

# Martin Buber and Eastern Wisdom Teachings



# Martin Buber and Eastern Wisdom Teachings:

*The Recovery of the Spiritual  
Imagination*

By

Hune Margulies

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## INTRODUCTION

### IN SEARCH OF LOST BETWEENES

*My reading of Martin Buber takes me to this principal insight: God is not in heaven nor on earth. God is not above nor below. Not within and not without. Not in the soul or in the flesh. God is not an entity anywhere: God is the between of an I and a Thou.*

This book is an in-depth conversation between philosophies of dialogue, particularly as espoused by Martin Buber, and those found in wisdom traditions of the East, principally in Buddhism and its Zen school, with a more specific focus in the Zen Pure Land teachings. Writings from Sufism, Hasidism, Hinduism and other wisdom traditions are discussed as well, as they all draw their essential teachings from what I refer to as *primordial moments of deep poetic insight*. Primordial events occur when we enter into I-Thou relationships with one another and with nature. Dialogical philosophy elaborates on the principle of relationship, which in its various contexts and different modalities is discussed throughout the chapters of this book. This book elucidates how the principles of dialogical relationships apply within different aspects of the spiritual life.

The principle of relationship establishes that God is not the wholly-other, nor is God the wholly-same: God is the wholly-between. The realm of the Between is the existential alternative to the realm of the transcendence and the realm of the immanence.

This book offers a combination of strict philosophic arguments together with poetic discourses concerning the philosophy of dialogue. In regard to the question of God, this book offers an alternative to the prevailing doctrines of theisms and atheism: We affirm the insight that God is the between of I and Thou.

This is the principal insight we learn in the meeting place between Buber and eastern wisdom teachings: There is indeed a “special transmission” that comes to us through our I-Thou dialogue with the “ten thousand things.” We are in search of lost betweenes, forgetting that the recovery of relationship is as near to us as our will to say Thou to the neighbor and the grace of saying it again. In the inexplicable paradox that is

spiritual enlightenment, the holiest person finds his repose in his engagement with his neighbor, her security in her doubts, and his utmost peace in the turning of his cheek. For this is the koan of enlightenment: the more your bare hands wash the dust off the feet of the desert walker, the cleaner they are. The more you stand and shout for peace in the village square, the deeper your restful silence becomes. The more you feed the poor and house the homeless, the better fed and housed your own being will be. There is one inescapable existential reality: to be enlightened we must do the *deeds* of enlightenment. For unless we do peace and we do love and we do compassion, anything else we do is nothing other than the fantastic delusions of Mara. Enlightenment is not a state of inner-bliss. It might be that too, but it is nothing at all unless it is an activity of *dialogical deeds* we do. The deeds of enlightenment are the fundamental project of Pure Land, that is: it is the making of peace and it is the making of love and the making of compassion, or in other words, it is the making of the between of the I and the Thou. As we consider the common principles found in the teachings of Ch'an Master Sheng Yen's Humanistic Buddhism, subsumed in the goal of "uplifting the character of humanity and building a Pure Land on Earth," with those of the "Hebrew Humanism" at the basis of the Dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber, we come to realize the potential to engender a most fruitful understanding of the urgent need and the vital prospects of creating a society founded on the values of Buddhadharma and the dialogical prophetic tradition. It is indeed a difficult task to undertake, but in the words of Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav "The world is a very narrow bridge, therefore the most important thing is never to be afraid at all."

Buber refers to God as the Eternal Thou, that is to say, a being that cannot be met in any way other than as a Thou. In this sense, Buber does essentialize God as a being, but my view is that from a dialogical perspective, this essentializing is not necessary. I argue that God is not *in* the between of I and Thou but that God *is* the Between of I and Thou. The dialogue between I and Thou is the primordial relational event, therefore all the experiences we identify as "spiritual" derive their legitimacy, as well as their beauty, from the extent to which they approximate a true dialogical event.

These pages are not an academic study in the strict sense. My insights in this book are not a literal description of Buber's philosophy, for Buber would never have approved of taking his words in any way other than in dialogue. Buber wrote in-dialogue with the reader, and I read Buber in the poetic philosophy of his words.

Martin Buber was one of the seminal philosophers of religion of the twentieth century. Buber's impact on western religiosity has been

recognized as foundational, not only in regard to the study of the universality of Judaism, but especially, and very importantly, Buber's books, in particular his masterpiece "I and Thou" first published in 1923, is studied as a most consequential teaching within the core canon of both Catholic and Protestant Christian theologies.

From a Dialogical perspective, we make the fundamental conceptual distinction between *dialogue* and *interactions*. We call dialogue those relationships based on I-Thou encounters with one another, and we call interactions any other transaction that is based on I-It. Only dialogue is a relationship. We hold a dialogue with our own selves, with our neighbors and with the world, and the dialogue extends to the wider society's ways of relationship with one another and with nature. Since Dialogue has both an individual and a social dimension, we do not begin our healing and our redemption from the-within of our own selves, nor do we begin from the-

outside of us: we begin in the-between of You and Me. Therefore we cannot taught to feel compassion for it is compassion that will teach us. We cannot be taught to love, we must let love teach us.

The essence of Martin Buber's philosophy could be subsumed in these terms: The presence of God in us is always enacted as the presence of God between us. It is not solely a matter of feeling or perceiving the presence, it is a matter of enacting the presence, for God, like love, like poetry, is a deed we do. The God-deed is actualized not in religious rituals or temples, but in the embrace of the neighbor. There is nothing we can predicate of God, certainly not existence, which itself is not a predicate, but we can still encounter God through the embrace of a being.

