

Awakening through Literature and Film

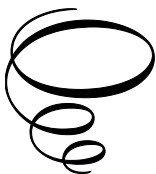
Awakening through Literature and Film:

Into the Dancing Light

By

Jae-seong Lee

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I sincerely hope that this interdisciplinary quest for the ultimate reality that brings together the studies of literature and film and the field of spirituality will help all who come to read this book.

Jae-seong Lee

FOREWORD

EMERITUS PROFESSOR CARL OLSON
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This book is an invitation for the reader to take a magic carpet ride on a transcendent journey. The carpet is constructed by the individual employing meditation, and it invites the reader to join in the meditation. Its magical aspect is an experience of non-dual unity, a unique experience devoid of the ordinary ego. On the journey, the reader encounters philosophy from the East and West, religious ideas from Buddhism, Daoism, Zen, and Christianity, and critical theory associated with postmodern/poststructural thought. The lessons of the journey are also illustrated with examples from the arts like film and literature. This journey is a quest for the truth and occurs within the realm of emptiness, the non-dual unity of everything.

In chapters 2-4, the reader is instructed to meditate on the points raised in each chapter. Thus, this call to meditate forms the book's methodological foundation that is intended not merely to inform the reader but also to transform the reader into an awakened state. In addition to its meditational foundation, this book exposes itself as an interdisciplinary quest by using literature (novels, plays, and poems), spirituality, films, philosophy, and religion. This type of approach's overall intention is to lead the reader to an aesthetic sensibility that destroys the duality of the deluded ego. The book aims to enable the reader to experience ultimate reality or, metaphorically, the non-dual dancing light world.

In the initial chapter, the author attempts to create a dialogue between himself and his reader; he does so by raising questions about various disciplines leading to ultimate reality. After confessing his desire to reach a wider audience, the author links Buddhist meditation with literature and film. He implies that these forms of culture can lead a person to an awakening by creating an aesthetic sensibility and giving one a glimpse of ultimate reality. The author also makes a case in this first chapter for the usefulness and benefits of meditation within the world, an exercise that assaults the ego or false self. Moreover, he combines postmodern ethics with Mahayana Buddhism to demonstrate the true nature of the self and empirical ego. It is also possible to encounter the real self by reading

literature or watching a film, suggesting that the arts can lead one to awaken. The author illustrates his theory about the true nature of the self by using the Oscar-winning movies *Parasite* and *Joker*.

Chapter two raises problematic philosophical issues of thinking and reasoning within the context of western metaphysics. The reader learns that a person can stay in a meditative state while reading literature or watching a film. The reader should be prepared to comprehend that one is reading an interpretation of western material from the author's eastern perspective, a native of South Korea where he teaches, and Buddhism and Daoism shape that. After discussing reason and infinity, the author tells his reader that he wants to link intellectuality and spirituality before mentioning genuine happiness that he interprets as pure awareness, unlike the dualism of the self to be discovered in the Book of Genesis.

Chapter three marks a creative and provocative turn in the book because it considers selected examples of art to interpret them as *kongans* (*koans* in the Japanese language), which have their origin in the Zen (Seon in the Korean language) Buddhist tradition. *Kongans* represent enigmatic dialogues between a master and a disciple used in monastic settings as objects of meditation to concentrate the mind on a single thing and block out extraneous distractions. These *kongans* are designated as language meditation. Within each dialogue or saying, there is a keyword (*hwadus*). This meditation method is traced back to the historical Buddha, who held up a flower and remained silent as he sat before a confused and hushed assembly of people waiting to hear his teaching. However, one monk named Mahakasyapa smiled at the Buddha's gesture and wordless response. When the Buddha saw the monk's smile, he was convinced that the monk grasped the message that the truth cannot be conveyed in language. The author does not recommend this type of meditation for beginners.

A profusion of *kongans* appears in chapter four in the literary form of the following works: *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *Moby Dick the Whale* by Herman Melville, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. This procedure represents a radical way of approaching and comprehending these works and represents an eastern interpretation of these literary works. In the postmodern spirit, it is certainly a different way to interpret these texts. Jae-seong Lee draws a parallel between reading literature and watching films, and meditation. He also calls attention to ethics issues and discusses the good and evil aspects of Melville's novel. And he adds an emphasis on becoming that is symbolized by the migration of the whale. Ethical issues are also raised by Stevenson's work about anger, pride, hatred, and their relationship to ego. When we read *Hamlet* as a *kongan*, its keywords are "To be or not to be?"

Lee is convinced that these art types can lead one to ultimate reality by freeing a reader from their ego intensity. He ventures into a comparison with a Christian fundamentalist approach to scripture. What is his purpose in this instance? He wants to indicate the importance of abolishing the ego by meditating on these types of art. What inspires Jae-seong Lee's study and spiritual guidebook is the instructions of the Zen figure Hakuin, a seventeenth-century Japanese master and reformer, and his teaching that a disciple should turn everything that one does into a mode of meditation.

Jae-seong Lee returns to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde's narrative and adds a motion picture film to the book written by Oscar Wilde in 1890 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, two examples of Gothic fiction. The author thinks that these examples of Gothic literature give rise to an aesthetic experience of the sublime. Besides, these works can be conceived as *kongans* that help a reader escape dualism. Again, the similarity between meditation and reading a literary work is evident in this chapter. Being grounded in meditation, the author indicates how to use language to go beyond language. From a different perspective, it is viewing a film to surpass its art form. In summary, the way of art can become a spiritual path to awakening to the ego's duality and the non-dual reality of emptiness. This realization is the dawn of the light.

This book represents a ride on a magical carpet intended to culminate with a personal awakening. It is thus a spiritual work that transcends ordinary interpretation, which itself is an art. It helps us to witness how the path of art is also a philosophical and religious way. Its lessons are comprehensible enough for the average reader to grasp and from which to benefit spiritually. In short, this book is the magic carpet, and you, the reader, are invited to ride within emptiness. Have fun! And enjoy the ride!

