



January 2010

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### Recommended Citation

Mecham, Christian (2010) "Cast Off Body and Mind: Realization of the Self in Phenomenology and Soto Zen," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 1.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol1/iss1/1>

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# Cast Off Body and Mind: Realization of the Self in Phenomenology and Soto Zen

## **Abstract**

Throughout much of the history of Western philosophy, the works of non-Western philosophers were often categorized as belonging to that of mystics and was not worthy of rational discourse. This attitude began to change in the mid-19th century with philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, but even more so in the 20th century as exploration of Eastern philosophy began in full earnest. Of particular note is Martin Heidegger's examination of Buddhism in his phenomenological work. Heidegger is not the only phenomenologist to have connections to Buddhism. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the leading French phenomenologist of the 20th century, argued that the body was not only necessary for experiencing the world, but also for the attainment of authentic self-hood. In a similar vein, centuries earlier, the Zen master Dogen was formulating a philosophy of the body that closely corresponds with what Merleau-Ponty discusses in his seminal work *The Phenomenology of Perception* by claiming that the body was the necessary component of attainment of enlightenment through its practice of *zazen*, or seated meditation. Drawing from these two philosophers, and contemporary commentators, this paper argues that the divide between philosophy in the East and West is not as great as one might think. By providing a space for dialogue between Dogen and Merleau-Ponty, we see how their philosophies discourse with one another, especially in regards to their understanding of the body's importance in realization of authentic self-hood. And in providing this space, the foundations of a greater discourse between East and West may begin.

## **Keywords**

Buddha-nature, Dogen, Immanence and transcendence, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology, Soto Zen Buddhism, Zazen, Comparative philosophy

## **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Dr. Cynthia Coe for her assistance with this paper, as well as Drs. Jeffrey Dippmann, and Chenyang Li for their guidance on the author's study of Buddhism. The author would also like to thank his parents, sisters, and Jennifer Eakins for their continued support, as well as his Holiness the 14th Dali Lama Tenzin Gyatso for fostering a spirit of understanding and peace both within the world at large and the author in particular. Finally, the author is indebted to the work of Carl Olson, without whom he would not have set off on this journey. Om mani padme hum.

Editor's Note: Dr. Cynthia Coe, a Professor of Philosophy at Central Washington University, served as the author's faculty mentor.

## INTRODUCTION

The connections between the phenomenologists of the twentieth century and the thoughts of Buddhist philosophers are readily apparent to those who know where to look, but what is not so apparent is just how deep the connection in fact goes. It is not simply a matter of using witty catchphrases and clever word play that binds phenomenology as a science to the faith of Buddhism, but it is in fact a deep, accurate portrayal of Buddhist beliefs to the Western world that allows phenomenology to bridge the philosophies of the East and West. The works of Merleau-Ponty and Dogen (founder of the *Soto Zen* School) are especially important in bridging this gap between Western and Eastern philosophical discourse because of their focus on the necessity of the body in experience. This emphasis of importance on the body by both of these philosophers is not merely comparable with one another, but the ideas expressed are also compatible, and highlight the way in which dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophy may more peaceably and respectfully proceed.

Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is necessary for the phenomenological experience of reduction, a psychological state where we are only examining our current, immediate experience for what it merely is. In Dogen's philosophy of *Zen* as *zazen* (sitting meditation) we see a parallel belief of how the body is used as a vehicle to reach enlightenment (there are parallels between reduction and enlightenment, as I discuss in a moment). For Dogen, *zazen*, the practice of sitting meditation was not only the path to Zen but was in fact Zen itself.

In Buddhism, every sentient being is possessed of Buddha-nature—every being is a part of every other, all beings are ultimately connected, and capable of

enlightenment. Essentially, when we break everything down far enough one realizes that we are ultimately all connected by this metaphysical claim.

The phenomenological claim of reduction is incredibly similar. What we see is that reduction defines the moment of *satori* (a brief and sudden moment of pure understanding that paves the way to full enlightenment)—it is, as St. Francis of Assisi and modern Zen practitioners would say, merely seeing the world in a different light and in a different way. When we observe something from the phenomenological mindset, the Buddhist would argue we are also acting in accordance with our Buddha-nature.

In order to fully explore this line of reasoning, we must first examine the foundations of both Buddha-nature and phenomenology as they relate to this essay. We will briefly observe the meanings of Buddha-nature and reduction before moving onto the comparisons between Dogen and Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body. Thus, much like our topic, we will proceed from the broadest understanding to the much more focused and narrow one.