It is essential to understand that I-Thou dialogue is not a mystical experience or a religious event. I and Thou is a mode of relationship with one another and with nature as a whole, and in this sense, I and Thou is a social praxis. In other words, when we speak of the relationship of I and Thou, the reference is not made to a spiritual contemplation of the divinity, nor is it an immersion into a transcendent realm of spirituality. The between of I and Thou, borrowing from Zen's language, is the ordinary mind actualizing itself in the quotidian world of the human realm. God is No-thing, but there is nothing that isn't God in the between of an I and a Thou.

Primordial events of I-Thou meeting with one another and with nature are the moments of inception for the deep poetic insights that give birth to the immensity and profundity of our spiritual imaginations. The argument this book advances is that religious practitioners, and subsequently organized and institutionalized religion, have confused, and in some cases

distorted, the advent of primordial events of deep poetic insights with events of transcendental supra-natural revelation. What religions have understood as experiences originating in the realm of the transcendent, dialogical philosophy ascribes to primordial events of I-Thou relationships acting as the source of our deepest poetic awakenings. These poetic insights feed and fecundate our spiritual imaginations and constitute the living wisdom open to every person willing to meet another being in the between of I and Thou.

Martin Buber described three realms of dialogue: dialogue with humans, with nature and with “spiritual Beings,” whom I shall refer to in this book as “contents of the mind.” To each of these realms we can say either “Thou” or “It”. The I that says Thou is different from the I that says It, therefore the choice we make to either say Thou or to say It will determine the nature and character of our personal selves. These verses from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishads reflect this same principle: “As a person acts, so he becomes in life. Those who do good become good, and those who do harm become bad. Good deeds make one pure, and bad deeds make one impure. You are what your deep driving desire is. As your desire is, so is your will. As your will is, so is your deed. As your deed is, so is your destiny.” There is no fixed inherent human character, for all that we are and all we long to be emerges and grows from the relational choices we make.

The in-between of relationship is life’s inherent substance, and it pervades the fabric of all living existence. Nothing that exists can live except in the realm of relationship. Relationship is immanent to the nature of existence, and every field of human endeavor rises or falls to the extent to which it affirms or denies the I-Thou mode of relationship. Our faculty of imagination enables us to contemplate wonder, and our spiritual imagination can guide us to greet any being with the embrace of Thou. In the embrace of I-Thou we find the guide to the discovery of new opportunities to create, sustain and recreate anew blessed times of inner awakening. Our spiritual lives depend on our will to meet the neighbor and the world in the between of I and Thou, and it is from this realm of dialogue whence spiritual imagination, like living waters, flows out in unmitigated freedom. The suppression of spiritual imagination causes the sublimation of our deep poetic insights in the twin forms of religious beliefs and the quest to seek consolation in illusionary realms of transcendence. This sublimation of primordial experiences into religious practices impedes the ability to live our lives immersed in genuine spiritual creativity and ultimate grace.

The recovery of our spiritual imagination depends on our return to the primordial I-Thou meeting with one another and all Beings. Buber described our spiritual paths as bifurcating between our exercise of will and our yearning for grace. Life is will and grace. One way to understand the

dichotomy between will and grace is to realize that the I-Thou meeting with the world is our event of will, and the deep poetic insight that emerges from that moment of inception is our event of grace. It is from the will to say Thou and the grace of giving birth to deep poetic insights that our spiritual imaginations emerge, and it is our spiritual imagination that alone can guide us to the attainment of our full human awakening. We must guard this attainment and not confuse it with a religious event, for spiritual imagination is the form and the content of our existential yearnings. In other words, the essence of Dialogical Philosophy is the affirmation that in every genuine I-Thou dialogue with a being we create new moments of inception of deep poetic insights, and those poetic insights are the fragrant and colorful flowers in the garden of our spiritual imagination. But it is also the case that we may mischaracterize these experiences as events of revelation emanating from a supernal transcendent being. This error in understanding is not only an intellectual issue, but it stands at the source of our inability to attain true liberation.

All activities pertaining to the body, to the mind and to society operate within the realm of the in-between, therefore, the mode of relationship we adopt toward one another, be that I-Thou or I-It, constitutes the method by which we create the world in which we live. All life is dialogue: we create the Beings that creates all Beings. We create the reality that makes us real. We create God and God creates the universe and us. There is a similarity between Whitehead's concept of a God emergent as process, and the concept of a God emergent in the between of the I and the Thou. In both concepts God is not "there" but it emerges "here" through the relational process. Nature, as Whitehead argued following Spinoza's concept of *natura-naturans*, is a process of emergence, a permanent unfolding, and that process ought to be carried out by our mindful dialogical engagement with one another and with nature. However we define this reality that emerges as the between of an I and a Thou, as with quantum theory where reality is the result of a relational observation, this is the entity many spiritual traditions have identified and variously referred to as God, Buddha, or a divinity. We have however misdirected our poetic insight of the dialogical reality of God by creating and essentializing a being that not only is placed outside of nature, but is its exact opposite. The "here" of God signifies that God is of this moment and of this place, like a divine *dasein*. With this we are moving the idea of divinity into a foundation that is not theism, nor it is deism or atheism, but rather to existence as a process of relational emergence. All life originates in the unfolding of the between of an I and a Thou. Martin Buber paraphrasing the book of Genesis said: At the beginning it was the relationship, and all real life is meeting. The

dialogical truth of Being is that dialogue precedes existence and existence precedes essence.

The human mind is physically located within the human brain, but it does not originate in the-within of the human person nor it enters into the human person from the-without: The human mind originates from the-between of the relationship between human and human and with nature. Therefore, if our engagement with the world is sustained by I-It interactions, our minds will only create and perceive the world as an "It." If, in contrast, our engagement with the world is sustained by I-Thou relationships, our minds will create and perceive the world as a "Thou".

