zen?” The teacher of my teacher, Joshu Sasaki Roshi, was once asked by Alan Watts, “Roshi, what is Zen?” Actually, both the Roshi and Alan were well into the sake that night, so it was probably more like, “Rrrroshiii, wat eeezzzzZennn?” The Roshi put his arm around Alan’s shoulder and said, “Aaaalllan, laffter izzZen.” Then he laughed. Like a good joke, attempting to explain Zen takes some of the magic away. As soon as we open our mouths to speak, we are off the mark. Still, if we remain silent we will be doing our listener a disservice. It is as if we are hanging by our teeth from a high tree limb. Someone far below asks, “What is Zen?” If we fail to answer we fail to help them. If, on the other hand, we open our mouths, we lose our life! So, I would ask the reader, “What is Zen?” Speak quickly!

“What is Zen? Inayat Khan tells a Hindu story of a fish who went to a queen fish and asked: ‘I have always heard about the sea, but what is this sea? Where is it?’ The queen fish explained: ‘You live, move, and have your being in the sea. The sea is within you and without you, and you are made of sea, and you will end in sea. The sea surrounds you as your own being.’” (Reps and Senzaki 211)

What is Zen? Historically, it is a Buddhist school that emphasizes meditation. The word “zen” comes from the Chinese word “ch’an,” which comes from the Sanskrit “dhyana,” which means “silent meditation.” So, Zen means meditation. Not just meditation on a black cushion, but living every second of our lives as a meditation. Meditation to plumb the very depths of our being. Zen is like dunking your head in a rushing mountain stream. When you pull your head out, ahhhhhhh, what invigoration!

How bright the sky! How green the trees! This is all. It is very simple. Washing dishes, walking down the street, eating a meal, reading a book, living in a monastery—all are meditation. It sounds easy, right? How can this be so? The thrust behind Zen meditation is to give ourselves totally to whatever we are doing at the moment. When eating, just eat. When walking, just walk. When sitting, just sit. The instructions are as simple to understand as they are difficult to carry out. It is very easy to read a book about Buddhism, but actually living the teachings is a lifelong practice. While Western philosophy attempts to solve existential questions such as “Who am I?” or “What is the meaning of life?” by ratiocination, by sitting around trying to figure out the answer as if the universe were a troubling algebraic equation, Zen seeks to find the place within ourselves where questions no longer arise. Slowly we learn that everything is perfectly clear to begin with; it is only our overactive minds which create complexity.

What is Zen? Ruth Fuller Sasaki answered:

Zen holds that there is no god outside the universe that created it and created man. God—if I may borrow that word for a moment—the universe and man are one indivisible existence, one total whole. Only THIS—is. Anything and everything that appears to us as an individual entity or phenomenon, whether it be a planet or an atom, a mouse or a man, is but a temporary manifestation of THIS in form; every activity that takes place, whether it be birth or death, loving or eating breakfast, it is but a temporary manifestation of THIS in activity. Each one of us is but a cell, as it were, in the body of the Great Self. [Having come into being, this cell] performs its functions and passes away, transformed into another manifestation. (Austin, 18)

What is Zen? At a recent retreat at the North Carolina Zen Center, my teacher Sandy Stewart, his student Matt, and Matt’s two-year-old daughter Samana were holding hands, singing “Pop Goes the Weasel.” (I should add that Sandy is approaching

seventy.) They danced around in a circle, singing, “All around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel, all around the mulberry bush, POP! goes the weasel!” At each POP! they would jump into the air. Then Samana would say, “Again!” Sandy would sing faster this time. Round and round they went, faster and faster! “Again!” “Again!” “POP!” “Again!” Finally Sandy fell down, pretending to be exhausted. Samana fell down too. This is Zen.

With Zen’s intent focus on meditation comes the phenomenon of samadhi. While we are asking what Zen is we may as well ask what samadhi is. I have collected a smattering of definitions from the back of Zen books and present them here. “A state of intense concentration of mind, which produces a sense of inner serenity.” (Watson 154) “A deep meditative state.” (Chadwick 452) “State of mind characterized by one-pointedness of attention. Also a non-dualistic state of awareness, characterized by putting all of one’s self into each activity.” (Maezumi 140) “Yogic concentration; meditation; one of the components of the Eightfold Path to enlightenment.” (Armstrong 204) “This Sanskrit term has a variety of meanings. In this book it implies not merely equilibrium, tranquility, and one-pointedness, but a state of intense yet effortless concentration, of complete absorption of the mind in itself, of heightened and expanded awareness.” (Kapleau 344) Conspicuously absent are first-person descriptions of samadhi, for as we will see, it is impossible to convey the experience of samadhi in words.

