

# The “Intense Concentration of Self”: Buddhist Metaphysics and Pip’s Experience in *Moby Dick*’s “The Castaway”

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In a book famously full of curiosities, perhaps no feature of *Moby-Dick* is as unexpected as the friendship, unfolding in the book’s final chapters, between Captain Ahab and the young sailor Pip. Their friendship follows directly from Pip’s experience in the chapter “The Castaway,” in which, after being abandoned by his shipmates and left out in the open ocean, Pip is said to have lost his mind. Called “mad” by his shipmates, Pip spends the rest of his too-short life searching for, well, himself, crying out for the boy he can almost remember having been: “Pip! Pip! Ding, dong, ding! Who’s seen Pip?” (400). Thus, as the Pequod hurtles toward its furious and fated end, Ahab finds momentary distraction from his cetological monomania in the figure of a young African-American boy with interest in neither whales nor whaling. Perhaps more importantly, by joining himself to someone who has been emptied of his understanding of himself as an individually existing being, Ahab is temporarily relieved of his obsession with his own “inexorable self.”

Pip is, as Ishmael might say, a land person. He describes him as being “entrapped” on the ship, and having arrived there not willingly, but “somehow unaccountably.” It is clear Pip misses life on shore, “and all its peaceable securities”; he wants his feet on the ground; he wants to be comfortable. While Ishmael spends his time in tireless navigations of the oceans and the mind, everything we know about Pip indicates that he is entirely uninterested in such psychological acrobatics (or, as Melville once described his own conversations with Nathaniel Hawthorne, “ontological heroics”). It isn’t that Pip is unintelligent—on the contrary, Ishmael ensures us Pip is “at bottom very

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The Humanities Review

Volume 11, Issue 1

Spring 2013 pp. 79-87.

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bright, with [a] pleasant, genial, jolly brightness," and calls him "brilliant, for even blackness has its brilliancy" (319). Rather, he simply has no connection to the existential questions being asked elsewhere on the Pequod—evidenced by his status as one of the "ship-keepers," the few men who stay onboard when the boat crews are off chasing after whales.

But it comes to pass that Pip ends up in a whale-boat as a replacement for another sailor, and thus embarks on an unintentional pursuit after truth, and is nearly destroyed by the experience. And while Ishmael steadfastly defends his shipmate against charges of madness, he offers little by way of explanation of his experience. However, religious literature offers many examples of subjects destroyed by visions for which they are unprepared. Buddhist literature in particular, in both ancient and modern expressions, has much to tell us of the potentially devastating effects of a spontaneous insight into ultimate reality. Scholar and translator Thomas Cleary writes, "When individuals are still at a stage where they need externally imposed structures of belief and practice . . . insight can be a shattering experience, beyond the capacity of an immature or unbalanced mind to bear with equanimity" (ix-x). If we consider Pip's experience from this perspective, we find someone who is subjected to a consideration of the world beyond conventional understanding of "Self" and "Other," and thereafter can no longer conceive of himself as an independently existing person. This interpretation not only bridges the gap between what Ishmael calls "man's insanity" and "heaven's sense," but locates a basis for the anomalous intimacy between Pip's selflessness and the "inexorable self" of Captain Ahab.

In the late chapters, Pip cries out exclusively for "Pip, who jumped from the whale-boat," as if with a vague recollection of the boy he used to be. While we might be surprised at the pointed emphasis on the act of jumping itself, rather than the interminable minutes he spends struggling to stay afloat in the open ocean, Ishmael has already done much to establish the significance of the whale-boat in his metaphysical landscape. As it carries the men into their adventures on the ocean, and most importantly towards the object of their spiritual quest, the great sperm whale, the whale-boat arises as Melville's chosen symbol for the soul, the heart, the Self. In "The Gilder," Ishmael describes the contentment of sitting in the whale-boat, abiding in this sense of Self: "These are the times of dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin . . . These are the times, when in his whale-boat the rover softly feels a certain filial, confident, land-like feeling towards the sea; that he regards it as so much flowery earth" (372). Ahab's attachment to Self is epitomized by his habit of spending long hours standing defiantly in his personal whale-boat, "high-hoisted" off the side of the ship (336, 378). And in "The Pequod Meets the Rachel," his usual call "Hast seen the White Whale?" is met with the thrilling news, "Aye, yesterday. Have ye seen a whale-boat adrift?" (397). Putting aside the literal implications for the narrative, the metaphysical analogue

here could translate as something like, "Have you been seeking Meaning?" "Yes, have you seen a lost soul?"