The issue of the nature of consciousness is essential for a proper comprehension of the concept of dialogical philosophy. We argue that relationship is the *modus operandi* at the basis of nature itself, a fact that quantum physics seems to corroborate. Quantum theory argues that nature is a series of relationships, and as long as the relationships persist, space-time will persist. In quantum there is an observer and there is an observed and it is the relationship between them that creates reality. To further inquire into the role of relationship in the emergence of consciousness we ask: what precedes what? The emotional contents we feel within us, or their physical manifestation in our bodies? That is, do physical tears precede emotional sadness? Or it is sadness that causes tears to flow? Does laughter precede joy, or we laugh as a result of joy? In other words: Do we feel sad inside because we cry, or joyous because we laugh, or the reverse is true? We physically cry because we feel sad inside, and laugh because we feel joyous? From a dialogical perspective, the emotions we feel inside and their physical manifestations in our bodies are not two separate events, one taking place within the mind and the other in the rest of the body. The emotions within and the manifestations in the body are one and the same phenomena. It seems clear that emotional contents experienced within ourselves and their physical manifestations in the body cannot be said to occur in isolation from the context of events we engage in with in the outside world. Our consciousness is generated in the relationship with the world, for the sources of our emotional contents and their physical manifestations are responses and reactions to inputs received from external events. If I laugh first, or cry first without regard to any external inputs, will joy or sadness emerge within me? In other words, what makes one cry? Or laugh? That which generates joy or sadness within me and the tears and the laughter in my body, is not one and the same with my body, even as it manifests itself within my body and in no other way. Even if we argue that we are able to detach from all external inputs and we no longer allow the world to influence our mental states, isolation is but another form of engagement with the outside world,

and what we derive from that particular engagement may generate in us the feelings of peace and contentment. Contents of the mind do not generate from within-themselves, but they are inner responses to external events we engage with in some form or another, therefore our emotions and our body responses occur within us, but their provenance is from our interaction with events outside of us. We can further ask: can a memory recall itself or is there an "I" that recalls it? If the latter is the case then the I is not one and the same with the memory. We know that memory and dreams are stored in the brain, they cannot exist without a brain to hold them, but they are not one and the same with the brain. When I ride on a horse, we both move and turn simultaneously, but I am not the horse, and the horse is not me. As we ride together we are inseparable as one, but we are not one and the same. We are two separate Beings, there is I and there is the other. This analysis is not an ontological discourse on the nature of Being, but a pointing at this truth: all life is a relationship between I and you, and all consciousness indicates the presence of a non-I with which the I enters into some manner of relationship. What confronts me as a presence I experience in my mind and in my physical body, but it is not one and the same with my mind and my physical body. We are not one, but neither are we detached from one another, it is all inter-being, and each being acts on other Beings in a myriad ways of dialogue. It is a dia-logos, in other words: our whole being is an existence of togetherness between us and other Beings that are distinct and separate from us, and the only time our existence is not in the between of us and the world is at the time of death.

The implications of a life characterized by a reciprocal influence between will and grace is that human Beings enjoy a measure of freedom to choose life and also to choose death, but at the same time this freedom is limited by myriad conditions emanating from existence itself. The call of will and grace is therefore to engage our freedoms with creativity and determination, while at the same time remaining joyfully expectant of beneficial outcomes. The poet philosopher Baruch Spinoza said that if we could ask an arrow flying in mid-air toward a target, it would probably reply that it is its own free will to move from point A to point B. In other words: the flying arrow is not aware of the causes for which its actions are an effect. Spinoza, therefore, argued that there is no free will, as our deeds and our emotions are determined by a chain of causes and effects outside of our own control. However, Spinoza argued that once we understand the laws of the processes of God-nature, this understanding will give us inner peace and free us from suffering. This is a similar argument found in the basic teachings of Taoism and later in Zen: The Wu-Wei, that is, the action of no action, teaches to allow nature to be our guide without attempting to

intervene in the normal and free course of natural events. That is the way of the Tao. Arthur Schopenhauer argued for a modified version of Spinoza's quasi-determinism. Schopenhauer said that we are free to choose what we will, but we are not free to will what we will. That is to say: there are few things in life open for us to freely choose, and they do not include the most essential facts that define the phenomena of life: we do not choose our births and our deaths, our bodies with all their rules, needs and limitations, our places of birth, our parents, our death, and the effects of time and the ecological context. All these facts have been predetermined by existence itself, but nonetheless we still must make moral choices within the framework of those limits and constraints. The poet-therapist Viktor Frankl said that between input and reaction, there is a small window that remains open, and from this almost imperceptible space, we are still able to make free choices, and it is that choice we make that confirms our human essence. This brings us to the dialogical understanding of the issue of the contradiction between free will and predestination: whether we are wholly free or partially predetermined, the existential truth is that nothing can prevent us from saying Thou to that freedom or to that predetermination. The saying of Thou is the essential deed of human life, and that is independent of any understanding as to the nature of Being. It is our Thou-response to our lives on earth, as-is, that we must seek to practice. We say Thou to life and we say Thou to death, we say Thou to our bodies with all their needs and limitations, and we say Thou to the effects of time and to the ecological context. Grace, therefore, is nothing other than our will to say Thou and our freedom to say it again. Grace is not a state of being that descends upon us from heavens, grace is a deed we do. The deeds of grace are our abundant and incessant will to say Thou to the neighbor and to all Beings.

The known quandary as to whether there can be free will in a universe where God has already predetermined the future and has foreknowledge of it can only be resolved existentially. In other words, we ought to live our lives in a mindful manner, conscious of the choices we make, even if those choices might not be fully ours.