INTRODUCTION

This book will guide the audience *spiritually* to advance through everyday affairs, particularly in the reading of *literary works and watching of films in a more desirable way than the simple thematic approach of the conventional style*. It will lead the reader to what happens while and after experiencing the aesthetic sublime feeling. Using mainly Buddhism and Western postmodern ethics (and also some examples from the Christian Bible), this book articulates that literature and film lead the audience through the aesthetic sublime sensibility by showing that the power of the sublime deconstructs the dual structure of the thinking ego and by presents many examples. The deconstruction brought by the power of the sublime much clearer as we see the sublime or *jouissance* from the perspective of postmodernism (not the thought of some misunderstanding people who call themselves postmodernists and proclaim that “anything goes”) than modernism. By reading this work, literary readers and film viewers will become better able to encounter the ultimate reality of their lives, or, the world of nondual dancing light.

This work will appeal primarily to *professors and graduate students* of literature, film, or Buddhism and Taoism, yet it is not limited to people with a high level of philosophical knowledge. It will also strongly engage spiritual teachers, meditation leaders, and lay practitioners. *Chapter 1* takes the form of *questions and long answers* with the purpose of attracting the spiritual people’s attention. It is not only when I work as a scholar and professor but also whenever I practice Buddhist meditation, alone or on retreat with others, that I strongly feel this kind of work makes philosophical literary criticism understandable for spiritual people. This is essentially because the academic field and the area of spirituality, religious or secular, share precisely the same purpose—to guide the reader to the ultimate reality, truth, or emptiness, in Buddhist terms. Unlike my previous book published in the United States, *Postmodern Ethics, Emptiness, and Literature: Encounters between East and West* (2015),¹ this project is aimed at reaching a much wider audience. As you go on reading, you will comprehend deep

¹ I was fortunate enough to win the Grand Prize at the 7th Wonhyo Academic Awards in 2016, the most prestigious academic award in South Korean Buddhism, for this book.

sources of the genuine happiness that you will want to experience with ease almost every day—through the works of literature and film. You will be guided to Truth that reveals itself just by reading books or watching movies.

As mentioned, Chapter 1 takes the form of questions and long answers in order to guide general readers to spiritual depths. All five chapters have footnotes that manifest the academically valid sources of my thoughts so as to support the validity of what I tell you. The source of spiritual teachings that mainly utilize poetry go with the work of finding an appropriate theme and an underlying sense of stillness and peace. My way of linking Buddhist meditation to literature and film is quite different from those that others have previously put forward.

I am convinced that it is now time for intellectual (philosophical, critical, academic) explanations and spiritual experiences to be brought to work together in the common areas of literature and film. The main issue of this book is that we enter the dimension of pure consciousness as we read literary works or watch movies in a meditative state. The topics addressed, scope, and approach of this book involve contemporary postmodern/poststructuralist theory, literary criticism in particular, and Mahāyāna—especially *kongan* and *hwadu* Ch’an/Seon/Zen—Buddhist thought, which will be explained in detail. However, the theoretical ground is only to help the twenty-first-century audience to deeply comprehend how literature and film offer us precious opportunities to experience the sublime aesthetic sensibility through which we glimpse the ultimate reality.

It is important for literary readers to experience someone’s life story by encountering *the non-duality of the ultimate reality in a way that transcends the dual nature of our five senses*. Toward the end of a given story, both concepts of good and evil are deconstructed (the dual construct is destroyed), and emptiness looms inside us. We experience the aesthetic sublime as the momentum of having a glimpse of perfect emptiness as fullness and infinity. The deconstructive and ethical reading of literature and watching of films, which is different from the commonplace thematic approach of the conventional style, will lead readers to the spiritual dimension of *non-duality* and does not require the audience to engage in a complicated thinking process. As I explain in this book, as we read the story as a vast *kongan* (an anecdote that leads Ch’an (Chinese), Seon (Korean), Zen (Japanese), and Thiền (Vietnamese) meditation practitioners beyond language and thought) in a meditative state of mind, we will go on powerfully to quest for the awakening to the ultimate reality of our life and the whole universe.

In Chapters 4 and 5 in particular, I ask readers to practice meditation after reading the literary works or watching the film adaptations that I take

as examples there, although I do not set out specific rules that readers are expected to follow. As explained in the book, great movies such as *Forrest Gump*, *Citizen Kane* (1941), and the 2020 Oscar-winning *Joker* and *Parasite*, as well as the literary works of *Hamlet*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* that I explain in the two chapters, lead us to the true self, which is the consciousness of the whole universe, or Buddha-nature as the perfect emptiness as fullness.

There have not been books that are as interdisciplinary as this project, not only in view of crossing the specialisms of the studies of literature and film but also in its openness toward general audiences. No doubt, in the United States alone, an uncountable number of books have been published on critical theory, as well as numerous books in each field of literary criticism, criticism of the arts, Asian studies, spirituality, and meditation. There have been a relatively small number of East-West comparative studies in the area of literary criticism. Spirituality and meditation have always been important issues for the general audience who are interested in Buddhism and Hinduism, yet these have not been serious issues in the academic world of literary studies.

It is a pity that spiritual leaders' teachings are not readily accepted by those scholars whose minds are so fond of their academically thematic approach and who are simply attached to the phenomena that are built by cognitive creativity and the language of the writer. Nor do popular spiritual teachers appreciate academic thinking, which does not directly transcend the level of using the mind in a logical way. Reasoning, although it works like a map or guide book that explains how we approach the ultimate reality, is limited to the work of the ego, which prevents the mind from experiencing the power of true freedom. Nevertheless, intellectual understanding can lead the audience to better comprehend and more deeply experience the ultimate spiritual reality.

