HENRI BERGSON: ZEN MASTER?

Paul Hahn

Theology Department

University of St. Thomas

Houston TX 77006

20 September 1998

Henri Bergson, French philosopher of the turn of the last century, seems to be primarily remem­bered for his doctrine of the *élan vital*, or “vital vigor.”[[1]](#footnote-1) But one fascinating aspect of his philosophy which has per­haps received less at­ten­tion that it deserves is his concept of intuition. It has been said (in my own hear­ing) that Berg­son’s con­cept of intuition seems the same as the experience of enlightenment in Zen Bud­dhism. A cursory look at both certainly does indicate similarities; could they be the same? ­Zen-Buddhist enlightenment appears to be some form of “intuition”; but to what degree is it the same as or similar to ­­­Bergson’s “intuition”? The answer to this question is the focus of the present paper.

Bergson’s “intuition” is rel­a­tively uncomplicated when compared to the tangled skein that 2500 years of Buddhism has woven; there­fore, I will begin with an attempt to untie that knot. For a westerner to understand the ex­per­i­ence of *nirvāṇa* in Zen Buddhism, it is necessary, in my opinion, to approach the phenomenon his­tor­i­cally. Once the basic nature of *satori* (Japanese for *nirvāṇa*) has been delineated, then a consideration of Bergson’s “intuition of duration” will follow; the chief need here will be explicating Berg­son’s epis­temology, of which the intuition of duration forms a part. Finally, in a conclu­sion, Zen *satori* and Berg­sonian “intuition” ­­­­will be compared and contrasted, to permit a conclusion that will answer the ques­tion posed.

**Zen Buddhism**

Zen Buddhism is the confluence of two religious traditions: Buddhism, which originated in India, and Taoism, which originated in China. A knowledge of these contributory traditions will help in the explication of the Zen-Buddhist concept of enlightenment.

Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563-483 bce), later called “the Buddha” (“en­lightened one”). In 534, aged twenty-nine, he spurned life as a wealthy aristocrat and be­came a wan­dering beggar; ­but neither yoga,[[2]](#footnote-2) nor Hin­duism,[[3]](#footnote-3) nor severe as­ceticisms[[4]](#footnote-4) induced the enlighten­ment he sought. Finally, on the night of a full moon, sitting under a tree, he achieved en­light­en­ment.

The traditional sources describe the Buddha’s ascent as a passage through four trance states (*dhyanas*); progress through these trance states remains the goal of many Buddhists today. In the first trance, he experienced a sense of calm, detachment from the senses, and dis­cur­sive thinking (“gazing at . . . mental images as they pass”). In the second trance, he experienced a feeling of zest and non­discur­sive thought (“one-pointedness of mind”). In the third trance, he experienced complete dispas­sion and bliss in the body. In the fourth trance, he experienced pure awareness and extinction of the four *asravas* (“outflows”): sense desire, desire to exist, wrong views, and ignorance[[5]](#footnote-5) (Robin­son and Johnson 11-12).

In his first sermon after his enlightenment, the Buddha systematized his insights as the “Four Holy Truths” and the “Holy Eightfold Path.” The Four Holy Truths are: suffering (*dhukkha*) pervades all existence; the source of suffering is one’s craving for existence and pleasure; dispassion ban­ishes suf­fering; the Holy Eightfold Path achieves dis­passion. The Holy Eightfold Path is (correct) views, in­tention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. The last three are some­times collectively called “concentration” (*samadhi*) and are of most interest at present. Right effort means simultaneously avoiding bad thoughts (and suppressing them should they arise) and developing good thoughts (and maintaining them when they arise). Right mindfulness means being attentive, simultaneously and fully, to one’s senses, emotions, mental states, and ob­jects in the environment. Right concentration is indescribable.

Taoism

The other stream contributing to Zen is Taoism. The earliest figures associated with Taoism are Lao Tzû, Chuang Tzû, and Yang Chu.[[6]](#footnote-6) The principal teaching of Taoism is the concept of *nat­ure*: the early Taoists “have discov­ered nature and are amazed and fascinated by it” (Creel 100).

Before Confucius, *tao* meant a “way,” either a “road” or a “lifestyle.” Con­fucius used the term to mean “­the *right* way of life” (for him, the life of a respectful and scholarly civil servant). But Taoists used the term to mean “nature,” both as “the basic [preexistent] stuff” and as “the unity ­of all things.” The Tao, they said, is “sim­ple, formless, de­sire­less” (Creel 100-02).

The Taoist conception of nature has important cognitive consequences.[[7]](#footnote-7) Since “The Taoist seeks to become one with Nature” and Nature is “simple [and] de­sire­less,” the Tao­ist seeks to be sim­ple and de­sireless (Creel 109). This results in anti-intellectualism. As *Lao Tzû* 81 says, “He who knows has no wide learning; he who has wide learning does not know” (Waley 143). The *Chu­ang Tzû* is even more explicit (1.303):

Relax your body, spit out your intelli­gence, forget about prin­ciples and things. Cast yourself into the ocean of exis­tence . . . [In­an­i­mate things] never leave the state of primal simplicity. But let them once be­come con­scious, and it is gone! Never ask the names of things, do not seek to spy out the workings of their na­tures, and all things will flourish of them­selves (Creel 109).

Buddhism in China and Japan

By the 200s bce, Buddhism was solidly entrenched in northern India, and mer­chants had carried it to southern India. King Asoka (269-232 bce), after his conversion (c. 263), unified the re­li­gion in India; and the second Buddhist council (at Asoka’s capital, Pataliputra, c. 250) sent forth missionaries who spread Buddhism to Burma, Ceylon, and Central Asia. By c. 100 bc Indian mer­chants had converted the oasis towns of Central Asia (Merv, Samar­kand, etc.), and by ad 100 they had es­tab­lished Buddhist communities in the Parthian empire (present-day Persia).[[8]](#footnote-8) In short, the trans­ference of Bud­dhism from India to China was effected through Central Asia during the “era of the ancient silk roads—roughly 200 b.c.e. to 400 c.e.”[[9]](#footnote-9) (Bentley 26; 44, 46, 48).

But “The crucial era for the permanent establishment of Buddhism as a popular religion was the period 600 to 1000 c.e.” (Bentley 72). During the 400s-500s ce, “Buddho-Taoism”[[10]](#footnote-10) de­vel­oped several schools (*Chü-shê*, *San-lun*, *Fa-hsiang*) and several sects (*T’ien-t’ai*, *Hua-yen*, *Ching-t’u*, *Chan*); but of the sects, only the last two survived. The *Ching-t’u* sect emphasizes paradise (the “pure lands”), and the *Chan* sect emphasizes meditation.[[11]](#footnote-11) In fact, the Chinese word *chan* “transliter­ates the San­skrit *dhyā*[*na*], [which means] meditation” (Corless 191); and, like Korean *chen*, Japanese *zen* trans­lit­erates *chan*. Zen Buddhism, then, is meditation Buddhism.

