

Sal Randolph

Mountains and Clouds: Flusser's Buddhism

“Whoever approaches a mountain range coming from the plains, suddenly suspecting that those nebulous blue forms that popped up on the horizon could be mountains, may nurture the following thoughts: I suspect that these forms on the horizon are mountains, and not clouds, although they seem like clouds, because I know that mountains, if seen from afar, seem like clouds.”

Vilém Flusser, *Natural: Mind*

“An ancient buddha said, ‘Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.’ These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains.”

Eihei Dogen, “Mountains and Waters Sutra”

Flusser's Mountains

Reading Vilém Flusser presents a number of well-known difficulties. Prolific and mutable, self-transforming and self-translating, Flusser challenges any who would pin him to specific thought, and yet Flusser's writings also seem to form a matrix, a characteristically Flusserian universe of shape-shifting concepts. Flusser's clouds of language lead you into his mountains, and it is possible, for this reader at least, to become trapped in these clouds and mountains, to lose sight of other realities. It can seem that no word of Flusser's can be truly spoken outside of all Flusser's other words.

One way to jump clear might be to read Flusser from the outside—to engage with non-Flusser texts and read them back against Flusser. In this essay I propose to read some Buddhist texts against Flusser in this way. These are not texts Flusser would have read; this is not a study of influence.¹ It is rather an experiment in the illumination two worlds of language can offer each other, in particular the world of Zen Buddhism and its previous incarnations in China and India. Flusser did have an encounter with Zen Buddhism in the 1950s, an encounter that was part of the development of key poles in his thinking which continued to reverberate through his work over time (Novaes 2014). I propose a

¹ See Guldin (2013) for a listing of one of Flusser's early bibliographies which offers some insight into his reading in Buddhism and Eastern philosophy during the 1950s.

somewhat contradictory project—to explore Flusser’s Buddhism both from within his writing, and from outside of it, and to see what becomes visible in the process.

To return to our epigraph, here is Flusser, writing in the 1970s, beginning a phenomenological meditation on mountains: “Whoever approaches a mountain range coming from the plains, suddenly suspecting that those nebulous blue forms that popped up on the horizon could be mountains, may nurture the following thoughts: I suspect that these forms on the horizon are mountains, and not clouds, although they seem like clouds, because I know that mountains, if seen from afar, seem like clouds” (Flusser 2013).

What is the reality? Mountain or cloud? Do the apparent clouds obscure the mountains, or are they the mountains themselves, seeming to be clouds? Flusser acknowledges that knowing what to expect causes one to suspect. The nebulous blue forms arise to the eyes as clouds, but the knowing mind suspects they are mountains. The distant cloud-mountains appear at the limits of seeing and knowing, hovering in the field of potentiality.

He goes on: “Within a few minutes I shall verify my suspicion: I shall see if such forms are mountains or clouds. But let us suppose that I had never seen or heard of mountains: I would obviously have no doubt that the shapes on the horizons are clouds. And in a few minutes, once such forms had revealed themselves as non-clouds, what would I be seeing?” (Flusser 2014).

Flusser invokes a traveler who has never before seen mountains, a nomad from the plains who is profoundly shocked when what seemed like clouds is seen to be the earth rising up, towering up. “Would I not have such an extraordinary and violent experience that it would shock me? A shock that could kill me?” (Flusser 2013).

Here is another traveler, gazing up at mountain and cloud:

Looking at Tai Mountain

What is it really like, Mount Ancestral-Temple?

From Qi province to Lu, blue without end.

North and South split dusk and dawn

Change-maker, vessel of sacred beauty.

Chest heaving, birthing layers of cloud.

Eyes burst where returning birds enter.

When I climb the highest peak

*A glance will make all mountains small.*²

This is the poet, Du Fu, gazing at up at the most sacred mountain in China. It is the year 736 and Du Fu is 24, a young man who has just failed the Imperial Examination and lost his chance at a promising career. Civil war has not yet broken out, but soon would, turning him and his family into refugees. For now, he was passing from Buddhist monastery to Buddhist monastery, from mountain to mountain (Hawkes 2016; Hsieh 1994).

Here he is gazing upwards at the greatest of mountains. It divides the ancient provinces of Qi and Lu, its blue-green flanks are split by sun and shadow, yin and yang. The mountains, in Du Fu's time and place, were sources of creation. To the Daoist religion that pre-dated, and then fused with, Buddhism in China, they were ancestors and gods. Human souls arose from Mount Tai and returned to the mountain at death (Kroll 1983). So many others had written poems to this mountain. Emperors had made their sacrifices at its peak. Confucius had famously climbed it and offered his comments. What would young Du Fu be able to add?