## BUDDHA-NATURE

One of the core doctrinal beliefs of Zen Buddhism is that of Buddha-nature. The belief in Buddha-nature is the closest belief within Buddhism that is analogous a belief in the soul. Like the soul, it is eternal and cannot be destroyed. However, it is not necessarily an individually possessed thing like a soul—that is, whereas the soul is the individual's own, separate, complete thing, the Buddha-nature is not the individual's own thing, for it is what ultimately connects the being to all beings by belonging to all beings. The Buddha-nature is not to be confused with a soul; it is not a personal,

transcendent quality unique to one being, but rather a feature of each sentient being that is equal in its representation and effect (i.e. the capability to achieve enlightenment). “The absolute inclusiveness of the Buddha-nature does not imply that it is immanent in all existences; rather all existences are immanent in it.”<sup>1</sup> A classic example used by Buddhists to explain Buddha-nature is the myth of “Indra’s Net.” In this story the god Indra created a great net made of fabulous jewels. Each jewel is separate, but reflects the others. What we see in this example is the idea that Buddha-nature reflects all other sentient beings within our selves, thus interconnecting and interpenetrating our own selves. Another classic tale involves one of the empresses of China and a Buddhist monk. The monk took a statue of the Buddha and set it in a room full of mirrors. The mirrors represented individual beings, who reflected the image of the Buddha statue. However, they also reflected the other mirrors, their reflections of the Buddha statue, and the reflection of their own selves as reflecting the others. Thus, each being is an individual, but is ultimately connected to and a part of all other beings.

The importance of such a belief is that ultimately, since all sentient beings (which in Buddhism comprises humans, animals, insects, and divine creatures such as bodhisattvas, asuras, and devas) have Buddha-nature, all beings are capable of attaining enlightenment. “If the Buddha-nature is equally present in all, then all are equally near Buddhahood.”<sup>2</sup> In practice, the

idea of Buddha-nature was latched onto as a means of recognizing the potential for *bodhi* (awakening) and was used as a means of expressing compassion to other human beings and sentient creatures. Thus, all beings are capable of awakening to Buddhahood through their Buddha-nature and thus, all beings are capable of enlightenment, which is the ultimate goal of the compassionate Buddha as expressed in the *Lotus Sutra*.

Soto Zen, which claims 15000 temples and has 5 million members,<sup>3</sup> was founded by Dogen, for whom Buddha-nature is even more inclusive than in other Buddhist schools. All things have Buddha-nature, including non-animal life (plants, etc) and non-living objects (rocks, etc), and the universe itself is a being in time. In addition, Buddha-nature is realized in *zazen*, the practice of sitting meditation. Dogen asserts that *zazen* is Buddha-nature, that *zazen* must be practiced in order to be more fully understood.

## PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology can best be described as the philosophical and scientific approach to understanding how we experience our experiences. It is the study of experience itself. Phenomenology also attempts to show not only how we experience (i.e., the experience of experience), but also what that experience means to us.

Within phenomenology there is an emphasis on the universality of experience—what the conditions of experience are in themselves. What phenomenology attempts, therefore, is

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Olson, “The Human Body as a Boundary Symbol: A Comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Dogen.” *Philosophy East and West*, 36 no. 2 (1986): 116.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*. (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), 145.

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<sup>3</sup> John M. Koller, *Asian Philosophy*, (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007).

not a detached judgment-experience of things as they occur (such as what Descartes argued—i.e., that we are constantly judging our experiences through the faculty of the mind alone), but rather that an acceptance of things as they are, without judging or ruling on the actions of things other than ourselves and of things that we ourselves do. As Edmund Husserl, who is widely considered to be the founder of the philosophical school of phenomenology, would say, the world originates in us, and as such, only our own consciousness can apprehend the world as it is, though as we shall see Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is a necessary part of this phenomenological experience as well. “The transcendental phenomenologist reduces the already psychologically purified to the transcendental, that most general, subjectivity, which makes the world and its ‘souls,’ and thus confirms them.”<sup>4</sup> Where in the mindset of Cartesian dualism we can’t even trust our own experiences of anything, such a position is unacceptable to phenomenology and instead we should attempt to understand experience simply as experience. This reduction, i.e., understanding experience as an experience, can therefore be said to be the experiencing of the world as it truly is by means of using the only thing truly available to us: our own selves. It is the process in which we “bracket” off the world and take it for what it is. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is a necessary component of this process of reduction; our own self is the body.