This book speaks of a God, but its definition of God is not theistic, it is Dialogical in nature. I extend the fundamental Buberian perspective to argue that God is not only in the between of I and Thou, but that God is the between of I and Thou. Therefore I do not speak of a God that exists in the same sense, manner and meaning as the concept of existence that is applicable to the Beings and objects of the universe. Existence, as we are able to understand it, requires a material substance, and if this is the case, the God that Abraham, Jacob and Isaac encountered in the desert of their



wanderings cannot possess any of the anthropomorphic attributes predicated of it. We cannot speak *of* God, but we can speak *to* Her. That is to say: God is not a body nor a spirit, and therefore He cannot be, nor can He possess, what we understand by the concepts of eternity, infinity, omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence. Nor, of course, is God any of its opposites. If God exists as an entity unto itself, we do not know, nor can we possibly come to know the essence of divinity. But we do know of the ways we can meet Her presence: We meet God *as* the embrace of a being. We meet God in our I-Thou Dialogical relationships with one another and with nature. And this is so for God is the meeting itself. It follows then that if God does not possess a natural personhood, He does not act toward the world in a personalized manner, not in a providential nor in a punishing capacity. We relate to God in a personal manner, but we cannot make the reciprocal claim in regard to God. In contrast to Theistic theology, the dialogical perspective argues that we ought not view God as a participant in human history or in the processes of nature: that is the human task and responsibility.

As a general typology, we can identify three basic types of spiritual approaches: spiritual individualism, spiritual collectivism and spiritual dialogue. Individualist spirituality is centered on the “I” and the-within. Collectivist spirituality is centered on the “Us” and the institutions of religion. Dialogical spirituality, in contrast, is centered not on the within nor on the without, but on the realm of the between of an I and a Thou. Individualist spirituality seeks the personal attainment of the spiritual goal. The collectivist model of spirituality demands compliance and devotion to religious rules and theologies generated by an external revelatory source. I-Thou dialogue is an existential alternative to both individualistic and collectivist spirituality. In Dialogical spirituality the realm of the between is itself the realm of spiritual practice. Of course these lines of demarcation between types of spirituality are not sharp and impermeable.

And this is of the essence of Buberian dialogue: Since God is the relationship, it follows that the kind of community we create amongst us will either be the manifestation of the presence of God or it will act as an hindrance to Her presence. This is what Buber called the eclipse of God. In other words: the messianic age is now and here, at each moment, and in every place, for messianism, or nirvana, are not stages of history in the future, or ones we have lost in the past. Every deed of embrace of the neighbor is the unfolding of the days of the messiah and the entering into the Buddha’s pure land. That is to say: each one of us is the one and true messiah, and each one of us is the rebellious and beloved prophet. Salvation

is possible, but as the Buddha said, salvation is entirely in our own hands, not in the mercy of heavens or in the practicing of religious rituals.

It is essential to note that Buber was not a religious person in the conventional sense of the term “religious”. Much as in Zen, Buber saw scriptures and rituals not as paths to a spiritual life, or as conduits for the revelation of the divine, but conversely, Buber regarded the institutions of religion as hindrances to the possibility of a personal I-Thou relationship with the “Eternal Thou.” The essential issue is not having a personal relationship with God, but the mode of the relationship we enter into. Religion functions in the mode of I-It interactions, while dialogue is the mode of I-Thou relationships, and since God is eternally a Thou, a genuine relationship with God must be conducted as the embrace of a being. Similarly to Buber, also Liberation Theologians focus their religious commitments in the I-Thou praxis of creating and sustaining communities where justice prevails, poverty is eradicated and peace is both a way of feeling and a way of living. Buber’s idea that the practice of I-Thou is our *essential* deed is what these thinkers know as the sacrament of the neighbor, or the sacrament of the people. A seventeenth century rabbi, Shmuel Laniado, described in exegetical terms an earlier version of the concept and practice of the sacrament of the neighbor: “The Torah says: ‘And you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am God.’ Two things are explained here. In the first place, that souls are all ‘part’ of God (as to their origin), and since the soul of a man and the soul of his neighbor both arise from the same Celestial Throne, therefore ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ literally means that he is like you. Since I, God, am the one who created your soul and the soul of your neighbor, he is like you (as it is said: ‘blood brothers’ from the spiritual point of view human Beings are ‘soul brothers’). And secondly, “I am God,” if your love for your neighbor is similar to the love you have for yourself, your love for your neighbor will then be considered as a reflection of your love for Me. As if I, God, had received it.” I argue that one of Martin Buber’s most important contributions to spiritual thinking is a version of Liberation Theology. This is so not only on account of Buber’s commitment to the intrinsic connection between spirituality and the pursuit of peace and justice, but mainly in this sense: Buber liberated God from theology. That is to say: For Buber the presence of God in our lives is not sustained by recourse to theological creeds or philosophical proofs, for God is the enlightened dialogical relationship between one another and with nature. Therefore, there is no presence of God outside of the free, just and peaceful community. The Hebrew prophet’s message was centered on this proposition in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Since God is the between of I and Thou, there is no religious practice that can substitute or sublimate the deed of embrace of the neighbor. In other words: we can say that the essential thinking in Martin Buber's philosophy is that the presence of God within-us is always enacted as the presence of God between-us. God, like love, is a deed we do. The God-deed requires no temples or theologies, it only requires our engagement in the practices of what liberation theologians have called "the sacraments of the neighbor." To properly comprehend the concept of God-deeds it is essential to understand that in Buber's terms, *experience* does not indicate only the occurrence of an inner perception or a phenomenon of the within, as the case is in mystical spiritualities. I-Thou is not an inner experience, it is a deed we do. In other words, for Buber the experience of God is actualized as deeds we do in the In-Between of the relationship between person to person and between persons and all Beings. Consider Master Dogen's statement: "The actualization of the Buddha-dharma, the vital path of its correct transmission, is like this: If you say that you do not need to fan yourself because the nature of wind is permanent and you can have wind without fanning, you will understand neither permanence nor the nature of wind." That is to say: irrespective of the fact that God, or Buddha is everywhere and everything, we will never actualize their presence in our lives unless and until we do the deeds of God or Buddha. It is true that air is everywhere, but we still must do the deed of breathing right here and right now. In Hebrew the word "ruah" translates as *spirit* as well as air or wind, therefore when we breathe air we inhale and exhale spirit, and even though the spirit is everywhere, we must still do the deeds the spirit requires in order to remain alive. The dialogical insight is that air, or the spirit, is always between us: it can never remain locked within us or stay external to us, and for this reason, the simple deed of breathing, which is living in and with the spirit, can only be enacted between-us, never only within us nor only without us. This breath is the spirit and it can only exist between us, for if we stop breathing in or we keep it inside the lungs without releasing it, we will cease to be alive. Breath, which is the primordial element in Buddhist and Hindu practice, is a dialogical affirmation of the true nature of existence. The between of I and Thou is the breath that enters God's nostrils and gives him life. But here's the fundamental insight: God is indeed everywhere, like air and spirit, but God's presence depends on our deeds of relationship with one another. God is not like the blood that runs within the body, but like the air that is always with us by being between us. Like the air that is everywhere, but we must wave the fan both toward and away from us, the question for God is not whether to be or not to be, but whether to be present or to be absent.