Alas, just as the scientifically-minded have attempted to make sense of the reading trance by charting physiological changes, scientists have applied their craft to the

ancient art of Zen meditation, seeking to clarify what appear to them to be muddy waters. However, the scientists whose studies I read were not aware of the fundamental clarity of things as they are and so only ended up confusing themselves further. A study conducted by Hirai examined a group of 48 Zen monks for EEG changes as they meditated, finding four stages: appearance of alpha waves, increase of alpha amplitude, decrease of alpha frequency, and appearance of theta trains. (Hirai 29) A control group of non-meditators showed no evidence of these stages. Further, there was a strong relationship between the years spent in Zen training and how pronounced the EEG findings were. (Hirai 31) In a shorter work Hirai and Kasamatsu compared the EEG reading they observed in monks to hypnotic and sleep states, finding no discernible difference between zazen and these ASCs. Austin reported the alpha rhythms of one subject increasing roughly 90 percent as he laughed, providing an interesting parallel with Joshu Sasaki's contention that laughter is Zen. Surveying a number of studies, Austin found indications that during meditative absorption subjects' chin muscle activity decreased markedly, a characteristic of REM sleep. (90) Murata et. al. performed a very involved study on EEG function and autonomic nervous activity, but puzzlingly, they used non-meditators as subjects, making their conclusions applicable only to non-practitioners who sit down and attempt to meditate. This is a little like taking a mailman off the street, hooking electrodes up to him, and asking him to play the trumpet like Miles Davis. Who would expect to hear beautiful music?

From the Zen Buddhist point of view, putting electrodes on a monk to try to "understand" zazen is a lot like looking for love with a metal detector: you may get some

highly interesting data, but you will never find what you're looking for. The fact that Hirai and Kasamatsu found no difference between EEG behavior during meditation, hypnosis, and sleep tells us that their studies are of little use. Though much of the scholarly literature refers to the experience of Zen meditation as an ASC, chances are a practitioner will tell you that this is a misunderstanding. Perhaps this is due to the fact that samadhi is a centered, blissful mental state that makes our everyday consciousness seem like the aberration. Either way, the question of whether samadhi is an ASC is merely academic. Though meditation can trigger spectacular altered states, and though we can learn much from these wonderful states, such experiences are not the focus of an authentic practice; they are spiritual pyrotechnics. Still, from the standpoint of our everyday, distracted "monkey mind," samadhi is a perceptible change; this is, after all, why we have a word for it. Fischer's attempt to model inner space along a hyper- and hypoaroused spectrum exhibits the Western tendency to grasp at these transitory states, attempting to create a "cartography of conscious states." (28-29) The main problem is that Fischer envisions each state as being easily demarcated from all the rest. While this may make for an elegant theory, in practice it is untenable. For example, "mystical rapture," "daily routine," "zazen," "dhyana," and "samadhi" are all discrete states according to Fischer's formulation. However, zazen is just another name for dhyana, as we saw earlier. Mystical rapture occurs during zazen, and samadhi is commensurate with daily routine and zazen. In being too attached to the names of things, Fischer misses their interpenetrating nature.

Bodhidharma, an ancient Zen adept, summarized Zen as follows:



1. A special transmission outside the scriptures
2. Not depending on words and letters
3. Directly pointing to reality
4. Seeing into one's own nature, attaining Buddhahood (Austin 8)

“Words and letters” refers to language, but also more broadly to the rational activity of the mind in any sphere. Thus from the Zen Buddhist point of view, trying to understand what Zen is with the thinking mind is as futile as attempting to drink all the water in the Mississippi River in one gulp. It simply can't be done. The Buddha once spoke about these matters when a disciple of his named Malunkyaputta asked a long string of speculative questions:

'Sir, when I was all alone meditating, this thought occurred to me: There are these problems unexplained, put aside and rejected by the Blessed One. [the Buddha] Namely, is the universe eternal or is it not eternal, is the universe finite or is it infinite, is soul the same as body or is soul one thing and body another thing, does the Tathagata [the Buddha] exist after death, or does he not exist after death, or does he both (at the same time) exist and not exist after death, or does he both (at the same time) not exist and not not-exist.' [Something tells me there are quite a number of Malunkyaputtas running around even today.] The Buddha replied, 'Suppose Malunkyaputta, a man is wounded by a poisoned arrow, and his friends and relatives bring him to a surgeon. Suppose the man should then say: I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know who shot me; whether he is of the warrior caste or of the priestly caste or of the trading and agricultural caste or of the low caste; what his name and family may be; whether he is tall, short, or of medium stature; whether his complexion is black, brown, or golden; from which village, town or city he comes. I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know the kind of bow with which I was shot; the kind of bowstring used; the type of arrow; what sort of feather was used on the arrow and with what kind of material the point of the arrow was made. Malunkyaputta, that man would die without knowing any of these things.' (Rahula 13-14)

Similarly, if we try to extricate ourselves from suffering with our discursive minds, we will never succeed. However, because our thinking mind is useful for solving many

everyday problems, our habit is to attempt to use it to answer our ultimate questions.