His chest heaves, or is it the mountain's? His breath merges with the layers of clouds. His eyes burst as they track the flight of returning birds. These anthropomorphizing lines, with their peculiar grammatical reversals in the original Chinese, have puzzled and divided commentators from Du Fu's time to the present (Hsieh 1994; Kroll 1983).

Here is Flusser again, continuing from the previous passage: "He who only knows the plains, where the landscape is always flat, will hardly survive when confronted with something so immensely extraordinary, so gigantically absurd as mountains. The emotions we feel as we approach a mountain range are a pale and late shadow of the sacred terror that our Siberian ancestors must have experienced as they saw the Pamir mountain range for the first time.... This primordial terror must be buried deeply within our collective subconscious" (Flusser 2013).

You can feel something of Flusser's sacred terror in the voice of young Du Fu. Du Fu's mountain rips language from him, but as his chest heaves and eyes burst open, it also creates language. Du Fu asks himself, if I had never read about this mountain, if I didn't know how famous it was, how would I describe it?

Flusser goes on in just this way in his "Mountains" essay, which comes from his collection of phenomenological essays, *Natural: Mind*. He casts himself as a 20th century traveler, approaching the

² Original Chinese Hawkes (2016) and Hinton (2019), translation SR.

Jur Mountains on the Bourg-en-Bresse road, trying to put aside everything he knows, and openly allowing himself to fail. Flusser has already acknowledged the “naivety” he is trying to achieve is itself a sophisticated product of culture, a Western philosophical posture. This deliberate casting off of knowledge is, however, not only Western. It has echoes in the the Daoist and Chan Buddhist philosophies of China, and the stream of practice and thought which continued in Japan as Zen.

In Zen, the mountains themselves are Buddhas. In this they are not different from anything else, and yet they are mountains, and as mountains have characteristics. In Japan, in the 13th Century, Zen master Dogen wrote: “Mountains and waters right now actualize the ancient buddha expression. Each, abiding in its condition, unfolds its full potential. Because mountains and waters have been active since before the Empty Eon, they are alive at this moment. Because they have been the self since before form arose, they are emancipation actualized. Because mountains are high and broad, their way of riding the clouds always extends from the mountains; their wondrous power of soaring in the wind comes freely from the mountains (Dogen 2012).

This is part of his famous “Mountains and Waters Sutra,” among the most enigmatically beautiful writings in the Zen canon. A sutra, traditionally, is a direct teaching of the Buddha, remembered and eventually written down. Dogen is not claiming his own writing to be a sutra, rather he is recording the sutra given by mountains and waters.

At 21, dissatisfied with the Buddhist teachers he had found in Japan, Dogen traveled to Sung Dynasty China, found enlightenment through encounter with a master there, and returned to revitalize Japanese Buddhism through an emphasis on the centrality of meditation practice, what we know as Zen. Fundamental to Dogen’s understanding of Zen was the experience of “mind and body dropping away,” and the conviction that the enlightenment experienced by Shakyamuni Buddha could be directly actualized in the present. “Mountains and Waters Sutra” was written when Dogen was 40, as part of a series of teachings offered to the monks he had gathered at the first of the monasteries he founded (Tanahashi 2012).

“Because mountains and waters have been active since before the Empty Eon, they are alive at this moment. Because they have been the self since before form arose, they are emancipation actualized,” (Dogen 2012). Dogen’s mountains exist in time, they are time embodied, past and present fused. They are simultaneously formations of rock and Buddhas; they are nothing but themselves. It is the actuality of mountains that makes them Buddhas. Dogen describes his mountains as flowing and and

as walking: “You may not notice that you study the green mountains, using numerous worlds of phenomena as your standards. Clearly examine the green mountains walking and your own walking,” (Dogen 2012).

This approach of Dogen’s could be read against Flusser’s phenomenology of mountains. Dogen, in 1240, notices that you study mountains “using the numerous worlds of phenomena as your standards.” You come to mountains with your existing views. “Clearly examine the green mountains walking and your own walking,” (Dogen 2012). To examine the self is to examine the mountain.

Flusser makes his journey into the Jur mountains, examining his own bits and pieces of floating knowledge and expectation. The Jur mountains give their name to the Jurassic period, the time of dinosaurs and pterodactyls; Flusser acknowledges and accepts that even these half-remembered facts frame his experience. He seeks a naive vision, but simultaneously undercuts that seeking by placing himself firmly in the 20th century.