The teaching is that spiritual or poetic contemplation must become a deed we do if it is to attain that which we are yearning for.

The in-between of I and Thou is a deed we do. Consider love making: To make love we need the I and the You. The I that gives love can only receive love by giving to the You. For in love making, who is the one receiving and who is the one giving? I and You can only receive love in the deed of giving love, and I and You can only give love in the deed of receiving love. In love making the act of giving is the act of receiving, and the act of receiving is the act of giving: it is one and the same.

Our experiences of God are our deeds of Thou. There can be no intellectual attainment of God, nor can it be a spiritual experience of His presence, for there is nothing we can predicate of God, certainly not existence, which, as Kant explained, is itself not a predicate. But, as Buber says, however we choose to define God, we can still meet Him in the embrace of a being. God is no-thing, but there is nothing that isn't God in the between of an I and a Thou. Kierkegaard can be regarded as a philosopher of dialogue in the sense that he places the center of the religious experience in the I-Thou dialogue between man and God. But Kierkegaard's dialogue is only between man and God, not between man and man. For Kierkegaard, the religious person lives a solitary life, and as such, it can only be lived in silence. For Kierkegaard it is not possible to share with other people a personal dialogical experience. Martin Buber parted from this approach and conceived the dialogue with God not as a personal inner experience, but as a deed that is actualized between man and man. Dialogue with God is not separate and apart from dialogue with all other Beings, but it is precisely that, and nothing other than that.

Spinoza said that God and nature are one and the same. Consider this: When I sit under my mango tree, I'm sitting with God. If God I am searching, where else should I want to sit? No ritual or puja or prayers are necessary to render the invisible visible. And I do know this: if a neighbor is in need, there too is where God is, for if I forget the mango tree, and if I forget the neighbor in need, where else will I find the presence of Her who is the mango tree and the neighbor in need? God is everywhere in the between of I and Thou.

The confluence of Buber and Zen creates a "Dialogical-Ecology" as from Buber's and Zen's perspective the I-Thou relationship, or the Buddhadharma, apply to all realms of existence: to the personal, to the social and to the natural. If any one realm of existence is ignored none can be fulfilled. Therefore I-Thou dialogue is an ecological project, that is to say, a comprehensive project of social and personal relationships with one another and with all Beings. This ecological approach reverts back to the

primacy of the human deed: philosophy we can learn, but dialogue we must do and poetry we must be. Consider this allegory: at the time of birth, we do not need lenses to read beautiful poems, but as we grew older, they often become necessary. We understand that sometimes those lenses take the form of beliefs, ideologies, religions, or just cultural commonplaces. But now we desire to read the beautiful poems without the mediation of either old or new glasses. But we must also understand that this non-mediating method is also a belief, and it is also an ideology and a cultural commonplace. And yet, we learn from the poets that this is also true: the touch of your beloved teaches you everything you need to know. And in reality there is nothing you really need to know for all is known in the between of I and Thou. Nonetheless we still ought to touch, and even more so, we should learn how to receive the touch. We will never learn life unless we breathe and we touch, for love, like God, is a deed we do. And God is a neighbor we embrace. To embrace is to say Thou to all that exists, it is to do the deeds of love and compassion. As Buber said: all real life is meeting. It is that simple. It is that complex.

From this we learn that since I-Thou dialogue is both a personal and a social practice it is not possible for us to enter into Dialogical relationships in a society that demands of us to spend most of our living time engaged in transactional interactions. When we interact with the neighbor as I-It, we must develop a social system that both enables and sustains I-It interactions. Conversely, when we relate to the neighbor as I-Thou, we must create an alternative social system that will both enable and sustain I-Thou relationships. Therefore, our personal healing and redemption depends on the healing of society, and the reverse is true too, for the healing of society depends on our personal healing. To attain the liberation of the self we must attain the liberation of society, and to attain the liberation of society we must attain the liberation of the self. Both liberations are one and the same, and neither method of liberation precedes or follows the other. In his "Shobogenzo" Dogen wrote: "Arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is making a vow to bring all sentient Beings to the shore of enlightenment before you bring yourself, and actualizing the vow. Even a humble person who arouses this aspiration is already a guiding teacher of all sentient Beings." It is common to hear the argument that one must love, or awaken, or be at peace with oneself first "before" one can help other Beings attain their own peace. Dogen and Buber disagreed: the path to the within is the relationship, and in this sense, Dogen's Zen was essentially dialogical and his teaching was clear: we attain liberation by actualizing our responsibility for other Beings.

Oftentimes we make the error of focusing on the self as if it were an entity unto it-self. We believe that the self can stand alone and apart from

the demands and conditionings of society as a whole. Furthermore, and this is at the foundation of all wrong understandings, we believe that the self can stand disengaged from the responsibilities toward our neighbors and all Beings. But self and community are engaged in a dialogue that is primordial, and as such, they cannot be separated one from the other. We must therefore understand that the liberation of the self is an existential project of the liberated-between. The liberated-between is our way of Dialogical relationships in society, therefore, genuine healing and redemption cannot occur neither within nor without, but only in the between of I and Thou.