This book advances the cutting edge of the contemporary issues of the Other and infinity by taking advantage of literary criticism, film criticism, Buddhism, and Taoism for meditation. A great merit of this book is that it reaches spirituality beyond academic circles. On the basis of this discussion of East-West comparative philosophy, it also guides you to experience what cannot be logically understood or felt with your five senses—the *infinity* of the Other or truly non-dual emptiness as fullness. All these expected audiences are those who would like to reach the foundation of true wisdom, for which other names are God, Buddha-nature, Tao, all-embracing love, and the true self. The title, *Into the Dancing Light*, means that literature and film lead us into the absolute truth, the light freely engendering (as if dancing) all phenomena, so that we may truly become one with that light.

The logical discussions of literature and film that we meet in our everyday life in the light of *non-duality* would truly help large numbers of people to overcome their sufferings. The deconstructive and ethical way of reading/watching that I demonstrate in this book would not be difficult for those who accept the teachings of renowned spiritual teachers such as Eckhart Tolle, Adyashanti, and Kenneth Wilber.

Therefore, from my experiences, intellectuality and spirituality are not to be recognized as clear-cut separate fields that push against each other. They can also reach out and help each other for the sake of human understanding of the ultimate reality. They can work not only for other people in their own fields but also for the public as they ease the tension of their minds, freeing themselves from their constraints. The ultimate reality, which is the universal and infinite self, is the common goal. Despite the fact that the non-dual truth lies beyond phenomena, it also produces all phenomena whose nature is only dualistic. Intellectuality and spirituality will contribute to each other in the way I demonstrate in this book.

It is well-known that countless people throughout the whole world, including a great number of Americans (as I emphasize), practice meditation—first to reduce the stress and anxiety they experience in everyday life, and, on a more serious level, to attain spiritual enlightenment from the dreamlike quality of life as a whole. It is clear to me that literature and film, with which we are in easy contact every day, can contribute to our lives by offering us the chance of experiencing the debacle of the hero's life.

More specifically, this book shows how a story of the destruction of the form of what is called “binary opposition” (in critical theory)—good and evil, right and wrong, presence and absence—leads us beyond language to enter the spiritual dimension of the Middle Path, or Transmiddle Path (the term I have coined in order to let readers better understand the Buddhist term ‘the Middle Path’). Just to mention two simple examples I take in this book, in *Hamlet*, not only does the wicked and immoral figure Claudius die, but so does Hamlet, the conscientious, reflective, and responsible hero. *Jekyll and Hyde* shows that the polar opposites are actually one. We start to experience the spiritual dimension of non-duality where the dual structure is destroyed and offered to us as the momentum of feelings of the sublime. This book explains the spiritual dimension of non-duality in great detail and beyond doubt.

Regarding spirituality, I will talk about my experiences. For years, I have been through different forms of strong and wonderful bliss, whether I was practicing meditation or not. There is no doubt I came back to pain when I was in the kinds of situation that did not please me. My ego took the form of too much pride in pleasurable situations. For some while, I was in

the middle of extreme mental suffering caused by some unexpected complicated events that were directly about my birth and life. Then all of a sudden, on three occasions, I very clearly felt the immense power that separates my infinite true self and my ego. Each time I immediately felt remarkable freedom from pain, including loneliness and depression. For about nine months or so, I was in excellent shape without feeling unhappiness and pain at all, yet then came back to loneliness again. However, I knew I was spiritually growing throughout all these experiences.

Then I finally had a true experience without any feeling or thought. It was not an “experience” in the usual sense. I never had a contact with the world that could be called “inside” or “outside” myself. The inside and the outside were just *one*. For a whole day, until I fell asleep that night, I knew much more than clearly that all beings and things were just *one* and that there was no room for a hierarchy of values. I was just calm and knew that there was absolutely no boundary between me and the objects. Yet it was indescribable; there is no way to explain or describe how the world was so or how I knew it so vividly. I also keenly knew that there is really one true time and that it is only now, the present moment. Everything was an image that appears in the space or on the screen of the true self, and it disappears as it appears. It is rather “appearing as disappearing,” as I call it in Chapter 3. Yet at the same time they were real; I was not in a vision or any fictive state of mind. Since that time of experiencing the epiphany of the ultimate reality, I have been attaining more and more wisdom to live my everyday life fully, there in the ultimate reality, as my true self. That both special and plain kind of experience came to be the firm ground of my everyday experiences. I now know that such a state (so as to transfer it into language, for it is not a “state”) of mind has always been the firm ground of my life since and prior to my birth, and also the foundation of the lives of all humans and all other existences.

Nevertheless, I would not cloud the issue of this book by talking more about my own spiritual experiences or those of others. I hope that this book, which involves the reader in literary works and films, is more practical and more interesting for the sake of the audience than works on the simple topics of the life of the Buddha or the right way to meditate. I would like to talk more about spirituality in itself in my next book. Thank you very much!

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CHAPTER ONE

WHY DO WE NEED THE MEDITATIVE MIND? PRESENT AGE SPIRITUALITY AND FILMS: *PARASITE*, *JOKER*, AND OTHERS

1.1. Why do we need a meditative mind?

Q: Well, the first point that comes into my mind is this. To live happily, would it not be enough to pursue happiness in the way we choose to deal with daily matters, whatever occasion arises? Why must we be enlightened?

That is a great question to begin with! Every day, we have to face what life deals us—different conditions, unexpected responses from others, whether they are large or trivial ones. It happens that your customers or clients demand you to do something bigger than what you think is right for them to ask. One or more of your colleagues gets on your nerves and bugs you by disregarding your rights. Even your family members can be people like that.