Perhaps this is the mistaken assumption underlying our Zen scientists' efforts.

## Methodology

In conducting my own study, I hope I have avoided the over-analytical pitfalls we often fall into. Armed with a considerable amount of book knowledge after doing the research for the first part of this paper, my task in designing the experiment was to delve into the states of ludic reading and Zen meditation as they are actually experienced in people's lives. Would their lived experiences jive with descriptions in books? How did people cultivate their states of absorption, and what, if anything, did they learn from them? I reasoned that many of my fellow library science students would be likely to have experienced reading's altered state of consciousness, so I planned on learning from their habits and techniques. An e-mail was sent to the SILS student listserv in order to screen for potential study participants, allowing them to preserve their anonymity. The Zen meditators were approached after group meditation sessions and discretely asked if they would be willing to be interviewed. I then conducted 20-60 minute interviews with four readers and three meditators, the proceedings of which were audio recorded. I used content analysis methodology to examine the data for trends and common themes. In short, the data was treated as a text which was in need of interpretation and clarification. As all data collected was qualitative, the relatively small number of study participants was not seen as a hindrance.

## Results

When asked to describe ludic reading as if to someone who has never experienced it, readers were very forthcoming and seemed to relish the opportunity to communicate about a normally private phenomenon. The responses were as follows:

I guess I would describe it as being so immersed in what you're reading that you don't even pay attention to anything that's going on around you, like people could be talking about you in the room right next to you and you don't even know, it's like later they tell you that, you weren't even aware of it, or you're sitting some place and reading and then you look over at the clock and realize two or three hours have gone by....Basically where you're so immersed in the story you're reading that you kind of forget your own world for however long a period of time.

It's hard to describe because it's something that's very central to my life. It's hard like describing blue to somebody who can't see blue. When I'm reading purely for the pleasure of it, I shut out the world. So everything closes down to tunnel vision, I guess. It's just me and the words on the page. It's a very relaxing feeling, almost like floating in the ocean, where there's a sort of rhythmic...the rhythm of the water and the rhythm of the sentence, the rhythm of the pacing of the book, and everything else is gone. It's definitely a retreat for me, something that gets me to let my shoulders down. The essential part of it is that you're not thinking. Your conscious brain is not nattering away, so you know, you are thinking, obviously, but it's in a processing sort of way. So there's not the overbrain observing your experience. For me it's just letting my conscious self, the chattering part, go.

I think if I tried to do that they would think I'm insane! [interviewer: Well, let them think what they will.] It's really just like being dropped into a scene, finding yourself as an almost invisible character in a movie...everything happens around you, and you're right in the middle of it, but nothing really happens to you; you're a silent, invisible observer.

It's really shutting off your external awareness. You may be sitting in a chair or on a bus or your bed reading or whatever, and there's a set of external stimuli there, you can feel the bed under your leg or if you're outside there's the wind or the light levels or whatever, but you just stop noticing them. To some extent you stop noticing the book, you're not actually seeing the book. I mean you're still turning pages, but at least for me when I really get to that point, I don't notice when I turn a page. I'm in the story. It's tuning everything out so that when something breaks that level of concentration, you have a sense that you do not

have the sensory memories for that time. There's a gap in your memories for that time.

Interestingly, the respondents showed a strong predilection to describing ludic reading in terms of what it isn't. They did not describe the events described in the book as filling their minds, but the absence of normal everyday stimuli from their awareness. Perhaps this was due to the fact that ASCs are notoriously difficult to describe. If the person one is attempting to communicate with has experienced ludic reading, there is no need to tell them what it is like. If, on the other hand, they have not known ludic reading, a description will never give them the experience itself. As will be apparent in the words of study participants that follow, the lived experiences of ludic reading and Zen meditation are impossible to verbalize. Still, attempts to communicate the incommunicable can yield some interesting results. Both the metaphor of the movie and the ocean describe experiences in which our normal will-driven, planning activity is relinquished: our body is tossed by the waves or our minds are occupied by the movie. But just as a choice is made to wade into the ocean or walk into the movie theater, the necessary antecedent for letting go, we must choose to enter the realm of the book. Respondents were very clear that being in a reasonably stress-free situation and having access to compelling material were necessary catalysts of the reading trance.