“My task shall be to attain a deliberately naive view of the Jura Mountains, and this implies the suspension of the prejudices that I nurture in relation to them. However, I may then observe that such prejudices are not necessarily a hindrance in order to see the mountains. They may, on the contrary, become powerful mediations for my view of ‘mountain-ness.’ Even more so because they are superficial prejudices that do not seem to touch the phenomenon proper that is the mountain,” (Flusser 2013).

Both Flusser and Dogen accept what is already in the mind as part of the direct experience of mountains, as part of mountain-ness. Both proceed from that point, examining, investigating. Flusser ends his essay noting he could not suspend his prejudices, may not have even wanted to. He returns to the simple act of experience: “As for myself,” he says, “I shall seek to spend some time in the mountain’s bosom,” (Flusser 2013). He abandons his philosophical stances, he lets go of the play of being “a nomad, a mountain dweller, a child, or tourist” and enters the mountains as himself, exactly as he is. Flusser’s mountains have their “mountain-ness” because he retains his Flusser-ness, just so.

Dogen ends his own essay by posing a paradox which goes on to become a famous moment of self-contradictory Zen expression: “An ancient buddha said, ‘Mountains are mountains, waters are waters. These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains.’” Dogen’s mountains are mountains becoming mountains. “In this way,” Dogen says, “investigate mountains thoroughly,”(Dogen 2012).

A regular reader of Flusser's might well see echoes of his characteristic paradox-thinking in Dogen's passages. The question is not one of influence, since it is unlikely that Flusser encountered Dogen's writing. Instead we might see two minds struggling at the limits of language. Where language truly meets phenomena, it must necessarily fail, and yet, for both Dogen and Flusser, silence is not an option. Within this impossibility, new language emerges.

Flusser's writing shows some resonance with Zen expression, but his interpretation of Buddhism itself is quite different in character. It is uneasy: sometimes dismissive, sometimes Orientalizing. He struggles to reject aspects of what he apprehends as Buddhism while at the same time "The East" penetrates his thinking, continuing to make appearances in his middle and later work.

Flusser's Buddhism

Vilém Flusser encountered Zen Buddhism, and Eastern philosophy more generally, in the 1950s through his friendship with Alex Bloch. Flusser was living in Sao Paulo and working as an accountant by day, reading intensively by night. Bloch worked in a bookstore and passed books on to Flusser, including books of Eastern philosophy. Bloch was also the general assistant to a Zen Buddhist monk, and for a time both Bloch and Flusser practiced some form of Zen meditation (Novaes 2014).

In his autobiographical work *Groundless*, Flusser characterizes his engagement with Eastern thought as play. He begins the chapter "Playing with Suicide and the East" with this statement: "To play with philosophy means to read philosophers—not with the intention of acquiring 'criteria,' 'knowledge,' or 'values,' but to discover the thematic and structural similarities between apparently contradictory philosophies, and to have fun with this," (Flusser 2017). Despite his evocation of fun, Flusser's existential pain is apparent throughout his early writings, and the idea of suicide haunts his philosophical speculations.

His uneasy reconciliation between "play" and "suicide" often took the form of recursion to the absurd, but it also found expression in his interpretation of "Eastern" methods: "The overcoming of thought through Eastern methods emerged as the overcoming of the Western dialectic, so that 'suicide' emerged not as annihilation, but as a dissolution that could not be diagnosed as 'Non-Being'" (Flusser 2017). This suggests a characteristically Flusserian paradox-thought—a death that is not death.

He is, however, careful to keep a certain ironic distance from "The East," to raise a protective wall of something like contempt. "The East was interesting simply as a method for transforming

thought into an object of non-thought. The so-called “Eastern Philosophy” (a variety of cosmologies, wisdom, and moralities) was not interesting.... One was permanently convinced that Eastern speculation was a type of primitive magic.” (Flusser 2017)

In a passage of *Groundless*, Flusser details a method he used in his meditation: holding two contradictory beliefs in his mind at once: “After having achieved concentration, as instructed, one meditated in the following manner: one would take any thought and transform it into an article of faith.... Afterwards, one would take the opposite thought and transform that into an article of faith.... The important thing was to believe in the content of the thought, without giving it any importance. Afterwards, one would simultaneously believe both articles of faith. That was difficult, but possible. Thus, a hole emerged in one's thought and faith, and one spun within this hole. So much so that one's spinning could also be observed from without. One could see oneself thinking and believing” (Flusser 2017).

From this method emerged a series of “enlightenment” experiences, experiences that Flusser characterizes as ecstatic, but at the same time clownish and ridiculous to the point of disgust, “Laughed at everything,” he says, “and was simultaneously nauseated by the same things.” He goes on “...after a certain time (two years more or less), these ‘enlightenments’ started to happen at the most inopportune moments. For example, one started to spin into an ‘enlightened’ state at the office while dictating a letter or at the cathedral square while looking for a restaurant. What kind of liberation was this? It was at least as nauseating as a physical suicide, only not as obvious” (Flusser 2017).