There is even a precedent for Pip's fateful leap, as early in the book Ishmael himself experiences something not so dissimilar to what befalls poor Pip. In chapters "The First Lowering" and "The Hyena," a whale-boat is smashed while chasing a whale, and Ishmael is the last sailor pulled to safety, and stands drenched and shivering on the Pequod's deck. But while Pip is entirely unprepared for his near-death experience and loses his mind, Ishmael sturdily arrives back on deck and proclaims, "I survived myself." Ishmael has joined the Pequod not only willingly, but desperately, seeing it as a vessel for (and emblem of) existential liberation. His indefatigable exploration of the nature of the sperm whale (in particular his brave consideration of "whiteness") is the fruit of considerable psychological and emotional preparation. Thus, he is able to thoroughly immerse himself in a mental space that would simply overwhelm the unprepared and uninitiated. The terror that most of us would feel (and that he earlier describes in "The Mast-Head") he has risen above. And in "The Hyena," as he drafts his last will and testament for the "fourth time in [his] nautical life," Ishmael further removes himself from attachment to Self: "After the ceremony was concluded upon the present occasion, I felt all the easier; a stone was rolled away from my heart. . . . I survived myself; my death and burial were locked up in my chest. I looked round me tranquilly and contentedly, like a quiet ghost with a clean conscience sitting inside the bars of a snug family vault." Ishmael finds himself unrestrained, and prepared for whatever comes next: "Now, then, thought I, unconsciously rolling up the sleeves of my frock, here goes a cool, collected dive at death and destruction, and the devil fetch the hindmost" (189).

So, Ishmael leaps from the boat and is able to leave himself behind—he "survives [him]self." In Pip's case, however—left in the Pequod's wake, abandoned to the "heartless immensities" of the open ocean—he is forced to consider, for the first time, the nature of the Self:

But we are all in the hands of the Gods; and Pip jumped again. . . . In three minutes, a whole mile of shoreless ocean was between Pip and Stubb. . . . Now, in calm weather, to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practised swimmer as to ride in a spring-carriage ashore. But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it? (321)

Melville is really asking a lot of us here, so it's important to consider this slowly. First, we should remember there are not only miles of ocean surrounding Pip horizontally; there are miles of ocean beneath his feet as well. So the "awful loneliness" gives rise to an "intense concentration" of his sense of Self—in the literal sense of having a body, being a body, floating alone in the infinite ocean. For a moment, the boundary between Self and Other is palpable, visceral. We can imagine his limbs paddling frantically, struggling to keep afloat, perhaps

considering his options of rescue or escape.

But then something shifts. From this "intense concentration of self," there is a sudden switch, as his "ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably." Eihei Dogen (1200-1253), the founder of the Japanese Soto school of Zen Buddhism, expresses something similar in his *Genjo Koan*: "To study the Self is to forget the Self. To forget the Self is to be actualized by myriad things." Looking for one's Self, one finds nothing but the "myriad things" in the universe. We might imagine that Pip, for the first time in his life, looks closely at himself, asking, Who am I? or What is this self that I feel so intensely? Or is the self the same as the body, lost out here in the ocean? If so, then where is my mind?

What Pip sees is the subjectivity of perception, and the fallacy of the instinctual impression that each of us is at the centre of the universe. For Pip, floating in the middle of the ocean, the "intense concentration of self" momentarily puts the center squarely in his own mind. But then, "Out from the centre of the sea, poor Pip turned his crisp, curling, black head to the sun, another lonely castaway, though the loftiest and the brightest" (321). The idea that the sun could exist on the fringe—as "another lonely castaway," lost and alone itself—is another way that Ishmael denies us the comfort of a convenient "center" to our experience and also pulls us ineluctably towards the margins. Instead of its mythologically ascribed role as the "ontotheological centre"—the ubiquitous source of light and intelligibility in religious symbolism, as well as the literal (and eponymous) center of the solar system—the sun now exists only in relation to Pip, burning somewhere in the distance, "out from the centre of the sea." If the sun is just "another lonely castaway," ostensibly having a similar experience to Pip's, then from its heliocentric perspective the center would be with it, some 93 million miles away. So the center lies both everywhere and nowhere, for ultimately there cannot even be fixed distinctions drawn between Pip and the sun—they, along with the ocean and the ship and the "multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects," are all dependently co-arisen. Indeed, the sun is only called "the loftiest and brightest" in relation to Pip's being less lofty, and less bright (321). Even Ishmael's curious reference to the "coral insects" might reflect this relationship—that just as coral reefs are composed of millions upon millions of mutually co-dependent organisms that together form what we call "coral," innumerable phenomena are every moment "multitudinously" creating what we refer to as "the universe." Thus the "little negro lad, five feet high" and the flaming ball of gas, over a million meters high, while obviously not the same, cannot truly be said to be different.