Far more than that, life's difficulties do not end on the outside. The realm of negative feelings is unimaginably broad—that is, you feel it arise inside you. A while after you feel good about your achievement, you see an unanticipated turn of events that lets you down. Facing your inability to handle important matters successfully, you feel foolish, or sometimes reach the conclusion that you are a person of highly nervous temperament. Then you go on to seek something that would please you; when you are pleased, you think you are happy. Most of us live this way, switching between elation and depression, ambition and jealousy, etc. Living this way, weeks, months, and years pass, and we grow older and older, complaining about time flying. Are we meant to live this way? Is it just OK to live by following the usual senses of happiness and shallow satisfaction? Would you not want lasting peace inside you? What if there was a way of living beyond suffering from oscillating between polar opposite emotions?

Any group with a collective egoistic desire is only hungry for its own interests and excludes outsiders. The domestic political situation of a country and its international relationships with other countries are specific

examples. The avarice of a dictator and the mass movement of their arrogant nation with a strong power not only destroy other countries but ruin their country itself. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis make supreme examples, but we know that there have been innumerable wars that have erupted under totalitarian regimes. Ranging from small troubles to war, humans are far crueler than other creatures. For example, strong beasts like tigers do not intentionally kill others of the same species. They hunt animals of other species to feed their cubs and themselves. Humans, out of greed, engage in wars to occupy other countries and exploit them.

Is there not a common source of the individual problem of agony and international conflict? We find no fundamental difference between the two. The common cause of all conflicts is the egoic mind, the person or group's sense of self-importance. But the ego is the false self that thinks without a fully calm, pure awareness of the environment as it is. The ego distinguishes itself as the subject from others as objects in thinking and feeling. It is the false self that confronts the world outside, trying to manipulate the objects in a self-centered way. More strictly speaking, it is the force that keeps us in the madness.

Religion must be a major way of saving people from this madness of the ego. In addition, many of them hold on to the theological doctrines and dogmas of their own religion while condemning or disregarding the views of other religions. Egoistic individuals, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly, try to appear to others as if they were living pious lives relying upon the precepts in the Bible or Sutras. This issue of happiness is surely not restricted to matters of being individual. Very conservative believers of a religion tend to practice love and compassion only within their religious community. When faced with the obligation of practicing love and compassion toward people outside of their religious circle, they try to convert the outsiders to their own religion for the sake of the outsiders' spiritual salvation.

Such tenacity, when it grows to be extraordinary, often brings about war, as history tells us. To them, God is the idea that they place on top of their system, as the supreme being outside of their minds. If you are interested in the teachings of contemporary spiritual leaders, you will know that just the most common point that almost all of them, at least apparently, share is that the *true God* is not any abstract idea but the *true nature of the human self* that occupies the center (or the whole) of all individual life and is *universal, cosmic, and infinite*. It is not the concept of *Atman* in Hinduism. In Hinduism, the incorporeal self of an individual is given the name *Atman*, but I follow the Buddhist way of negating any kind of individual self. What I mean by the true self is infinity itself.

The Buddhist doctrine of *anatman* (Sanskrit; *anatta* in Pali) states that there is no integral and autonomous being of an individual like a “soul.” The individual entity is merely an aggregate of the five *skandhas* (elements)—dense form, sensation or emotion, perception, formations, and consciousness—that are always changing according to natural causes and effects. The body and personality of a sentient being are constituted by those components without a separate self that embraces them all. What you call your “self” is actually your “ego,” an illusion that you think controls your life.

On the other hand, the ego is the individual self, which is usually called the false self. The ego is some “false” notion of the self that exists abstractly in thought. It must be used as *the means of (phenomenally) representing or manifesting the true self* in a given situation. The oppositions of “right” and “wrong,” of “presence” and “absence,” do not carry any importance here. First and foremost, the true nature of the human self is not the conditioned self as identified in a given time and space.

In other words, the *true nature* of the ego as an individual self is not the small mind that is characterized by unnecessary anger, jealousy, or hate. However, just taking a glance at human history is enough to prove that humankind, in pursuing happiness, has usually taken the individual ego and the collective ego (the egos of a group or society) as their master. Many wars have been caused by such angry religious people hating other religions that have grown in different cultures and with different creeds. But in fact, if we limit our discussion to major religions—Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam—, we would find the same nature of loving the ultimate reality, which is not reachable with our power of reason and emotion, and of loving others. This matter of pursuing egoistic gratification through religion causes the great majority of social problems, instead of just promoting and maintaining people’s belief in the all-embracing truth and their devotion to creating a more peaceful world. Of course, it is beyond question that all these major religions have the same purpose of leading believers to attain the ultimate reality that transcends the nature of the ego.

Are we meant to seek the ways we can find relief from our anger, anxiety, and stress by trying to benefit from others, by loving people inside our own circle, and by looking down upon, excluding, or hating outsiders? Can we reduce life’s troubles and find solutions in this way? The truth is that hatred only increases hatred, disputes, conflicts, and war. Are we not expected to seek peace and happiness through reducing conflicts and struggles by first releasing our anxiety, fear, and anger and by keeping our composure? Ordinary people usually do not try to calm down or stop their prejudice and hatred in order to know what is really there behind all they respond and react to. People simply feel an urgency to respond and react to

objects that they think are “outside” themselves. When they have no object to hurry to react to, they feel bored. This is because, to them, getting out of the whirlpool of the excitement would mean being motivated by naïveté or strictly conservative religious faith.

A wonderful way of keeping our mind away from distress and anxiety and staying in equilibrium is practicing meditation. I do not propose that you should spend a long time doing this every day. However, I am sure that at least practicing formal or informal meditation would lead you to keep yourself in a peaceful state of mind even when you are in a situation that is stressful or unfavorable. Informal meditation can not only be in the seated/sitting position, but also when walking, eating, and the like. On the first kind of meditation, it seems to me that “seated meditation” was the general term in the past, but “sitting meditation” is more widely favored today, and thus I would like to employ the latter in this book. By practicing meditation in any form, you try to stop disturbing thoughts and recover stability and peace.