This “unexpected aesthetic effect” brought Flusser's experiments with Buddhism to an end, and under Flusser's influence, his friend Alex Bloch also abandoned the practice (Novaes 2017).³

Flusser revisits this method in *The History of the Devil*, the work which includes his most detailed discussion of Buddhism. The main body of *The History of the Devil* is organized in chapters mapped on to the seven Christian mortal sins; Flusser's discussion of Buddhism begins in the closing paragraphs of the seventh chapter, “Pride,” where he introduces the related ideas of silence and nothingness. When pride has exhausted itself, what is left is silence; a silence, Flusser tells us, which is the end of the Devil, a sacred silence. This silence is the falling away of language.

³ It is of course impossible to evaluate Flusser's “enlightenments” from this distance in time and space. It should be noted that dramatic outbursts of laughter and waves of unusual emotion have been documented as part of enlightenment experiences, but these are not the goal of Zen practice. Experiences of openings or realizations known as *satori* or *kensho*, are gateways but are not the end of practice and study—study typically continues for many years after these experiences under the direction of a teacher until the “stink of Zen” is eliminated. See, for instance, Kapleau 2000.

Proceeding as he often does, zig zagging through irony and self contraction, Flusser says, “The author of this book does not have the experience of this silence, and the fact that this book carries on despite his argument proves it. Even though the author has felt the imminence of humility several times, he has resisted it gallantly” (Flusser 2017). Here, we might guess, he is referring to the idiosyncratic form of Zen practice he described in *Groundless*. One can imagine Flusser’s friend Alex Bloch learning traditional Zen meditation from the monk he was assisting and then passing this instruction on to Flusser—I can picture the two of them sitting next to each other in a São Paulo apartment, silent, cross-legged on the floor. Possibly they counted their breaths, in the manner usually prescribed for beginning Zen students. Possibly they attempted the more advanced practice of *shikantaza*, or “just sitting,” where the mind is emptied of thought.

It is perhaps unrealistic to think that Flusser would have remained long with an empty mind. In *Groundless* he says, “One read Hindu and Japanese authors (the Chinese were not available) for one’s own praxis. The positive and negative results of this effort will not be described here because they are extremely shameful. Only the process will be described,” (Flusser 2017). One naturally wonders about those shameful results, but the process he goes on to describe, creating two opposing beliefs and simultaneously believing both, is in no way characteristic of traditional forms of Zen meditation. It is distinctively Flusser’s invention, the meditation practice of a philosopher not a Zen student.

The humility Flusser resisted so gallantly would then be his own fleeting enlightenment experiences, experiences he found to be ridiculous and nauseating but could not quite reject altogether. The silence he experienced in meditation may well have flickered uneasily between the emptiness of Zen and the nothingness of nihilism. To have accepted that enlightenment may have seemed like the death of philosophy.

In the *The History of the Devil*, he makes the distinction between what he calls the sacred silence of mystics and the silence which he experienced himself: his own silence was a Devil’s silence, a false silence.

“This [false] silence emerges when the mind seeks to simultaneously articulate two opposing judgments. This simultaneous articulation of ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ which is an intense articulation, has all the appearances of the sacred silence. In this intense articulation, nothing is articulated, because both judgments call each other out. A zero emerges in this articulation; nothingness emerges. However, this is a dialectically tense zero: a nothingness that is contradictory and full” (Flusser 2014).

A zero emerges from the simultaneous articulation of “yes” and “no.” A nothingness emerges, but one that is dialectically tense, contradictory and full.

Throughout *The History of the Devil*, Flusser invokes “nothingness” as a characteristic aim of Buddhism⁴. “The Buddhist seeks nothingness,” he says, or: “Eastern tradition proclaims nothingness. Every manifestation of the East is a variation on the theme of nothingness” (Flusser 2014). Flusser variously describes this nothingness as an abyss, an annihilation, a death, a deepest hell. It is silent. It swallows and shocks.

The closest Buddhist term for nothingness is the Sanskrit *shunyata* which is much more commonly glossed as “emptiness.”⁵ *Shunya* is the Sanskrit word for zero, so *shunyata* can be thought of as zero-ness; it also has the connotations of hollow or void. It is one of the central technical terms of Mahayana Buddhist thought and therefore a key term of Chan and Zen (Pine 2004; Tanahashi 2014).