Consider the case of Moses the prophet as it clearly illustrates the concept of a Dialogical Ecology: Moses knew that slave individuals, as long as they are slaves, cannot attain inner liberation. Only a dualistic conception can divide the inner from the outer and suggests opportunities for one without regard to the other. Genuine inner liberation can only be attained within the context of a free community founded on social, economic and political freedoms. Therefore, rather than teach Torah inside the camps of his enslaved people, Moses spent his time and heart fighting their enslaver to let his people go. In a sense Moses' fight against the oppressor is itself the entirety of the teaching. Moses did not bring the revelation of God to the people while still slaves in the land of constrictions, for he knew that revelation and the human freedom it endows, is not of the within, nor it is of the without, the revelation is of the between. And it is for this reason that Moses took his people out of the physical land of constrictions and into a physical land of promise. Egypt was not a land of spiritual constrictions only, neither the promised land was going to be a land of spiritual freedoms only, both Egypt and Canaan were physical lands in a map made of other physical lands. For Moses, social freedom is essential for inner freedom, and for freedom to ring across the land Moses needed a land of promise in which to enact the liberation of the people. There is no liberation that is not enacted as a community of neighbors. When settled in the land of promise, the people will create a society of social justice and peace, thereby becoming ready and able to be truly healed. In other words: to receive a Torah a people must be free, for freedom is of the essence for the practice of any possible Torah. There is much liberation in many teachings and in many poetries, but none can be lived if the people are not free in body as well as in mind, and that which is not alive is dead.

But we must know that there is more to liberation than being free in the body and the mind. Moses did not think that the people he took out to freedom were yet truly ready to be liberated, therefore he kept the generation of freed slaves in the desert for forty years, never to enter the land of

promise. And neither did Moses himself, the messiah of the slaves, enter the land. Consider this: the generation of freed-slaves was the one that had witnessed astonishing events of God's might, such as their escape from slavery, their deliverance from pursuing armies, and their prophet bringing to them the Torah of God in his own hands from the heights of Mount Sinai. And yet, Moses knew that the people were still lacking, for the people saw and heard great miracles and powerful signs, but they still did not know how to truly see and hear their neighbors.

God must be enacted as ways of relationships in the community, and our inability to practice this truth is the source of the dukkha of all existence. Pope Francis said it well: "Faith grows through the encounter with a person." Encounter requires not only a personal disposition toward the-other, it requires a holistic societal change, and for that reason Pope Francis added the exhortation: "To work for the culture of encounter, in a simple way, as Jesus did." It is a social and cultural change we need to attain. For we must know what Moses knew: a Torah will never be within if it's not in-between. A true Torah, like love, like God, is a deed we do. Moses knew that a people that receives the Torah but does not make it a deed of in-between will never enter a land of promise, and he was right, they never did. And he was one of them too. And they are us: for to this day we are all still waiting in the vast wilderness.

Since the days of old we were given the poetries of thinkers like Martin Buber and many other poets, philosophers and thinkers of whom I write in this book. And yet, we are still not truly free to hear their words. I met their words as a child in the between of pages that smelled the wondrous fragrances of softcover books. Now I went out to meet them again, and I ask that you do too. Your life does not depend on reading true words, but true words depend on you reading them, for truth always lives on the sacred deeds of meeting.

From Buber I've learned to be a person of faith, but not a believer. If one believes despite the absence of facts, that is not faith, that is a delusion. In the face of facts one does not need to believe, only accept. I cannot believe, but I have chosen to have faith because I am in search of lost-betweens. That is to say: I long to immerse myself within poetries of encounter and events of will and grace. For it is not the pains and the heartbreaks, it is the absence of presence that we dread. And for that reason, in the face of no-beliefs I asserted for myself a vastly koanic set of faith-contents: For instance, I have faith in a God I create every day, and who every day creates my life and also my death. It is all will and grace, for God exists in the will to say Thou to a being and in the grace of saying it again. We must awake to the truth that sacredness is nothing other than the will to

say Thou to a being, and the grace to let dialogue be our sacrament. God is everywhere and every time in the-between of I and Thou.

If there was a way to define the unique character of being human we could say that what distinguishes humans from their animal counterparts is our sense of the ethical. We are homo-fabers, and homo-sapientes, but our essence is to be *homo-ethicus-dialogus*. We are the species that distinguishes itself by its ability to make ethical choices and to enter into intentional, mindful I-Thou relationships with one another and nature. This book is both a scholarly as well as a poetic reading of dialogical philosophy. In these pages the reader will find thoughts and notes of my dialogue with the texts of the writings of Martin Buber and other sources hailing from the wisdoms of the East. My dialogue, with its agreements and disagreements, if it remains a true dialogue, it is a faithful Buberian text.

This book is dedicated to Yankl and Livshe, my late beloved parents and teachers. To my three children, Amos, Hadas and Isaiah, may they live a long and sweet life. To my brother and teacher Dr. Meir Margalit. And I dedicate this book to Sharanrani Hemady, my refuge and my love.



# THE RECOVERY OF THE SPIRITUAL IMAGINATION: MARTIN BUBER’S DIALOGICAL COMMUNITY AND THE BUDDHA’S PURE LAND IN THE HUMAN REALM

*“The meaning of the Pure Land in the Human Realm indicates that the present world in which we actually live is the Pure Land” Ch’an Master Sheng Yen*

*“Religion without Socialism is a spirit without a body, and Socialism without religion is a body without a spirit. Socialism without religion does not hear the divine address, while religion without socialism hears the call but does not respond” Martin Buber*

## Preface

This chapter discusses in depth the intrinsic interconnection between the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber and Buddhist teachings concerning the Pure Land of the Buddha in the Human Realm. Some emphasis will be placed on the teachings of Taiwanese Ch’an Master Sheng Yeng (1931-2009). I argue that the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber is a creative confluence between aspects of Judaic and western spiritual Humanism and some forms of Humanistic Zen Buddhism, especially the Pure Land doctrine as espoused by Sheng Yen. Sheng Yeng’s doctrines and the Dialogical-Humanist-Socialism of Martin Buber share similar principles and, most importantly, similar existential manifestations.