In China, *Chan* developed into five “houses,” of which two, founded in the 800s, survived: *Lin-chi* and *Ts’ao-tung*. The former entered Japan c. 1175 and became the *Rinzai* school of Zen Bud­dhism; the latter entered Japan c. 1225 and became the *Sōtō* school of Zen Buddhism. *Rinzai* em­pha­sizes “sub­itism,” the belief that enlightenment occurs all at once; and it especially uses *koans* (riddles) to induce enlightenment (Corless 192). *Sōtō* emphasizes “gradualism,” the belief that enlightenment occurs by stages, and espe­ci­ally uses *shikantaza* (stopping the mind in the present moment by mere sitting) (Corless 194-95).

Zen Enlightenment

How is Zen enlightenment to be conceived? Here is a description of the experience from one of this century’s leading exponents of Zen, Daisetz T. Suzuki.[[12]](#footnote-12)

[If one is] still on the conceptual level, [then one is] away from life itself. . . . The high­est and most fundamental experiences are best communicated without words . . . [One needs a] direct, non-mediated understanding of reality . . . The question in regard to being and non-being is a philosophical one dealing with abstract ideas. All our thoughts start from the opposition between being and non-being; without this antithesis no reasoning can be carried on . . . [But] the suchness of things—the antithesis of being and non-being[[13]](#footnote-13)—is beyond the ken of . . . dialectical delineation, [and] no amount of words can succeed in describing, that is, reasoning out, the what and why of life and the world (63, 65-66, 70).

The crucial thing to notice about this description is its nearness to Taoism and its dis­tance from non-Zen forms of Buddhism. *Nirvāṇa* as the Buddha proclaimed it was very little like the ex­per­i­ence Suzuki describes.

For early Buddhism the supreme good was Nirvana—‘the blowing out’ of the lamp or fire of existence when all sensation will have ‘grown cold’, peace, disgust at all transient existence, detachment from it, its total cessation . . . This means nothing less than the destruction of life, of the human condition as we know it. Indeed the man who has reached Nirvana and thereby brought all activity to a standstill will differ from a dead man only in so far as he retains physical life, heat, and the senses, though he will be totally detached from and unaffected by these: his only characteristics will be indifference and insight (Zaehner *Zen* 118).

This is the *nirvāṇa* still sought by practitioners of Thera­vada Buddhism, the form of Bud­dhism dom­in­ant in Southwest Asia and acknowledged to be closest in form to early Buddhism.

But Zen Buddhism is not just Buddhism: it is the confluence of Buddhism and Taoism. While Zen seems to have retained from Buddhism the emphasis on attainment of enlightenment through med­i­­ta­tion (in ori­ginal Buddhism, through yogic disciplines),[[14]](#footnote-14) it seems to have retained from Taoism, more than from Buddhism, its understanding of the experience of enlightenment.[[15]](#footnote-15)

And what is the nature of enlightenment in original Taoism? “Taoism . . . is a nat­ure mys­ti­cism” (Creel 101). Since one is inescapably part of the totality of things,[[16]](#footnote-16) one should not seek to escape nature or act contrary to it but “to become merged into the *Tao*” (Creel 110), an experience that *Lao Tzŭ* 56 calls “the mys­terious absorption.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The *Chuang Tzŭ* states, “If one once[[18]](#footnote-18) recognizes his iden­tity with this unity, then [death and life] disturb his tran­quility no more than the succession of day and night” (Creel 100-02).

Taoism, however, is not the only form of nature mysticism to emerge over the centuries. “According to the whole pantheist tradition, starting in the West with Heraclitus and ending with Engels, Jung, and Teilhard de Chardin, and striking us again via the Indian religions through neo-Vedanta and Zen, man at his deepest level and the Universe or ‘God’ are in some way identical” (Zaeh­ner *Zen* 20). Nature mystics whom Zaehner examines are: the *rishis* of the *Upanishads*[[19]](#footnote-19) (*Zen* 43, 54); Alfred Lord Tennyson (42); Al­dous Huxley (41); Mar­cel Proust (44-45); Karl Jung (46); William James (48-49); Forrest Reid (Irish novel­ist, 47); Richard Jefferies (American poet,[[20]](#footnote-20) 50-60); and R.M. Bucke[[21]](#footnote-21) (60-62). In addition, in­ci­den­tal re­fer­en­ces are made to Spinoza’s identification of God with Nat­ure (50), Freud’s “oce­anic feeling” (42, 50), Teilhard de Chardin’s “Omega Point” (58, 74), and Walt Whitman’s “sexual pantheism” (79, 83).

Bergsonism

We have now identified Zen Buddhism as, essentially, a form of Taoism, and Taoism as a form of nature mysticism. Is the experience of enlightenment about which Zen masters speak the same as Berg­son’s “intuition”?

To understand what Bergson meant by “intuition,” it is necessary to understand Bergson’s epistemology. It may be summarized thus:

matter > pure perception > affections > duration < memories < pure memory < spirit

Let us consider each item in turn.

Matter

When referring to matter, Bergson speaks by preference of “images” rather than “objects,” since part of his agenda is to prescind from the subject/object split. For example:

Matter, in our view, is an aggregate of “images.”[[22]](#footnote-22) And by “image” we mean a cer­tain ex­is­tence which is more than that which the idealist calls a *representation*, but less than that which the realist calls a *thing*—an existence placed halfway between the “thing” and the “representation.” . . . the object exists independ­ently of the conscious­ness which perceives it. . . . the color ascribed to it by the eye . . . or the resis­tance found in it by the hand [are] in the object . . . the object is, in itself, pictorial, as we perceive it: image it is, but a self-existing image. . . . matter exists just as it is per­ceived . . . we consider matter be­fore the dissociation which idealism and realism have brought about between its ex­is­tence and its appearance. (*Matter* 9-10)

Nevertheless, Bergson affirms that matter exists independently of our perceptions: it is not true “that material objects cease to exist when we cease to perceive them.” (*Matter* 48)

Bergson sometimes refers to the self-existing object[[23]](#footnote-23) as “the absolute.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Examples of ab­sol­utes that he gives ­­in *Introduction* are: the hero of a novel, as one would know him if one were he (and not as readers know him) (22); “the impression that a passage in Homer makes” (versus the impres­sion that a des­crip­tion of the passage would make) (23); raising one’s arm, as a unitary and internally-ex­perienced move­ment (as opposed to an externally seen and infinitely divisible action) (23—see the in­­ves­ti­gation of movement, 42-44); a visit to Paris (which “an infinite number of accurate sket­ches” could not convey) (33); and the experience of a poem (versus the jumbled letters of a poem) (33-34).