Perhaps the most famous formulation of emptiness is in the *Heart Sutra*, the ultra-condensed form of a corpus of texts on “the perfection of wisdom,” *Prajna Paramita*, all of which are centrally concerned with emptiness. The *Heart Sutra* says, “Form is no other than emptiness. Emptiness no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form” (Loori 2008).

In the context of the Heart Sutra this is not tautology, but rather revelation. It is spoken by the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, to the stodgiest of Shakyamuni Buddha’s disciples, Shariputra. The *Heart Sutra* begins: “Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, doing deep prajna paramita, clearly saw emptiness of all the five conditions” (Loori 2008). Which is to say, that the Bodhisattva named Avalokiteshvara was in deep meditation, experiencing the perfected state of inner wisdom, when he (or she, the gender of Avalokiteshvara being somewhat ambiguous) suddenly perceived the “emptiness” of everything that makes up the world as we experience it: form, sensation, perception, discrimination, and awareness. Avalokiteshvara sees that all aspects of the world as we know it are “empty” of any self-existence, having no fixed state.

Avalokiteshvara then exclaims: “Oh, Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form. Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are likewise like this,” (Loori 2008)

This emptiness is more like everythingness than it is like nothingness. It is something that can be seen, that can be directly experienced in states of awakening. In the Chinese, and then Japanese, the

⁴ See Huzdik 2019 and Guldin 2013 for consideration of other aspects of Flusser’s use of “nothingness.”

⁵ This distinction is preserved in the original Portuguese text of *The History of the Devil*, where the word that represents “nothingness” is *nada*, as in “Nós encaramos a cada passo o nada, pronto a engolir-nos. O budista procura o nada,” (Flusser 1965 p. 212), whereas in typical examples of Portuguese translations of the Heart Sutra, a central Zen text on emptiness, the words employed are *vazia*, *vacio*, or *vacuidad* (“O Sutra do Coração” 2020; “O Sutra do Coração” 2020b).

Sanskrit *shunyata* is given the character 空 which is also the character for sky (Pine 2004; Tanahashi 2014). Contemporary translator Kazuakai Tanahashi renders it as “boundlessness,” (Tanahashi 2014).

Seeing this emptiness is enlightenment, no different from seeing thusness. It is the dropping away of body and mind. Returning to Dogen: “An ancient buddha said, ‘Mountains are mountains, waters are waters. These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains,’” (Dogen 2012). Mountains are beyond words and beyond form, they do not speak, but they are not silent, they give forth sutras. They are empty and entirely present, just thus.

Flusser’s Clouds

Flusser’s “Buddhism” is no Buddhism. By this I do not mean that Flusser is mistaken, that he has misapprehended Buddhism, though he may have, but rather that he has appropriated “Buddhism” to stand in for a part of himself. In Flusser’s “Buddhism” the goal is the ultimate death beyond death of nirvana, it is nothingness and abyss, it is silence (Flusser 2014).

Zen is often thought to exist on a knife’s edge between enlightenment and nihilism, but emptiness is not truly nothingness. Instead, emptiness is simply reality continuously unfolding. It is beyond speech, but never silent.

Young Du Fu stands looking up at the mountain birthing clouds, and by birthing clouds birthing the whole universe. Dogen sees mountains riding clouds, riding clouds because they are mountains soaring in the wind. Flusser sees clouds, but knows they are mountains. And yet all three seek and find the thusness of mountains themselves.

Flusser’s work does contain flashes of emptiness, but they tend to occur when he is looking in another direction, not at Buddhism, say, but at a mountain. His later visions of a dialogic society of autotelic players have a recognizable quality of emptiness (for instance, in the “Chamber Music” section of *Into the Universe of Technical Images*).⁶

The History of the Devil offers this self-descriptive passage: “And when the philosopher directs his gaze to the ivory tower where he lives, this tower dissolves into the fog of nothingness. The specter hovers above the clouds like the sage of Chinese paintings. He extends his tired arm into the clouds, and these form according to the movement of his arm. And when he looks at himself, he also becomes

⁶ “Chamber music is pure play, by and for the players, for whom listeners are superfluous and intrusive....To play for himself, each player plays for all the others...It is futile to look for the meaning of the information that emerges in the game itself, in the players, and the rules they follow,” (Flusser 2011).

a cloud, floating among the other clouds, and is formed by them. No wind blows in this nebulous region, and no wind can give consistency to the clouds” (Flusser 2014).

This philosopher is of course Flusser. His tower has dissolved into the fog of nothingness. Of Flusser’s nothingnesses, this is the most empty; this is the self of no-self. The philosopher extends his tired arm. The clouds swirl as he moves, and he himself dissolves into them.

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