The ludic readers were also questioned about the impact of the reading trance on their emotions:

Right before the semester ended in December I remember going to the SILS library and I was looking at the young adult books, because those when they're well written I can get sucked into them more easily but they're also short enough that I don't get too distracted, so I guess if I'm more stressed or something I may

be more interested in tackling something that's...a little easier reading so I can get caught up in the story. I guess I do experience whatever's going on in the story. [in terms of emotions]

When I am particularly stressed out or particularly upset or in a bad mood I'll go for either books that I know will be decent enough that I won't be constantly irritated with the author for it being such a bad book or irritated with the copy editor, but nothing that's going to demand my emotions or demand me to think about it. Or, I will read old favorites, even very affecting old favorites because I know that I won't have to react, I know that level of higher awareness is not going to be kicked in. Something that'll be good and entertaining, but will not seize upon me, because I need the meditative aspect of it much more than I need the higher consciousness. [later] In terms of the meditative aspect and the relaxation of it, if I'm doing it for that purpose I want to be reasonably sure of what I'm getting. One of my favorite things when I'm really stressed out and miserable and my brain is just squeezed dry, I reread murder mysteries. And people are like, "What is the purpose of that? You already know who done it." And I'm like, "That's exactly why I reread it!" There's no suspense, I can go with it, just enjoy watching somebody else's thought processes; I don't have to think about it.

If it's Steven King, I'll feel scared; if it's *Tuesdays With Morrie*, I'll feel sad.

While the first and third readers reported being emotionally affected by what they read, the middle respondent reported seeking out known territory so that she would *not* be at the mercy of the material. Though all three people reported selecting a certain type of material based on the mood they found themselves in, their strategies of selection differed. The first two reported seeking out material that was not too mentally challenging, as this would impede the induction of the trance state. In other words, they were reading not to gain understanding or to exercise their rational faculties but to take refuge in the physical, emotional act of reading. There is a parallel in Sturm's discussion of the storylistening trance in that he argues that the best storytellers are the ones who fade into the background by supplying just enough information and inflection and emotion, without attracting the listener's attention to the telling itself. This allows the

audience to focus on the story instead of the telling, just as our readers found ways to focus on the story instead of the act of reading. And, whether they opted for the strategy of seeking out new material or old favorites, all three implicitly admitted the strong emotional impact of what they read. Perhaps one aspect of the reading trance that is so attractive is the surrender to the emotions triggered by the book, the opportunity to leave our everyday world and problems behind. It would seem to be an open question whether our inner brains know the difference between an experience gleaned vicariously via some media and a genuine, lived experience. While we are immersed in a narrative world, that world is more real to us than our physical reality, just as a dream is more real to the dreamer than reality. To what extent might these vicarious experiences affect our day-to-day lives?

Lastly, participants were asked if they had learned anything from their many hours of ludic reading...

The joy of books. Because I see books as being an enjoyable, a relaxing thing, and because I am stress-prone and anxiety-prone, and therefore I read more to get away from that....You do notice words or phrases and they sort of float to the back of your brain, where they stay. I don't know. [later] It's like when I walk into a house where there are no bookshelves, and there are no books, I'm like, "How do you survive?"

I don't quite understand reading, why it's so compelling, but I guess...I don't know...I kind of feel sorry for people who don't read, who don't experience it in the same way that I do. Maybe what I have learned is that reading can help balance things out a bit, like if I'm feeling stress letting myself get absorbed in a book.

Just that it is possible to completely shut out the world. I have good hearing, so usually I'm very aware of what's going on around me because I'll be hearing noises of my roommate or the car out in the parking lot, and they're normal

noises, so they're not distracting me. But if I'm really reading that deep then they're not there anymore. I wouldn't be able to tell you whether a car came or went. Being able to completely tune everything out is nice. Deep reading like that, I guess I will come out of it with the emotions of the story. I may have read it five or six times, but I momentarily forget how it ends.

Conspicuously absent were descriptions of any hard facts. Excepting the respondent who claimed to have learned nothing, the chief lesson learned seemed to be that ludic reading can be used as a palliative in dealing with troubling emotional states. Readers did not describe their insights into human nature or reel off the intricate history of Middle Earth. One respondent even asserted that she felt it would be impossible to learn anything in the reading trance. Thus it seems, for our participants at any rate, that ludic reading is engaged in solely for the pleasure of it and the solace of a calming activity. Curiously, the same Zen writings that speak of the futility of describing reality in words stress over and over that Zen practice is not done to achieve any particular end but just for the sake of the practice. One Zen practitioner reported rattling off a list of things she wished to accomplish by meditating to her teacher many years ago, upon which she received a look as if to say, "What are you *thinking*?" If there were teachers of ludic reading perhaps they would respond in a similar fashion to such coldly rational approaches to the activity.

Paralleling the question about the experience of ludic reading, meditators were asked to describe samadhi. Though none of them quite winced, it seemed clear that they did not relish the question.