Bergson speaks at times of projecting oneself into the absolute of an object: “in pure perception we are actually placed outside ourselves; we touch the reality of the object in an immediate intuition”[[25]](#footnote-25) (*Matter* 75). But at other times he indicates that this is only theoretically possible. Note the qualifying “at least” when he says: “There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time—our self which endures” (*Intro­duc­tion* 24). And elsewhere he says: “The consciousness we have of our own self in its continual flux introduces us to the interior of a reality, on the model of which we must represent other realities” (*Introduction* 49-50). That we know the interiority of other ob­jects *by analogy* means that we do not know it firsthand. Perhaps a solution to this apparent contra­dic­tion could be this: Bergson intends his “projection” language literally when he refers to “pure per­cep­tion” (this term will be explained in a moment), which is only the minutest part of any actual per­cep­tion; but his projection language is ­­fig­ur­a­tive when he refers to a “present perception,” which consists of pure perception plus memories.

Pure Perception

Every actual perception, Bergson maintains, is primarily composed of memories, but at its core is a “pure per­ception.” Though a pure perception cannot be perceived in its purity, its existence must be hypothe­sized be­cause its presence as a stage in the epistemological process is necessary.

In fact, there is no perception which is not full of memories. [But] Let us, for the pur­poses of study, substitute for this perception, impregnated with our past, a perception that a consciousness would have if it were . . . confined to the present and ab­sorbed [in] the external object. . . . this impersonal perception [is] at the very root of our know­ledge of things. . . . [By] *pure* perception . . . I mean a perception which exists in theory rather than in fact and would be possessed by a being placed where I am, liv­ing as I live, but absorbed in the present and cap­able, by giving up every form of mem­ory, of obtaining a vision of matter both immediate and in­stantaneous. . . . No doubt there is an ideal present—a pure conception, the indivisible limit which sepa­rates past from future. (*Matter* 33-34)

We do not perceive images purely, but pure perception is part of a “present perception”:

No doubt there is an ideal present . . ., the indivisible limit which separates past from future. But the real, concrete, live present—that of which I speak when I speak of my present perception—that present necessarily occupies a duration. (*Matter* 69)

Affections

Eliminating memories from a present perception does not leave only pure perception, how­ever: there also exist “affections.” Hence, after eliminating memories, “we must first of all subtract [af­fections] from perception to get the image in its purity.” And what are “affections” (which Bergson also, quite confusingly, calls “sensations”)? Apparently, whereas perceptions are aware­nesses of ob­jects external to our bodies (for example, a tree), affections are awareness­es of our bodies from within (for ex­am­ple, a pain).[[26]](#footnote-26)

Duration

We come now to the crux of Bergson’s epistemology, duration. Bergson des­cribes this crucial item as follows.

Pure perception, in fact, however rapid we suppose it to be, occupies a certain depth of duration, so that our successive perceptions are never the real moments of things . . . but are moments of our consciousness. . . . there is for us nothing that is in­stan­tan­eous. In all that goes by that name there is already some work of our memory, and consequently, of our consciousness, which prolongs into each other, so as to grasp them in one relatively simple intuition, an endless number of moments of an end­lessly divisible time. (*Matter* 69-70)

The memories in a present perception are of two sorts. Most immediately: ­­“there is already some work of our memory” in pure perception because in it memories of successive moments of pure per­ception accumulate into a single perception; this is the combination of pure perception and mem­ory referred to in the preceding and in the following quotations.

However brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain duration, and involves, consequently, an effort of memory which prolongs, one into ano­ther, a plurality of moments. . . . there is no state of mind, however simple, which does not change every moment . . . Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which pro­longs the past into the present . . . Without this survival of the past into the present there would be no dur­a­tion, but only instantaneity. (*Intro­duc­tion* 34, 40)

But a second type of memory is more remote: a pure perception (accumulated into a united per­cep­tion) will also evoke a crowd of recollections, memories of objects or sit­u­a­tions that resemble the present perception; and these memories, too, press into the pres­ent perception. Bergson refers to both sorts of memory, though in reverse order, when he says:

. . . memory in these two forms, covering as it does with a cloak of recollections a core of immediate perception, and also contracting a number of external moments into a single internal moment, constitutes the principal share of individual consciousness . . . (*Matter* 34)

. . . our memory directs upon the perception received the memory-images which re­sem­ble it . . . Memory thus creates anew the present perception, or rather it doubles this perception by reflecting upon it either its [the perception’s] own image or some other memory-image of the same kind. (*Matter* 101)

It seems, then, that by “duration” Bergson means: pure perception plus the first form of memory (mem­ory as accumulated remembrances of immediately pre­ceding moments of the same pure per­cep­tion) but minus the second form of memory (memory as recollections of similar but now tem­porally dis­tant per­cep­tions); and this duration is experienced from with­in, as a unity.[[27]](#footnote-27) Bergson expresses the es­sential nature of duration in several ways.

. . . perception is brought about by two opposite currents, of which the one, centripe­tal, comes from the external object, and the other, centrifugal, has for its point of departure that which we term “pure memory” . . . (*Matter* 127)

. . . the perception-image, going toward the mind, and the memory-image, launched into space, career the one behind the other. (*Matter* 103)

There comes a moment when the recollection thus brought down is capable of blend­ing so well with the present perception that we cannot say where perception ends or where memory begins. (*Matter* 106)

. . . there can be no question here [in pure perception] of a mathematical point. No doubt there is an ideal present [but] the real, concrete, live present necessarily occupies a duration. Where then is this duration placed? Is it on the nearer or on the further side of the mathematical point . . .? Quite evidently, it is both . . . “my present” has one foot in my past and another in my future. In my past, first, because “the moment in which I am speaking is already far from me”; in my future, next, because this moment is impending over the future: it is to the future that I am tending . . . (*Matter* 137-38)

With awareness of duration comes the recognition that reality is a “continuity of becoming” (*Matter* 139).[[28]](#footnote-28)

Memories

It has been necessary already, in our examination of duration, to discuss the two forms of mem­ory; Bergson concentrates almost entirely on the second form, memory as recollection, as that which comprises most of what one perceives in a present perception. He comes close to giving a definition of “memory” in the comment, “memory, that is, the survival of past images . . .” (*Matter* 65-66) The peculiar flexibility of memories and the will’s power over them are also noted: “The memory of a given reading . . . I may lengthen or shorten at will; I assign to it any dur­a­tion I please; there is nothing to prevent my grasping the whole of it instantaneously” (*Matter* 80-81). Though memories loom very large in Bergson’s treatment, they are not difficult to understand; and since we have discussed them already under duration, we need not linger on them here.

Pure Memory

Where do such memories come from? To repeat a quotation cited but a few sentences ago, one current, “centripetal, comes from the external object, and the other, centrifugal, has for its point of departure that which we term ‘pure memory’” (*Matter* 127). As for the mysterious process by which memories come about: “from the moment that it becomes image, the past leaves the state of pure memory and coincides with a certain part of my present. Memory actualized in an image dif­fers, then, profoundly from pure memory” (*Matter* 140, 142). Since memories are unextended, it follows that pure memory must be also.