Before you start your car, before you attend a meeting with your colleagues, when you feel you are angry with your client, customer, or your family member, or before you start your daily routine or especially work that needs strong concentration, I recommend you give yourself a moment to take at least a few breaths—deep breathing is OK, but it does not have to be deep breathing. Just try to slow down your normal breathing. If you reach the point of having slow breathing, you will find yourself composed and feel confident in handling the stressful situation. Then, as you work with that effect, you will surely come to expect reliable effects from meditating on a daily business. It is OK to tell others to reduce their anger or nervousness by practicing meditation, but you should be a successful example of a person with a composed state of mind. You can then find a point where they will agree with you and share peace.

Most people who have succeeded in overcoming one or two disturbing situations may think that would suffice. They think they are too busy to try more than that. One of the main reasons not to meditate is always being “busy.” But actually, if you want to have more psychological and spiritual power to prevent agitation and disrupted situations or handle them with more equanimity, you need to build a habit of regularly practicing sitting meditation without moving around and staying composed.

When it comes to Buddhist meditation or Christian contemplative/centering/breath prayer, it is mainly sitting meditation or prayer with almost no words. Spending some time doing sitting meditation definitely brings you the great effect of staying in a peaceful mind. Studies show the excellent effects of meditation—memory improvement, having insight into work and

life, efficiency enhancement, as well as dealing with difficult situations with calmness. Then, reading literary masterpieces and watching great films in the way I will introduce later will also guide you to enter a new state of mind and spirituality.

However, if you are not used to being in a meditative state of mind, or if you consider yourself a beginner, you may not easily come to have a mind to start meditation. Neither sitting and walking meditation nor trying to remain staying in that state of mind throughout your daily life would attract your attention. You may not easily find any meditation practitioner among your family members, colleagues, or friends who can introduce you to the depth of meditation. You may just want to follow what interests you, thinking that the best way of living is seeking happiness, judging between right and wrong. Even though you know your interests change swiftly and that you hear meditation works for stress reduction, health improvement, and acquiring the power of profound wisdom, you just would not go on to practice it enough to have such effects. It might still seem odd to you. Or it is possible that when you first attempt meditation, you fall asleep and become reluctant to start again.

If you want to taste meditation more, I would recommend that you begin by simply breathing a few times before starting your car or at your desk before work. Meditation is right for you—where you are now. By meditation I do not only mean sitting meditation. Walking meditation and keeping still and fully awake throughout everyday life will bring inner peace and deeper insight into what you do. Or you can just watch some YouTube videos on Vipassana/mindfulness meditation or Zen and attend a weekly meditation group meeting once or twice to motivate yourself. Some people know Zen as a Japanese tradition in Mahayana Buddhism, but it is also the most popular name for the same Buddhist tradition in other Northern Asian countries—Ch’an in Chinese, Seon in Korean, and Tien in Vietnamese.

Q: Nowadays, countless people throughout the whole world, including 15% of the United States’ population, meditate and very much favor and try to follow Buddha’s teachings. What new issues can meditation make us aware of?

In this opening chapter, I would like to lay down a general and brief view of the spirituality of the human self that is now known to the public who are interested in this field, at least to some degree. I present what is shared by religious leaders, especially Buddhist, Christian, and secular spiritual leaders, from my perspective, nourished on the ground of my academic achievements and my spiritual experience. This is the first step of our

inquiry into the way of improving the spiritual condition of humanity, especially in relation to literature and film.

I know there are innumerable people who have been meditating in America and others who learn from spiritual teachers who have been training as religious people, especially Buddhists. This book will help those who want to live without much stress or even wish to be awakened from the dreamlike life. By this, I mean life itself, just like everything that takes place in a dream, has no fixed, stable laws or principles, and this fact confuses those who are not spiritually awakened. That is, the ego as the false self does not willingly accept the hard necessity for the destruction of its construct. The intensity of the ego consistently creates a prison.

Particularly for the sake of those who have not had a chance to meditate or who are not interested in such an activity of quietly observing the inner world, let us go back to the main issue of this beginning chapter. I would like to reaffirm that prior to being able to discuss anything else, including meditation through literature and film, the point of departure would have to be like the following question: “Why do we ever need to calm down and be composed?” This has to be the question to be put above all else, since “calming down” and staying in a state of composure or equanimity is necessary for all meditation practitioners.

The purpose of meditation is first to relax and be composed, precisely because when you are composed and not in a state of being attached to the forms of outside objects and confused, you become able to find and recover your true self. Then you would have the capacity to perform your work better than when you do without meditating. You would find yourself handling your work with more wisdom, deeper insights, and loving kindness. This is because your true self is not limited to what you do but comprises everything. It is the source of suffering and distress as well as that of loving kindness. Your true self is not limited to you, so I would like to call it “the” true self, not “your” true self. The true self is not your separate, individual self but the whole self.

If we practice meditation on a daily basis and try to keep the meditative mind all day every day, we would experience genuine joy and bliss which transcends superficial feelings of happiness that has its other side—sadness or unhappiness (as will be explained in the next part). We would attain a lasting peaceful state without the tenacious strength of the ego. The benefits have been studied and reported on numerous occasions. According to these studies, meditation would give you a variety of neurological, psychological, and even physical advantages. In this new era, the early part of the 21st century, it has been reported by reliable sources that a large number of Americans practice meditation. Yes, according to different studies, at

present, around 15% of the American adult population practice Buddhist (Vipassana/mindfulness and/or Ch'an/Seon/Zen) meditation.² The number would be greater if the practitioners of Christian contemplative/centering prayer were included.