[pause] It seems hard to describe without having an experiential base...that's kind of the point of practice is to give one an experiential base, and then it's clear. I

think what winds up happening when we start talking about things in words, they wind up going off track, but I guess that's all been said a million times, so then I guess the way to speak about it is some form of characterization, and I always think of a cartoon or a caricature. I think what [his teacher] says sometimes is it's like eating a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich. How can you tell someone about a peanut and butter jelly sandwich? You really can't. You can describe the flavors, but you can't get it, and you never will, unless you experience it. And so it's the same kind of thing. It's so far off the mark to try to talk about it that it always strikes me as kind of a waste of time. With all that in mind [long pause] I guess sometimes I kind of think about it like being a total condensing, like being a brick, and being inside the brick. But at the same time, the brick is total expansion. It's like total density to the point of heat, like being inside a brick, like when they form and they shrink, but at the same time, it's like...[trails off, laughs]

[pause] Well... [unenthusiastically] I don't have a really clear definition of samadhi. This is very personal or subjective, because not being very clear on the definition, I would say samadhi is a situation which exists for different lengths of time and that we are really experiencing samadhi every time we receive a stimulus through any of our sense organs, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. In that when we hear a sound, like [clap] at that moment there's no separation between the sound and myself. There are different ways people express it, you know, like, "Oh, that was a breathtaking sunset," you just open up the door and there's this magnificent sunset, and you're like, "Ahhhhhhh." That's a little bit of a longer moment than your usual stimulus samadhi. Or a loud noise might do it and for a moment we're just stunned and don't have any thinking going, so there's that togetherness of the self and the object of hearing. And I've heard that there are examples of people being in a state of samadhi for longer periods, like an hour or even a day or two days, and I heard from somebody that Eckhart Tolle had been in a state like that for a year! So, I don't know about that. Most of the time my experiences of it are very brief.

It's forgetting about myself. Not having my interpretation or not having an "I" thinking about, "I have to go in ten minutes to do X." There's only the sound that I'm listening to or the feel on my arm.

The Zen practitioners seemed to be running into the same problem mentioned by one of the ludic readers when she stated that describing ludic reading was like describing blue to someone who can't see blue. Later in the same interview she offered this explanation of



how human language can fail to express that which we most earnestly wish to communicate:

But that's the whole point of it, to not be in the everyday world, not be in the everyday experience, and that's what languages describe, shared experience, so that we know what each other is talking about, and an altered state of consciousness means that they are not in that everyday world, that shared awareness, by definition. It is like a drug in that way, you don't want to go back soon.

Though she was talking about the reading trance, the heart of her insight can be just as easily applied to the experience of Zen meditation. Whether our practice is to engage with the everyday world or to escape from it, what we find is impossible to verbalize. Nor can it be expressed with paint, with instruments, or through interpretive dance. Ultimately, human experience is ineffable. Depending on how we choose to approach this fact, it can trigger discomfort or awe. The choice is ours. Frank Zappa said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture, and I suspect the study participants were running into the same dilemma when confronted with my queries. If it were possible to convey the essence of human experience through words or any other means, all beings would be awakened by now, since the insights of spiritual practitioners would have been passed to all of us by one means or another. Perhaps all verbal communication is really a form of miscommunication, and when we truly understand each other, words are no longer necessary. In this case silence would be the most eloquent speech.

Our intrepid Zen practitioners were also asked to describe any relationship they had noticed between an absorbed, meditative state of consciousness and their emotions.

I'd say dissipating is probably a good description. I find that if I go into the zendo [meditation hall] and I've got some issue going on, maybe I'll notice that my heart's beating fast and I'm kind of emotional about something, invariably, the sitting or the service will go and and it'll [the emotions] drop off, of course not always, if it's something that I'm really struggling with, but say 99% of the time it drops off.

If anything I would say it allows them the opportunity to appear. The alternative would be if I'm working and busy thinking about what I'm doing. But if I just sort of let the observing self be quiet, there's the opportunity for emotions to surface. Just like thoughts surface. I think of thoughts and emotions as both objects which appear to the mind, just as sound appears to the ear and sights appear to the eye.

Afterwards I think I'm always less perturbable, less grinding, let's make things happen. I'm just more at peace and more fun-loving afterwards.

Well, the confused reader may ask, which one is it? Two meditators speak of the release from emotion, while the other reports meditation has the opposite effect of allowing his emotions to bubble to the surface. How can this be so? My guess is that the practitioners were describing different stages of the process of working through emotions. Take anger as an example. Before anger arises we are calm and untroubled. Scant seconds after anger has arisen, however, our equilibrium is lost. If we try to fight the anger or feed it by building up thoughts around the issue that is troubling us, rest assured the anger will build. The angrier we get, the more we want to blame others for it, and the more we blame others the more outraged we become. This can quickly lead to a downward spiral ending in confusion and suffering. The popular bumper sticker that says, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention" has it backwards. If we are compassionately paying attention to our emotional state and taking care of it responsibly, outrage will never have the chance to arise. So, emotions pass through our consciousness like storm

systems. They arise and pass, like everything else. Our practitioners were likely mentioning specific phases of this phenomenon without bothering to describe the entire trajectory that becomes visible when we take a few steps back.

I also asked the meditators to describe what they had learned from their Zen practice.