[There is no more] reason to say that the past effaces itself as soon as perceived than there is to suppose that material objects cease to exist when we cease to perceive them. . . . For every one admits that the images actually present to our perception are not the whole of matter. But, on the other hand, what can be a nonperceived material ob­ject, an image not imagined, unless it is a kind of unconscious mental state? Be­yond the walls of your room, which you perceive at this moment, there are the ad­join­ing rooms . . . realist or idealist, you are evidently thinking, when you speak of . . . other rooms in the house, of so many perceptions absent from your consciousness and yet given out­side of it. They are not created as your consciousness receives them; they ex­isted, then, in some manner, and since, by hypothesis, your consciousness did not ap­prehend them, how could they exist in themselves unless in the unconscious state? . . . How comes it then that an *existence outside of consciousness* appears clear to us in the case of objects, but obscure when we are speaking of the subject? (*Mat­ter* 142)

Spirit

Whence come immaterial memories, and all the other ultimate aspects of the self? Apparently they come “out of the fabulous darkness.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The existence of memories are Berg­son’s principal proof for the existence of *spirit*:

as pure perception gives us the whole or at least the essential part of matter (since the rest comes from memory and is superadded to matter), it follows that memory must be, in principle, a power absolutely independent of matter. If, then, spirit is a reality, it is here, in the phenomenon of memory, that we may come into touch with it experimentally.[[30]](#footnote-30) (*Matter* 73)

Spirit is “not only undetermined, but also reasonable and reflective.” (*Matter* 221)

Intuition of Duration

The epistemological process, then, as Bergson conceives it, focuses entirely on duration; that is the crux of the process. But Bergson does not speak only of duration; he also refers to the *intuition* of duration. What can he mean by this phrase?

Unfortunately, he uses the word “intuition” in relation ­to two distinct aspects of the know­ing pro­cess: pure perception and duration.[[31]](#footnote-31) He refers to the intuition of pure perception when he says that pure perception, “the basis of real, and so to speak instantaneous, *intuition*, on which our per­cep­tion of the external world is developed, is a small matter compared with all that mem­ory adds to it”[[32]](#footnote-32) (*Mat­ter* 66—italics added). A pure perception is an “intuition” because it is a “direct apprehension” (*Ran­dom House Dictonary*, q.v. “intuition”)—in this case, a direct apprehen­sion of matter. Pure per­ception, however, is not ­an intuition available to consciousness, since no present perception consists only of pure perception but is always composed of memories as well. Since a pure perception is unmixed with memories, Bergson calls it a “simple” intuition; but a present perception, which com­bines pure per­cep­tion with mem­ories, can only be called “a relatively simple intui­tion.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

In Bergson’s references to the other sort of intuition, the intuition of duration, a dis­tinc­tion is needed. Sometimes Berg­son seems to identify the intuition of dura­tion with dur­a­tion itself. The following statements exemplify this usage.

[The intuition of duration is] the original feeling[[34]](#footnote-34) I have of the flow of my own conscious life. (*Introduction* 27)

. . . I replace myself in duration by an effort of intuition . . . [Replacement in duration] can only be by an effort of intuition. (*Introduction* 31)

. . . intuition has the mobility of duration as its object . . . (*Introduction* 45)

There is some justification for this usage. Duration itself is, after all, an intuition: I cannot immediately ap­pre­hend an object in an act of pure perception, for I can never elimin­ate from a perception the ac­cum­ulative effect of memory that gives to my pure perception its duration; what I dir­ectly ap­pre­hend­, there­fore, is not a pure percep­tion but a present per­cep­tion, an inextricable combination of pure per­cep­tion and the first form of mem­ory (mem­ory as accumulated remembrances of immediately pre­ceding pure per­cep­tions).

At other times, however, Bergson seems to identify the intuition of duration with the per­cep­tion of oneself while one is having a present perception. The following state­ments exemplify this usage (italics are added).

. . . an inner, ab­sol­ute knowledge of the duration *of the self by the self* is possible. (*Intro­duc­tion* 31)

What is really important for philosophy is to know exactly what . . . the self actually is. Now philosophy will know this only when it recovers possession of the simple intuition *of the self by the self*. (*Introduction* 37)

The *consciousness* we have *of our own self* in its continual flux introduces us to the interior of a reality . . . (*Matter* 49-50)

By an intuition of duration in this second sense, then, Berg­son seem to mean, not the experience that duration itself is, but an awareness of the experience that duration itself is.

In the first sort of intuition of duration, which identifies intuition of duration with duration itself, what is directly apprehended is an object, purely perceived but with an accumulated series of remembered pure perceptions giving the pure perception duration. In the second sort of intuition of duration, which identifies intuition of duration with the perception of having experienced duration, what is directly apprehended is a *memory* of having perceived an object (purely but with first-form memory as well). In the first sort the object of the intuition is an external image; in the second sort the object of the intuition is an internal memory.

A third type of intuition might be imagined at this point: what about combining the two sorts just mentioned and having an intuition of duration in which I directly apprehend myself while my self dir­ectly apprehends an object? I do not believe this is possible; certainly it is not within Berg­son’s epistemology. ­For consciousness is unitary; it *is* that which perdures in duration. Hence, if I were sim­ul­tan­e­ously conscious both of an external object and of my self perceiving an external object, then I would be two consciousnesses. To present the difficulty in pictorial form: imagine seeing a tree on which your eyeballs are focused, and at the same time seeing, from a side location, your eyeballs focused on the tree. From one and the same vantage point—your unitary consciousness—you cannot look forward and backward simultane­ously; you cannot perceive both the tree and your eyes, both the object and your self. To perceive your self perceiving, you must have, as the object of your present perception, the ­­memory of having perceiving an object but a moment ago; and that is the second type of intuition outlined above. Hence there can be no third type.

Bergson, then, must choose, as the meaning of the term “intuition,” either the first or the sec­ond sort of intuition of duration: perceiving an object, or perceiving one’s having perceived an object. He seems to prefer the former. The following statements (all quoted previously) supplement the examples given above when first explaining the identification of intuition of duration with duration (p. 20); most employ the term “intuition” and apply it to duration itself.

There is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time—our self which endures. (*Introduction* 24)

. . . duration that is lived [is] the original feeling I have of the flow of my own con­scious life. (*Introduction* 27)

. . . I replace myself in duration by an effort of intuition . . . [Replacement in duration] can only be by an effort of intuition. (*Introduction* 31)

. . . intuition has the mobility of duration as its object . . . (*Introduction* 45)

. . . our memory . . . prolongs into each other, so as to grasp them in one relatively simple in­tuition, an endless number of moments . . . (*Matter* 69)

I must admit that it is hard for me to see exactly what is gained by calling “duration” itself an “in­tuition” of duration. Dur­ation itself is an intuition—in this case, of pure per­ception plus first-form memories. But the intuition that duration itself is, is not at all uncommon: it is something that I experience every conscious mo­ment; it is, ­in fact, the only thing I ever ex­peri­ence, except for second-form memories (recollections, which comprise the preponderance of every ex­perience). To experience duration in every present per­ception is so common that it can be said just as well of a dog: when it per­ceives a tree, it directly apprehend­s pure perception plus ­first-form mem­ories; just like me, at every con­scious moment it experiences the intuition that duration itself is.