Of course, there are many different types of meditation, depending on religious sects and also on large groups that follow non-religious/secular spiritual leaders. The most famous contemporary religious figures who are involved in Buddhist meditation or Christian contemplative prayer are the Reverend Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-), the Dalai Lama (1935-), Fr. Thomas Merton (1915-68), Fr. Thomas Keating (1923-2018), and Fr. Richard Rohr (1943-), just to name a few. The most prominent secular spiritual leaders are Alan Watts (1915-73), Eckhart Tolle (1948-), Ram Dass (1931-2019), Ken Wilber (1949-), and Adyashanti (1962-), among others. All of them, without exception, teach us to try our best to decrease the unnecessary, intense power of ego and to eventually attain the breakthrough to spiritual awakening.

For my part, studying the thoughts of Buddhism and Taoism, and especially Western philosophies and literature, and inspired by those open-minded religious and secular spiritual leaders mentioned above, I would like to present how their thoughts and experience would work for literary reading and film watching. I would like to introduce the heart of my view as “postmodern ethics,” which is “a new system of ideas to contribute to the ethical development of literature and the arts of the new age”³ (I see “postmodern ethics” in a

² Meditation has become one of the most powerful and effective trends in the U.S. to make life healthy and fulfilling. In 2017, 14.2% of American adults said that they had meditated “within the past year, a threefold increase from 4.1% in 2012, according to a report from the CDC” (Angelica LaVito, “More Americans are meditating than ever before, as mindfulness goes mainstream,” *CNBC*, November 8, 2018, <https://headtopics.com/us/more-americans-are-meditating-than-ever-before-as-mindfulness-goes-mainstream-2397486>). It is also reported that 40% of Americans in religious groups meditate frequently—“at least weekly” (David Masci and Conrad Hackett, “Meditation is common across many religious groups in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, January 2, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/02/meditation-is-common-across-many-religious-groups-in-the-u-s/>). Noticeably, “16% of people in the age group 45 to 64 years old practice meditation” and “women are more likely to practice meditation” (Arthur Zuckerman, “46 Meditation Statistics: 2019/2020 Benefits, Market Value & Trends,” *CompareCamp.com*, May 22, 2020, <https://comparecamp.com/meditation-statistics/>). It is also reported in the same article that more and more schools have meditation programs in their curricula And that “[a]lmost 10 times more children have practiced meditation since 2012.”

³ Jae-seong Lee, *Postmodern Ethics, Emptiness, and Literature: Encounters between East and West* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 19.

different sense to Zygmunt Bauman). I am certain that the meaning of “postmodern ethics” can be understood by *the public*. What worth would it have if people did not understand the experts’ esoteric ideas? I would like to link the spiritual inspiration I have attained from these open-minded theologians and spiritual leaders with the academic thoughts of postmodernists and, going further, with Eastern thoughts of Buddhism and Taoism.

At this point, I would like to briefly introduce the basic feature of postmodern ethics to the general audience. “Deconstruction” is a way of freeing the duality of metaphysics from its structure and nature of dualism. It became a well-known term in English literature due to Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), who contributed greatly to the work of freeing Western thoughts from the shell of dualism. Derrida was most influenced by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95), who criticized Western metaphysics’ inherent nature of dualism and developed it in their own ways. Levinas, who is the main figure of my study, pointed out that the nature of the whole of Western metaphysics is “ontology,” a study of existence whose nature is essentially dual (being and non-being). His postmodern/poststructural philosophy is specifically called “ethics.” Broadly speaking, postmodern ethics includes Derrida, Jacques Lacan (1901-81), Jean-François Lyotard (1924-98), Gilles Deleuze (1925-95), and others.

However, it seems to me that contemporary Western postmodern ethics does not carry the importance of spirituality. I am convinced that postmodern ethics should be combined with the Mahayana Buddhist view of the ultimate reality. Thus, I have two purposes in producing this book. Firstly, I unite intellectuality and spirituality, handling various fields together—philosophical intellectuality, both religious and secular, and literature and film—in an interdisciplinary way. My second purpose is to communicate with the general public so that they easily share these precious ideas. Having learned all these thoughts, I was always full of desire to learn more. Nevertheless, I am now sure that I am eager to share my ideas with a wider audience. I truly wish to help the general public to better understand literature, film, and other art forms.

In the 21st century, whether you like it or not, we are living in the era of *postmodernism*. Postmodernism as a mode of thinking and living arose across philosophy and criticism of literature, the arts, architecture, etc. in the mid to late 20th century after humankind had experienced World War II, which proved the terrible faculty of modernism. Modernism was the big issue that described the whirlpool of efforts to educate, enlighten (edify),

and develop the intellectuality of people. The negative side of modernism was the nature of tyranny and violence.

To unite Eastern and Western thoughts for the purpose of having a whole view of human thought in the light of the ultimate Truth, or the genuine liberty of humanity, I would first like to discuss the generally acknowledged fact that Western thought has been assured to innately have *dualism*. Western philosophy is now prevalent around the world of today, and this means that general human thinking in this age is basically in the form of duality. Traditional Western philosophy and theology have had *supreme reason* as their prime object. But I would highlight the change in Western people's thought. The postmodern Western thought of today also shows that it would see its own purpose far more clearly with the help of Eastern thought. My discussion goes on with my conviction that the primary problem with the Western mode of thinking is on the grounds of "dualism," which is in the structure of "binary opposition." For both scholars and general readers, *binary opposition* is the form with which to understand this problem of conflicts arising from reason and rationality.

In Western thought, which is largely said to have begun with Plato and Aristotle, reason and rationality were always considered to be higher than emotion, but in fact, those faculties worked to tie the polar opposites that construct a finite, narrow egoic thought. It is now a common sense that this is the innate weakness of Western metaphysics.