That's such a big question. That's not really the way I'd like to approach it. I feel like what I've come to is that for me it's like paramount to actualize the practice and that there's really nothing nearly as important to be learned. It's just so clear to me that everything else pales in comparison in importance, though the other things are important too. Sometimes I find myself getting involved in some project or some mental discipline or learning about something just because you have to do it in your life just to get on, like Kim [his wife] went to school, she learned to be a nurse, so there's this huge body of knowledge that you have to spend time and energy on, and then you do your first sesshin [Zen meditation retreat] afterward, and it's like, it's just so clear to me every time that everything else pales in comparison in importance. I mean obviously you have to learn these skills to quiet your mind and to focus and to have technique or skillful means is the way that I've heard Roshi [his teacher's teacher] consider it, but I think more important than that is seeing the paramount importance of it because then no matter whether you pick up the skills or not, you will, eventually. It's just gonna take a lot of time and it's just gonna be like grinding, grinding, grinding, grinding. [When asked what he meant by the word "actualize," he replied as follows.] Carrying your practice through your life, so not just in the zendo. [meditation hall] It's carrying the zendo in your life, basically. But this is all getting a little dangerous because it's getting a really specific, you know, perspective on my practice, which is must my mind's way of framing it up now that we're sitting here, which is like...smoke. This is part of why I don't smoke anymore! 'Cause it's kind of pointless, you know. Just practice. That's the point.

The really big one was having read that the self or consciousness is like a child born of two parents, so like the self of hearing is born depending on sound and the ear or the hearing faculty. So thinking of the self in those kinds of terms is quite an astonishing...it's not the way we usually think about who I am. [later] That's something that may have come about from practicing Zen. I can remember before I was in Zen, I liked to wash the dishes so I could think about stuff. Now I like to wash the dishes because I can wash the dishes! I just pay attention to washing the dishes. It's the same way when I'm sitting down—I just pay attention to the sitting. So, in a way, this practice has spread out the formal practice into the

whole day. [later] The only thing I remember noticing, was in my early practice I was very focused on the posture, or my koan, [a seemingly puzzling utterance of a master taken up in one's meditation] or chanting, or working, or whatever, after several months of that I noticed I was feeling much happier instead of feeling totally freaked out and crazy, and that was a great relief!

I would say when I practice more I learn more how to have an open heart. I just don't know where I'd be without it; it's like that trajectory if you didn't do X where would you be, but I do know that by practicing I can keep myself from being rigid. I mean I still get rigid but it's definitely a way to break down boundaries between me and everything else. I know it's an aid for that.

It would be next to impossible to make a general statement about what people learn from Zen meditation. Since the method of Zen is to expose us to the starkness of our lives without the aid of any intermediary, asking people to share what they have learned from Zen is like asking them to share what they have learned from being alive. Everyone learns something different. Or, we may have to relearn the same lesson over and over again. The first two practitioners were a bit flummoxed by the question. Since there is no emphasis in Zen on discursive thought about one's practice as an object, this was a very un-Zen question to ask. The first two practitioners reacted as if they hadn't thought about the question in ages and that it was somewhat strange to be asked such a thing. Then again, perhaps they were making the question more difficult than it really was. It has been said that the purpose of Zen is to completely open the heart, which was echoed by the third practitioner. Learning to open one's heart—is there anything more important?

Lastly, I wish to share the words of ludic readers and Zen practitioners side by side, so that the reader may get a sense of the differing “feel” of each activity and draw her own conclusion. In both cases the participants are speaking about their chosen

activity. I will leave it to the reader to determine which activity is being described. I believe the excerpts speak for themselves of the commonalities and distinctions between the two activities.

It's an enjoyable place to be however you get to it. I'm quite aware that most serious meditation practitioners would scoff at my making any comparison. They would say that the brain is too busy while it's reading for it to be meditation, but I don't care. Where you go is a good place to be and it's a rare place to be. [about the oceanic metaphor] I have no idea if that's maybe some sort of subconscious connection to the theta waves that are supposed to be induced during meditation.

I just have to remember to concentrate. If I just remember at any time I try to do it. Like if I have to have an MRI, which I don't like, I'll just go in and I'll make use of focusing on something to get rid of my self. Or sometimes when department meetings are really political, and I'm like whoa, I try to not get too entangled in that, caught up in the self issues, I'll focus on my breathing. It might be conducive to happen naturally at other times, when I'm not consciously trying to make it happen. I would say there are certain times when external things kind of congeal and allow for that to happen more easily. Sometimes I think it's when my routines are shaken up in a deep way, I might be more like pliable to it happening, rather than me focusing on it happening. Or sometimes when things are very dramatic, even like a storm, a big storm will take me over rather than me focusing on being in a particular state.