In what way, then, does my con­sciousness differ from a dog’s? The number of re­min­is­cences (second-form mem­ories) which come crowding into my duration is surely far greater; but that is only a difference of degree. I differ from a dog in kind, apparently, in that I can *know* that I have had a duration; I doubt very much that any dog has ever stopped to consider that it has just ex­per­i­enced duration. While it is true that I cannot experience duration, in a per­cep­tion devoid of reminiscences, while having the perception (since knowing that I have had a duration is a memory, and duration by definition is a *present* perception), still, I can know that I have experienced duration the moment *after* I have experienced it, by recalling the duration I have just experienced. This is, of course, the second type of intuition of duration described above. Using “intuition of duration” to mean the intuition that duration itself is is redundant; we already have the name “duration” for the intuition that duration itself is. Use of the phrase “intuition of duration” to mean the second sort of intuition of duration would at least have meant something new. But Berg­son’s epistemology is, after all, Berg­son’s; and if he wishes “intuition” to refer primarily to the act of duration itself, so be it.

I have now established, as precisely as I can in a brief summary, the nature of Bergson’s “in­tu­i­tion of duration.” Since we have already established, albeit briefly, the nature of the “intuition” which Zen Buddhists strive to achieve, we may now consider the original question, to what extent these two experiences are identical.[[35]](#footnote-35)

**Buddhism and Bergsonism**:

**Similarities**

There are similarities between Zen Buddhism and Bergsonism, and no doubt these are the basis for the suggestion that the intuitions of Zen Buddhism and Bergsonism are the same.

Ineffability

• *Buddhism*. The experience of enlightenment is “ineffable and cannot be put into words that make sense to anyone who has not had such an experience” (Zaeh­ner *Zen* 62). As *Lao Tzû* 56 says (Lao Tzû *Tao Tê Ching* 117): “One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know.”

• *Bergsonism*. “The inner life . . . cannot be represented . . . it is not even ne­ces­sary that I should attempt to render it. If a man is incapable of getting for himself the intuition of the constitutive dur­a­tion of his own being, nothing will ever give it to him, concepts no more than im­ages” (*Intro­duc­tion* 27).

Anti-Intellectualism

Both Zen and Bergson have been charged with being “anti-intellectual.”[[36]](#footnote-36) It would be better to say that the experiences they speak of are “non-intellectual.”

• *Buddhism*. “. . . Zen is [not] a philosophy or a religious faith . . . without the experience there is no Zen” (Suzuki 61-62). “It is true that Zen emphasizes direct experience and denounces mere intellection . . . [But] The abandonment of conceptual knowledge is only temporary, being a practical means” (Chen-chi 119-20).

• *Bergson*. “. . . perception and memory-image are taken in the static condition, as *things* of which the first is supposed to be already complete without the second; whereas we ought to consider the dynamic *progress* by which the one passes into the other” (*Matter* 127).

Habit

• *Buddhism*. Zen’s emphasis on spontaneity, an inheritance from Taoism, is similar to Berg­son’s emphasis on motor response to perception and on habit.

When you say “this” or “that”, however abstract and universal it may be, you are sing­ling the particular “that” or “this” out of multiplicities, thus making it one with them. We cannot help this as long as we are what we are . . . The only way to escape this infinite regression is actually to beat the drum, or to dance up and down with a rice-bowl, or to sing out loudly “La-la-la!” (Suzuki 77)

• *Bergson*. According to Bergson, “The past survives under two distinct forms: first, in motor mechanisms; secondly, in independent recollections” (*Matter* 78).

The memory of the lesson . . . learned by heart, has *all* the marks of a habit. Like a habit, it is acquired by the repetition of the same effort. Like a habit, it demands first a decomposition and then a recomposition of the whole action. Lastly, like every habitual bodily exercise, it is stored up in a mechanism which is set in motion as a whole by an initial impulse . . . (*Matter* 79-80; cf. 111-12)

Concreteness

• *Buddhism*. “The highest and most fundamental experiences are best communicated without words . . . if two people have had an experience of the same nature, the lifting of a finger will set the whole spiritual mechanism in vibration” (Suzuki 65-66).

• *Bergson*. The intuition of duration “cannot be represented in images. But it is even less possible to represent it by *concepts* . . . Now the image has at least this advantage, that it keeps us in the concrete” (*Intro­duc­tion* 27).

Direct Apprehension

• *Buddhism*. “Dhyana Buddhism [is] known in Japan as “Zen” and is not speculation at all but immediate experience” (Herrigel 7). “Zen is not . . . a philosophy, but a direct experience” (Chen-chi x).

• *Bergson*. Bergson’s choice of the word “intuition” to describe duration points to his belief that in it he is directly apprehending reality. See also the discussion above (pp. 19-24) of his concept of the intuition of duration.

Subject/Object Unity

• *Buddhism*. In “nature mysticism . . . the distinction between subject and object seems to melt away . . . one is merged into and in a sense becomes the ‘All’” (Zaeh­ner *Zen* 50).

• *Bergson*. In pure perception “subject and object coincide” (*Matter* 221).

. . . the reality of things is [not] constructed . . . but touched, penetrated, lived, and the problem at issue between realism and idealism, instead of giving rise to intermina­ble metaphysical discussions, is solved, or rather, dissolved, by intuition. . . . Subject and object . . . unite in an extended perception, the subjective side of perception being the contraction effected by [first-form] memory, and the objective reality of matter fusing with the multitudinous and successive vibrations into which this perception can be internally broken up. (*Matter* 69-71)

**Buddhism and Bergson**:

**Differences**

Despite these similarities, Buddhism and Bergsonism remain fun­damentally distinct, and this chiefly in two very important ways.