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<sup>4</sup> Edmund Husserl, “Phenomenology” in *Twentieth Century Philosophy*, eds. Forrest E. Baird, and Walter Kaufman, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 10.

## DOGEN, MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BODY

In both traditional Buddhism and the phenomenology of Husserl, there is a condemnation of the body. While phenomenology strives to rid itself of Cartesian dualism and Buddhism strives to be nondualistic so as to not suppose souls (i.e., the Buddhist ideal of anatman<sup>5</sup>) of any kind, both can and do fall into the clutches of dualistic claims. We see this in any work of Buddhism which argues for the renunciation of the body and the material world and in the works of Husserl, who struggled throughout his life attempting to remove this “stain” from his works. In the Soto Zen school of Buddhism, which was founded by the Zen Master Dogen, and in the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (for this essay we will focus on his work *Phenomenology of Perception*), we find the opposite: that the body is not simply a material thing, but is involved in the transcendent experience necessary for us to experience the world as it really is.

The body, as traditionally understood throughout both Western and Eastern thought is simply a material object, much as any other material object such as a chair or a book or even the world itself. As such it is merely a vessel that the consciousness temporarily resides in and has no effect on the consciousness itself. It is not to be regarded in a special manner like the mind, nor is it to be held in reverence like the consciousness. Some traditions reject the body as evil, or corrupted; at the least, all who reject the body claim that paying it any great attention beyond simple procedures to keep it alive prevents the individual from

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<sup>5</sup> Anatman has been defined as “no-soul,” “non-being,” and “not-self.” The Buddhist belief that there are no existing souls which carry on eternally, unchanging.

ascending to a higher understanding of reality.

Both Dogen and Merleau-Ponty reject this claim; for them, the body is not simply a physical entity. It is not a material object among other material objects, important only because it holds the consciousness in a state of life. The body is not a vessel that holds back enlightenment of a greater reality, but is the vehicle to which one melds consciousness and body, subjectivity and objectivity. It is dynamic and nondualistic.

For both of these men, the body is more than just the individual body parts or their collection. “The body cannot be comprehended by measuring its properties, the causal relations among its parts, or its causal relation to other such entities, nor can it be reduced to an object which is sensitive to certain stimuli.”<sup>6</sup> The body, for Merleau-Ponty, is my body, it is the body through which I experience. It is a body in which I live—it is a lived body.<sup>7</sup> My body is responsible for my perceptions of the world and my consciousness is dependent on those perceptions for its understanding of the world; Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to reject the idea of an independent (from the body) consciousness altogether.

“The true *Cogito*<sup>8</sup> does not define the subject’s existence in terms of the thought he has of existing, and furthermore does not convert the indubitability of the world into the indubitability of the thought about the world, nor finally does it replace the world itself by the world as meaning. On the contrary it recognizes my

thought itself as inalienable fact, and does away with any kind of idealism in revealing me as ‘being-in-the-world.’”<sup>9</sup>

Let us highlight what Merleau-Ponty means by this with an example. I have two hands; with them I manually manipulate various objects in the world (such as the keyboard I am using to type this essay). However, I can also touch them together. My hand touches my other hand and thus I experience my self by using my self. My body perceives the world, and its perceptions, my perceptions, are used by my consciousness to experience the world as itself. I can see my body, I can touch my body. The world is thus both experienced by perception and perception is from the body which perceives the world. Thus, the body is not distinct from the mind. This is how we are “beings-in-the-world”: we exist in the world and we experience it thusly. Through this experience we discover our existing in the world and through the world.

Dogen agrees with Merleau-Ponty on the body as being a necessary component for the world to be experienced. Dogen expresses this in an analogy to sailing a boat. The boat is the body; its various parts are the way in which the passenger, who is the consciousness, affects the water that the boat is moving through. The boat could not move without a will behind it, but the will cannot affect the world by itself. “Even though the boat is the sailor’s mode of transportation, it is he who makes it a boat which becomes a world of the sailor.”<sup>10</sup> I cannot understand the world beyond the boat without experiencing the boat itself, without

<sup>6</sup> Olson, 108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>8</sup> Here Merleau-Ponty is referencing Rene Descartes (whose philosophy is commonly attacked by Merleau-Ponty).

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. “What is Phenomenology?” in *Twentieth-Century Philosophy*, eds. Baird, Forrest E. and Walter Kaufman, 5, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 280.