On the surface, this interaction between Pip and the sun appears comparable to mythological archetypes wherein an unprepared mortal gains insight into the world of the divine: Zeus's lover Semele (taking Hera's devious advice) demanded to see the Olympian god in his full glory, and when he reluctantly obliged, she "sizzled, shrank, and was vaporized" (Ovid III.308-309). Moses made a similar

request of God, and God refused, knowing the prophet would not survive the sight (Exodus 33:20). Pip's experience in "The Castaway," however, illustrates precisely the opposite point of view. For the two Classical examples are emphasizing difference: the human seeks a close relationship with the god (or God), and the Deity makes clear the fundamental separation between them. In Pip's case, the insight is one of sameness—that human, deity, and the relationship between them, are all One, and, as Zen scholar R.H. Blyth writes, all indispensable parts of the universe: "Mountains and rivers, birds, beasts and flowers are all one undivided indivisible thing. Yet on the other hand, each thing is itself and no other thing, unique, irreplaceable and invaluable. Sameness and difference are also one thing, yet two things" (83). While this might sound encouraging at first—that we are one with God and God is one with us—it can actually be a terrifying prospect. For although we might easily grasp the idea of everything around us being a part of God (and thus lacking inherent existence), eventually we will have to dismantle the idea of our Self as independently existent as well. Again, it is not that individual things don't exist; it is that they do not exist independently of everything else. But the idea that the Self is a delusion, and what we refer to as the Self is a mere amalgamation of sense perceptions, is, to say the least, unsettling.

And this is how Pip loses his mind: "By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was" (321). It is also precisely why Pip's "mad" post-castaway ravings are almost entirely concerned with his search for Pip—"Pip, that jumped from a whale-boat" (366), and left behind his idea of Self. Thus he is no longer able to understand the connection between the name "Pip" and the person "Pip": "Pip? whom call ye Pip? Pip jumped from the whale-boat. Pip's missing. . . Pip! Pip! Pip! Reward for Pip!" (391-392).

But Pip is no idiot, as Ishmael well knows. The experience of insight is literally outside the realm of language, and, as Buddhist scholar John Blofeld remarks, "those who have actually achieved this tremendous experience, whether as Christians, Buddhists or members of other faiths, are agreed as to the impossibility of communicating it in words" (17). The historical Buddha himself is said to have initially decided against attempting to share his teaching with others: "If I taught the Dhamma, people would not understand it and that would be exhausting and disappointing for me" (qtd. in Armstrong 94). And of course, these are the experiences of people who have spent their lives preparing for such a moment; we cannot imagine Pip to fare very well thrust unwillingly into this arena.

So, again, "Pip's ringed horizon [begins] to expand around him miserably," until finally he can no longer distinguish between Self and Other (321). For the initiated, Dogen concludes, this is a moment of existential liberation: "When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away." But for Pip this happens "miserably," as he is unprepared for the loss of

his belief in a separate Self.

Pip is then "carried down to wondrous depths [where] the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps" (321). Surprising, then, that the idea that Pip is turned into an idiot has persisted among scholars, since Melville explicitly states that his guide in this adventure is none other than Wisdom itself. In this strange alliterative phrase, is Wisdom revealing the heaps that he himself has hoarded? Or is he revealing to Pip the truth of his own hoarded heaps? If we take this latter view, Melville appears to be pointing again to Pip's elusive Self. The Buddha taught that what we mistakenly consider our separate self is actually "a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies" (20). These energies are divided into the five *skandhas*: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness (*Samyutta Nikaya* 22.56). And while the Sanskrit word *skandhas* (*khandha* in Pali) is usually translated as "aggregates," a more literal definition is "heaps" or "piles" (Schuhmacher 335). The word "hoarded" usually connotes something saved for future use, but here can suggest something to which one is attached, or clinging. So, bringing this back around, when Melville writes, "Wisdom revealed his hoarded heaps," he is pointing to something like the revelation described above—that what we usually think of as the Self is revealed to be nothing more than a delusion based upon clinging to these five heaps:

We seem to believe that there is some self lurking behind the awareness of the body and mental objects. But if you turn and look for this "somebody" behind your awareness, you do not find a self independent from awareness. By thoroughly contemplating such intrapsychic conversations between self, awareness, and its objects, you realize that there is no self aside from awareness and the objects of awareness.