Unconditioned and Conditioned Being

• *Buddhism*. In nature mysticism, of which Zen is a form, “the experience is one of release from time into timelessness and from place into ‘boundless Being’. Essentially it is a release from this conditioned, phenomenal world” (Zaeh­ner *Zen* 46).[[37]](#footnote-37)

• *Bergson*. Bergsonian intuition, on the contrary, is an experience of “that continuity of be­com­ing which is reality itself” (*Matter* 139). Far from transcending the material realm by sensing it whole, it seeks to snuggle into matter (so to speak) as deeply as possible; it does this by eliminating all sec­ond-form memories. (It would eliminate all first-form memories, too, if it could; but pure per­cep­tion without second-form memories cannot be experienced.) Intuition, in short, seeks “the elementary psych­ical state [which], taken in itself, is a perpetual becoming.” (*Intro­duc­tion* 41)

While the physicist observes objects and events in succession, time is presented to con­sciousness as *duration*—an endlessly flowing process in which one moment grows from another and yields to its successor. The experience of *la durée* is available only inwardly: external observation measures *le temps*. But this inner presentation shows us the true nature of time as process, while the time observed by physics is disaggre­gated and atomized. (Scruton 225)

Self and SELF

• *Buddhism*. Zen claims to reveal a Self deeper than one’s self.

[In] nature mysticism . . . one is merged into and in a sense becomes the ‘All’ (a very ‘vitalist’ All [and] therefore ana­thema to orthodox science) . . . all things are merged into the One . . . This is characteristic of nature mysticism . . . Sometimes the word ‘God’ will be introduced but this God is . . . the all-pervad­ing essence, the Brahman, of which the Upanishads speak. It is the God whom Spin­oza identified with Nature . . .[[38]](#footnote-38) (Zaehner *Zen* 50)

Zaehner equates this with the experience of being “merged into Brahman” (*Zen* 49) that is con­stantly referred to in the *Upanishads*—e.g., *Chān­dogya Upanishad* 3.14.1-3:

All this is Brahman. From It the universe comes forth, into It the universe mer­ges, and in It the universe breathes. . . . [He] who embraces all this, who never speaks, and who is without longing—He is my Self within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice . . . (Nikhilananda 299-300)

• *Bergsonism*. Bergson rarely speaks of the “self” and never, to my knowledge, of the “Self.” Though he often speaks of “consciousness,” he tends either to identify it with duration or to speak of it as that in which duration occurs. In neither case is he referring to the “merger” of self and Self which pantheism celebrates.

Our final conclusion, then, is that Zen Buddhism’s experience of enlightenment and Bergsonism’s intuition of duration, though they share many accidental characteristics, are in essence two different experiences. The experience of which Zen speaks is in the last analysis reli­gious; the ex­per­i­ence of which Bergson speaks remains essentially philosophical.

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1. “The resurgence of vitalism [was] dominated by the doctrine of Henri Bergson (1859-1941) . . .” (Bré­hier 121). See also Zaehner, *Zen* 18-20, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Immediately after beginning his wanderings, the Buddha met a fellow-men­di­cant, Āḷāra Kālāma, from whom he seems to have learned “a condition of trance-like meditation in which the meditator is awake but inturned” (Schu­mann 48)—apparently yoga. “Yoga,” from the root *yug*, means “to unite” or “join” (cf. Eng­lish “yoke”). Some of its practices—con­trol of breathing, lotus position, etc.—probably existed in India even before the first Aryan invasions (c. 1700 bce). Closer to the Bud­dha’s day, one finds already in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* 2.8-15 “a remarkably system­atic descrip­tion of the practices and results of *yo­ga*” (Organ 226). Nevertheless, since “attain­ment of *bodhi* (‘enlightenment’) and *nirvāṇa* (‘emancipation’) through cultiva­tion of meditative trances” is not fully described until the *Bhagavad Gītā* and Patañjal­i’s *Yoga Sutras* (both first centuries ce), these meditative techniques must have come into Buddhism “not from Brahmanism but from the ascetic wanderer sects of ancient India” (Robinson and Johnson 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Buddha next encountered a second fellow-mendicant, Uddaka Rāma­putta, from whom the Buddha seems to have learned “Upanishadic ideas, i. e. the doctrine of Brahman as the Ab­sol­ute present in all things” (Schu­mann 49). Raised a Hindu, the Buddha would have imbibed from his intellectual milieu several presupposi­tions about reality, assumptions which for the most part remained in his own “heretical” system: that time and space are infinite; that identity extends beyond this lifetime; that the universe (*saṃsāra*, “that which turns around for­ever”) is constantly changing and perilous; that one is completely res­pon­sible for one’s fate (*karma*); and that es­cape from *saṃsāra* is *nirvāa*, release into a transcendent, death­less state (*not* release into heaven: heaven and hell are part of the *saṃsāric* world system) (Robinson and Johnson 15-16). But the Hinduism the Buddha learned at home would have been “the ­­esoteric rituals of the traditional brah­min priesthood” (Bentley 43). New ideas were afoot among the ascetics inhabiting the North-Indian for­ests (men called *rishis*), ideas which even­tually con­densed into the literature known as the *Upaniṣads*; and these seem to have been more influential on the Buddha than traditional Hinduism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Siddhartha tried severe asceticisms next. For example: he went naked; he plucked rather than cut his hair and beard; he lay only on thorns and slept only in graveyards; he never washed; he ate only a handful of grain or one fruit each day, and sometimes ate his own ex­cre­ment instead (Schumann 52). These were mild practices compared to those of, say, the Ajivikas, who held hot metal, sev­ered fingers, and broke a bone or cut a muscle to cripple themselves; among them suicide was *de rigueur* (Organ 140). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. According to the traditional sources, the Buddha also received in the fourth trance the “six super­know­ledges”: miraculous powers (levitation, walking on water, etc.); the divine eye (described either as cosmic vision [“per­ception of living be­ings ev­ery­where dying and being reborn”] or as clairvoyance [the Buddha sometimes used the divine eye to locate per­sons he wanted]); the divine ear; telepathy; and knowledge of one’s former lives (Robinson and Johnson 12, 22). (A variant tradition in the sources describes the Buddha’s passage through three unusual cognitive states: know­ledge of past lives, the divine eye, and full enlightenment [Robinson and Johnson 12].) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Lao Tzû” means “Old Master”; “Chuang Tzû” means “Master Chuang.” Tradition says Lao Tzû was an older contemporary of Confucius (the latter died c. 479 bce)—thus making Lao Tzû’s pedigree more august than Con­fu­cius’. In fact, if there even were a Lao Tzû, he probably lived somewhat later than Confucius. Chuang Tzû died af­ter 300 bce.

   The oldest Taoist works are the *Lao Tzû* and *Chuang Tzû* (the former is also called the *Tao Tê Ching*, i.e., *The Canon of the Way and of Virtue*). Both works are composite (the *Lao Tzû* c. 500-100 bce, the *Chuang Tzû* c. 300-50); both are aphoristic, seem deliberately obscure at times, and teach contradictory doctrines (Creel 96-98).