<sup>10</sup> Olson, 109.

acknowledging that the boat is the vessel on which my self resides. This makes it seem as if the sailor (mind) is still in control of the boat and resides higher than it, but this view is incorrect. On the contrary, the sailor cannot exist outside of the boat—without the boat, there is no sailor. The boat is integral to the sailor’s existence; what can a sailor sail without a boat?<sup>11</sup> The body is thus the conclusion and answer to the problem of how the consciousness experiences the world; it is the I perceive and the I experience all in one. By experiencing, it perceives and by perceiving, it experiences. It may seem that the boat is merely a vessel for the man, much as dualism states that the body is a vessel for the mind. However, for Dogen this is not the case. As noted Dogen scholar Joan Stambaugh argues in her work *Impermanence is Buddha-nature*, the man does not exist apart from the boat. Body and mind are one—the mind makes the body more than just an object and the body makes the mind more than just a subject. One is necessary to create the other, thus they are both object and subject, passive and active.

As shown earlier, the body is a thing that can perceive itself as a being by means of its senses. Dogen goes further than Merleau-Ponty with his argument to “Cast off body and mind.” It was upon hearing this phrase from a Ch’an master in China (Zen is the pronunciation of the Chinese Ch’an) that Dogen is said to have achieved enlightenment. Upon an initial reading of the statement “Cast off body and mind,” one might suppose that Dogen is going against Merleau-Ponty and that we should reject the body; this is a classic misunderstanding of Dogen. What he means by this is that we should not become attached to either body or mind for to do so would be to ignore the

core of Buddhist teachings—that attachment to anything is dukkha. In fact, the Third Noble Truth states that in order to end dukkha (Pali: “dis-ease,” “suffering”) one must end all attachment, any greedily/fearfully grasping onto worldly things. Dogen maintains that the body is the manifestation of Buddha-nature, which he defines as beings and being itself.

“Dogen writes, ‘The Buddha-body is the manifesting body, and there is always a body manifesting Buddha-nature.’ This revealing is at the same time a concealing, because Buddha-nature eludes the grasp of knowledge. By the power of the Buddha-nature to subsume and transcend existence and nonexistence, the manifesting of Buddha-nature by the body negates the body and transcends it. Thus, to grasp the essence of the body truly is intuitively to grasp emptiness, the dynamic and creative aspect of Buddha-nature.”<sup>12</sup>

What is expressed here is the idea that the body, as the force that perceives the world it exists in and interacts with, perceives not only the world, but Buddha-nature itself. It can accomplish this because the body is Buddha-nature; that is, it is a being (the body as object) and being itself (the body as subject). It bridges and eliminates the gap found in mind-body dualism, because it is both object and subject at the same time, both transcendent and immanent at once. For Dogen, this realization occurs in zazen, the motionless sitting meditation that Buddhist monks worldwide are renowned for. For Dogen, the practice of zazen is paramount—it follows thusly that the body is Buddha-nature, that zazen is the practice of enlightenment, and that if the body is Buddha-nature, then zazen is Buddha-nature. This also leads us to the conclusion that since zazen is practiced enlightenment,

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, please see Jeeloo Liu’s *Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism*, Blackwell Publishing 2006.

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<sup>12</sup> Olson, 112.

zazen is also the way to cast off body and mind. By overcoming our attachment to the dualistic idea of mind-body separation (and our individual attachments to each), we come to realize that zazen is Buddha-nature and thus devoid of ego. All, as the Buddhist would say, is emptiness.<sup>13</sup>

## RECONCILIATION

As we have seen, both Dogen and Merleau-Ponty place great importance on the body as a necessary part of experience. However, we also see that there are some tensions between the two; the most apparent being that Merleau-Ponty does not support spiritual claims and what else could Dogen be giving us if not a spiritual claim? While it is simple enough to say that they shall agree to disagree on these points, it is perhaps more enjoyable to exercise one's intellect and try to find some reconciliation between the two. Will this reconciliation be perfect and complete? Most likely not—such is the nature of disagreements that compromises are often lacking of something unique and original between the two ideas that disagree in the first place. However, I shall attempt to make as complete a reconciliation as possible, for it would be a shame to the understanding of the philosophy of both if one were to come so far only to have to feel and think that adherence to both is simply impossible because it is not as my reconciliation shall show.