There's definitely a transition. What happens most often is that it's not a natural ending, I'm not finishing the book, so it's a major external stimuli, somebody moving right near me so it's not a level of sensory information I can just tune out, like a phone ringing or a bus slamming on its brakes, that's enough to do it. And in that case, it's really an abrupt...shaken back to myself. Part of my brain is still trying to keep track of the story, but suddenly the sensory parts of my brain are trying to pay attention to the here and now. The other time that will happen is if I'm immersed in a book and I finish the book, that's a lot slower. If I'm reading a book to the depth that I'm in the story, I'm affected by the rise and the fall of the story. I end up thinking about the plot of the book or my brain is trying to fill in the parts of the story that the reader doesn't see. I'm thinking about it for awhile, but then I'm definitely back in the here and now.

I think a lot of people think of meditation as going into some kind of mental state, you know like a different...and there are meditations that do that, that aim at that, but mine doesn't. It's just to be present. So if you're present when you're sitting you can be present when you get up and when you walk out. It's not like, "Oh I

have to give up my trance now and go back to ordinary mind.” I haven’t been interested at all in developing special powers or abilities, so that’s kind of why I like Zen, it’s more simple-minded. Just be present.

I’ve had experience of trying to bring myself out of the book world and back into reality where it might take me a couple minutes. It’s kind of like...you look over your shoulder and expect to see that character still sitting there, it’s a little freaky and it’s not something I usually admit to people...they’d think I’m nuts! If you’ve ever woken up somewhere and you weren’t sure where you were immediately and you hadn’t been drinking the night before...sometimes it takes me a couple minutes if I’m at someone else’s house and I’m not familiar with my surroundings...I’m real fuzzy in the morning, and it’s the same way coming out of a trance.

When I asked one of the Zen practitioners to share any last insights as an afterthought, he offered the following words:

Your main thing of your study talking about ludic reading and samadhi...so I think they sound the same to me. Ludic reading is when the separation that we would think of when we think about a book, between the book and myself, disappears. So you’re reading and you’re totally engrossed in reading, you’re not thinking about “I am reading a book.” That would be the samadhi of reading; the self has vanished into the book so to speak. Like the sunset or like the sound. So perhaps reading would be an excellent practice to clarify samadhi. Because typically it seems like when we’re reading something engrossing, it can last a longer time than when we’re looking at a sunset. Music can be, I suppose there’s ludic listening. [interviewer: Yeah I had to narrow my study down, but I was thinking that it could be just about anything.] Ludic sweeping. [Or a basketball player on the freethrow line.] You should talk to the luge people. It seems like they’d be really intense. It would be nice to have a ludic luger!

He raises an interesting point. Are ludic reading and Zen meditation in fact the same, as he suggests, or are they, as the scholarly literature would suggest, discrete activities?

Well, both! From one angle the two are separate, with ludic reading having all of the specific characteristics which were discussed above. Ludic reading involves experiencing the alternate universe of a text, while Zen meditation focuses emphatically on this universe before us right now. Still, one has to admit that there is a remarkable

degree of congruence between the two pursuits. Both involve a non-dual interaction. Perhaps it would be helpful to think of the reading trance and Zen meditation as analogous to sects of the same religion. No one could argue that they each have their distinct characteristics, and yet their root is identical. Sons of one mother. Fingers of one hand. Depending on the circumstance it may be useful to make a distinction between them or to emphasize their shared nature. What need is there to tie ourselves down to a single rigid interpretation?

A scholarly paper on any topic having anything to do with ASCs would be incomplete without this famous quote from William James:

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question,--for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality. (Becker, unpaginated)

Though this is undoubtedly a very interesting statement, in my opinion James is off the mark before he gets halfway through the first sentence. “Normal waking consciousness...” is there such a thing? Who decides what is normal? Tart responds: “A culture can be seen as a group which has selected certain human potentials as good and developed them, and rejected others as bad. Internally this means that certain possible experiences are encouraged and others suppressed to construct a “normal” state of

consciousness that is effective in and helps define the culture's particular consensus reality." (34) So "normal" is a cultural construct, a mental abstraction. Still, from our everyday standpoint, we have very definite ideas about what is normal: as I type these words, I am over here and my computer is over there, separate from me. This is irrefutable. We need this shared experience in order to communicate, and, as Tart points out, "Enormous benefits result from sharing in our consensus reality..." (48) However, if we examine this so-called normalcy in meditation we will find it to be considerably less solid than we had thought. Both my computer and myself are empty of any permanent identity. Tart continues his quote: "...but these benefits must not blind us to the limits of this [consensus] reality." (48)

As for our quotation from James, who decides what is a normal state of consciousness? Compare the state of mind of Hitler moments before he committed suicide with the Buddha moments after his breakthrough under the Bodhi tree. There is a vast spectrum of states of consciousness between these two extremes. If we pay attention to our own minds, we will notice ourselves experiencing a series of states that is constantly in flux, much like the weather. There is a saying in the Midwestern states to this effect: "If you don't like the weather, just wait a little while; it'll change." We should not suspect for a moment that this insight is limited to the realm of climatology. Things change; better yet, things *are* change. Nothing is constant for even the minutest millisecond. I am a different person than I was when I commenced work on this scholarly adventure, just as you the reader are a different person than when you sat down to read it. Our blood has been coursing through our veins, our nails have grown, food has



been digested, we have encountered many thoughts; we have changed. In the midst of the whole ever-pulsating tragicomic ball of wax called the universe, who can cling to a permanent self, let alone call it normal? This is what a Zen master will tell you. My guess is that the average ludic reader would be more likely to assert the solidity of her self. Paradoxically, both would be correct.