The dialogical relationship of I-Thou is the primordial spiritual event. All other practices, such as rituals and sacraments of religion, represent sublimations and attempted reenactments of primordial spiritual events. As we move away from the moments of inception of spiritual events we forget the initial deeds of dialogue that plenished our spiritual imaginations, and that which remains in us as intuitions of the primordial dialogue, we proceed to sublimate with layers of theologies and their designated sacraments. In other words, the human choice to enter into

dialogical relationships with one another and with nature does not derive from antecedent religious beliefs or philosophical syllogisms, it is prior to religious beliefs and independent of all philosophical insights. From the perspective of dialogical philosophy, all spiritual practices derive their genuineness from the extent to which they engage in deeds of dialogue. Dialogue precedes not only religion and philosophy, but existence itself, as Martin Buber said: "At the beginning it was the encounter".

The relationship of I and Thou is the moment of inception for deep poetic insights, events often confused with spiritual experiences of transcendent revelations. These poetic insights plenish our minds and hearts with the highest openings for the flourishing of our creative spiritual imagination. Dogen offered a clear description of the emergence of the spiritual imagination. Master Dogen said: "Handle even a single leaf of green in such a way that it manifests the body of the Buddha. This in turn allows the Buddha to manifest through the leaf." In other words, we actualize our awakening through an enlightened I-Thou relationship with the "ten thousand things." Compare the similarity of this statement with the Hebrew prayer that says: "The God that is holy, is hallowed by compassion." The idea in both statements is similar: The body of the Buddha and the holiness of God are inherent to God and to everything that exists, but it is our task to make it manifest in our lives. If holiness and awakening are not actualized by our deeds they are neither holiness nor awakening, they are a delusion. Dogen's insight is that our relationship with all Beings is the manifestation of the Buddha. This is similar to what the Kotzker Rebbe said: "God is there where we let him in." How do we let God in? By handling every being in such a way that it manifests the body of God, and this in turn allows God to manifest through the other. The sacrament of God and the Buddha is to say Thou to the world. That is to say, we come to the presence of God in the relationship with the neighbor. Irrespective of how each of these poets has chosen to name the essence of being, be that Buddha or God, the poet Dogen and the poet who wrote the ancient Hebrew prayer, and also the Kotzker, agree on the essential dialogical nature of the liberated life.

Spiritual imagination is born from deep poetic insights, which in turn, elevate our spiritual imagination to higher levels of creativity. Dogen's spiritual imagination led him to confirm the essence of all his deep poetic insights when he said: "The color of the mountains is Buddha's body; the sound of running water is his great speech." When celebrated as a Thou, the world itself, and all its Beings, become both the form and the teaching. No temples necessary, no rituals performed, only presence with nature is the offering of the sacrament. Dogen said that the "insentients" teach the dharma incessantly and abundantly. We dialogue with the world and its

Beings and then we learn dharma in ways no teacher or text can approximate. We recognize the Buddha or the God in everything and always when we understand that for the world to be dharma, or for the world to be the kingdom of God, we must handle the world in the ways of dharma, that is, in the ways of I-Thou. Both Spinoza and Dogen said that God and nature are one and the same, therefore our human attainment, our awakening itself, is to relate to all Beings the same way we relate to God or the Buddha. Buber said that all real life is meeting, and we can add that all real meeting is God and is dharma. Is there God or dharma without meeting? God and dharma are deeds we do, therefore all real dharma and all real God is dialogue. The beauty of being is enacted in the relationship, for we go toward the within by going toward the between.

### **Martin Buber's Primordial Religiosity**

1. The fundamental dialogical principle is that God is not in heaven nor on earth, God is not above nor below, not within and not without, not in the soul or in the flesh, God is not an entity anywhere: God is the between of an I and a Thou. From this we learn that I-Thou dialogue is the primordial spiritual practice. The enlightened social praxis is the realm of the spiritual, as there can be no spiritual life except within the life of the enlightened community. Dialogue is here understood as the I-Thou relationship we enter into with all three realms of existence: the human, the natural and the spiritual. Buber's was a social spirituality in which existence precedes essence, and the primordially of dialogue precedes existence. Levinas said that ethics is first philosophy, and that is correct, but from a dialogical perspective we modify this insight by saying that dialogue is first philosophy, for all insights into the essence of humanity derive from the deed of encounter. We do not conceive an antecedent understanding of human nature from which we subsequently conclude that relationships are fundamental, but the reverse is true: every fundamental conclusion we arrive at pertaining to human nature is derived from the primordial fact of human relationship. For Buber there is no "direct" meeting with God that bypasses the meeting with the other, for the I-Thou meeting itself is the presence of God. There is the meeting with all Beings, and in that meeting of an I and a Thou, God is made manifest as the in-between. It is in this sense that we say that the social is the spiritual and there is no spirituality apart from the social.