I have elaborated on binary opposition in great detail through the whole of my previous work, *Postmodern Ethics, Emptiness, and Literature: Encounters between East and West*, with reference to both Eastern and Western philosophies. In the present book, I lay emphasis on binary opposition not only as the structure of thinking or as the ego construct, but as the basis for transcending itself. Then I explain how "postmodern ethics," the ethical and theological aspect (pursuing genuine transcendence) of postmodernism, does this work of self-transcending in pursuing non-duality. After all of this history, what is still needed is not the thinking capacity for acute reasoning but the opposite, the unknowable. In contemporary literary criticism, the unknowable is pursuable with "affect" that lies beyond reason and emotion. We need to know more about affect. Our discussion in this chapter will reach the point of the need for the *affect theory* as a synthesizing view of what is being explored in this new era. Then the next chapter will be focused on the solution to dualism from the perspective of the affect theory.

Q: All these spiritual leaders have one common issue, although their views of humanity and the world vary. Whatever style of meditation they contend, they all agree that the ego has to be abolished. If we abandon the ego, will we not lose the power of thinking and our grip of consciousness? How can we live on without perception? Is their view not nihilistic or pessimistic?

The issue of spiritual awakening must not be misunderstood in a nihilistic or pessimistic sense and dismissed. It means that you enter the dimension of the secret and enigmatic movement of *perfect emptiness*, or *Emptiness*, as I always write it with the purpose of signifying it as the depictive name for the ultimate reality or truth. Yes, it is true that Emptiness is a name that reveals the nature of the exterior of our thinking and feeling. It is the dimension of the fundamental power of living with pure joy and bliss, without the oscillation between transitory pleasures and suffering from anxieties. You come to live a life in a lasting state of inner peace, genuine joy, and true insight into life only when you abandon your egoic desire for self-satisfaction with materials and sensuousness. The egoic desire is satisfied with the shallow feelings of pleasure and happiness, and it does not meet your pure desire to encounter the true self. Only the true self leads you to live with fundamental wisdom.

It is also critical to be keenly aware that the ego is the thinking self, and thus that without the ego, we are not able to perceive, understand, or judge phenomena and others' ideas as right or wrong. The pure awareness that is perfectly empty of thought needs the thinking self, although thinking is actually an illusion-making mechanism. Therefore, uniting the two opposite sides, pure awareness and the thinking ego, I propose that thinking and judgment should be done with the power of the *minimal phenomenality* of the ego, which is *the smallest amount of selfhood*. In Buddhist terms, minimum selfhood belongs to the Middle Path between the polar opposites—the beginning point where thinking starts. It does not take sides phenomenally but beyond phenomenality; it both embraces and denies both sides. Thus, judgment should be made where pure awareness and practical egoic power meet. For example, the best judgment is made and the best inner peace is gained at the point where both happiness and pains are embraced, and one side has a more powerful grip.

Otherwise, the *unnecessary, intense power of ego* (which I call *ego intensity*) arises in the form of too much happiness, self-admiration, superiority, anger, jealousy, hatred, and violence that are the sources of racism, sexism, dictatorship, nationalism, and international war. When the *ego intensity* fails to harm others, it turns against itself and comes to have impulses of stress, pain, inferiority, shame, self-hate, cowardice, fear, and

even death. You may easily find that when the power of your shallow self, the ego, strengthens, it becomes very capricious and lays judgment on an outside object or on you first as pleasurable, favorable, and strong, and then, in a different situation, as offensive, despicable, cowardly, and hateful. The ego lives on by becoming pleased with the result of its job—comparing and contrasting the images of itself with others. In that sense, the ego is so fanciful that it is like a chimpanzee in a jungle that swings from tree to tree using its arms. It simply sees things outside its own realm, and itself too, only as objects, and does not confront the purest, real dimension of itself.

Let me elucidate this connection more. The intensity of just the raw sense of the egoic judgment is always fundamentally outside the source of true happiness or bliss. Living with an ego intensity indicates the state of human living outside of Paradise as a result of God's punishment for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, as is expressed in a symbolic way in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. In Paradise, Adam and Eve had the power of the *minimal phenomenality* of the ego as the faculty of perceiving objects. The minimal phenomenality of the ego is the basis for positive conceptualization/reasoning and decision-making. It means that you are not attached to your ego, which seems to serve you positively but really confines you in a prison-like narrow mind.

What is usually called "ego" is ego intensity, as I name it here. Ego intensity raises thinking—conceptualization by comparing and contrasting its condition and others'. Of course, conceptualization goes together with emotions—pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, and excessive pride and fear/cowardice. Without the intensity of ego, you will have more wisdom from pure consciousness. If you do not have the unneeded surplus of the ego's power, your minimal amount of thinking capacity manifests the pure, universal, infinite consciousness and does the right reasoning and makes decisions correctly. You will actually be wiser to manage your daily life affairs. In short, you are not in prison. If you identify yourself with your egoic power too much, you ARE the prison! Since you are not attached to the ego, you still can make a judgment on the grounds of Emptiness, the pure awareness without the ego intensity. It means that you are in a position to make the smartest decision in the situation in which you are placed.

Calming down and maintaining composure is the first step into spiritual depth and obtaining true wisdom and enlightenment. That is why practicing meditation in stillness remains a vital and necessary part of Buddhism. Contemplative centering/silent/meditative prayer has been part of the traditions of Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and Quakerism (a Protestant sect). In fact, only when your mind calms down and stays composed and equanimous can you realize what is truly going on in the

heart of your life. It has been proven in cognitive science, and even some quantum physicists have proved that we can benefit from meditating, and some try to combine science and meditation. Now, that is the practical purpose of meditation and staying in a meditative state of mind. Thus, you do not want to have the image of an ascetic practitioner in the Himalayas in your mind. The first purpose of practicing meditation and trying to be in a meditative state of mind is to improve your life.

1.2. The true nature of the self and the ego

Q: I think I have your point straight. But could you elaborate more on how the true self, or the true sense of God, and ego as the false self are different?