Awareness and its objects account for all experience. This is not to say that there is no self, it's just that there is no independent self. The self exists only in dependence upon mind and its objects. When you clearly observe the dependent co-arising of self, mind, and objects, the belief in a self independent of mind and objects drops away. (Anderson 162)

This idea of "boundaries" recalls the ancient Chinese Zen text Hsin Hsin Ming, which states: "Emptiness here, Emptiness there, but the infinite universe stands always before your eyes. Infinitely large and infinitely small, no difference, for definitions have vanished and no boundaries are seen. So too with Being and non-Being."

Contemporary philosopher and theoretical psychologist Ken Wilber deals with this subject at length in his book *No Boundary*. He describes the usual human experience as drawing a mental boundary around ourselves: everything on the inside of that boundary is the "self"; everything outside the boundary is "not-self" (4). The boundary is malleable, and exists on several levels, as in our connections with objects and people—for example "my coffee," "my job," "my husband"—and

we often feel threatened when our relationship to those things is compromised (as we will see in a moment, regarding Ahab and the loss of his leg). But what is important for our purposes here is his argument that the boundary can be eliminated altogether:

The most radical re-mapping or shifting of the boundary line occurs in experiences of the supreme identity, for here the person expands his self-identity boundary to include the entire universe. We might even say that he loses the boundary line altogether, for when he is identified with the "one harmonious whole" there is no longer any outside or inside, and so nowhere to draw the line. (5)

Wilber also argues that the ultimate aim of Zen Buddhism (one might say with all religions) is "to heal the split between the total organism and the environment to reveal an identity, a supreme identity, with the entire universe" (12). Ishmael's remark that the "pointless centres" of "great hearts . . . contain the entire circumferences of inferior souls" is similarly suggestive of the permeability of boundaries (411-412).

So Melville equates "man's insanity" with "heaven's sense," and "wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought" (321). For Pip, poor Pip, the trouble comes only when he attempts to return to the conventional world, after having been united with the ultimate. "Lines are drawn in the mind. There are no lines in nature," Stephen Batchelor writes (76). What happens when one loses one's line-drawing capacity? Pip feels "uncompromised, indifferent"—for he cannot take care of a Self he no longer feels exists.

Pip's indifference toward identity is, finally, what brings him together with Captain Ahab. Separately, the two represent opposite sides of the extreme views of existence, as Pip nihilistically denies there is anything called "Pip," and Ahab is obsessed with the fundamental independent existence of this thing called "Ahab." As Newton Arvin wrote, he "has refused to accept the interdependence that is the condition of genuinely human existence" (178-179). And in "Ahab and Starbuck in the Cabin," the first mate urges his captain to regard the corrosive effects of his self-obsession: "I ask thee not to beware of Starbuck; thou wouldst but laugh; but let Ahab beware of Ahab; beware of thyself, old man" (362-363). Despite meeting this admonition with a loaded musket, Ahab is clearly interested in the idea, and is struck with a moment's contemplation: "What's that he said—Ahab beware of Ahab—there's something there!"

But, again, Ahab never does shed his fixation on his "inexorable self." He is able to connect with Pip precisely because the boy is without an individual identity, and thus cannot reflect (or contradict) Ahab's sense of self: "And who art thou, boy? I see not my reflection in the vacant pupils of thy eyes" (391-392). Not only does Ahab feel unthreatened by this empty shell, but also it momentarily relieves him of his Narcissistic obsession with his own separate self, allowing him to feel connected

to another living being “Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings.” By joining hands they are merged, and their positions intermingle. Ahab says, “Now, then Pip, we’ll talk this over; I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee!” (396) and specifically notes that caring for this boy is wearing away his feeling of separation: “There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady” (399). Pip, in turn, moves from feeling he is nothing, to feeling that he is a part of Ahab—indeed, as he says, the missing piece: “No, no, no! ye have not a whole body, sir; do ye but use poor me for your own lost leg . . . so I remain a part of ye” (399).

As the two walk hand in hand, the old Manxman calls them daft: “one daft with strength, the other daft with weakness” (392). British scholar R.H. Blyth writes, “Some minds have a tendency to overemphasize difference, some to make everything of a meaningless sameness. Both are wrong, the latter perhaps more than the former” (90). So Pip, nudged back from the edge of nihilism, comes quite close to the idea of the Ultimate Truth, beyond Self and Other, where he and Ahab are momentarily united. Ahab, however, knows he is too far gone to abandon his quest—and though he acknowledges the remedy, he wants not to be cured: “for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health” (399). Pip is finally left alone once again: “I’m alone. Now were even poor Pip here I could endure it, but he’s missing. Pip! Pip! Ding, dong, ding! Who’s seen Pip?” (400). It’s heartbreaking that, in the end, he doesn’t even have himself to keep him company.

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