2. The second dialogical principle is the understanding that this spirituality-as-dialogue is a practice that stands outside and beside the theologies and sacraments of organized conventional religion. Buber distinguished between religion as an institution and religiosity as the natural human engagement with the realm of the spiritual. The spiritual precedes religion and remains unencumbered by it. Genuine spiritual practice is the dialogical I-Thou encounter with all Beings, and that relational event bypasses all systems of religion as it is an immediate existential response to the encounter with a God who is found in the embrace of a being. I-Thou dialogue orients the practitioners directly to the sources of the ever renewing, ever emanating moments of inception of deep poetic insights, which in turn become the form and the content of our spiritual imaginations. Dialogue is an existential deed, and there is complete identity between the deed and its content. There is no attainment that stands outside or transcends the deed of dialogue, and in this sense dialogue can be likened to love making: in love making there is no distinction between the act of giving and the act of receiving, and there is no difference between the act itself and the attainment of its content. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: "This is the miracle that happens every time to those who really love: the more they give, the more they possess of that precious nourishing love from which flowers and children have their strength, and which could help all human Beings if they would take it without doubting." In other words: the more I say Thou to a being, the more "I" am, and even though the word "more" denotes quantity and one cannot be more I than one is, the statement is correct in its essential insight.
3. The third Dialogical principle of Buber's religiosity is the understanding that the manifestation of dialogue in "real life" requires a fundamentally comprehensive rearrangement of the structures and institutions of human society. Dialogue, in essence, is a social project, and as such, it aims to reconstruct society in the manner of a free network of communities of dialogue. The dialogical transformation of society calls for the replacement of the system of I-It interactions between people and with nature, with a system of I-Thou relationships between people and with nature.

Within the context of the Judaic tradition, the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber represents a non-institutional and non-theological spiritual program based on the understanding that the spiritual realm is not a

transcendent reality opposed to the realm of the immanent, or hidden from our grasp by the pernicious influence of the physical realm. The spiritual realm is nothing other than the life of dialogue between an I and a Thou. In the context of dialogical philosophy what is referred to as the realm of the spirit, it should be understood as our awakening to the primordial realm of the poetic. What is regarded as mystical experiences is but a misunderstood primordial poetic insight, and as poetry evidences, the images, words and sounds of religious practices are similar across cultures and ages.

## **Between Buber and Zen**

Dialogical philosophy begins where Zen normally leaves-off, namely, it suggests ways to implement in society relational practices consistent with an awakened mind. Pure-Land Zen, as we will discuss in a different section, is, by definition, a socially engaged practice, thereby being more explicitly connected to dialogical philosophy than other schools of Zen. Nonetheless, primordial dialogical practices are part of Zen practice across its various schools and methods. Zen works toward the attainment of an enlightened mind, but, since we argue that enlightenment is a social practice, how does it become actualized in the life of society? The argument presented here is that an awakened mind can only be actualized in the realm of dialogical relationships. Conversely, Zen offers dialogical philosophy meditation and mindfulness practices geared toward the facilitation of the awakening of a dialogical consciousness. In this context the question as to whether consciousness precedes social practice or social practice is the source of consciousness is of lesser importance, for ultimately, from the perspective of dialogical philosophy, consciousness and social practice must be integrated as one and the same existential reality.

In both Buber and Zen, the teachings of each are already embedded within the other, but in a form that requires an effective and concrete path for the integration of personal enlightenment with the transformation of society. The building of a dharmic society is not an incidental addendum to the Zen practice, it is an integral part of the enlightened life, and in that sense, it is a shared goal with the Buberian task of building a dialogical society. Each system emphasizes its own practices: in Buber it is the practice of I-Thou dialogue and the reduction of the scope of I-It interactions between people and with nature, and in Zen it is the practice of Zazen leading to awakening, but within the context of the actualization of enlightenment in a dharmic society, the two systems reach a state of confluence in both concept and practice. It is a confluence in this sense: I-Thou dialogue could be understood as a practice of social-meditation, and

Zazen, inasmuch as it teaches non-attachment and the limitation of greediness, can be understood as a practice leading to the reduction of the scope of I-It relationship with one another and with the ten thousand things. In other words, we can argue that the saying of Thou to all Beings and the practices of meditative mindfulness are one and the same existential deed.

There are several different types and modes of meditation: I-Thou is social meditation. As such, the pursuit of the life of dialogue is not a mystical engagement with a realm of transcendence, nor is it only an inner spiritual experience, but the life of dialogue is the communal task of reducing the scope of “It” in the world so as to be able to enact and sustain the realm of the Thou. And this is the foundation for both a dharmic and a dialogical society. However large and seemingly intractable the scope of “It” or the realm of samsara that needs to be delineated and enclosed, that which remains outside their dominions are the vast open fields of the realms of the Thou and the dharmic society. From the perspectives of dialogical philosophy and Zen, the personal and the social are no longer divided into two separate realms. The non-dual existential realm, what Zen refers to as inter-being, denotes the essence of the Buberian concept of the-between. One becomes an I through a Thou, as the only realm of existence that is genuinely human is the between of I and Thou.

In the model of apophatic methodology, we can argue that saying Thou to the world means simply this: the refusal to say It. I-Thou is no I-It. In other words, I-Thou is a negation rather than an affirmation, for it indicates which behaviors are hindrances we ought to avoid without prescribing specific behaviors we should positively engage in. There are no Thou-deeds per-se, there are only the deeds of “non-It.” Similarly, there are no specific dharmic behaviors, there is only the avoidance and removal of hindrances in the path to enlightenment. Zazen helps clarify the difference between genuine practices and hindrances, and it only asks that we liberate the mind from the bondage to behaviors not compatible with the life of enlightenment. The opposite of “It” and the opposite of samsara is an infinite realm of living possibilities. Borrowing from the model of the Kabbalah’s concept of “tzimtzum,” or constriction, we attain a Thou-society simply by constricting, reducing and delimiting the scope, reach and influence of the realm of “It.” Therefore, the Thou-deed is nothing but the relentless, unending and difficult task of placing a clear circle of demarcation, an “eruv,” around the realm of It. The Thou deed is to constrict the vitality of the “It” so as to prevent it from over-encroaching into all aspects of our personal and social lives. In the same vein, the realm of dharma is to constrict, reduce and limit the scope of samsara from blocking our path to liberation with its myriad hindrances.