The prime purpose of practicing meditation and staying composed is to reach far beyond those benefits and attain spiritual enlightenment. Meditating and maintaining inner peace in your everyday life would replace your ego, an individual and superficial self with its intractable and unceasing desires, with the true, unlimited self. We always have to try to *calm the ego that is necessarily formed in the growing process down to the original, all-embracing, and infinite true self*. In this sense, the two selves are completely different in nature. The ego is a petty mimicry of the infinite self, whereas the true self is infinity itself beyond time and space.

The true self is the source or origin that forms the individual or separate ego. The true self is Emptiness, or the perfect emptiness with wondrous movement in the Buddhist sense. No wonder it is God in the Christian sense, since it is the dimension of the most fundamental *love*. In this sphere of true love, you are able to see others and the world as such—without attachment to them and beings of a transient nature—or “things-in-themselves,” in the words of Immanuel Kant, one of the greatest Western philosophers. By “things-in-themselves,” Kant does not mean that we have to admit the different qualities of separate objects like different personalities. Instead, Kant means that all beings and things have the same nature.

Kant observed that there is only one true nature, which is called “Emptiness” in Buddhism. You may find that common nature, Emptiness (“body without organs,” in Gilles Deleuze’s words), only as your mind becomes empty of its separate nature, the ego. In Buddhism, the true self is metaphorically expressed as a clean, bright mirror. This mirror reflects everything without being disturbed by anything. Just like that mirror, you can see through to the serene depth of life without egoic thoughts. That is, it is none other than your pure nature that is empty of the phenomenal intensity of the ego. In fact, if you truly experience the oneness of your

original nature and the original nature of all other humans, other creatures, and inanimate things, it means you are coming closer to the spiritual breakthrough to awakening from the illusory life of suffering.

Fully enlightened ones like Shakyamuni Buddha do not become attached to the presence or the absence (the other form of presence) of outside objects and become anxious. However, one who has awakened from the dreamlike nature of thinking and living is not like a stone statue. Without ego intensity, an enlightened one, or a Buddha, is living every day, every second of life with genuine and unswerving wisdom. Such a person has a free spirit. Liberty here means they are free to think and act on the grounds of true nature. When they concentrate on some work or objects outside themselves, their mind is not attached to objects or get excited or depressed. In other words, awakened beings know that they are in the dream where everything is just unstable and empty of fixity. Buddhas have a clear, free mind to choose between good and evil, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, but they have lost the intensity or strength of the power of egoic adhesion.

Yet again, real freedom means you are free from the ego intensity that puts you in a prison built by your own discerning mind. If you choose what simply sensuously looks good to you or arouses your fantasy, it would put you in a deadlock or at least in a complex situation. It is possible that in such a situation, you might think you are doing very well by releasing your nervous tension, but that is what your ego does.

Yes, it is a harsh fact that nobody can tell you when to stop delusory thinking. You just have to try to follow what your natural, true mind tells you and reject the egoic desire. The more you are driven to the whirlpool of the complexity of the situation you are placed in, the less peace you will find. Awakened individuals actually have no barrier of the mind; their mind is one with all other beings and phenomena and has no resistance based on egoic desire.

Q: So, true freedom lies beyond the ordinary feelings of happiness and suffering. To employ the story of the first humans in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, does it mean we are not genuinely or deeply happy as Adam and Eve were before they were expelled from Paradise?

That is a great question for the sake of a Western audience because Western civilization is based on Christianity. My discussion would be characterized as one that links Eastern and Western *philosophical* thoughts in view of *spirituality* that transcends the ordinary ways of thinking and emotion. As we are staying on the ground of the studies in philosophy and religion that have been serious about humanity and true transcendence for two to three

thousand years, we can be safe from the enticement of wrong meditation styles and cults or superstitions. Meditation, not practiced in a strange way, is nothing mystical. In fact, all of the traditional authentic Western philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, just to name a few, have explored the purest state of spirit or mind, characterizing it as infinite, universal, absolute, and true.

The story of the first humans, Adam and Eve, tells us that they were punished by God because they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and came to have the intellectual ability to distinguish between good and evil. I propose that this story metaphorically explains that the human subjects began to have the egoic nature and the ability to compare and contrast because they broke the relationship with the absolute truth. As a result of gaining reasoning faculties, humans began to experience anxiety, fear, anger, jealousy, superiority, and inferiority. The ego that resulted from a guilty conscience is the barrier to liberty.

That is to say, before they ate the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve already had the proper amount of spiritual capacity they needed to live on. They were able to listen to the omniscient and omnipresent God and revere him, but by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they gained an excessive amount of discerning ability that is the power of what we call the ego. The story of the first humans presents to us that we have an amount of capability that we are not able to control. The ego intensity is the vanity of the self, the surplus of capacity we need to distinguish between good and evil. Because of the unnecessary capacity we have, or as a result of Adam and Eve's sin as told in the Biblical story that is an allegory of human nature, we struggle with ourselves when we face unexpected or stressful situations.

From this story, I deduce the following point in view of the future cooperation of Eastern and Western styles of thought. It is positive and significant that Western thinkers have sought truth on the grounds of logic, the human science of objective reasoning, for which comparing and contrasting is necessary. However, what is more important from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism (in China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Tibet), the abolishment of the ego and the awakening of "the true self" or "the real I" cannot be done on the basis of logic and reasoning. Buddhism always declares that intellectuality and spirituality are radically different.

By eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, humans lost the ability to stay in peace constantly. Yet, in the Buddhist sense, paradise metaphorically expresses the original state of our mind. Our innermost mind is *the awakened state*. Exactly in that sense, we are still in paradise, just like Adam and Eve were before they were punished by being expelled from Paradise, as described in the Book of Genesis, the beginning