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<sup>13</sup>Emptiness is the closest English translation to the Sanskrit "*sunyata*," the idea that one is not-self, or empty of attachment and thus emptiness is the Perfection of Wisdom and vice-versa (re *The Heart Sutra*). For further information, please see Edward Conze's *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, on 130-131.

Many would argue that phenomenology is not concerned with spiritual matters, while a religion like Buddhism is. In the simplistic definition of religion, they would be right. However, one of the key defining features of the twentieth century was the rejection of the idea that only religion (especially theistic-centered ones) gave us a meaningful reason for and of life. Merleau-Ponty himself, however, rejects both the idea that only religion can provide a meaningful life and that life is meaningful without any sense of spirituality. Instead, Merleau-Ponty offers us a substitution when he draws on the sublime while rejecting the claim that the world is imminent in the subject.

“...[T]here exists a unity of the imagination and the understanding and a unity of subjects before the object, and that, in experiencing the beautiful, for example, I am aware of a harmony between sensation and concept, between myself and others, which is itself without any concept...It is no longer merely the aesthetic judgment, but knowledge too which rests upon this art [imagination], an art which forms the basis of the unity of consciousness and of consciousnesses.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, there is something more than just merely existing that is important to Merleau-Ponty. In this harmony that Merleau-Ponty describes we see solidarity between persons and between the experience and the one who experiences. Merleau-Ponty, however, does not limit this sublime feeling to only experiences of art and nature—here he is arguing that the viewpoint of reduction brings about such solidarity. Throughout his works, he refers to phenomenology as being the means to view the world with wonder—experiencing the world phenomenologically

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<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 283.



allows the subject to conceive of the world via the transcendence of reduction.

What Merleau-Ponty essentially argues for is what we now call humanism, a non-theistic, anthropocentric claim that is often seen as a “replacement” religion. In a similar manner, Zen Buddhism is a non-theistic, philosophical religion that is often confused as merely a philosophy. Merleau-Ponty may not be a humanist himself nor even arguing for humanism, but one can see the arguments within his philosophy. He places a great emphasis on the human body, on the interplay of human consciousness with the body, and on the wonderment that phenomenology brings to humans.

In addition to this, Merleau-Ponty continually repeats that reduction never ends, that there is no thought which embraces all thought.<sup>15</sup> In a similar manner, Dogen argues that *zazen* doesn’t end when one is enlightened. Enlightenment is a practiced condition, just as Buddha-nature, time, and the body. Is the reduction therefore a form of enlightenment? Not necessarily, but the parallel thoughts of how we should experience the world (reduction for Merleau-Ponty, enlightenment for Dogen) are certainly similar—also, as a practitioner of Zen, Dogen would support whatever brought about the enlightenment of a person. Zen Buddhism is well known for its belief that whatever brings a person to enlightenment is worthy of being practiced—to that end, Zen masters will occasionally strike, shout at, or otherwise behave in an odd manner to disrupt a student’s common, unenlightened understanding of the world. Such behavior is to get the student to view the world

differently, in such a way that helps lead to enlightenment.<sup>16</sup>

Thus we see that ultimately, it doesn’t matter if Merleau-Ponty directly states the spiritual aspects of his works—it is evident in them already. The sublime ideal of Kant that Merleau-Ponty reworks to be the reaction to the phenomenological experience of reduction is that spiritual nature.

Ultimately, what is important is that both Merleau-Ponty and Dogen agree that the body is a fundamental and necessary part of experience. In recognizing the importance of the body, you recognize its limitations and the way in which to overcome those limitations. “To be in the world and to be at mercy of unseen biological forces of the body represents a human limitation. Although humans experience their incarnation as a limitation, this experience is already an overcoming of this limitation.”<sup>17</sup> This overcoming is achieved by Merleau-Ponty in the wonderment that the phenomenological experience brings (which is achieved by the body, the necessary component of perception) and for Dogen in realization that seated meditation (*zazen*) is Buddha-nature, which is the body, time, and ultimately, emptiness.

The importance of the connections between these two philosophers is not only the ideas they present to us, but that they essentially reached the same conclusion using different ideas to get there. It is the hope that these beginning connections may expand into greater ones, much in the same way that practiced seated meditation or continually experienced phenomena leads us to greater truths about our world, our bodies, and our very selves.

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<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 281.

<sup>16</sup> For more on Zen Buddhism and its beliefs, please see Alan Watts *The Way of Zen*, Vintage 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Olson, 117-118.

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