   According to the *Lieh Tzû* (written centuries later), Yang Chu (c. 380 bce) said: “The bene­vol­ent sage dies just as dead as the wicked fool. . . . Then let us make the most of these moments of life that are ours.” (Compare Ecclesiastes 2:16b, 24a [c. 250 bce]: “How can the wise die just like fools? . . . There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil.”) Such pes­sim­ism will sound as a minor note in Taoism through­out its history. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It also has important ethical consequences (though these are less important in comparing Zen with Berg­son). For example, it exalts *tê*, “virtue”—not the virtues “enjoined by social sanction and educa­tion” (which Confucius promoted) but the “natural, instinc­tive, primitive” virtues (Creel 102). Hence the famous Taoist adage, *Wu wei*, “Do nothing”—not meaning inactivity, but doing nothing that is not ­nat­ural or sponta­ne­ous (Creel 106). *Chuang Tzû* 2.16 uses archery to illustrate: “an archer who is shooting for . . . an earthen­ware dish will noncha­lantly display his best skill. . . . Offer a prize of gold, and he will become tense, and his skill will desert him entire­ly” (Creel 106). Eugen Herrigel, who studied Zen in Japan under a master archer for six years, found this to be the case: when an archer becomes “simultaneously the aimer and the aim, the hitter and the hit, [then] comes the supreme and ultimate miracle: art be­comes “artless” . . .” (Herrigel 6) The same is true, Taoists say, in all that one does.

   In politics Taoism eventually led to fascism, inspiring China’s most despotic emperors. To govern well, the *Lao Tzû* advises, a Taoist “­emp­ties the people’s minds and fills their bellies . . .” Since the Tao feels no pity, why should the Tao­ist, who emulates the Tao? “If it suits whim, he may destroy a city . . . After all, both life and death, beget­ting and destruc­tion, are parts of the harmonious order of the universe, which is good because it exists and because it is itself” (Creel 111-12). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “. . . Parthian traders were especially prominent among the early Buddhists in central Asia and China” (Bent­ley 46). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I have emphasized the role of merchants and missionaries, but others who effected the transmission of Buddhism to China were ambassadors, soldiers, prisoners, hostages, slaves, pilgrims, and spouses in cross-cultural political marriages (Bentley 37, 42, 54). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Corless’s term (190). See Bentley (50, 77): “When seeking to communicate unfamiliar beliefs and values in China, Buddhists found Daoism the most important bridge between Indian and Chinese cultures. . . . [Eventually Chin­ese Buddhism’s] Daoist associations were so many and so strong that Chinese sometimes mistook Buddhism as a sect of Daoism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bentley (80): “From a very early date, the two most popular schools of Buddhism in China were the Chan and Pure Land sects, both of which were deeply influenced by Daoism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Until his death Suzuki was professor of Buddhist philosophy at Otani University in Kyoto. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Suzuki could be taken here to be putting “the antithe­sis of being and non-being” in apposition to “the suchness of things”; but that would contradict what he has already said. Either he is putting “the antithesis of being and non-being” in apposition to “things” and distinguishing from both ­the “suchness” that underlies them; or he is saying that “the suchness of things” is “the antithesis of [that antithesis which is] being and non-being.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It may be that Zen adopted some of its meditation practices from Taoism rather than Bud­dhism. Dumoulin notes that, even in Taoism, “Breathing techniques were mentioned as early as the sixth century b.c.” (31). But Dumoulin admits that “The difference is quite clear where the efficacy of the Tao is said to reveal itself to the Taoist “step by step” . . . as opposed to the Zen way of a sudden realization” (33-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dumoulin takes to task “Western Zen scholars [who go] so far as to take for Zen’s very foundation the Taoist elements . . . The more correct view [is] that Zen is based on Buddhism [and only] saturated with Taoism” (32). On the other hand, Zaehner seems correct to assert that Zen is typically a nature mysticism—as is Taoism. For example, he quotes the contemporary Zen master Abbot Shibayama to the effect that Zen is “being identified with the universe and being one with all things” (Zaehner *Zen* 125). The abbot further says that Zen enlightenment “is often likened to the ‘infant-like mind’. The non-defiled mind of an infant has no traces of discrimination, between good-and-evil, you-and-I” (125). This is obviously Taoist doctrine, and is open to the same objection to which Taoism is open: one is left also “as amoral as a newborn babe” (125). One might at­tri­bute such Taoist sayings to the eccentricity of one Zen abbot, were they not common on the lips of most Zen masters through the centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Even in death: according to the *Lao Tzû*, “though one dies, he is not lost [to the universe]” (Creel 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. It is curious how differently translators render this phrase: Creel translates “mysterious ab­sorp­tion” (110), Lau “mysterious sameness” (Lao Tzû, *Tao tê Ching* 117), Ta-Kao “absolute equal­ity” (Lao Tzû, *Tao te Ching* 83), and Waley “mysterious levelling” (210). Waley says that the experience meant is one where “there is a general perception not effected through particular senses.” He quotes the *Lieh Tzû* 2.3, “Henceforward my eyes were one with my ears, my ears with my nose, my nose with my mouth” (210). This is a merging with nature; this is nature mysticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Note the reference to a once-for-all recognition, which becomes an important emphasis in Zen Bud­dhism. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “The dominant ‘flavour’ of the Upanishads is pantheistic (‘All is One’, ‘I am Brahman’, etc.) . . . [and] the pantheism of the Upanishads . . . *is* closely akin to nature mysticism” (Zaeh­ner *Zen* 80, 72). In *Concordant Discord* (43) Zaehner notes that Brahman as experienced in nature mysticism “is not interested in human affairs: it . . . ‘does not speak and has no care’ [*Chāāndogya Upanishad* 3.14], and as such it could scarcely be more different from the God of the Bible and the Koran.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Jefferies wrote: “I was sensitive . . . to the least blade of grass, to the largest oak. They seemed like ex­ter­ior nerves and veins for the conveyance of feeling to me” (Zaehner *Zen* 51, quoting *The Story of My Heart* [Rpt. ed. London: ­Macmil­lan, 1968] 140-41). On this Zaehner comments, “Like all the nature mystics he had ex­perienced a sense of identity with nature” (51). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Bucke coined the phrase “comsic consciousness” in his 1901 book by that title. In it he says (17‑18): “the universe is God and . . . God is the universe . . .” As Zaehner re­marks, “This is pantheism with a vengeance” (*Concordant Discord* 43). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bergson emphasizes elsewhere that this is his definitive definition: “*I call* matter *the ag­gre­gate of images* . . .” (*Matter* 22; italics in original) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “. . . the mat­er­ial world is made up of objects, or, if you prefer it, of images . . . the object is, in itself, . . . but a self-existing image. . . . the object exists independ­ently of the consciousness which perceives it.” (*Matter* 48, 10) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Introduction* 21. Bergson’s “absolute” seems to be essentially what Maritain calls “the trans­objective subject.” (Maritain *Existence* 17) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Similar statements are:

    . . . it is really in P, and not elsewhere, that the image of P is formed and per­ceived. When we represent things to ourselves in this manner, we do but return to the sim­ple con­victions of common sense. We all of us began by believing that we grasped the very object, that we perceived it in itself and not in us. (*Matter* 43)

    [Pure] perception coincides with the object perceived and . . . is, in fact, exter­nality it­self. (*Matter* 66) (On pure perception—also called “impersonal perception,” “immediate perception,” and “external perception” [*Matter* 33, 34, 101]—see below, pp. 13-14.)