In preparing to write this paper I was forced to narrow the topic down to a manageable size, but this should not lead the reader to suppose that absorbed states of consciousness are limited to reading and Zen meditation. On the contrary, playing music, riding a bicycle, making love, eating breakfast, listening to a story, walking through a park, watching the sky, dancing...all are opportunities to experience nonduality firsthand. I invite the reader to find your own ludic path of self-transformation and healing. For example, in Japan flower arranging, tea ceremony, and rock gardening are pursued as spiritual practices. Is there something innate about these activities which makes them somehow “spiritual?” I think not. Any (preferably nonviolent) act can be spiritualized if we bring the correct intention to it. A neighbor of mine says he gets into a meditative state when cleaning his boat. Wonderful! With all the turmoil and suffering we are faced with in the world right now, we need all the nondualism we can get, even in scholastic circles. With this in mind, a number of potential studies on related topics suggest themselves. One could focus on the history of a particular ASC or on ASCs in general in various social contexts. Why do certain cultures give sanction to certain ASCs and forbid others? Within the realm of a given ASC or meditation, are there levels of absorption? Does facility with one ASC transfer easily to others? Do people from given

cultural/racial/economic backgrounds tend to favor certain ASCs over others? I would be very curious to learn about the neurochemistry behind ludic experiences and how these immersive experiences can be used to heal. The practitioners interviewed for this paper strongly attested to the healing, even salvific power of their chosen ASCs; could reading, meditation, and music be used as therapeutic tools? The possibilities for further exploration are tantalizing.

But what does this paper have to say about how we actually go about experiencing this “altered” state of nondualism? The words of Zen masters, ludic readers, and scholars have been dancing around each other through the previous pages. Are any conclusions possible? For one, it seems safe to assert that both ludic reading and Zen meditation can give rise to powerful absorbed states of consciousness. The scholarly material on ASCs attests to the breadth and history of departures from more common states of mind, while those interviewed, whether eager to talk (the readers) or more reticent, (the meditators) without fail asserted the centrality of their chosen activity to their lives. It seemed clear that the people I interviewed had regularly experienced the “sweet spot” alluded to earlier in the paper. As the side effects of reading and meditation are minimal, they would seem to be a much safer method of altering one’s consciousness than those involving street drugs. I also found it intriguing that neither the readers nor the meditators were able to capture the essence of their activity in words. Some participants used metaphors, such as the woman who described floating in the ocean, whereas others stated flatly that any attempt to put their experience into words was impossible, but no one provided a convincing first-person description of an ASC. This

obvious omission leads us to conclude that human language (English, at least) is not an all-powerful descriptive tool. Only shared experiences can be communicated, and even then there is much that can go wrong. As one of the Zen practitioners stated, attempting to impart an experience with words alone is an exercise in futility. No matter how many cookbooks we read, we will not know how to make an omelet unless we have done it with our own two hands. However, when experience and words are used in tandem, effective communication is much more likely to ensue.

This should also tell us why writing about ASCs is so difficult: since they are by definition states of mind that deviate from more commonly-experienced states, it is considerably less likely that the average reader will have the experiential base necessary to appreciate what is being described: they will not know what blue is. For example, take the many trip reports found in the ASC scholarly literature, or the utterances of seasoned meditators. If we have not taken the drug under discussion or had a similar experience in meditation, the words are likely to baffle us. If, on the other hand, we have had some first-hand experience with the drug or practice in question, a first-person description is likely to make perfect sense. We would be wise not to dismiss supposedly strange words out of hand; whoever composed them may merely be speaking of something we have yet to experience. As Don Juan put it, “To believe that the world is only as you think it is is stupid.” (Tart 32) If we can give up our preconceived notions of what is true, we have already moved towards the sweet spot where new understandings can dawn. And perhaps this is the most crucial conclusion of all: that ludic reading and Zen meditation are potent and mutually supportive means of learning gracefully from our lives. How

tragic it would be to limit ourselves to what can be learned in school! Let this paper be a challenge then, a throwing down of the gauntlet, a white glove tossed with utter insouciance in your path, a forceful encouragement to unleash your barbaric yawp upon the world, taking all you see in a loving embrace. If you hide from the lessons of your life you will be spurning the best, most unique teachers you will ever have. If, on the other hand, you pluck up your courage and proceed with open hands and open heart, there is no telling what wonders you may find.

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