    . . . even the sensible qualities of matter would be known *in themselves*, from within and not from without, could we but disengage them from that particular rhythm of dur­ation which characterizes our consciousness. (*Matter* 69) (On duration, see below, pp. 15-17.)

    If we were to eliminate all memory, we should pass thereby from perception to matter, from the subject to the object. (*Matter* 70)

    There is a reality that is external and yet given immediately to the mind. Com­mon sense is right on this point, as against the idealism and realism of the philosophers. (*Introduction* 49) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. the phrases, “internal affections,” “external perceptions” (*Matter* 57, 59). If this distinction is all that Bergson means by “affections,” then it is difficult to see why it is relevant to the noetic process: whether my perception is of a tree or of hunger, it is still a “present perception,” composed primarily of memories but with a pure perception at its core. Since the elimination of “af­fec­tion” is necessary to achieve a (theoretically) pure perception, Berg­son perhaps means “af­fec­tion” to refer ­instead to an automatic motor response to a pure perception:

    the office of sense-stimulation is merely to impress on the body a certain attitude [he means “bodily attitude,” not mental] into which recollections will come to insert them­selves . . . the whole effect of the material vibrations is exhausted in this work of motor adaptation . . . external perception provokes on our part movements which re­trace its main lines . . . (*Matter* 99, 101)

    See also 53-59 and especially 233-34, where adaptation is associated with motor response. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Again, cf. Bergson’s distinction between raising one’s arm as a unitary and internally-ex­per­i­enced move­ment versus raising one’s arm as an externally seen and infinitely divisible action (p. 12 above) and his comment that duration (unlike matter) “excludes all idea of juxtaposition, re­cip­ro­cal ex­ter­nality, and extension.” (*Intro­duc­tion* 26) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bergson expresses this conviction a number of times.

    . . . that continuity of becoming which is reality itself . . . (*Matter* 139)

    . . . the elementary psychical state . . ., taken in itself, is a perpetual becoming. (*Intro­duc­tion* 41)

    There is a reality that is external and yet given immediately to the mind. . . . This reality is mobility. Not things made, but things in the making, not self-maintaining states, but only changing states, exist. . . . All reality, therefore, is tendency, if we agree to mean by tendency an incipient change of direction. (*Intro­duc­tion* 49-50, italics eliminated) (The term “change” here seems odd: my duration has the future as its permanent direction; how can that direction change? But a statement three paragraphs later—“our intelligence . . . can place itself within the mobile reality, and adopt its ceaselessly changing direction” (51)—indi­cates that “change” in the above quotation refers to the contents of duration, not its direction.)

    There is, beneath [perceptions, memories, and motor actions], a continuous flux . . . a succession of states . . . [They] form multiple states [only] when I have already passed them and turn back to observe their track. Whilst I was experiencing them they were so solidly organized, so profoundly animated with a common life, that I could not have said where any one of them finished or where another commenced. In reality no one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other. (*Intro­duc­tion* 25) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. William Butler Yeats, “Two Songs from a Play.” 1927. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See also *Matter* 71, “pure memory [opens] to us a view of what is called spirit,” and 243, “pure recollection is already spirit . . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. He even says at one point that a memory “is embraced in an intuition of the mind” (*Matter* 81); but that is a quite singular usage. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See also the statement, made during a discussion of pure perception: “By in­tu­i­tion is meant the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpress­ible” (*Intro­duc­tion* 23-24, original italics deleted). It is odd that he should use the word “intellectual” here, but he is clearly expressing his con­cept of projection into the absolute of an object (see above, p. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Bergson is referring to a present perception, however, when he says, “there is no state of mind, however *simple*, which does not change every moment” (*Matter* 40—italics added). Though he won the Nobel prize for literature in 1927, his ­language too often lacks precision. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “Original” seems to mean: prior to any later remembrance of the flow; “feeling” seems to mean: prior to any intellectual reflection upon it. (A “subsequent feeling” would be the second sort of intuition of duration, which I will discuss in a moment.) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It may have been noticed that, in the exposition of Bergsonism just present, I rarely speak of Bergson’s emphasis on “action.” This is because I am suspicious of it; I suspect that, by this emphasis, Bergson is trying to give a diachronic answer (via evolution) to a synchronic question (how knowledge arises from object to subject). See Bergson *Matter* 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In the case of Bergson:

    . . . because [for Bergson] intelligence has for its main object the inorganic solid, it does not perceive continu­ity clearly, but competently handles only discontinuity and immobility; “intelli­gence is charac­terized by a natural incomprehension of life” [*L’évolution créatrice* 179]. This statement has become a symbol for the so-called “anti-intellectualism” of Bergson. (Gilson 767-68)

    The Bergsonian theory of the intellect consists, in the last analysis, in declaring that the understanding deceives us in the formation of concepts, that reason deceives us in the analyses it makes of reality, that the intellect is not made for truth . . . (Mari­tain *Bergson­ian Philosophy* 143) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. The two characteristics mentioned here, timelessness and spacelessness, need not coincide; it is possible to experience the one without the other. Zaehner distinguishes, for example, four types of Hindu mysticism:

    1. The transcending of spacial limitations and the consequent feeling that one is the All.

    2. The transcending of temporal limitations and the consequent realization that one cannot die.

    3. The intuition of oneness outside both space and time in a realm in which there is no becom­ing, only Being. . . .

    4. The [pure] love of God . . . (*Concordant Discord* 204; cf. *Zen* 93)

    (Zaehner was the twentieth century’s leading typologist of mysticisms and argued throughout his career that, “just as there are ‘varieties of religious experience’ . . . so there are ‘varieties of mystical experience’” [*Zen* 79]. His principal distinction is that between “sacred” and “profane” mys­ti­cism [see his *Mysticism*, *Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: OUP, 1967)]. Zaehner’s fullest typology of mysticism is in *Corcordant Discord* 40-171, 194-322.) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The “Brahman” of nature mysticism “is clearly not the God of the Bible but the pantheistic God” (Zaeh­ner *Zen* 50). See also 127:

    . . . if the essence of Zen is ‘being identified with the universe and being one with all things,’ then it is really no more than an experience of nature mysticism . . . For the Zen people as for the [spontaneous] nature mystics there is no sense of God as a Person who is both absolutely lovable and absolutely *terrible* [i.e., terrifying]; there is rather a sense of fusion with all Nature, and Nature . . . knows nothing of good and evil.

    Christian and Muslim mystics, however, “even when they tend to slip over into monism, rarely lose sight of a personal God with whom a relationship of love rather than a merg­ing into him remains essential.” (*Zen* 49-50) [↑](#footnote-ref-38)